

INTERVIEW SUMMARY FORM**CONWAY
HALL**

Interviewee: Gordon Honey
Interviewer: Rosa Vilbr
Date of Recording: 9/5/2016
Length of Recording: 02:04:41

Time Code	Summary
0:00:00	<p>Date of birth 16.02.1926. Was born in Bolton, Lancashire. Spent a few years there as a child, but spent most of his childhood in Manchester, in Higher Crumpsall.</p> <p>He had an older brother who was born out of wedlock in 1922. "I had a mother who was quite special. She was a wonderful mother, I don't think she was such a good wife but she was a wonderful mother and that's the best thing for a child". His mother refused to marry his brother's father, who had fought in the First World War with his uncles. She also refused to "get rid of it" (the baby).</p> <p>After his brother was born his mother travelled steerage to America to join her older sister. While she was there she met his father, Ernest Honey, who was American. When she was pregnant with Gordon she came back to Bolton to nurse her father. Gordon's father continued to send money until 1934, although his mother had made no attempt to return to America. She never went back. His father never came to England.</p>
0:04:27	<p>His mother lived off the money his father sent until that stopped in 1934. His father was a mining engineer. After 1934 his mother was forced to go out to work.</p> <p>She sold 'Dolly Blues' which were made by Ricketts Blue which made your washing whiter. His mother used to go door to door selling them for a penny each on commission. His mother was a wonderful mother, with a wonderful sense of humour.</p> <p>His brother died in 1932, and she then went into Spiritualism. In 1939 they moved to Morecambe, where they spent the war years.</p>
07:17:00	<p>Interest in music stemmed from school: "I had a pretty voice at school".</p> <p>He left school at 13 because when they moved to Morecambe his</p>

	<p>mother thought he may as well get a job a year early. He worked as an errand boy and did different jobs.</p> <p>His mother during the war got very much into Spiritualism: reading palms, tea leaves. As he had a good singing voice his mother would send him under the stairs. She said “when I cough my dear I want you to sing Ave Maria”. “The distance of this child’s voice coming from under the stairs enhanced her spiritualist activities.” His mother met a woman called Martha who was a medium and, unlike his mother, could go into trances. They joined forces. During the war many people needed reassurance and his mother would make them feel better. Martha told his mother that Ave Maria was not a good song, that Danny Boy would be better “because the Protestant spirit connections in heaven had objected to the Catholic Ave Maria”. By then he was working on Heysham Docks and his friends used to come and sit on the top of the stairs and laugh at what was going on.</p> <p>His mother sincerely believed in Spiritualism, influenced by having lost a child. She used to set a place at the table for his brother long after he had died.</p>
0:13:30	<p>He joined the army in 1944 at 18 but because he had had rheumatic fever he only did the training (in Ireland) and was stationed in Leeds. After the war his mother decided they would go back to America to stay with his aunt and so they travelled to London: although there were no ships available for civilian travel after the war so they had to wait.</p>
0:14:35	<p>He got a job at the London College of Music in Great Marlborough Street later run by Dr Lloyd Webber. He got a job as an office boy and had free singing lessons there. Then he got a scholarship from London County Council to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, then in John Carpenter Street.</p> <p>He was living in the YMCA in Tottenham Court Road. There was a music publisher living there, and he recommended a job at Schotts, the music publishers. Next door he noticed the London College of Music and wondered if they give singing lessons. He was sent in to speak to the director, Dr Bromley Derry, a “very eccentric chap”. He asked what he could sing and he said Ave Maria, and asked what version? Gordon said “oh, is there more than one?” which made Derry smile. Dr Derry offered him a job as an office boy, to write certificates and make tea, so he never made it to Schotts. Later he would go back to the London College of Music to teach. He won a bursary, which paid for his singing lessons.</p>
0:20:30	<p>He had a natural singing voice. That’s quite a controversial subject! Singing is one of the most difficult things to teach. Everyone can sing and to put over a song you don’t have to have a fantastic voice. Anecdote about an actor, Rex Harrison, singing a song by speaking to the music, which brings a tear to his eye.</p>
0:22:00	<p>He got a British Council scholarship to study in Germany which is where he learnt German Leider which he performed at Conway Hall.</p>

	He studied there with a famous baritone and coach called Gerhard Hüsich.
0:22:50	Got basic training at London College of Music. He learnt from a teacher who was in the BBC chorus and learnt many English songs. That was a good grounding for his singing. He learnt Vaughn Williams, early English songs, George Butterworth.
0:24:08	He later met Vaughn Williams. When he came back from Germany he did a lot of broadcasting, live recitals at 9 am. He chose to do a song by Vaughn Williams so he wrote to him to ask if he would hear the songs and give him some idea of the tempo. He said yes, asked him to bring a pianist to play as he was too old to play. Vaughn Williams asked him to recite the poem before he sang the song, which flabbergasted him: singers are not necessarily good actors! He got through it. Vaughn Williams' tempo was very slow, Gordon had it timed at the BBC for 3 minutes, but at that pace it would have taken 6. When you're young you sing quicker!
0:27:27	He didn't have particular ambitions. He had an agent, who got him into the open air theatre in 1956 to sing the Shakespeare songs. He got the job as a singer in <i>As You Like It</i> . There were famous actors like Robert Thorndike on the stage. He realized when he heard the speech all the world's a stage that he was in a famous play: "What would my mother and my auntie Ethel in Bolton say?" It was wonderful training listening to the actors, now he loves poetry more than singing.
0:30:40	He wrote, later on, a one man show: <i>Gilbert and Sullivan a la carte</i> and toured the world with it. He went on the QEII with it. It was extremely popular. In 1970 he toured South Africa with the Cape Performing Arts Board.
0:31:55	<p>He was a full time student at the Guildhall. He had a grant as well as a scholarship from the LCC. His first teacher was nothing special but later on he had Walter Gruda, a Jewish German refugee, who ran a Lieder class. There was a famous Russian singer Oda Slobodskaya, at the Guildhall but everyone wanted to learn German songs instead, even though it was right after the war, Schubert and Schumann etc. He continued lessons privately with Gruda afterwards.</p> <p>He wrote to Peter Pears (tenor who worked with Benjamin Britten) to ask advice for who he should study with in Germany. Peter Pears recommended Gerhard Hüsich. Hüsich knew a lot about vocal technique and gave him advice about the human voice and the value of related vowel sounds and how they change as the notes you are singing get higher. The vowel sounds need to change as you sing or you might break your voice. He had difficulty with his high notes before this training. Sings some examples of vowel sounds changing.</p> <p>He didn't know Peter Pears personally but he'd been to hear him sing and there was something about him performing with Britten. He had listened to him and so wrote to him and met him for half an hour. Many years later he spoke to Peter Pears and said he was lucky to live with Britten as you'd have lots of rehearsal time. But Pears told him he was</p>

	<p>lucky if he got 20 minutes! The reason was Britten adored jazz and he thought you could over rehearse. Talks about importance of leaving something to chance. Being trained you lose the ability to sing jazz – he tried to rehearse an Ella Fitzgerald song but it was all wrong. As a trained singer you lose something natural jazz singers have.</p>
<p>0:47:00</p>	<p>Going out in London as a young person: when he worked at the London College of Music as an office boy he had free tickets to go to the Wigmore Hall so he went 3 or 4 times a week for concerts. Vaughn Williams was often in the audience listening and he used to see him there. He heard all the great musicians. Talks about how badly paid the teachers at the music schools were and how the law was changed to put them onto the teaching pay scale. Even Oda Slobodskaya was living in poverty.</p> <p>Was enthusiastic about all kinds of music. Before he was trained he would “croon”, and has always had feeling for light music. When he lived in Morecambe there were talent competitions in the Winter Gardens. Sings ‘There’s a Cowboy Riding in the Sky’. He sang that in a vocal competition and won the talent show – he thinks because he was more local than the competition!</p> <p>If you have a natural singing voice you just copy what other people do.</p>
<p>0:55:05</p>	<p>How came to perform at Conway Hall: probably through his agent. He thinks Conway Hall used to contact artists to see if you would appear. Mostly they didn’t have singers, they only had quartets. One singer per season, according to the program he has. He was fortunate enough to be asked to do that. “The money wasn’t that great”. Can’t remember how much he was paid.</p> <p>Talks about the other performers at the April Fools Concert he performed at – all sorts of well-known people on the list. John Amis, who had a television show “a very flamboyant gentleman”.</p>
<p>0:58:37</p>	<p>First performance at CH was the song cycle, Schubert with Paul Hamburger. Did about 3 concerts at CH. First was in 1964. Was 28 (RV wrongly says 32) at the performance. Says male voices develop later, compared to female voices which mature younger.</p> <p>Anecdote about difficulty of teaching singers without natural talent. You get this attitude with singing rather than other instruments “its such a natural part of you and everyone can do it to a point”.</p> <p>Details of the night: “I was terribly, terribly nervous. I always suffered dreadfully with nerves.” That’s why he was happy to do other things than perform and take on other work.</p> <p>Talks about how he was given translation work when he came back from Germany, first accompanying Romanian musicians to hear Peter Pears and Benjamin Britten perform. Because of his personal connection he was able to arrange for the Romanians to run into Britten ‘by accident’.</p>

	<p>There's no rational explanation about why some performers are nervous and others are not. Singers have to worry about getting colds which can make it impossible to sing. "If someone breathes over you you run a mile ... so we are a difficult lot".</p>
1:10:54	<p>Had come to 1 or 2 of the CH concerts before but not a lot. CH was a wonderful experience. First impression: thank goodness it's not the Albert Hall because it's a much smaller hall to work in. How nice to be getting up to sing and to be paid for it – but that increases your nerves "because you are only as good as your last concert".</p> <p>As a classical singer you have to stand stock still: "if you're a male singer you are stuck with only one or two positions, you can't put your hands in your pockets". Women can make more movements but men must stay still.</p>
1:14:34	<p>Has no memories of the architecture/building because he was nervous before the concert. Singers are obsessed with themselves and their performance "it's a question of me, me, me". Singers are neurotic, anxious about their voices.</p> <p>The hall acoustics were very good. Friends who came to hear him said it had gone alright.</p> <p>It depends what you are singing – he was most nervous during 'auditorio' [phonetic] when you had to sit on display the whole time. The concert at CH was different because he was performing alone and could get into the song cycle.</p> <p>The song cycle lasts about an hour. Because you are continually singing its better than sitting and waiting on view. Talks about how difficult he thinks dancing is – tougher than being a singer, although classical singing is not easy.</p>
1:19:32	<p>At the point he performed at CH his voice still had to develop although he had already had his training in Germany (1958-1960). He gave Leider recitals on the BBC quite a lot, which is why he was invited to CH.</p> <p>The other quartets and ensembles on the bill were very distinguished and he was very honored to be asked to sing with these musicians: Melos ensemble, Amici string quartet and the London string quartet.</p> <p>"It didn't pay the rent for a year like a pop singer, nonetheless I didn't mind fitting in, doing other jobs". Anecdote about one of his translation jobs where he was asked to use technical German which he did not know – he only had conversational German.</p>
1:24:25	<p>He always arrived at least an hour before a concert because he was neurotic about central heating. He would arrive with a set of keys to turn the radiators off. "and while the audience would be feeling a bit chilly, Mr Honey's voice would be feeling very comfortable because the heating wouldn't make him sing out of tune, because an overheated place is fatal for a singer". But he didn't have to use his</p>

	<p>keys at CH because the temperature was already good.</p> <p>There was an artists' room to change in. It wasn't evening dress or tuxedo. You wore a suit or dark clothes.</p>
1:26:32	<p>The audiences were always very good at CH. "There was a lot of polite clapping. You didn't get cheered on unless you were a famous carouser or something." There was always a good crowd in so you didn't just sing to half a dozen people. Sometimes if you booked Wigmore Hall you'd sing to 20 people. CH had their own subscribers and they circulated to their own audiences. However, not all those who liked quartets would like singers, but perhaps it was a different audience. CH probably advertised in musical magazines and then you'd hopefully have friends who would come and support you.</p> <p>He didn't know anyone who worked at CH. He had an agent and they may have been in touch with him.</p> <p>The audience were distinguished: they were interested in the arts. Anecdote about Kenneth Williams being outside one of his concerts at Wigmore Hall. He was a distinguished audience member!</p>
1:32:06	<p>The other concerts he did were the April Fools Concert and he did Winterreise at CH. But he only sang 2 or 3 times at CH. "but CH concerts always had a great prestige because they only employed the very finest of artistes! I have to say that don't I?" [laughs] The quartets were world famous, he wasn't.</p> <p>Most audience members would pay on the door. Does not know if CH had subscription concerts. The price on the program says 3 shillings. Very low compared to today's prices. People didn't earn very much so it was all relative. He remembers paying £1.25 a week for a room. When he came to London in the forties there were lots of old ladies with large houses in Kensington and Chelsea who let rooms.</p>
1:38:16	<p>How did he prepare for a concert? He was always in training, like an athlete. "That's why a singer's life is absolute hell" - because if you catch a cold you can't perform. He didn't do a lot of warming up. Some musicians never practice at all.</p> <p>Important to keep fit. Not as physically taxing to sing as to dance or play sport. But you did feel tired after a concert "when you sing you sing with your whole body, you are giving everything you've got."</p> <p>Would not go out with friends after a concert. Was always an early to bedder and early riser. Loves early mornings and doesn't like night life.</p> <p>Singers have to be careful about their diets. In the 1970s he had health problems and he went to a doctor who recommended he go vegetarian and he became fit again.</p>
1:44:00	<p>Favourite memory of Conway Hall? Just of being invited to be with these well-known people, it was an honour.</p>

1:44:45	<p>He wrote his Gilbert and Sullivan show in the late 1960s. He still adores Gilbert and Sullivan.</p> <p>He performed at a summer season at Cromer with Ronnie Corbett in the 1950s. It was Ronnie Corbett's first job. He was always very easy to get along with. He had a marvelous personality.</p>
	<p>Break in recording</p>
1:48:31	<p>How did the lighter music he did compare to performing at CH? "It was easier in a sense." Although he was still nervous but at Cromer he had to introduce people and he found it terrifying. Children should be taught drama so they don't get nervous speaking in public.</p> <p>He sang a song called 'Seafever' at Cromer and Ronnie Corbett used to send him a Christmas card with the lyrics in. Ronnie Corbett was really good at remembering what other people did and got on with everyone, which he thinks is the secret to his success.</p> <p>He was never nervous when doing comedy. He did a summer season in Blackpool with Thora Hird and Freddie Hinton which he did and he wasn't nervous, it was a speaking role. He was glad to do it because it was well paid. It was only where serious recitals are concerned that he'd get really nervous. It's not the same tension as standing alone in front of a piano and singing for an hour.</p> <p>Asked if he was more comfortable performing back in Lancashire: depends what the concert is and who was in the audience, would be more nervous performing in front of the Queen than Mr and Mrs Smith in Blackpool.</p>
1:54:04	<p>Where did his confidence come from? When his mother was selling Dolly Blues she would take him out of school and put him in a brand new white shirt. She'd get him to twirl in front of the customers to show how white the Dolly Blues made his shirt. "My mother gave me confidence if anything ... and you also get your humour".</p> <p>His mother used to say it was important just to do my best and that gave him confidence. That will leave any child feeling happier, knowing he's made his parents happy. He never had pressure to succeed.</p> <p>He loves speaking to strangers: "I was very much in love with the ordinary way of life, I was never blinkered to step onto a stage, it never worried me". He was happy when he was working elsewhere and didn't have to perform.</p>
1:57:53	<p>His mother was proud of his singing. She died in the early sixties so she didn't see him do a lot of things.</p> <p>His Auntie Ethel and Uncle Howard in Bolton would listen to his Lieder recitals on the BBC and his aunt would call and say "Why can't you sing something in English with a nice melody to it" which would make him smile.</p>

	<p>“Being healthy and having a sense of humour are the most important things in life”.</p>
2:01:06	<p>Has not been back to Conway Hall much over the years. Not free on Sundays. Some of his friends at Charterhouse come regularly to listen to the trios. He only lives 3 bus stops away.</p> <p>What he thinks of the hall more recently: has just been out and seen the size of the balcony and its much bigger than he thought it was. Especially upstairs, there are a lot of seats. “Of course if I had known that I would have been 4 times as nervous!”</p>
2:02:49	<p>If he could change CH in some way: he would like a Gilbert and Sullivan concert. They are still very popular.</p> <p>“That’s how I would like to change Conway Hall, but don’t tell too many people, Gilbert and Sullivan: they are still wonderful, wonderful songs”.</p> <p>Sings a snatch of a song.</p>