

Rediscovering John La Montaine

American Music Center, Tuesday, May 20, 2003, 2 PM
Transcribed by Randy Nordschow

1. Full-Time Composing
2. Toscanini
3. Teachers: Hanson, Boulanger, etc.
4. Self Publishing
5. Pulitzer Piano Concerto
6. "Official" American Music
7. Opera, Jazz, Music Boxes
8. Notoriety
9. Composers Today

1. Full-Time Composing

FRANK J. OTERI: It's such a joy to finally meet you. I've been a fan of your piano concerto for many years, and I also adore your piccolo sonata.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: One of my earliest works and one of my latest works! *[laughs]*

FRANK J. OTERI: I always wondered what was in-between...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: There is an awful lot of in-between in my music. *[laughs]*

FRANK J. OTERI: I read a comment that you made in an interview that you gave, I believe, 20 years ago. You talked about the importance of being a composer fulltime.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Oh yes, it's hard to be a part-time composer. There are a lot of part-time composers who have written some wonderful pieces. But the fact that they were part-time makes you think what else could they have written? Howard Hanson has written some marvelous pieces. If he hadn't put in the tremendous amount of work and time that he spent making the Eastman School what it was, who knows what wonderful things we would have done with that kind of musical mind? It's been true of so many composers. They spent their lives teaching and they should have been writing. I knew very early that I didn't even have the ability. Hanson asked me two different times to come and be a composition teacher, and I did that. During the time that I taught I didn't write any music at all. I got so interested in what the pupils were doing. I was going back and forth to New York and I always took all of their compositions and read them carefully. You know, teachers don't do that, but I knew every piece that they wrote and I could always offer them comments. You can't teach composition. It's just not possible. But there are a lot of things you can say that are relevant. You can teach counterpoint. You can teach orchestration. You can teach a lot about orchestration and that I certainly did. But if composition doesn't come from the middle of you, it doesn't amount to anything. If you're too disturbed with other things, I don't think you can... Ravel couldn't have written those pieces if he taught.

FRANK J. OTERI: What I find so interesting though is before you were awarded the Guggenheims and the Pulitzer, you considered a career in investment banking.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Oh, well, that's not exactly the way it came about. I had two jobs when I first moved to New York. Very soon after that I got the job with the NBC Symphony. (We can talk about that another time.) I was also assistant conductor for Menotti's opera on Broadway. So I earned quite a bit in one year, but it was not enough for what I wanted. I wanted to earn enough so I could give my full time to composing, or at least give myself four years. And I thought, what can I do that would earn me the most money in the least amount of time so I can stop earning money and just write music? So that was my plan. I figured that you couldn't do better than a stockbroker. So I went to school and I was really good at it. I got the highest grades and everything. I got to the point where I could get the license. I did get it and I was ready to go. Now, other things happened. One day—if I can remember them now *[laughs]*—it was the same day that I got the license, that was the day that I got a letter saying that I was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. Then I got a phone call. They said I'm so-and-so and I'd like to speak to you about your prize. And I said what prize? He said the Pulitzer Prize. I said excuse me—I had just gotten out of the bathtub and I was wet *[laughs]* with the phone, and I said, "Excuse me, I have to put pants on." *[laughs]* That's about the dumbest thing you can say... Well, that was my response to the Pulitzer Prize! *[laughs]*. But those three things happened in one day. It was the same day!

FRANK J. OTERI: So you never became a stockbroker.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I closed the book and I never opened it again.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting though because you have had other careers besides being a composer. Notably you were a concert pianist and you worked as an orchestral pianist. Granted, that is still working in music...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Well, I played pretty well. I played the Brahms first concerto and the Emperor Concerto when I was in high school. I really played pretty well. In addition to those things, I earned quite a lot from playing for singers. I played for a whole array of great singers. I played two times for Mary Garden—you don't have to believe it, but it's true!—and once with Maggie Teyte and Leontyne Price. Leontyne Price performed my first work for orchestra outside of school. It was a whopping success. It started me on the professional composer level. A lot of things came from that.

FRANK J. OTERI: What was that piece?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: *Songs from the Rose of Sharon*. It's the entire second chapter from the *Song of Songs*. She did such a marvelous performance of it and she repeated it again the next year. Then she sang it in Boston, Washington, and all over. Her first performance, which we have on a recording—it's never been recorded professionally, but we have her recording—it's magic the way she plays that work. It's so interior and comes from the inner soul of the woman—it's a black woman that the second chapter is about, "I am black but comely..." I carried on that idea and Jessye Norman sang the other one. It was a much longer work than the one Leontyne Price sang. It's actually an opera for solo voice. It's the entire life of that woman who called herself the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Fields.

2. Toscanini

FRANK J. OTERI: You were a pianist for Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Pianist and I played celesta. That came about in a strange way. Earl Wild played with the orchestra often, when needed. There was another fellow, too. But when they decided to tour the United States in 1950, NBC wouldn't let either of them go; they were too good and useful. So I had a telephone call with someone I didn't know who said I'd been recommended to them and wanted to know if I'd care to go with Toscanini around the country. I said, would you please repeat that? *[laughs]* I said I certainly would. And he said, have you played La Mer? I said, no I haven't played La Mer. He hadn't asked me if I'd played the celesta, and I'm glad he didn't because I never had. He said get out the score and look at it, come to the rehearsal on Thursday, play the performance on Saturday, and if you're still in the orchestra on Monday, you're hired.

FRANK J. OTERI: *[laughs]*

JOHN LA MONTAINE: *[laughs]* So I survived the 42 or so notes that I had to play, and I was there for the next four years.

FRANK J. OTERI: Toscanini was never a great friend of contemporary composers, did you ever show him any of your own music?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: No, but I talked to him and he was very kind to me. In fact the one time I made a mistake he caught it. I'll tell you about that. I had the chance to talk to him alone while we were on that trip. I said, maestro, I wanted to thank you especially because I am a composer and I'm leaning so much I didn't know about the orchestra by sitting there in the middle of the orchestra as the celesta player. And I said, I'm very grateful that as a composer I have been able to see you close at work. You know, he didn't talk, he growled. *[imitating Toscanini's voice]* You're a composer? I said yes. He put his hand on his heart like he was conducting and said, *[imitating Toscanini]* "Some say inside no just notes." I never forgot that. I know a lot of composers manipulating notes, and those composers should have talked to Toscanini. *[Again imitating Toscanini]* "Something inside maybe, inside." The way he would growl it sounded like he was in a tomb. *[laughs]*

FRANK J. OTERI: So that experience of being a pianist, of being a celesta player in the middle of the orchestra was actually part and parcel of your development as a composer.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Absolutely, absolutely. You know, everything said about Toscanini is not entirely true. Everyone talked about his faithfulness to the composer. The first week I was there I heard him say *[imitating Toscanini]*: "The composer is wrong, always wrong!" *[laughs]* And what he was talking about was balance. There's a place in the 9th Symphony where there is an important moment for solo clarinet buried in the orchestra and you never hear it. He made it heard. He knew that if it's solo it has to be on a different level than everybody else that has the same dynamic marking. He knew that there had to be differences and he was always balancing the orchestra. Sometime it was a little gesture like... *[demonstrates]* He would do things like that. He excelled in that more than any other conductor I played under. During those four years I played under a lot of different conductors. The funny thing is that he was the hardest conductor in the rehearsal that is imaginable. In the rehearsal he subdivided, all kinds of subdivisions. In the performance they had disappeared. That's the difference between him and other conductors. He knew how to balance an orchestra with the slightest movement.

FRANK J. OTERI: That kind of experience of having worked directly with a conductor is so invaluable for a composer. For many composers today it is so difficult to get an opportunity to write for an orchestra. It's one of the hardest opportunities, and it's even harder to actually work with that orchestra that you're writing for. These lessons of the balance of the solo clarinet in the context of the orchestra, you could read every orchestration book in the world and study with great teachers, but you're just not going to know it unless you're there.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Absolutely. Yes. You couldn't speak truer. Nobody gives enough credit to Hanson for what he did. The composers who go to Juilliard and all the great schools—I know this because I went to Juilliard and they had composer-teachers—never get their pieces played.

3. Teachers: Hanson, Boulanger, etc.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Every spring Hanson would read the best of the student works, and that was usually all of them. When I was a freshman, he performed my first two orchestral pieces. One of them he played on a national network. Can you imagine the lift that gave to a kid seventeen years old? There was a major orchestra, the Rochester Philharmonic, performing his piece. That was something, you know. I could never stop thanking him for that. And he did that for how many composers? Hundreds! Tell me another school that did that. That's the reason I went there. I had a better fellowship elsewhere, but I wanted to be where my work would be played.

FRANK J. OTERI: I heard there was an anecdote about a teacher there—you said you had a better fellowship elsewhere—a teacher that actually helped you with tuition while you were at Eastman.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: [*laughs*] I don't know if I can tell that story. I'll probably start crying! [*laughs*]

FRANK J. OTERI: We'll bring some tissues. [*laughs*]

JOHN LA MONTAINE: In high school I had a mathematics teacher—I studied algebra when I was a freshman, and she didn't teach, she just kept asking you questions. This question, that question, and that... suddenly you just knew it. They called that a Socratic method. Is that really true? Is that the way Socrates taught? Anyway, I just loved her because every day I sat at the desk right in front of hers, really close, and everything she took, I just swallowed it. People think a lot about intelligence tests. They don't test anything. Well, they do test one thing. They test a lot of things that you learned in class. And you know algebra answers all kinds of questions. The questions were there, and I had the answers in my head. I wrote them down and I was done with the test. They told me I had an I.Q. of 160. That's not true. I'm not that smart! [*laughs*] I'm smart enough, but not very. Anyway, she knew that I just worshipped her, but no words were ever spoken to that effect. When I went off to school, my family was very poor. My father died when I was a year old and my mother somehow kept alive her three children. We had terrible hardship. It was a time when everybody was having a difficult time. It was around 1920 when he died and from then on, she was it. She was never praised enough for what she did for those three children. I had enough money to pay for the first semester at Eastman School and so I paid. At the end of the first semester I got a letter that I would have to leave the school because I hadn't the money to pay the bill. The week that I had that letter saying that I was going to have to leave, I thought, what am I going to do, what am I going to do, what am I going to do...? I got this letter from Oak Park, Illinois, which was my home and where she was. I got a letter from this algebra teacher. It said something like, when you were my student, I was writing a book and the book is now published. By law I'm not allowed to accept any royalties from books sold in my own school, so I'm sending you \$125. I want to thank you for your part in making my book.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's beautiful.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I stayed at Eastman School.

FRANK J. OTERI: Great! So you studied with Hanson. You also studied with Bernard Rogers.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Yes. A wonderful, wonderful man to talk to. Rogers was a wonderful teacher in that he was very talkative. He would talk on a level that you would call philosophical rather than like a teacher. He had a wry humor when he told stories. I can't say that I learned very much about composition from those teachers that I had, that's because composition can't be taught. They helped me

on all sorts of other things: my view of music, how things fit together, and, the main thing, they played the works. They didn't have to say that there was something wrong; you heard it.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's great. Were your studies with Nadia Boulanger before or after Eastman?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Long after. I had already been playing with the NBC Symphony when I thought about studying with her. Shall I tell you something about her?

FRANK J. OTERI: Please do.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I didn't know what to expect. Everyone said she was the best teacher there was for composition, and I didn't know what they were talking about. I'm not so sure that they all knew what they were talking about. I have talked to other composers and none of them have the same thing to say about the way she taught me. I never went to one of her classes. Everything was private, but the things she said to me are different to the things she said to other composers. The very first lesson I put up on the music stand—we always sat at the piano—a notebook that I kept for years with samples from composers of every period from way back, right up to the present day, where the composers violated the rules that were prevalent at their own time. So she looked through just about the whole book rather quickly, and closed the book. Then she said, don't judge composers by any rules. She said, if I tell you the truth, the absolute truth, I don't know any rule that is universally applicable, any rule. Whoa! The sky opened up! You can't imagine the effect on me, because I was a good boy.

FRANK J. OTERI: To get back to Hanson, he was one of the founders of the American Music Center. Is he the reason that you came to work here when you did?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: No. No connection. It was much later that I came here.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, in the '40s, the Center had just been founded in 1939, so it was pretty early in the history of the Center.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: It had to be after '46... I can't remember if I was already in the NBC Symphony, I think I was. So that would have been after 1950.

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh, okay. So it's later when you came...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Yes, it's not in the '40s that I came to you. It was when the American Music Center had its first printing press. I bought it, and I ran it. I was going to do as many people's pieces, and I did some of my own. Although I paid for the printer, I also paid for the copies I made. They needed the money. They didn't have anything back then.

FRANK J. OTERI: Was Harrison Kerr still there?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: He wasn't when I was there. I wasn't there very long because pretty soon after I move to California.

FRANK J. OTERI: So was Ray Green here at that point?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: No.

FRANK J. OTERI: Maybe it was in-between that time.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I can't tell you details.

FRANK J. OTERI: In your looking through other scores here and making copies of scores and things that you did here, how did that help you as a composer?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I wasn't with it long enough. I saw what they needed and I thought I'd try my bit with the printing press and so on. I left so soon that I didn't make any major contribution.

4. Self Publishing

FRANK J. OTERI: Perhaps operating the printing press for the American Music Center informed your decision to become the publisher and promoter of your own work...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: That really started my last year in New York. I learned right away, with an apartment on 57th Street, there wasn't enough room to be a publisher. [*laughs*] I had another fellowship at the place for composers out in California that was started by the owner of the A&P stores. It was a wonderful place to work. I did a large chunk of work on my first opera of the Christmas cycle at that foundation. By that time, Paul Sifler and I had a publishing company in New York and it didn't work. We also started a record company and that didn't work because we had no place to store anything. So I called Paul and said, it would be a good idea to buy some property out here where we'd have a lot of room to expand and room to compose. He was also a composer, a good one. He came out, we found a place, and bought it. We rented it out until the mortgage was paid. We didn't want to take any chance on losing it. We began right away. I can't tell you what the first things were or when we got the Finale system and started making real publications. The ones that I did for the American Music Center were actually printed, but they were printed manuscripts. That just wasn't good enough for real professional quality. I had a heck of a time learning Finale! There was no one to help me. I knew of no one doing it, and I didn't understand the instructions.

FRANK J. OTERI: To go back a little before we talk about computer notation programs, in the early days you had scores published by Elkan-Vogel, Galaxy, Carl Fischer, Belwin-Mills, these were the top publishers of their day.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: That was the trouble. They all wanted my pieces. Everything I submitted got published, but nobody knew where to find anything. Is this with Carl Fischer? Is this with Schirmer? I had things with all the best publishers. Between Paul and I we were with 11 different publishers. Now how are you going to start hunting for a piece by John La Montaine? What's the use?

FRANK J. OTERI: There was no effort in the early years for one of those publishers to demand that you be exclusive?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: No. By then I had written so much music that they couldn't afford to publish all my stuff even if they wanted to. I don't know if they wanted to because I never saw them. I guess I had 6 pieces with Broudie. Schirmer did the first of the Christmas operas. There were lots of things wrong and they sent out orchestra parts where things were missing, and left out whole sections. Other publishers didn't interest me at all.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting the question of the prestige that a publisher represented in musical life then and even now to a great degree. To this day there hasn't been a single piece ever to win the Pulitzer Prize that is a self-published work.

5. Pulitzer Piano Concerto

FRANK J. OTERI: Your Piano Concerto wasn't self-published...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Actually that Concerto was cooking for four years. I started it the day before I went into the Navy. My first sketches were from the day I went into the Navy. That was cooking in my head throughout the war. I call it now *In Time of War*. I had offered it to 3 publishers, and they all refused it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow! This is prior to Galaxy taking it.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: It would have been too big an investment. It would have been a bad investment.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yet, talk about a good investment, this was a piece that won one of the American Music Center Ford Foundation orchestra commissions. It was done by six different orchestras.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: That's true. It was the only piece from that whole commission that was performed by all of them. The things that Broudie published were good pieces, but they were on a limited number of pages. But orchestra parts...

FRANK J. OTERI: When you think about it, a new piece of music being performed in one or two seasons by six different orchestras, that's unheard of, even today...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: And by one of the greatest pianists of the time, Jorge Bolet.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's amazing to get such recognition. After reading through all the press materials and all the coverage that this work got, it seemed inevitable that it would get the Pulitzer Prize...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: [*laughs*] Thank you. I'm so pleased you feel that way. Why weren't you in the right position at that time? [*laughs*] Look, that was opus 9. I was a kid in their view.

FRANK J. OTERI: But, for the rest of your career, nothing else ever got as much exposure as that piece.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Well, even more surprising to me is the fact that no one got the idea to commission me to write a second concerto. I didn't write the second concerto until 30 years, 40 years later.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: And then I fell in love with the idea and wrote 3. So there are a total of 4 concertos. People say, I know your concerto. And I say, which one? Oh, is there another one? [*laughs*] To me, the second concerto is the finest work I've ever done for piano. It's so creative. It's almost unbelievable.

FRANK J. OTERI: I love that opening flourish in the solo piano.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: The whole story is in that. The whole concerto was made from that fragment. Not a single bar is without it.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's such a haunting motif. Which leads me to another question because in the writings that have appeared about you—there is an entry in the Grove Dictionary of Music, and it describes your music as being serial...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, I thought you'd find that amusing.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I wrote them a letter and I said, which piece did you receive? [laughs] I can count all my serial pieces on one hand. After hearing one of them, I asked my great teacher Stella Roberts if she knew it was a serial work. She said, no I didn't. She's a brilliant woman, that's not an insult. I don't believe in -isms. I don't want to be attached to an -ism. I don't want to be stuck in some hole, expected to do a certain thing. There is not one of my pieces that is like another piece. If you can find me two pieces that are alike, I'll give you two other ones. [laughs]

6. "Official" American Music

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs] I want to talk to you a bit about the commission for JFK's inauguration which happened soon after...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Oh, no! I want to talk about Jacqueline Kennedy [laughs].

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs] We'll talk about her, too!

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Leontyne Price did the first performance of *The Rose of Sharon* in Washington. That started me off in Washington. A lot of people in Washington got interested in my work. Someone suggested to the Stern Foundation to ask me to write the piece that they wanted for the inaugural concert. They had just started doing an inaugural concert for the president. Someone called me from the Stern Foundation and asked if I'd accept the commission. I said of course, I'd like to do that. I worked very hard on it. Fortunately, they asked me two years ahead of time. I'm a pretty slow worker, and it took me a lot of time to figure out what I wanted to do. Anyway, I wrote a piece that I thought was fine. Howard Mitchell decided to open the concert with it. Anybody who remembers the day that Kennedy was inaugurated will recall that a snowstorm started in the morning. It was really heavy snow. People began to worry and they had reason to. By that night the traffic in town couldn't move. People walked to the concert. I walked there. The conductor walked there. The first trumpet player walked there. It happened that the Kennedys came back to talk to the conductor because everybody was waiting for the concert to start. Well, the concert couldn't start until the first trumpeter walked over the bridge, through the snow, carrying his trumpet. He was to play the first three bars of the piece that I wrote. So there was a time when the Kennedys, the conductor, and I were standing together and I presented Kennedy with the score that I had written. It was amazing to me because this was the night before he was president. He opened the score and went through it page by page. Somebody else's work—the president, imagine! He said: "All those little notes, do you have a special tool to do that with?" I said, "Yes, Mr. President, a dip pen." [laughs] And he laughed. Jackie took me aside, and the conductor talked with the president. I sat down with Jackie Kennedy. People who only saw her on TV didn't know how beautiful she really was. Close up she was just incredibly beautiful and spoke quietly. She was dressed in a cream colored dress with simple earrings with green... I tell you, I noticed! And a necklace with sapphires and diamonds... That was all. Everything else was plain. She looked so beautiful. I think I was habitual with her. Where there's a group she doesn't look around to see whom else she would talk to, or ought to talk to. You were the person she was talking to. All the attention was on you. [sighs] What do you say that can be worth that? I opened the score—I still had it—and showed her the dedication. I said, I finished this piece in August and wrote the dedication to President Kennedy. The dedication was written in August. She said, oh my goodness, I was so pregnant, and I really thought we were going to lose. She said, I didn't think we had a chance. I said, well, mine was a good guess. You thought you weren't going to win and I thought you were! [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: So the terrible question is, you dedicated the score in August, what would have happened if Nixon won?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I don't know. The work might not have been played. [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs]

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I wasn't going to change it! Believe me.

FRANK J. OTERI: Really?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: No sir.

FRANK J. OTERI: You wouldn't have rewritten the first page?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: No. Only once.

FRANK J. OTERI: This is interesting because you later did a piece for the bicentennial, *Be Glad Then America*, which was commissioned for the bicentennial. It's an opera about an hour long, in that sense of opera, which I want to get to with you soon. I find the Kennedy inaugural piece and the bicentennial piece both very interesting in that they are official American works. In our culture today you don't have the White House commissioning composers.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Well, the White House didn't commission that piece. It was the Stern Foundation.

FRANK J. OTERI: But it was part of the event.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Yes, that's exactly true.

FRANK J. OTERI: It seems an important way of honoring an important occasion in history.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: That's true.

FRANK J. OTERI: And we've lost that, somehow, in our society today.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I'm not sure that it wasn't lost already then. It took me a lot of time to say this has to be for that. I've always thought that our National Anthem should be "America the Beautiful." It's not a war-like thing, and it has beautiful words. I think the tune is good, too. It's a very excellent tune. That tune is buried throughout my piece. It's a little sneaky. After all, I am sneaky. It's not blatant, but the whole thing does come in the grandest moment of the piece. When I was with Jackie Kennedy she said, what is your piece like? I said, "I can tell you one thing, it's not bombastic." She clapped her hands and said, "Oh, then I'll like it!" [*laughs*]

7. Opera, Jazz, Music Boxes

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to ask you about your definition of opera, because I find it very, very liberating.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: *[laughs]* Why should you put that on me?

FRANK J. OTERI: *[laughs]*

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Definitions are limitations. I don't think there is a limitation.

FRANK J. OTERI: So an opera then is...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: An opera is a sung work with orchestra.

FRANK J. OTERI: It has to have orchestra?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Maybe not. It can be a small orchestra. It can just be piano and drums.

FRANK J. OTERI: Does it need to be staged?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Oh, yeah! You left that out. That's the acceptable part of the limitation. I'm hiring you, come out to California. *[laughs]*

FRANK J. OTERI: I know that you dabbled a little bit into writing for jazz band and you worked a bit with electronic instruments. You've performed Bach on a Roland digital piano. I wanted to ask you about these other media: the jazz band, amplified instruments, and electronics. Are these all part of your classical concert music in your view?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Part of my creed is that you should be interested in everything. I listen to jazz all the time. I think there are so many marvelous aspects to it. In California, I related myself with a group of black fellows who are extremely gifted musically and they know nothing about how to write it down. I have on a number of occasions written down what they can do. I write down *[sings a complex melody]* and they say: "No, that's not the way to write it; *[sings a single note]* that's how you do." So we're fighting all the time, but I'm learning. It's like at Eastman. I learned more from my pupils than they learned from me. And that's really true, not just a way of saying. They got me interested in writing things they couldn't hear. It happened very often. I would play what they had written with a wrong note and I'd ask them what the wrong note was. They couldn't tell me. I said, you are a liar. I said, you shouldn't be writing things that you can't hear. I had 6 brilliant students and they started fighting me on that. They said, how are you going to know that works if you don't start using it? You start using it, and you learn from it. If it doesn't work, fine. If it does work, fine. They beat me down. They absolutely won. I said you go on and write whatever you want. You can be as dumb as you want—I mean you can be as smart as you want! *[laughs]*

FRANK J. OTERI: Electronic instruments?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Yes, I've used them. I've used them a lot. You know the thing that I gave you that has music boxes from all ages. I would love to write for music box. I would love to write for the merry-go-round in Central Park. I asked them how I could do it. It was so complicated that they couldn't

let me do it. I'd like to do all those things. I don't think there is any limit on what I would do. I've written very childish children's pieces. I've written canons that a child can play. It's a big hit all over the country. That's my most sold piece! [*laughs*]

8. Notoriety

FRANK J. OTERI: I'm going to ask you a question that might be difficult to answer. It's sort of a loaded question. Here you wrote this amazing piano concerto, won the Pulitzer Prize, had two Guggenheim fellowships, a piece performed by 6 different orchestras, you wrote a piece for Kennedy's inauguration, you were the star composer, circa 1960. The star composer...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Some people thought so.

FRANK J. OTERI: The music is fantastic in these pieces. So why aren't you a household name? Why isn't everybody listening to your music? Why aren't there recordings everywhere?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I can't answer that. What you say it true. Once in awhile there is somebody who knows about my work and gets more interested in it. Even though I've had a publishing company, I've never been pushy. I've never spent a lot of time on publicity or anything like that. I just want to write my pieces. If they don't live on their own, they don't live anyway. All I ever wanted to do since I was 5 years old was to be a composer, and that did not include being a publicist.

FRANK J. OTERI: So in a way the music is its own reward.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Oh, sure. I listen to my own pieces sometimes. I know a lot of composers don't. But I want to see if they're whole, the whole story for that particular piece. I have a list of pieces that I've written that I don't feel that are good enough. They're in my catalog, but I just as soon let them go. But that's a small number because when I work on a piece, I give my all to it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you wish more people were aware of your music, that there were more performances?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: That's up to them!

FRANK J. OTERI: So it doesn't really matter to you.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: No, I can't say that. That's too self-centered. It's nice. I really like it when people like my music. I really like that a lot. It means we're talking the same human stories.

FRANK J. OTERI: One of things I wonder about, in 1959, 1960 you were this meteor in American music. There was a period, I guess in the 50s to the early 60s, to the Kennedy years before the Kennedy assassination, where American classical composers had some visibility. Copland was very visible. Samuel Barber was very visible. Menotti...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: They earned that. They're good composers.

9. Composers Today

FRANK J. OTERI: Something happened and composers stopped being in the public eye so much.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: It's even worse now because serious music doesn't even deserve a page in *Time magazine*. The popular music has drained the country of time. I hear a piece everyday that goes [*sings a short repeated phrase*], never anything else, and then the whole piece is over. I don't feel that's nourishment enough. I don't know when the time will come when people need nourishment, but it must happen sometime. I think that people who need nourishment are going to listen to my pieces because there is something for them.

FRANK J. OTERI: This leads us to the whole question of what is the future for this music? How do you get more people to listen to this music?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: The symphony orchestras are doing pretty well, and the opera houses are doing pretty well. The piece that they are doing fills that bill of giving people what they need.

FRANK J. OTERI: These are older pieces, pieces by European composers from other centuries.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: But look at it this way, there isn't a time in the history of music when they didn't play music of their own period. Music of our own period is played, but to our mind not enough. I have wonderful recordings of nearly all of my best pieces. A couple of the best ones haven't been recorded, but they've had a hearing to start. But put it in a larger picture. When I was quite young, I didn't know about Bartók's work, not until I was about 16. What I knew was from studying scores, not from hearing the works, and I knew there was a great composer there. No matter how much work he did the 10 years before he died, not one orchestra in the United States played one piece of his. Now he's not any worse off than we are. When he died every big orchestra in the country did his pieces. Money began to flow to his family that he had never seen. He knew what he had written. I heard a performance once with him playing the piano, and he knew what was in those scores. There's meat and drink for everybody.

FRANK J. OTERI: You say you have recordings for most of your pieces. We have a situation today where composers will write a piece for orchestra, and they can't even get a recording of that piece. The orchestra won't give them a recording because of union contracts and...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: That's terrible.

FRANK J. OTERI: So how can that piece ever have a life? How can you ever get it into someone else's hands?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: You know, in my case the union has made it impossible for Leontyne Price to record my *Rose of Sharon*. The union price for recording the opera that I wrote for the bicentennial, *Be Glad Then America*, was \$30,000 and nobody would pay it. Now what I've done is—I think you're recording what we're saying and I'll probably go to jail—I've made 100 copies on CD of most of my major works. I'm not going to make anymore, and they can come and take me to jail for it, but I do not have a contract covering some of those recordings. I did get together enough money to pay the union to record *Wilderness Journal*, a big orchestral work with organ and singer. It's all about nature.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's the Thoreau setting...

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Yes. I spent a year reading Thoreau's journals. I wanted to get through them all, but I didn't. I picked texts that I thought would be good to set to music. I worked on that piece for two years. It was just terrible that we couldn't get a recording. It was 10 years later I got a letter from Kay Shouse who had paid me to write that work. She's done a lot of good things, as you know. She said that she'd found in a closet the recording that was made of that performance. I wrote to say that I could pay half if she'd pay the other half of what the union wanted to put out the recording. We paid for it. It was around \$20,000, but she and I did it. That's how it happened. So that one is legal, you don't have to throw me in jail for that one. [*laughs*]

(Richard Kessler joins the conversation)

RICHARD KESSLER: A lot of composers can't get recordings from orchestras and think there is a sense that this is a problem of our time only. They think it's something of the 21st century, 2003. You talked to me a bit about not being able to get a recording and writing to the orchestra to try and get a recording and all the work it took to do that and they finally sent you a recording after you wrote to them.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Yes, it's really true. Of course, I could be in jail for it... if I tell this will I be hurting them?

RICHARD KESSLER: Well, you don't have to tell us the name of the orchestra.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: No, it's essential to tell. I'm going to tell anyway because it's something very important. Howard Hanson asked me if I would play my Piano Concerto on a program with the school orchestra. He wrote to me—I was in Italy at the time. I of course wanted to play it. We did play it but the piano in the hall, it was a good piano, but I couldn't do on it the things that the piano requires for that concerto. So I went to the Steinway Company and played all their pianos and took the best one. They moved it to Orchestra Hall so I had the piano I wanted to play. They recorded the concert and it was broadcast all over the world by the Voice of America, but not in the United States. So I couldn't copy it off the radio and they told me they couldn't give me the tape of the performance. I had written it. I had copied the parts. I had paid for the printing of the score and the parts. I had rented the piano and had it moved to Carnegie Hall. I had practiced enough to be able to play it again, and they said I couldn't have the recording.

RICHARD KESSLER: What year was this? Do you remember?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: Probably about '64. How could they do that? How could anyone say that? It's mine. That's my piece, and you have it. You're giving it to the world, and you won't let me have it. I wrote a letter to that effect to the man in charge of Voice of America in Washington. About two weeks later here comes a tape with no mark of where it came from.

FRANK J. OTERI: Of course, the question remains... How do composers get their works out there? You publish your own scores. They're all in one place, which is important, but you don't have time to do the publicity for them. You're not interested in the publicity, so people don't get to learn about them. You disseminate recordings of your own music, but you only have the efforts to make, say, 100 copies. There's no way to distribute it. You can't find *Wilderness Journal* at Tower Records. What's a composer to do in this climate?

JOHN LA MONTAINE: There's nothing I wish more than to be able to answer your question. I think it would just be wonderful. I can't think of one thing to help. After Bartók died, his works were played everywhere. What you're doing here at the American Music Center is our best hope!

FRANK J. OTERI: Disseminating music through the Internet is one of the big programs we do here. Through *NewMusicBox* we have articles and interviews with people to get them aware of American music and American composers. We have another website, NewMusicJukeBox, where people can get excerpts of scores and recordings and the music gets disseminated that way.

JOHN LA MONTAINE: I didn't know you had developed this far. I don't have the Internet myself, but my nephew sent me the whole thing about you. I thought this is the big hope that we have. Everybody should start throwing money at you to do it because it's the most hopeful thing we have as composers.