

HELEN KOTAS (1916-2000): A FEMALE PIONEER IN MAJOR US ORCHESTRAS

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Helen Kotas was an accomplished musician and teacher who helped open the door for women in major US orchestras. In 1941 the Chicago Symphony hired its first female brass musician, principal hornist Helen Kotas. With that daring move, she became a pioneer for her gender in the major orchestras of North America. Despite her many contributions to the musical community, Kotas's life has not been researched and documented. This paper looks at Helen Kotas's career as well as a glimpse at her life and personality. In addition to documenting her life, this dissertation attempts to show at least a portion of Kotas's philosophy of teaching and horn playing. She was an accomplished horn soloist and studied the literature extensively.

Kotas performed in the Chicago Civic Orchestra, the Woman's Symphony Orchestra, and Leopold Stokowski's All-American Youth Orchestra. Kotas was hired by Fritz Reiner as third horn of the Pittsburgh Symphony. When Frederick Stock, conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, heard that Helen Kotas was going to Pittsburgh, he insisted that she audition for the CSO. Kotas auditioned on the Concerto for Horn by Richard Strauss and the concertmaster said, "Hire her!" She performed as principal horn with the orchestra until Artur Rodzinski was hired as conductor in 1948 and replaced Kotas with Philip Farkas. Following her time with the CSO, Kotas was principal horn of the Chicago Lyric Opera and taught at the Sherwood and American Conservatories. She was an active soloist and premiered works by Arne Oldberg and Hugo Kauder.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The European tradition of all-male orchestras, particularly in France and the Germanic countries was imported to the US in the nineteenth century.¹ This tradition survived well into the twentieth century and continues to be the custom in some major European orchestras. In 1983, the general music director of the Berlin Philharmonic, Herbert van Karajan, hired the first female orchestra member, the clarinetist Sabine Meyer. Her male colleagues were in an uproar and harassed Meyer until she left nine months later. Men would “slide their chairs away from her”² when she sat in the orchestra and the union proclaimed that “the all-male ensemble had the ‘democratic right’ to choose who it wanted.”³ Until 1997, when the Austrian government demanded open auditions for the privately run but state supported Vienna Philharmonic, there were no females under contract.⁴ At that time, the female harpist who had performed with the orchestra for nearly thirty years was offered a contract and listed in the program. Although the Vienna Philharmonic still limits the number of women in their orchestra, other European orchestras have accepted women and their numbers are growing.⁵ Female musicians were accepted earlier in the orchestras in some countries, particularly in Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. The transition to acceptance of

¹William Osborne, “Art Is Just an Excuse: Gender Bias in International Orchestras,” William Osborne and Abbie Conant, <http://www.osborne-conant.org/excuse.htm> (Accessed April 18, 2009).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hyde Flippo, “Extra: Women and the Vienna Philharmonic,” The German Way and More, <http://www.german-way.com/women.html> (Accessed April 18, 2009).

⁵ William Osborne, “Art Is Just an Excuse: Gender Bias in International Orchestras,” William Osborne and Abbie Conant, <http://www.osborne-conant.org/excuse.htm> (Accessed April 18, 2009).

females in US orchestras, though earlier than Vienna and Berlin, was slow but increased steadily.

Before 1941, female musicians in most US cities, particularly those who did not play stringed instruments, were usually relegated to all-female or training orchestras. That year the Chicago Symphony hired its first female brass musician, principal hornist Helen Kotas.⁶ With that daring move, she became a pioneer for her gender in the major orchestras of North America. Kotas worked toward that prestigious position, having first been a member of the Chicago Civic Orchestra, the Woman's Symphony Orchestra, and Leopold Stokowski's All-American Youth Orchestra.⁷ While earning a degree in psychology at the University of Chicago, she studied horn with Frank Kryl and Louis Dufrasne.⁸

In 1941, conductor Fritz Reiner hired Kotas as third horn of the Pittsburgh Symphony.⁹ When later that year she won the principal horn position in the Chicago Symphony, conducted by Frederick Stock, she was released from her contract with Pittsburgh after a suitable replacement was found. Her replacement was James Chambers who later became principal horn of the New York Philharmonic. When Artur Rodzinski was hired as conductor of the Chicago Symphony in 1948, he replaced Kotas with Philip Farkas. According to Lowell Greer, an American horn virtuoso who studied

⁶ Chicago Symphony Orchestra, "Historical Timeline," <http://www.cso.org/main.taf?p=7,2,1,10> (Accessed April 8, 2009).

⁷ Melissa Derechailo, "The Goddess List," The Horn Goddess, http://www.thehorn goddess.com/Goddess_List/Goddess_List.htm (Accessed April 8, 2009).

Lowell Greer, "Helen Kotas Hirsch," The Italian Horn Website, <http://www.corno.it/Articoli/LGreer/HelenKotasHirsch.html> (Accessed April 8, 2009).

⁸ Melissa Derechailo, "The Goddess List," The Horn Goddess, http://www.thehorn goddess.com/Goddess_List/Goddess_List.htm (Accessed April 8, 2009).

⁹ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 5.

with Kotas, her firing was very likely because she was a female.¹⁰ The *Chicago Symphony History* briefly acknowledges the hiring of Helen Kotas in 1941 but does not expand on her performance or the reasons she left.¹¹

This dissertation presents a biography of Helen Kotas, with an emphasis on her horn playing career, and her significance as a female in the music profession. Details of Kotas's life and career as a horn player are scattered among several documents and in the memories of students and friends. I was able to access Helen Kotas's personal documents, pictures, the transcript of an interview conducted by Frank Monnelly, and newspaper articles at the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Interviews with her college roommate and several of her students contributed opinions and stories which completed the research on Helen Kotas. Her contribution to the field of horn playing was not limited to being the first female principal hornist in a major symphony; she was an accomplished horn soloist and studied the literature extensively. This dissertation also attempts to reveal at least a portion of Kotas's philosophy of teaching and playing. As an outstanding musician and teacher, Helen Kotas helped open the door for women in major US orchestras.

¹⁰ Lowell Greer, "Helen Kotas Hirsch," The Italian Horn Website, <http://www.corno.it/Articoli/LGreer/HelenKotasHirsch.html> (Accessed April 8, 2009).

¹¹Chicago Symphony Orchestra, "Historical Timeline," <http://www.cso.org/main.taf?p=7,2,1,10> (Accessed April 8, 2009).

CHAPTER 2

HELEN KOTAS – THE EARLY YEARS: 1916-1941

Helen Anne Kotas was born on June 7, 1916 to Bohemian immigrants, Rudolph and Mamie Kotas.¹² Helen and her sister Beatrice grew up in a brick house on Woodside Ave in the Hollywood subdivision of Brookfield, IL. Kotas began her musical training with piano lessons at the age of 6, which continued until she was 14.¹³ Encouraged by her father to play a wind instrument in high school, she began playing the cornet after graduating from the Corkery Grammar School in 1928. She joined the Chicago High School Girls Band after studying the cornet for only two months. The director noticed Helen's swift progress on the cornet and said to her, "Why don't you take up the horn – horn players are always in great demand and you seem to be getting along so well on cornet. I think it would be a good idea."¹⁴ So her father bought a Wunderlich single F horn at Brousek's music store for \$25.¹⁵ They took it to Frank Kyrl, horn player with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1914-17), who approved of the horn. Kyrl lived a few blocks from the Kotas family and gave her horn lessons through high school and junior college.¹⁶

Helen participated in varied activities. In the summer of 1927 she attended Millhurst, the Chicago YWCA Camp for Younger Girls, and joined the Girls Reserve the

¹² US Census Bureau, Rudolph and Mamie Kotas (1920); Johnson, Susan, *In Memoriam: Helen Kotas Hirsch*, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Chicago, IL, 2001).

¹³ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Randall Faust, "In Memorium: Helen Kotas Hirsch and The Sound of the Horn," *The Horn Call* vol. XXXI, no. 3 (May 2001): 35.

¹⁶ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 1.

following September.¹⁷ In addition to attending several dances, Kotas was a pitcher on two girl's baseball teams.¹⁸

Although it appears she remained involved with the YWCA, Kotas's most significant high school experiences involved music.¹⁹ She attended Harrison Technical High School with a band and orchestra that were ranked the best in the city. Kotas was a member of the band when it competed at the 5th and 6th annual National High School Band Contests in Flint, MI and Tulsa, OK respectively. The judges at these competitions were famous band conductors and composers including John Philip Sousa, Victor Grabel, and Edwin Franko Goldman.

Kotas continued to play in the Chicago Girls Band through high school attaining the highest honors awarded by the ensemble.²⁰ In 1932, at the National Instrumental Solo and Ensemble Contests, she received "first honors" as a soloist and the horn quartet in which she performed won second place. The horn quartet included Helen, Russell Shriner, Charles Machan, and Frank Brouk (who became principal horn of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the 1960s). One of her judge's commented on her solo playing, "You are a very fine horn player. Develop a bigger-rounder tone, Bravo!"²¹

¹⁷ *Millhurst 'On the Fox': Chicago YWCA Camp for Younger Girls* (Near Plano, Illinois, 1929); Helen Kotas, "Girls Reserve Membership Card," Scrapbook in Helen Kotas Hirsch Collection in The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (September 24, 1929).

¹⁸ Helen Kotas, "dance cards" Scrapbook in Helen Kotas Hirsch Collection in The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Chicago, IL, 1929-30).; Helen Kotas, "handwritten lists of baseball teams," Scrapbook in Helen Kotas Hirsch Collection in The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Chicago, IL, 1929).

¹⁹ Programs and papers from Scrapbook in Helen Kotas Hirsch Collection in The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Chicago, IL, 1927-32).

²⁰ Helen Kotas Hirsch Collection, Awards and Medals, The Rosenthal Archives of The Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

²¹ Judges's comment sheet from Scrapbook in Helen Kotas Hirsch Collection in The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Chicago, IL, 1927-32).

In addition to winning competitions, the orchestra at Harrison accompanied the glee club for musicals. Kotas played in the orchestras for *Robin Hood*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and *The Mikado*.²² In addition to performing in school ensembles, at age 14 she became the fourth horn in the Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago and after one year moved to first.²³ Her premiere concert on principal horn was at the Drake Hotel in Chicago and "the review in the paper the next day said, 'obviously there is a change in the first horn,' so I [Kotas] was pleased with that."²⁴

Kotas's musical experiences in high school were high quality and varied. She performed in many different genres and styles and was surrounded by fellow band and orchestra members who were highly ranked at the national competitions. Kotas received good fundamental teaching from Frank Kyrl. That, combined with excellent ensemble playing experience in high school led her to study and perform beyond high school.

After Helen graduated from high school on June 16, 1932, she attended the Lyons Township Junior College in LaGrange, IL.²⁵ There she played first horn in the West Suburban Symphony Orchestra performing, among other works, Antonin Dvorak's "New World Symphony". Kotas enjoyed playing on her single F horn but her teacher, Kyrl, felt she needed a double horn for the Dvorak symphony so he loaned her his Geyer double horn. Kotas said:

²² Programs from The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Chicago, IL, 1929-32).

²³ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 2.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 1.

.... [Kyrl] taught me how to finger certain things just so I could get the high notes. So I did, and the program went very well indeed. My father, Mr. Kyrl, and my mother were there. Mr. Kyrl said to my father, "Someday she is going to be in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra." Unfortunately, he [Kyrl] died just the year before I was in the Orchestra but that is what he said at that time.²⁶

By her second year at the junior college (1933), Kyrl decided Kotas should study with Louis Dufrasne, principal horn of the NBC Orchestra in Chicago and the former principal of the Chicago Opera Company.²⁷ In 1934 she received her first Carl Geyer double horn as a gift from her sister Bea and played it until 1954.²⁸ The bell was twelve and a half inches in diameter and silver plated because Helen did not like the "green hand," caused by the interaction between normal skin acidity and unlacquered brass.²⁹ Helen performed on Geyer double horns and mouthpieces throughout her career, as did many of her students.³⁰ She continued to play in the Woman's Symphony Orchestra and the West Suburban Symphony Orchestra and graduated from junior college in May of 1934.³¹

Kotas applied to and was accepted by the psychology department at the University of Chicago and was offered a half-tuition scholarship because she had been ranked second in her junior college class.³² She wanted to continue to perform and auditioned for Charles Bricken, the orchestra director at the University of Chicago, who

²⁶ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 2.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Christopher Leuba, "Helen Kotas: An Appreciation," *The Horn Call* (November 1995): 47-8.; Jack Riddle, email to author (March 27, 2010).

²⁹ Loan Worksheet, Music in Chicago Exhibition, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL: Lowell Greer, interview by author (September 26, 2009): 79.

³⁰ Jack Riddle, email to author (March 27, 2010).

³¹ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 1-2.

³² Ibid., 2-3.

was so impressed he offered her another half-tuition scholarship to play in the orchestra. As a result, her tuition at the University of Chicago was completely paid, which, in Helen's words, "was very nice indeed."³³ While working on the undergraduate degree, Kotas maintained an active playing schedule in the Woman's Symphony Orchestra, a woodwind quintet, and the university orchestra.

Despite the heavy work load, Kotas retained personal relationships with her peers in college.³⁴ One of her college roommates, Dena Epstein, fondly recalls many great times with Kotas. Epstein was a year younger than Kotas and lived across the hall from her in the dormitory. The two young women first met when Kotas came across the hall and offered Epstein a cookie. The following year Kotas, Epstein, and another friend, Irene Ford, moved out of the dorm to share an apartment. Epstein recalls the three planned to alternate cooking but the two older girls did not trust her, so they gave Epstein cooking lessons on the evenings that she was to prepare the meal. Epstein described Kotas as a very friendly and relaxed person who took her horn playing very seriously but not in an anxious manner. Epstein remembers her as a very hard worker who did not waste time. For example, Kotas invited several of her friends to her parents' house for a Sunday dinner. After dinner, Helen gathered some mending, passed it around, and had her friends help with the mending while they chatted. Kotas saw the opportunity to be productive while they enjoyed their time together. Epstein and Kotas remained lifetime friends.

Helen graduated from the University of Chicago on March 17, 1936 with a

³³ Ibid., 2.

³⁴ Dena Epstein, interview by Heather Thayer (June 1, 2009): 47-9.

bachelor of arts from the Department of Social Sciences.³⁵ She continued graduate studies at the University of Chicago but also auditioned for and won a position in the Chicago Civic Orchestra in the fall of 1936.³⁶ The Civic Orchestra was conducted by Hans Lange and was already considered the training orchestra for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Hans Lange was probably one of the most influential people to help me [Kotas] because he felt that I could play and he tried to make occasions for me to be hired to play in various places. For instance he was conducting in Michigan to relieve a friend of his who was ill, Michael Press, who was a very close friend of his and they needed a first horn for one of the concerts and he asked me to come to play.³⁷

Lange helped Kotas obtain her first job with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as sixth horn for performances of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.³⁸ Kotas auditioned on the sixth horn part for Dr. Frederick Stock who then said to the personnel manager, "Hire her."³⁹ After that audition the orchestra continued to employ her as an extra horn. She generally played extra horn or, if principal hornist Philip Farkas was ill, she substituted for him. So Kotas: "...had the opportunity to play many, many solos and one thing just led to another."⁴⁰

While Helen was searching for a position in an orchestra, she traveled to Ravinia, the summer home of the Chicago Symphony, to audition for conductors.⁴¹ On July 26,

³⁵ "Helen Kotas," *University of Chicago Diploma*, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL.

³⁶ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 3.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 25.

1938, Kotas played for Eugene Goosens, conductor of the Cincinnati Orchestra, who wrote her a recommendation letter.

The bearer of this letter, the horn player Helen Kotas, recently played and auditioned for me. Her performance on that occasion warrants my describing her as a magnificent artist, capable of holding a position of utmost responsibility in a major symphony orchestra. As first horn she would prove an acquisition to any great orchestra and with a dazzling technique and beautiful tone, she is as well-equipped as any male performer to meet any and all demands that be made upon her artistry.⁴²

While Kotas was playing in the Civic Orchestra, the Woman's Symphony Orchestra, and extra in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, she began performing with the Pro Arte String Quartet, one of the premiere string quartets in the world.⁴³ On February 7, 1938 she performed the Mozart's Horn Quintet at the University of Chicago in Mandel Hall, becoming the first woman to perform with the quartet.⁴⁴ Kotas said they could have asked anyone to play: "but he (University of Chicago orchestra director, Charles Bricken) insisted that he wanted to give me the opportunity to play."⁴⁵ In that same month, there was an announcement in *Women in Music*:

Helen, first horn player of the Woman's Orchestra of Chicago, earned a fine compliment for herself and her organization, when she was asked, last month to play a week's performances with Frederick Stock's celebrated Chicago Symphony, as one of the eight horns required for Strauss *Ein Heldenleben*.⁴⁶

⁴² Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 25; Eugene Goosens, letter to Helen Kotas, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (July 26, 1938).

⁴³ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 24.

⁴⁴ Pro Arte String Quartet of Brussels, "Quatuor de la Cour de Belgique," 7 February 1938, The University of Chicago Mandel Hall, Chicago, IL; Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 24.

⁴⁵ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 24.

⁴⁶ *Women in Music* 3 no. 6, February 1938, Orchestrette Classique (New York: New York).

As a result of her excellent reputation with the orchestra, Dr. Stock recommended Kotas for the All-American Youth Orchestra that Leopold Stokowski was assembling to tour South America in the summer of 1940.⁴⁷ Kotas auditioned and was accepted along with seventeen other young musicians from Chicago. The other horn players in the orchestra were James Chambers, Mason Jones, and William Sanberg.⁴⁸ Kotas kept a detailed journal of the trip and their adventures. During the return journey aboard a ship, Stokowski told Kotas he was pleased with her playing and asked her to return the next summer for the US tour.⁴⁹

Kotas's active life as a musician led her to the Rockford (IL) Symphony where she played first horn on *A Midsummer's Night Dream* by Felix Mendelssohn with its famous horn solo in the *Nocturne*.⁵⁰ Olive Woodward Hoss, wife of Wendell Hoss, who had been principal horn in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1923, happened to be in the audience that evening and was "very impressed"⁵¹ by Kotas's playing. Mrs. Hoss told Kotas to make a tape to send to her husband, so she recorded: "the most famous horn solos from the various symphonic repertoire"⁵² in Carl Fischer's studio and sent it to Wendell Hoss. Impressed with Helen's playing, Hoss commented in a letter to her

⁴⁷ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 3.

⁴⁸ The All American Youth Orchestra, 1940; James Chambers and Mason Jones went on to have great careers of their own.

⁴⁹ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 3.

⁵⁰ Randall Faust, "Kleine Abendmusik für Horn Allein: A Faculty Recital In Memory of Helen Kotas Hirsch (1916-2000)" (lecture, Hainline Theatre, Macomb, IL, January 29, 2001); Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 4.

⁵¹ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 4.

⁵² Ibid.

that: “the record was a remarkable achievement. I am sure I would never go through a list...with such practically flawless accuracy...I hope you will find some satisfactory opportunity to use such ability.”⁵³ Hoss, who had recently been hired by Fritz Reiner to play principal horn in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, recommended that Reiner listen to Kotas.⁵⁴ So in February of 1939 Fritz Reiner asked Helen to play for him.⁵⁵ It appears that Kotas auditioned “officially” for Reiner in February 1940 for the position of third horn for the 1941-42 Pittsburgh Symphony season.⁵⁶ In an interview with Frank Monnelly, Kotas described the audition experience with Fritz Reiner:

I got there...I auditioned in February in Mr. Reiner’s apartment and Wendell was sitting right in the room and Mr. Reiner was sitting next to me. I was going through all of these passages and every time he would say to me, “You know that, don’t you?” and I said, “Yes, I do.” He finally kept on going until the end and [he had me] play a combination of the first and third horn parts of *Die Meistersinger* and it’s very hard. And even Wagner knew that one horn couldn’t play this because the first horn would play and then the third horn would play and so on. But he had me play the whole thing and he said, “You didn’t know that, did you?” and I said, “No.” He was completely satisfied. Then he sat down and I think it was partly because I was a girl and he hadn’t heard a girl play before and he didn’t know how much endurance I have. So then after the long audition he sat down and played the Strauss Concerto [the Concerto for Horn and Orchestra by Richard [Strauss] with me and we had a marvelous experience obviously.⁵⁷

In the spring of 1941 Philip Farkas, who had been principal horn since the 1936 season in Chicago, resigned to take the principal horn position in the Cleveland

⁵³ Wendell Hoss, letter to Helen Kotas (May 13, 1939).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Letter from Fritz Reiner (February 23, 1939) Pittsburgh, PA; Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 5.

⁵⁶ Telegram from Fritz Reiner (February 29, 1939) Pittsburgh, PA; Letter from Charles Kunan, contractor for The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (February 26, 1940); There are several letters and telegrams to Helen from Fritz Reiner starting in 1939 but she was released from her contract with Pittsburgh Symphony in May of 1941 which means she was not on the roster to play until the fall of 1941.

⁵⁷ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 5.

Orchestra.⁵⁸ Lange asked Kotas to audition for his position, but she was already committed to the Pittsburgh Symphony.⁵⁹ Kotas had been playing regularly with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra so instead of a formal audition she played the Concerto, Op. 11 by Richard Strauss with the orchestra during a Saturday morning rehearsal. Dr. Stock was “very anxious”⁶⁰ to have her and Chicago’s concertmaster John Weicher concurred, so they contacted the personnel manager of Pittsburgh. Fritz Reiner finally agreed that if they could find an appropriate replacement, he would release Kotas from the contract.⁶¹ Kotas called on her friends from the All-American Youth Orchestra and in the end James Chambers won the job in the Pittsburgh Symphony.⁶²

Despite Kotas’s heavy participation in music, she continued to develop other interests. The summer before Kotas began playing with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra she went on her second tour with the All-American Youth Orchestra.⁶³ This was a tour of the US that ended in California. After the tour Kotas drove to Newport Beach with some friends to see a 136-foot schooner.⁶⁴ The boat’s crew was a group of artists preparing for a sailing trip to Hawaii. She asked if there was any room on the boat for one more and they told her, yes, if she was willing to work. So in August 1941, just months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Kotas sailed to Hilo, HI. A newspaper

⁵⁸ Edward H. Tarr, “Farkas, Philip Francis,” Oxford Music Online.

⁵⁹ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid; Letter from Howard Spencer, manager of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (May 2, 1941) Pittsburgh, PA.

⁶² Randall Faust, interview by author (October 7, 2009): 65.

⁶³ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 3.

⁶⁴ Helen Kotas, Personal journal of trip to Hawaii, July, 1941, Helen Kotas Hirsch Collection in The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL.

article in the *Hilo Tribune Herald* documented the event, “20 Arrive on 136 Foot Schooner.” The article mentions Kotas: “Also in the group is Helen, who plays French horn with the Chicago Philharmonic Orchestra and a member of the young orchestra which toured South America.”⁶⁵ Kotas, who continued to enjoy sailing for many years, kept a detailed journal documenting that trip.

Kotas’s musical ability was fostered in the excellent ensembles with which she performed in her first years as a horn player, including the Chicago High School Girls Band, the Harrison High School Band and Orchestra, and the Woman’s Symphony Orchestra of Chicago. A great deal of credit must be given to her first horn teacher, Frank Kyril. His guidance and establishment of solid fundamentals gave Kotas the start she needed to, only thirteen years later, become the principal horn of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

⁶⁵ “20 Arrive On 136 Foot Schooner,” *Hilo Tribune Herald* July 30, 1941.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHICAGO SYMPHONY YEARS: 1941-1948

In the fall of 1941, at the age of 25, Helen became the first female principal wind player contracted by a major US orchestra, an honor sometimes attributed to two other women. Some award the title to Ethel Merker who played horn in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the 1968-69 season, years after Kotas.⁶⁶ Further, Merker was not a contract player, rather a regular substitute. Doriot Anthony Dwyer was principal flute in the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1952 to 1999 and has been cited as the first female in a major US orchestra.⁶⁷ While she was the first female principal in the woodwind section, Helen predated her in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra by over ten years.

Kotas's superior artistry was the reason Dr. Stock hired her and why the public responded to her hiring so positively. In an interview with Frank Monnelly in 1990, Kotas described her reaction to joining the orchestra:

Of course, I was very pleased and I had wonderful experiences. And I was able to play with people who had so much experience and were such artists that it gave me a great opportunity to learn from them. I have always said, always felt myself and I have told all my students, always try to play with people that are better than you are so that you can learn from them and so that was my great experience here. Here I was playing with people who had been artists for years from whom I could learn a great deal and they were all very, very generous with their time and playing with me and showing me how to do things. So, it was a real experience obviously.⁶⁸

Kotas was clearly honored to be a member of the orchestra and felt very

⁶⁶ "Former Musicians," The Rosenthal Archives, http://cso.org/uploadedFiles/8_about/History_-_Rosenthal_archives/former_musicians.pdf (Accessed March 26, 2010).

⁶⁷ Kristen Kean, "First Flute: The Pioneering Career of Doriot Anthony Dwyer," (PhD. diss., Southeastern Louisiana University, 1999), 1.

⁶⁸ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 6.

welcomed by her colleagues; she told Monnelly that she was “very well accepted.”⁶⁹ When she met with Dr. Stock and Mr. Voegeli, the orchestra manager, to sign her contract for a second year, Dr. Stock had spoken with the principal wind players and they were very pleased with her work and wanted her to return.⁷⁰ She also had “a wonderful rapport”⁷¹ with the other members of her section and the entire orchestra. Kotas related that playing with specific colleagues was very rewarding. For example, when she and Robert Lindemann, the principal clarinetist: “played things together like, for instance in the slow movement of the Franck Symphony, it was like one person playing. We had the same ideas and everything.”⁷² Another example she shared was the dialogue between the horn and the flute in Symphony No. 5 by Dmitri Shostakovich. When she played it with Ernie Liegl: “it was really a dialogue and this was a marvelous experience because it was like the four woodwinds and the horn were playing chamber music like a woodwind quintet, which is what has to happen.”⁷³

Comments at the time Kotas was hired and for years after support Kotas’s acceptance in the orchestra. Edward Kleinhammer, bass trombone player for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, said Kotas’s sound was: “bold and singing, her phrasing flawless.”⁷⁴ He also said: “she was a very aggressive player, didn’t hold anything back.”⁷⁵ Arnold Jacobs, tuba player in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, often said that

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ James Janega, “Ex-CSO musician Helen Hirsch, 84.” *Chicago Tribune* (Dec 21, 2000).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

in all the time they worked together he never heard her miss a note.⁷⁶ In a lesson taken by Randall Faust, Kotas said she did crack a note in Beethoven's Symphony No. 4 but, without a tuba part, Jacobs would not have heard it.⁷⁷

The press complimented her playing before and after the Chicago Symphony Orchestra contracted her. After a performance of Liszt's *Les Preludes* by the Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago, in Grant Park under the direction of Gladys Wedge, Cecil Smith's review stated:

The members of the orchestra did their best work in Liszt's *Les Preludes*. The most beautiful solo playing I have heard in this orchestra was that of Helen, who plays the French horn better than anyone else in Chicago.⁷⁸

In December of 1941, she performed Mozart's Horn Quintet in E-flat Major K. 407 with a recently founded Chicago quartet, the Fine Arts String Quartet. Cecil Smith also reviewed this concert and said:

The pure luminous tone of Helen, first horn player of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, was as much of an asset to the music in the slow movement as her confident and impeccable articulation of the rapid, decorative passages in the finale.⁷⁹

Two years later, in a summer performance of Symphony No. 2 by Antonin Dvorak by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at Grant Park, Albert Goldberg applauded Kotas's playing saying, "a lovely *adagio* in which Helen, horn, was heard to advantage..."

A few reporters wrote articles about her that did not focus on her playing ability.

⁷⁶ James Janega, "Ex-CSO musician Helen Hirsch, 84." *Chicago Tribune* (Dec 21, 2000); Randall Faust, interview by author (October 7, 2009): 2.

⁷⁷ Randall Faust, interview by author (October 7, 2009): 59.

⁷⁸ Cecil Smith, "Gladys Wedge Leads Concert at Grant Park," *Chicago Tribune* (July 23, 1938).

⁷⁹ Cecil Smith, "String Quartet Concert Draws Capacity House," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (December 8, 1941).

In *Front Views and Profiles*, Marcia Winn wrote about her first exposure to Kotas as a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra:

Many a person has had a severe jolt at concerts of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra this season when, listening idly or intently to the music, he has seen what appears to be a girl playing a French horn back in the wind section...Anyway who ever heard of a girl playing horn with a major symphony? He is wrong. A girl does...⁸⁰

Winn discussed Kotas's hair, wardrobe, and education. She spoke of how unusual it is for a woman to play horn and how the harp is usually more suited to a woman. In the end, however, she seemed convinced that Kotas was capable of playing the instrument and her sex: "seems to have only one effect on her horn. The interior of the bell, that portion into which the hornist places his right hand to control quality and pitch, is lined with five or six scratches from her diamond ring."⁸¹ Winn discovered in her interview with Kotas that her private dressing room was a 4x4 cubicle in the basement of Orchestra Hall. She noted, at the end of the article, that her:

Favorite piece is Siegfried's horn call from the *Rhine Journey*. She thinks it is the greatest call of all time and plays it as she thinks a real Siegfried would have. "Most people," she explained, "play it in a slow movement, but I always think of Siegfried as a young person and play it with that in mind."⁸²

Another biographical article titled "No Man's Land" by Katherine Doyle was included in *Women's World*, a section of the *Chicago Times*. Doyle recounted that Kotas "got into orchestral work 'more or less accidentally'."⁸³ In an interview with Doyle, Kotas stated she had difficulty finding a job in psychology after graduating from the

⁸⁰ Marcia Winn, "Front Views and Profiles: Young Girl with a Horn," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (March 9, 1942).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Katherine Doyle, "No Mans Land," *Chicago Times* (1941).

University of Chicago. She was told she did not have “enough worldly experience.”⁸⁴ So she was able to devote her extra time to playing the horn, with excellent results, and was happy with her career: “Hers, she says, is an ideal career. Indeed, it has only two drawbacks. To keep from interfering with her wind, she avoids highly seasoned food and lipstick before a concert.”⁸⁵

In addition to professional and press support, Kotas was surrounded by a great deal of personal support. Many of her friends and colleagues sent letters and telegrams of congratulations on her achievement.⁸⁶ She received telegrams from John Barabash, her high school band director, from Mrs. Kyrl, her first horn teacher’s wife, and one from the Immaculata High School Orchestra (an all-girls Catholic school in Chicago), which said, “Helen...Our sincere congratulations on your initial appearance with the symphony. Your triumph inspires us as young musicians, sharing a mutual interest.”⁸⁷ R.W. Bouslough wrote a note to Helen on December 12, 1946: “While it would be an exaggeration to say that I came to hear the Eroica for the horn passages alone, nevertheless they give me such personal pleasure that I want to add a little extra applause in this form. Hence, greetings to Miss Helen.”

Two Chicago women were very helpful and supportive of Kotas’s transition into the orchestra. “Francis Glessner Lee was a wonderful, wonderful woman...and she was very anxious to see that everything went well for me, so she not only was pleased with

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Telegrams and letters in The Rosenthal Archives of The Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

⁸⁷ Telegram from Immaculata High School Orchestra, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1941).

my playing but she wanted me to have my hair done differently.”⁸⁸ Lee connected Kotas with the beauty parlor she used and her dress maker (Mrs. Samatini). Lee believed that there was a proper way for Kotas to dress, the consequence of which was a long black dress with a white lace collar for afternoon concerts and a long black velvet dress for evening concerts. Kotas noted that Mrs. Voegli, the wife of the orchestra manager, was also very helpful and lived near her in Hyde Park.⁸⁹

Kotas was principal horn of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from the fall of 1941 through the 1946-47 regular seasons and the summer seasons at Ravinia from 1942 to 1946.⁹⁰ The Ravinia season was contracted separately and she participated every season except 1941, when she toured with the All-American Youth Orchestra. Kotas was principal horn on several recordings with the orchestra, including *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, *Aus Italien*, and *Burleske* by Richard Strauss, Symphony No. 3 by Brahms, Frank’s *Le chasseur maudit* (1946), Symphony No. 7 by Schubert, Respighi’s *The Birds* (1945), Handel’s *Water Music Suite* (1946), *Fireworks* by Stravinsky (1946), Symphony No. 2, and Beethoven’s Piano Concerti Nos. 4 and 5.

Helen often told a story from the summer of 1942 at Ravinia.⁹¹ The Chicago Symphony Orchestra performed Beethoven’s Piano Concerti Nos. 4 and 5 with Arthur Schnabel at the piano and George Szell conducting – Frederick Stock was on vacation in Wisconsin. Schnabel was thrilled with the performances and insisted the concerti be

⁸⁸ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁹⁰ Contracts with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for the Ravinia Festival, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1942-1947).

⁹¹ Randall Faust, “Helen Kotas Hirsch (1916-2000)” (lecture, Western Illinois Horn Festival, Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL, April 6, 2003), 3.

recorded immediately. Unfortunately the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Arthur Schnabel were under a contract with RCA but George Szell was in a contract with Columbia, so Szell could not conduct the recording. Stock, who was called to help solve the problem, said he would get in his car and to have the orchestra ready tomorrow morning. Stock drove through the night from Wisconsin during his vacation, to conduct the recording with Schnabel. Kotas was very impressed by the dedication Stock showed through this event. That recording was Stock's final recording with a major symphony orchestra and is still available on re-mastered CD.⁹²

The following fall, on October 20, 1942, Dr. Frederick Stock suddenly passed away.⁹³ His death was a great loss to Kotas, the orchestra, and the Chicago musical community as a whole. Kotas wrote a short tribute for the funeral in which she exhibited her respect and affection for Stock, who had come to be called "Papa Stock."⁹⁴ In Kotas's brief association with Stock, she knew him quite well and saw him as "the nucleus of everything musical in Chicago."⁹⁵ She considered him an inspiration and admired his close relationship with the members of the orchestra.

His association with the members of the orchestra was unlike that of most symphonic conductors. In addition to being respected as a musician, he was loved as a friend. This paternal affection on the part of Dr. Stock brought forth devotion from the orchestra rare in such groups. It is only with this kind of feeling that great music can actually be made.⁹⁶

⁹² Leslie Gerber, "Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 4 and 5," Amazon, http://www.amazon.com/Beethoven-Piano-Concertos-Ludwig-van/dp/B000003FCK/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=music&qid=1269588330&sr=8-1 (Accessed March 26, 2010.)

⁹³ Helen Kotas, "Dr. Frederick Stock," The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 1.

⁹⁴ Frank Villella, conversation with author (June 5, 2009).

⁹⁵ Helen Kotas, "Dr. Frederick Stock," The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 1.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

This affection was nurtured by Stock's support of his musicians. During concerts he regularly acknowledged their accomplishments by a simple, silent "Bravo!"⁹⁷ or a solo bow after a work. Kotas stated: "He was equally helpful when something went amiss, and helped the performer in a constructive rather than a destructive manner."⁹⁸ The audience also experienced his kind, paternal conduct. At "Pops" concerts Dr. Stock took the time to speak with the audience, often singing or humming examples in a "jovial and friendly"⁹⁹ manner. He frequently asked the audience for encore suggestions and then performed them, when possible, on that concert. His presence allowed the audiences to feel "much more closely associated with the orchestra and the conductor as well as the music played."¹⁰⁰ Kotas finished by saying: "With the death of Dr. Stock came the end of a very definite epoch in the musical life of Chicago. Because of his nobility and greatness as man and musician, his spirit will live in Orchestra Hall forever."¹⁰¹

Hans Lange took over as conductor for the remainder of that season; then Désiré Defauw was hired in 1943.¹⁰² According to Kotas, Defauw was from Belgium and represented a different style of music-making than the Chicago orchestra was accustomed. Kotas: "enjoyed playing with him very much and all of us [the orchestra]

⁹⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰² Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 12.

did but there were certain people, especially the press who didn't."¹⁰³ In the interview with Frank Monnelly, Kotas referenced an article that reviewed a concert which included Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5. The critic said: "even Mr. Defauw couldn't spoil my [Kotas's] beautiful horn playing."¹⁰⁴ Kotas insists the comment was inaccurate because Defauw encouraged her to play the second movement solo in her own style – he trusted her to play the solo beautifully and musically.¹⁰⁵ Kotas believed the critics did not give him the credit he deserved primarily, she thought, because he did not come from the Austro-German background. Kotas agreed that Defauw was different from Stock, but in a positive way, and she enjoyed the new ideas Defauw brought to the orchestra. In the spring of 1947, Defauw was released from his contract and Artur Rodzinski was hired for the 1947-1948 season.

Frank Monnelly, referring to the first season with Rodzinski, asked: "What was the season like?"¹⁰⁶ Kotas responded: "It was terrible."¹⁰⁷ She said Rodzinski was very bad to all the players and their rapport suffered. This was exacerbated by what happened to Kotas at the beginning of the season. We should remember that the players of the Chicago Symphony deeply respected Helen.

There are many stories about this event in Kotas's career and versions have been exaggerated or simply confused the years since.¹⁰⁸ The following is the account that Kotas related in her interview with Frank Monnelly in 1990. When Rodzinski was

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 12.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

hired, there were rumors that he planned to return Philip Farkas to the principal horn chair. However, George A. Kuyper, the manager of the CSO 1944-1959, assured Kotas that would not happen. Kuyper said: "Rodzinski wants it but pay no attention because everyone realizes that Bruno Walter did say you were the second finest artist as long as you are in the orchestra and you will not be replaced."¹⁰⁹ However, Rodzinski found a loophole in Kotas's contract: she was listed simply as a horn player, not principal horn, which allowed Rodzinski to move her into the section, and this is exactly what he did.

Philip Farkas was hired as principal horn of the CSO for the 1936 season and left in the spring of 1941 to perform as principal in Cleveland.¹¹⁰ He was principal there from the fall of 1941 through the spring of 1947, except the 1944-45 season when he was co-principal in the Boston Symphony. Farkas resigned from the Cleveland Orchestra in the spring of 1947 claiming to be returning to his hometown of Chicago to join his father in the advertising business. It may be no coincidence that Rodzinski was the conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra when he was hired by Chicago and Farkas left Cleveland the same spring.¹¹¹ In September of 1947 Farkas had a contract from the Chicago Symphony naming him principal horn. Rodzinski gradually replaced Kotas by first splitting the principal horn duties with Farkas.¹¹² Then the December 4/5, 1947 concert listed Kotas as third horn. After this demotion she usually played assistant principal or third, or was not in the section. Of course, this was a very bad way to start the season and other members of the orchestra were very distressed about it. At the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Edward H. Tarr, "Farkas, Philip Francis," Oxford Music Online

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 12.

end of the season Kotas decided that if she could not play principal horn she would leave the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.¹¹³

During the end of her time at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Helen met Edwin Hirsch.¹¹⁴ In her personal collection there are several letters to Kotas from Hirsch, beginning in October of 1947. On March 19, 1949, Helen Kotas married Dr. Edwin Frederick Hirsch. Dr. Hirsch was a research associate and associate professor of pathology at the University of Chicago from 1912-1951, at which point he became Professor Emeritus.¹¹⁵ He had been married previously and had two daughters, now Helen Hirsch Kent and Jean Hirsch Priest. Edwin Hirsch was a member of the Hyde Park Union Church in Hyde Park, IL where the couple was married in the office of the minister, Dr. Rolland W. Schloerb. Kotas then joined that church and remained an active member for the rest of her life.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Helen Kotas, Personal Letters, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL.

¹¹⁵ Program of A Dinner Celebrating the 100th year of the Birth of Edwin Frederick Hirsch, M.D., Ph.D., The University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine Department of Pathology, The David and Alfred Smart Gallery, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (November 13, 1986).

CHAPTER 4

AFTER THE CHICAGO SYMPHONY: 1948-2000

Performer and Teacher

Although Helen's position in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was famous because of her gender and the symphony's status, she rebounded from her experience to eventually play principal in the Grant Park Symphony (1951-60), principal horn in the Chicago Lyric Opera Company (1954-59), then third horn in the Opera (1959-64).¹¹⁶ The Lyric Theatre of Chicago, which became the Chicago Lyric Opera Company, was founded in 1954 to fill Chicago's decade-long operatic void and conductor Nicola Rescigno hired Helen as its first principal horn.¹¹⁷ After her first performance with the Lyric Opera in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Kotas described the experience as "such a wonderful job."¹¹⁸ Of her years in the Lyric Opera Company she thought: "It was a wonderful opportunity for me."¹¹⁹ Conductor Fritz Reiner came to the Chicago Symphony in 1953 and later invited Kotas to return as third horn but she was excited about her new position in the opera. Kotas said, "But you see by then I really loved the Opera and there are very few orchestra players, especially wind players, who had as many years in opera and symphony as I had."¹²⁰

In addition to the two ensemble positions, Kotas played in several chamber

¹¹⁶ Schweikert, Norman. "Survey of Orchestral Musicians." Chicago: The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (April 13, 1967).

¹¹⁷ Lyric Opera of Chicago, "Lyric History," <http://www.lyricopera.org/about/lyric-history.aspx> (Accessed Feb. 16, 2011).

¹¹⁸ Helen Kotas Hirsch, interview by Frank Monnelly, March 31, 1990, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL, 13-14.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 14.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 14.

concerts and made regular solo appearances.¹²¹ On May 1, 1949, Kotas and Reid Poole performed a selection of Mozart's Duets for French horn, K. 487 on a chamber music concert at the University of Chicago. A few weeks later, on May 22, she performed Robert Schumann's famously difficult *Konzertstück* with horn players Reid Poole, Laird Brodie, and Birk Kitzmiller, accompanied by the University of Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Christopher Leuba, a colleague in the Grant Park Symphony, performed Sonata for Four Horns by Paul Hindemith with Helen and fellow symphony members, Carroll Simmons and Robert Wirth.¹²² Simmons discovered the piece in a music store and wanted to perform it on his Master's recital at Northwestern University. Leuba believes this may have been the first non-conducted performance of the work – Hindemith had conducted the premiere at Yale. The quartet “suffered, during a beastly hot summer...rehearsed two hours a day, five days a week, for the ten-week Grant Park season...Our Hindemith went very well.”¹²³ Leuba said it was Kotas's “love of chamber music and perseverance that made the performance possible.”¹²⁴

Kotas was very interested in new works for horn and especially promoted and performed the music of Chicago composers. Three of these composers were Hugo Kauder, Ernst Levy, and Arne Oldberg.¹²⁵ She performed Hugo Kauder's Concerto for

¹²¹ Program of The University of Chicago Collegium Musicum, May 1, 1949, The University of Chicago Leon Mandel Assembly Hall, Chicago, IL: Program of The University Symphony Orchestra, May 22, 1949, The University of Chicago Leon Mandel Assembly Hall, Chicago, IL.

¹²² Randall Faust, “Helen Kotas Hirsch (1916-2000)” (lecture, Western Illinois Horn Festival, Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL, April 6, 2003), 2.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹²⁵ Randall Faust, “In Memorium: Helen Kotas Hirsch and The Sound of the Horn,” *The Horn Call* vol. XXXI, no. 3 (May 2001): 35-37.

Horn on January 7, 1951 and March 7, 1952. Also on the March 7 concert, she premiered Ernst Levy's Sonata for Horn. On November 28 and 29, 1953, Helen premiered *Le Son du Cor* by Arne Oldberg with the Tri-City Symphony Orchestra conducted by Harry John Brown.¹²⁶ Paul Anderson, Professor Emeritus of the University of Iowa and principal horn of the Tri-City Symphony, said, "Kotas was an incredibly accurate player – she did not miss a note that entire weekend of dress rehearsals and performances."¹²⁷ A Second Sonata for Horn and Piano and *Kleine Abendmusik für Horn Allein* by Hugo Kauder were both written for and performed several times by Helen, who also had her students perform them.¹²⁸

Other solo and chamber appearances included Hindemith's Sonate for Horn, Mozart's Concert Rondo, Piano Quintet, and Horn Quintet, the *Quoniam* from Mass in B-minor by Bach, Britten's *Serenade*, and Francaix's Quintet for Woodwinds.¹²⁹ Despite her retirement from the Chicago Symphony, Kotas continued to be a respected and favored performer in the Chicago musical community.

In addition to her performances of new compositions, Kotas supported new works for horn by attending several premieres and performances in both the US and Europe.¹³⁰ Lowell Greer, a former student of Kotas, specifically remembers her discussing the premiere of Gordon Jacob's Concerto for Horn in England. Greer

¹²⁶ *Le Son du Cor* was later published by Southern Music Company under the name *Serenade* because Oldberg wrote an ensemble piece with the title *Le Son du Cor* which was originally written for six horns and two bassoons. The work has since been published for eight horns by The Hornist's Nest.

¹²⁷ Randall Faust, "In Memorium: Helen Kotas Hirsch and The Sound of the Horn," *The Horn Call* vol. XXXI, no. 3 (May 2001): 35-37.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Programs from Helen Kotas Hirsch Collections at The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL.

¹³⁰ Lowell Greer, interview by author (September 26, 2009): 79-80.

remembers it was especially interesting because Dennis Brain played it twice, once before intermission and once after so it would become more familiar to the audience. She also traveled to hear older pieces that were resurrected during this era. In Germany she heard Erich Penzel perform the Stamitz Concerto in E-major. She traveled to Europe frequently and attended Brain's premieres of Paul Hindemith's Concerto for Horn, *Nocturne* by Matyas Seiber, and Benjamin Britten's *Serenade*.

Starting in the late 1950s until 1967, Kotas traveled to Wisconsin to perform as principal horn in the Waukesha Symphony Orchestra.¹³¹ In a particularly memorable concert, Lowell Greer heard Kotas play the horn solo in Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony. Greer recalls the solo in great detail:

The phrasing was classic and well developed, the execution was flawless, the intonation was remarkably accurate...But, the most outstanding quality of the solo, which I can still hear echoing in my memory, was the sound...Helen Kotas produced the most living, vibrant, and rich tone I had ever heard. Neither big nor small, bright nor dark, it was convincing and engaging and immediately became my new sonic ideal. When trying to describe it, I could only say that it had warmth and dimension, and seemed bolder in character than it was loud, due to lovely coloration at the start of the note. In other words there was a slight blossom of sound occurring at the moment of truth... Many have commented on the strength of her playing, suggesting somehow that she was louder than others. But I think it was the way of starting sounds and the natural projection of a well centered tone that give her command of the hall.¹³² ...The audience responded to Helen's performance with an elevated level of cheering and applause.¹³³

Kotas gradually withdrew from a heavy performance schedule.¹³⁴ In 1959 she moved to third horn in the Lyric Opera. In 1960 she retired from the Grant Park Symphony, in 1964 she retired from the Lyric Opera Company, and in 1967 she

¹³¹ Ibid., 70.

¹³² Lowell Greer, tribute speech at memorial service for Helen Kotas Hirsch, Hyde Park Union Church, Chicago, IL (January 6, 2001).

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Schweikert, Norman. "Survey of Orchestral Musicians." Chicago: The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (April 13, 1967).

stepped down from the Waukesha Symphony. Kotas was known for holding herself and others to an “exacting standard and part of that exacting standard was to know when to retire.”¹³⁵ Helen retired from full-time performing at a relatively young age. After exhaustive research and interviews with many people who knew her, it remains a mystery as to her reasons for retiring. It is possible that she simply wanted to spend more time with her husband. In addition to caring for her mother, Helen often traveled with her husband, who retired in 1951 and presented lectures in the US and in Europe.¹³⁶ It seems likely Helen chose to move her focus from full-time horn playing to her family and community commitments. She did not quit playing entirely but, after 1964, she primarily performed in faculty recitals at the American Conservatory. The works Kotas performed on those recitals are listed below but there is no evidence of her performing beyond 1975.

July 15, 1969	Concerto No. 1 <i>Nocturnes</i>	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Arnold Cooke
July 7, 1970	Sonata for Horn <i>Canto Serioso</i> <i>Dance</i>	Ernst Levy Carl Nielsen Karl Reiner
July 20, 1971	Sonate for Waldhorn [Alto Horn] in E-flat	Paul Hindemith
July 22, 1974	Concert Rondo <i>Reverie</i> <i>Contecor</i>	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Alexandre Glazounow Henri Busser
June 29, 1975	<i>De Profundis</i> , Op. 71	Gardner Reed ¹³⁷

In addition to performing, Helen participated in other professional activities. In the summer of 1974, Kotas attended the International Horn Workshop in Muncie, IN.¹³⁸ At

¹³⁵ Susan Johnson, interview by author (October 9, 2009): 97.

¹³⁶ Jack Riddle, email to author (January 26, 2011).

¹³⁷ Programs, Helen Kotas Hirsch Collection, The Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL.

¹³⁸ Picture of Helen Kotas Hirsch in front of the sign for the Horn Workshop.

the American and Sherwood Conservatories she conducted the horn choir and taught horn and a few music classes.¹³⁹ Kotas often had at least ten students each semester, all of whom played in the horn choir. The horn choir played concerts at the conservatories, two specific examples are *A Program of Horn Excerpts from the Operas of Richard Wagner* and a concert *In Memory of Carl Geyer*, both included commentary by Helen Kotas.

Kotas taught several students who enjoyed successful careers in music. Most were horn players but there were other instrumentalists who were strongly influenced by her. After speaking with a few of her former students, some general characteristics of Kotas's teaching became clear. As she did in herself, Helen expected the highest standards from her students but demanded them with kindness and respect. Lowell Greer, a former horn student, recalls that Kotas held each student to his own standard and "did not tolerate it...when you played and it was not as well prepared as it should have been."¹⁴⁰ She was always kind about it but told Greer maybe you should do that again next week. "Not that there weren't good moments but a lot of it was I would say 'unacceptable.'"¹⁴¹ Kotas explained to Greer that he had already set a standard for his own playing and he needed to maintain that standard. In another example, Greer had just played Mozart's Concerto No. 2 for her. She told him it was beautiful and brilliant playing except for rehearsal letter "P" which was unacceptable. According to Greer the worst comment she could give you was: "that was unacceptable."¹⁴² She always said it

¹³⁹ Helen Kotas Hirsch, Gradebook, The Rosenthal Archives of The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago, IL.

¹⁴⁰ Lowell Greer, interview by author (September 26, 2009): 82.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 82.

¹⁴² Ibid., 82.

in a nice way but she made it clear that his playing at that point was not up to her standard.¹⁴³

Kotas taught her students musicianship and gave them pedagogical information, but her larger goal was to help them learn to think for themselves and to find their place in the world. In that same memorable lesson, Kotas laid out a career path for Lowell Greer.¹⁴⁴ Greer had a dream of recording the Mozart Horn Concerti one day and nervously mentioned this to her. Kotas said to him:

I don't know of anyone in this country maybe not even in Europe now who could do what you just did. She said I am not just talking about playing the notes and you did that very well. Other people can play the notes very well but beyond the presentation of the particular harmonics there has to be an element of creativity an element of interpretation where the listener was engaged and you just did this. And I don't care if I get paid for today's lesson because I just got paid. I just got a salary from you. So you should record the Mozart Concerti and probably many other things too but I am just trying to think.¹⁴⁵

Kotas was concerned that the recording companies would not be interested in him because several recordings of the concerti existed. Why would they take a chance on someone relatively unknown unless he had something unique to offer? She suggested that perhaps he could play them on the natural horn and perhaps he could build a horn that was a replica of the Classical era instruments. This idea was very appealing to Greer – she “had planted a seed.”¹⁴⁶ Later Greer earned a doctoral degree with the project, recorded the Mozart Concerti on natural horn, and continued a career on the natural horn. Greer said: “I think she understood that not everyone would join a

¹⁴³ Ibid., 82-3.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 83-4.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 84.

symphony. I think that she knew a big part of her job was to help a young person find his niche.”¹⁴⁷

Years later, Greer was invited to play Bach’s B-minor Mass on natural horn with a group in Chicago.¹⁴⁸ After the concert, Kotas came up to see him with about seven of her students.

She had heard that I was going to be in town and she said “oh without fail you’ve all got to come hear this. Yeah I know he is a gifted player. I haven’t heard him in a long time but it is on the natural horn. Where are you going to hear the B-minor Mass played on the natural horn?”¹⁴⁹

With this one act, Kotas was supporting the work of a former student and furthering the knowledge and experiences of her current students.

Randall Faust studied with Helen later in his career.¹⁵⁰ He had already earned a DMA degree and was teaching at Auburn University but he still felt her demand for excellence. Faust remembers playing many excerpts and solos for Kotas; she had thoughts and suggestions about each. He specifically recalled one moment when he was playing and she was looking out the window at Grant Park. When he finished Kotas asked: “Randy, why did you play that fingering on the B-flat side of the horn?”¹⁵¹ Faust said she was “not militant about the F horn but she had a really good ear for color.”¹⁵² She was no longer playing at that point, but she had a specific standard of the sound she was looking for and Faust’s fingering choice did not fit that standard.

In Faust’s lessons she worked on his playing but also shared with him her

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹⁵⁰ Randall Faust, interview by author (October 7, 2009): 62-4.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 68.

¹⁵² Ibid., 69.

background and studies with Frank Kyril and Louis Dufrasne.¹⁵³ She focused on the solo literature for horn, introducing Faust to several new works, including Hugo Kauder's *Kleine Abendmusik*. Kotas helped Faust expand his knowledge base to improve his teaching and performing.

Lisa Targonski-Cisneros, a flute player, was in Kotas's Woodwind and Brass Literature course at the American Conservatory.¹⁵⁴ Wind players had to take the course for four semesters, so the students became very familiar and comfortable with Kotas. In the course, Helen assigned them each a composer every week. The students were expected to read about the composers and discuss them in class. Kotas insisted that the students read the information and create a biographical and compositional summary, not just bring a copy of the information to class. Targonski-Cisneros recalls her singing the horn parts of a work and expecting the students to name the work. There was one trumpet player in the class who was not as organized as the rest of the students and who continually arrived with a copy of the information. Targonski-Cisneros remembers that he "made her crazy. She liked him but he made her crazy because he came in with a copy."¹⁵⁵ Targonski-Cisneros recalled that Kotas saw the trumpet student as a talented musician, liked him, and respected some of his work, but she still expected him to reach the standards she required of the class. Without berating him she pushed him to work harder and achieve more.¹⁵⁶

For Lisa Targonski-Cisneros, Kotas's influence went beyond the classroom.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Randall Faust, interview by author (October 7, 2009): 61-2.

¹⁵⁴ Lisa Targonski Cisneros, interview by author (October 12, 2009): 124-5.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 124-5.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 122-6.

During and after the class, Targonski-Cisneros and another flute player, Joanne Rubin, spent quite a bit of time with Kotas. They often went to lunch and art museums. Later Lisa helped Kotas with trips to the doctor and invited Helen to her house for the holidays. In turn, Kotas encouraged Targonski-Cisneros to move forward with her career. Lisa said she spent hours in the practice room but Kotas insisted that she should spend less time practicing and become more efficient. Targonski-Cisneros tried to apply this and, over the years, understood what Kotas meant and eventually benefitted from this wisdom. Kotas encouraged Targonski-Cisneros to continue to strive for her goals even when she did not see immediate results. This friendly assistance led Targonski-Cisneros into a satisfying and fruitful musical career.

Helen was devoted to the development, well-being, and success of her students. When Targonski-Cisneros was in the process of buying a new flute, the flute she now plays, she asked for Kotas's opinion.¹⁵⁸ The flute was sold either with a gold or silver head joint. Lisa played both for Kotas who insisted that she should buy the gold head joint. However, it was expensive and Targonski-Cisneros was not in a financial position to spend the extra money for it. Kotas said:

Well I am going to go to the bank tomorrow and I am going to cash in one of my bonds and I am going to loan you the money and you will pay me back. I said no, no, no. But she was very insistent. She was very insistent about helping her students.¹⁵⁹

It was not about the money – Kotas wanted to help her students succeed – they were important to her and she wanted to do all she could for them.¹⁶⁰ Kotas also attended as many performances of her students as possible. She flew out to hear

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 126-7

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 126.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 126-7.

Targonski-Cisneros's graduate recital and her personal collection includes many recital programs from around the country. She treated her students with the utmost care – they were her family.¹⁶¹

Church and Community Member

The exacting standards, absolute devotion, and sincere kindness that Kotas demonstrated in her playing and teaching was evident in her work in the church, in the community, and in her relationships. Even after Dr. Hirsch passed away in 1972, Kotas remained active in the Hyde Park Union Church as treasurer for twenty-five years and president of its Women's Society.¹⁶² As treasurer, she spent many hours working on the books for the church. "She did things the right way and she cared a lot about it."¹⁶³ She participated in fundraising for the Baptist Children's Home and was president of the Vermilliad Society. Susan Johnson, currently the senior pastor of Hyde Park Union Church, became acquainted with Kotas when she was the campus minister and the women shared an office. "Reaching the bar"¹⁶⁴ in Kotas's eyes was difficult – she had high standards for herself and others. Johnson quickly gained Kotas's respect because Johnson understood the importance of finances in the church. In turn, Kotas appreciated that Johnson was willing to plan within the church's budget and knew how to "push gently for more resources."¹⁶⁵

Kotas had great respect for Dr. Rolland Schloerb, the senior pastor at Hyde Park

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 126-7.

¹⁶² Susan Johnson, interview by author (October 9, 2009): 94-5.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Union church when she and Dr. Hirsch were married.¹⁶⁶ Dr. Schloerb was the standard to which Kotas subsequently held all pastors. When Johnson came to the church, Helen often discussed Dr. Schloerb's methods and held Johnson to those standards. Kotas kept a small book of Dr. Schloerb's sermons on her bedside table, read them often, and received spiritual fulfillment from them. By presenting Johnson with a copy of this book, Helen showed Susan the level of sermons expected in the church and shared how important those sermons had been in her life. While Kotas was demonstrating her expectations to Johnson she was also giving Johnson a gift that had been Kotas's "spiritual guide and compass."¹⁶⁷ After Susan Johnson had been hired as senior pastor, Kotas continued to hold her to the standard of Dr. Schloerb. Helen would often recall that Dr. Schloerb had died the Thursday before Easter with his sermon written on the text "Into thy hands I commit thy spirit."¹⁶⁸ After Johnson had heard this story several times, she finally turned to Kotas and said, "Helen if I die on a Thursday you are going to have to get a sub."¹⁶⁹ Helen looked at her with a sly little grin and Susan never heard the story again. While Kotas had exacting standards and high expectations, she was never mean or vindictive.

Over the many years as church treasurer Kotas gained a large amount of control in the church.¹⁷⁰ If she wanted something to happen, and it was not in the budget, she added it, or if there was something she did not approve of in the budget, she saw that it was removed. If she believed the church needed something but did not have the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 100, 103-4.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 104.

¹⁶⁸ Luke 23:46. Susan Johnson, interview by author (October 9, 2009): 100.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 98-9.

resources to purchase it, she saw that the money was raised outside the budget process. As the church grew and changed, her control over the budget began to bother some members of the congregation who believed that the church could not move forward if restricted by individuals, like Helen, with too much control. So in a Church Council meeting it was decided to set a term limit for church officers of five years. This meant that Kotas, well over her time as treasurer, must be asked to step down. Those council members who knew that Helen was both very devoted to the church and her role in its daily operation worried about telling her. However when this news was conveyed to her by a member of the Council, she met with Johnson, the senior pastor, and said:

“I assume this was all done with your blessing?” And I [Johnson] said, “I think it is the right thing for the church.” And she [Kotas] said that she had long ago, meaning when my predecessor was here that she didn’t like, decided that this was her [Kotas] church and that she had seen a couple of prominent older members get their nose out of joint and leave and she said this is my church. This is the church I want to take care of me in my old age and this is where I want my family to be. I am not going to leave this church. It is my church too. In a sense she was saying even if you sting my feelings I am not going. And I thought that was beautiful. Because we get our feelings hurt from time to time. And if we pick up our toys and leave then we only have ourselves to blame when we have no one left to play with. And she realized that. In a way from that time forward, from the time she was no longer treasurer she and I were even closer.¹⁷¹

This incident speaks volumes about Kotas’s priorities and sense of strong relationships. The church was her family and she was not going to lose the sense of family and belonging because of one hurtful decision.

Helen maintained a separation between her personal relationships and her opinions about the activities of the church. While Johnson and Kotas had become quite

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 99.

close, Kotas did not support the choice of Johnson as the senior pastor.¹⁷² Helen respected Susan but was not sure women should be ministers. This is perhaps a little shocking coming from the first woman to be principal horn in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. When Johnson asked Kotas about it she said: “Well that was that and this is this.”¹⁷³ Johnson thinks she “was a product of an era” and that “there were traditions that were not to be broken.”¹⁷⁴

It would be great to say and she was a ground breaking women’s liberationist. But she wasn’t she was a very serious musician and when she was playing the French horn she didn’t consider herself male or female, which is how I feel when I am preaching the gospel. But it didn’t necessarily transfer for her.¹⁷⁵

Susan was chosen as senior pastor despite Helen’s vote and their relationship continued to grow over the years. Johnson continued to meet Kotas’s standards and gained her respect.

Kotas was deeply loyal to her sister Beatrice, called Bea.¹⁷⁶ Bea often came to Chicago and paid for a room in a downtown hotel. Bea, Helen, and often Vernon Studt, the music director at Hyde Park church, spent hours in social activities downtown. The three of them thoroughly enjoyed each other’s company and developed a deep bond. While the specific reasons are unknown, Susan Johnson believed that Dr. Hirsch did not allow Helen’s sister in their home, which is why Bea stayed downtown. Helen apparently accepted this as a “limitation of her marriage,”¹⁷⁷ but did not allow it to end her relationship with her sister. Bea passed away soon after Johnson came to Hyde

¹⁷² Ibid., 96.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 96.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 96.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., **96**.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 102-3.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 103.

Park and Kotas was deeply saddened. She shared her grief with Johnson but generally kept her personal affairs private. Bea attended Antioch College in Ohio and apparently had an ideal experience there. Helen felt so strongly that the College had been a positive influence on her sister that she left a bequest in her will to the College in honor of her sister.

Helen's friendship with Vernon Studt, the music director at Hyde Park Union Church, was another clear demonstration of her loyalty.¹⁷⁸ Vernon and Helen were good friends and Helen made a lot of the musical decisions at the church. She brought in Chicago Symphony members for special occasions or when she thought there needed to be something special at the service. She did a beautiful job of enhancing the music and Studt welcomed both her help and friendship. Studt was in the position for years but when his partner died he began to struggle with alcohol, which in turn began to affect his work in the church. Susan Johnson and the council decided it was time to let Studt go. Although Helen supported their decision, believing it was the right thing to do for the church and for Studt, she remained his steadfast friend. "When she was in your corner, it was forever."¹⁷⁹ She continually surprised people— she had such high standards for both herself and others that many assumed she would turn her back if you did not hold to those standards. However, over and over again she showed that "having an exacting standard was different than being mean."¹⁸⁰

Helen's personal generosity can be witnessed in the time she spent as president

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 98-100.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 100.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 100.

of the Women's Society at Hyde Park Union Church.¹⁸¹ The society was an "aging group"¹⁸² because, at that time, a lot of women worked during the day. Kotas believed that the Women's Society was an important part of the lives of its members and spent time and energy to keep it going: "She really respected them and loved their company and thought older members deserved our respect and care."¹⁸³ The group had regular luncheons and concerts, and they still hold a luncheon and concert every year on June 7, in honor of Helen's birthday.

Another group associated with the church was the Baptist's Children's Home. To raise funds for this project, Helen annually organized a "tag day" where church members stood on street corners in Chicago and asked for donations.¹⁸⁴ She spent years fighting for the prime locations and twisted arms to get people to occupy them. She had members working shifts before work, during their lunch breaks, and after work. She volunteered her time on the street corners as well, in any weather. She said, "If you don't know how to beg for money I will teach you. You have to be cheerful and insistent. If you don't believe in your cause no one will believe in it."¹⁸⁵

Personally Helen had several distinctive characteristics, including her attention to exacting standards, which motivated most of her decisions.¹⁸⁶ With her high expectations came a somewhat severe demeanor that Johnson believed came more from Helen being an introvert than wanting to come across as unapproachable. As she

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁸² Ibid., 97.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 97.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 113-4.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 113.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 110.

aged, fewer individuals were willing to challenge her because of her presence, intelligence, and high standard of living. However, Johnson said that her severity could be broken and she always enjoyed the moments when Helen broke into an almost child-like giggle and sly smile. Helen was consistent in her demeanor and dressed simply and conservatively. Many people have mentioned her trench coat that she would “throw on” in cooler or rainy weather. She also moved quickly– Johnson described her movement as something brisker than walking, more like “jetting.”¹⁸⁷ Kotas rarely said mean or hurtful words about anyone or anything; her comments were constructive and purposeful. Occasionally, when she felt the need to express her dislike or distaste for someone or something, she said, “That (or he) is for the birds.”¹⁸⁸ This was her “utter dismissal.”¹⁸⁹

Her Final Days

Kotas continued to drive until the end of her life. Everyone she knew was familiar with her antique cream-colored 1970s Mercedes which she kept in “mint condition.”¹⁹⁰ Everyone loved her car and asked after it. The car “was part of her character – it was as classic and precise and dignified and beautiful as she was.”¹⁹¹

Helen drove everywhere except to downtown Chicago, so on October 27, 2000 she intended to catch a bus on her way to a Chicago Symphony alumni event.¹⁹² She

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 110.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 109.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 110.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 110.

¹⁹² Ibid., 105-7.

left her apartment and was crossing the street to catch the bus when a driver in the northbound lane hit her. Helen was immediately unconscious, with several broken ribs, and severe head trauma. She was in a coma and never came out of it. She was on life support for about eight weeks and once it was removed she lived for another several days. While Helen was in the hospital, she had many visitors including her students, friends, and members of the church, who kept a regular cycle of people reading to her, talking to her, and playing music for her. The amount of love they all had for Helen was obvious by their presence during her final weeks.

Helen Kotas Hirsch died December 15, 2000 at the age of 84.¹⁹³ A memorial service was held at the Hyde Park Union Church on January 6, 2001. Her former students and colleagues performed the prelude to the service.¹⁹⁴ The service included the hymns, a reading, a vocal solo by Ingrid Wallace and tributes by Randall Faust, Lowell Greer, Dena Epstein, and Rev. Susan Johnson. Those in attendance said that it was a beautiful ceremony worthy of Helen's life and achievements.

Helen Kotas Hirsch will be remembered by all who knew her as a kind, generous, dedicated, and hard-working person. "Her precision and integrity were only matched by her deep affection and boundless generosity toward others."¹⁹⁵ The high standards to which she held herself and her love of music led to her position in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a ground breaking occasion for women, and established her as an extraordinary musician who was respected by her colleagues. She continued to

¹⁹³ Susan Johnson, Death Announcement for Helen Kotas Hirsch (December 2000).

¹⁹⁴ The performers included Randall Faust, Eva Heater, Peter Jirousek, Jack Riddle, Ann Shipley, Pamela Stephan, Stephen Thurlow on horn. Christina Andrews, Bonnie Christie, Joanne Galler, Cynthia Penny, and Lisa Targonski on flute. The Hyde Park Union Church Senior Choir. Keith Hampton and Vernon L. Studt on organ.

¹⁹⁵ Susan Johnson, Death Announcement for Helen Kotas Hirsch (December 2000).

contribute to the Chicago musical community through the Lyric Opera Company and the Grant Park Symphony. Throughout her career she remained focused on performing, teaching, and encouraging the composition of new works for solo horn. She was an excellent teacher and her students carry her legacy in their playing and teaching. Her impact on the music world remains far-reaching and enduring.

APPENDIX
INTERVIEWS

Dena Epstein

Interview by Heather Thayer

June 1, 2009

DENA EPSTEIN: Well one story that I love. I moved to the east coast when I was married and I lived on the east coast for 20 years before we came back to Chicago and my kids were born on the east coast. Well Helen decided she wanted to meet my children and she came to New York and she called me and said, well I didn't bring my horn it was too bulky but she still wanted to meet my children. So she came out to New Jersey where I was living, and played her mouthpiece for the children. And they still remember that.

HEATHER THAYER: Did she play songs for them?

DENA EPSTEIN: I don't remember, I was just so overwhelmed

HEATHER THAYER: It is such a funny sound. I bet they liked that a lot.

DENA EPSTEIN: Now you know where she lived?

HEATHER THAYER: No I don't

DENA EPSTEIN: The building I can't remember the name of it but it is on Stony Island Ave next to the doctors hospital and she was living there when she was hit by the bus...bus or car I don't know. I think a lot of people living there now would have lived there when she lived there. And they were all friendly.

HEATHER THAYER: So the two of you were college roommates?

DENA EPSTEIN: Yeah She was a sophomore when I was a freshman but we lived across the hall from one another and we didn't like the dorm very much so then we

rented an apartment south of the Midway in Woodlawn. Her friend from college, whom I had not met before, Irene Ford, and I and Helen all lived in an apartment together.

HEATHER THAYER: So you met in the dorms? How did you meet her?

DENA EPSTEIN: She knocked on my door and offered me...I forget what she offered me. I think she offered me a cookie or something like that.

HEATHER THAYER: So what was the degree you were working on?

DENA EPSTEIN: Music

HEATHER THAYER: You were working on music?

DENA EPSTEIN: Yeah and she was working on psychology. But she was already playing in the university orchestra.

HEATHER THAYER: What was your instrument?

DENA EPSTEIN: I didn't play an instrument. It was music history. Or I think they called it Musicology. The first two years I wasn't taking music courses anyway. I was taking survey courses. The university required that.

HEATHER THAYER: So do you have any fun memories from when you guys lived together?

DENA EPSTEIN: Oh yes! I remember once I came in to take my turn cooking dinner and they had come earlier to cook dinner because they didn't trust me, I was a freshman after all. They gave me cooking lessons.

DENA EPSTEIN: My favorite story about Helen is that she invited a bunch of her friends out to her parent's home for Sunday dinner and after dinner was over she went upstairs and came down with all kinds of mending and handed it out to us and told us we could earn her dinner. So I darned her socks.

HEATHER THAYER: How long did you know her? For many years after?

DENA EPSTEIN: For many years. Of course I was gone for 20 but we kept in touch and she came to visit us once. And then in 1963 my husband was offered a job at the Chicago board of health so we decided to move back to Chicago. My family was still here but his family was still on the east coast. But he liked Chicago. We came back and we were here from then on. I went to a lot of her programs. In June the church where she was financial secretary had a special program in her honor. And her former students would travel from all over the country to hear her play. One woman came from New Haven Connecticut. And they are still doing it. I was invited to go. I couldn't find the invitation. I thought you might like to go.

HEATHER THAYER: Do you know what church that was?

DENA EPSTEIN: I think it was called the Chicago Union Church but it's the daughter of the current minister lives in this building because she would not only know the church but everything that is going on there. I have been there to their June meeting three or four times.

HEATHER THAYER: Did you hear Helen play a lot?

DENA EPSTEIN: Oh yes. And um when we moved to Chicago she was the first person who invited us to dinner was Helen and she invited my whole family, my husband and my two children who were then 8 and 10. No they were older than that. My son was a sophomore in high school. And um I am not sure but I think she played for them that night. She had a lot of students living in the neighborhood and of course she also played downtown.

HEATHER THAYER: What did you think of her horn playing?

DENA EPSTEIN: Excellent. There is one story that probably I should not tell you. But the chairman of the music department decided to conduct operas and he was going to do a Czech opera that Helen was very interested in and ummm I am trying to remember the name of it. It was a very famous one. Helen was playing first horn in the orchestra and um she happen to come back in to make sure we had arrived and she happen to overhear the wife of the conductor say it was a rotten performance and she got irate and all the horn players went on strike. They wouldn't finish the rehearsal until this woman was ejected because she criticized them. And so the usher came and asked the lady to leave. At first she refused but he persisted and she left. I don't know that Helen ever engineered a strike before then. I never heard of any.

HEATHER THAYER: Did she ever talk to you about what it was like to be a female horn player?

DENA EPSTEIN: Now and then. She also before she was hired by the orchestra she auditioned in Pittsburgh. Oh you knew about that.

HEATHER THAYER: Yes but that's ok keep going.

DENA EPSTEIN: She told me that Stock auditioned her on the stage of orchestra hall. And he only heard a little bit and said hire her.

HEATHER THAYER: Were in contact with her when she was playing in the Chicago symphony?

DENA EPSTEIN: Oh yes.

HEATHER THAYER: Was that a good experience for her?

DENA EPSTEIN: For her? Yes She enjoyed it and felt she was well received. The other men in the orchestra were welcoming. She also played in the woman's orchestra. I don't know where their information is.

HEATHER THAYER: Did you ever talk to her about when she left the Chicago symphony?

DENA EPSTEIN: Well the new conductor brought all the first chairs from Cleveland with him. He insisted on bringing them. And she was just a first chair. She was just included in what happened and that is when she went to the opera.

HEATHER THAYER: So all the first chairs were affected by that. Not just her?

DENA EPSTEIN: That's right exactly.

HEATHER THAYER: They just came from Cleveland. So, there are a lot of rumors about that story and that even when she left the symphony.

DENA EPSTEIN: I don't have access to all of that.

HEATHER THAYER: Well your memory is better than some of the information I can get.

DENA EPSTEIN: Thank you. Well I just heard from her. I wasn't in touch with other people in the orchestra.

HEATHER THAYER: If you were going to describe her as a person, or her character what would you say?

DENA EPSTEIN: Now that's a hard one. She was a very friendly, relaxed. She took her playing very seriously but she was not a tight person. Now I don't know how the men in the orchestra felt but I would be amazed if they weren't very welcoming of her. She had been playing around Chicago for years before she went to the orchestra.

HEATHER THAYER: And seemed to be respected even before she went to the orchestra.

DENA EPSTEIN: And people in the Woman's orchestra were very fond of her. I went with her to visit some of them. And I imagine that a lot of information about what she did could be gotten from their records if they have any. I remember meeting a lot of women from the orchestra. She took me to visit Marian Lickenheim.

HEATHER THAYER: Did you know her family?

DENA EPSTEIN: Her sister had moved to California. I met her sister once or twice. Then her sister moved to California and stayed there.

HEATHER THAYER: Did you know her stepdaughters or her husband?

DENA EPSTEIN: I met her husband when she invited us to dinner but I never met her stepchildren. And my husband and I went to the funeral for her husband.

HEATHER THAYER: She continued teaching after she was married? Correct?

DENA EPSTEIN: As far as I know she was teaching. I knew various people who had their children studying with her. But I don't know the names anymore.

HEATHER THAYER: Can you reflect on how her professional life may have affected any of her personal choices?

DENA EPSTEIN: I would not know how to answer that. She never discussed it with me.

HEATHER THAYER: She never talked about it?

DENA EPSTEIN: No

HEATHER THAYER: What kinds of things did you guys do together? I know you talked about the cooking lessons.

DENA EPSTEIN: She had a garden in the yard of the building where she lived and I would go there and help her weed.

HEATHER THAYER: What kinds of things did she grow? Flowers?

DENA EPSTEIN: Flowers I think. Now as I said the daughter of the current minister of the church, lives in this building and I know her. I planned to speak to her about it because she would have access to all the church records. Helen kept the financial records of the church.

HEATHER THAYER: How did other people perceive her?

DENA EPSTEIN: I think everybody admired her. It was well known all over the neighborhood that she was the first woman ever hired by the symphony except for pianists and harpists. The first first chair certainly.

HEATHER THAYER: She didn't discuss that much. It wasn't a big emphasis in her.

DENA EPSTEIN: Not to my knowledge.

HEATHER THAYER: Did she ever talk to you about her psychology work?

DENA EPSTEIN: No.

HEATHER THAYER: So you cooked and gardened?

DENA EPSTEIN: She was very interested in my children. She didn't have any of her own. By the time we got to Chicago. My son was already a musician. He is now a professional. She was very much interested in what he was doing.

HEATHER THAYER: Did she work with him at all and just listen to him?

DENA EPSTEIN: I can't remember. She may have, she would come to house and play piano but I guess just to entertain the children.

HEATHER THAYER: So she played piano fairly well?

DENA EPSTEIN: Yes she never exhibited anything. It was her entertainment.

HEATHER THAYER: Did you go to her concerts much?

DENA EPSTEIN: Go to her concerts? I am trying to remember. I don't remember. I occasionally went to the orchestra when she was performing as a member but she would be asked by members of the faculty in the music department to demonstrate the horn. And to play certain things and if I was in class I would hear it.

HEATHER THAYER: Any other memories?

DENA EPSTEIN: Well we talked a lot when we were living together. I think she liked that fact that I was moving back to Chicago. She and my mother got along very well. I remember when I brought the children to visit their cousins here. She insisted that I let her take them to the zoo out on the west side. So we visited her parents' home which was near the zoo and she insisted on taking them to the zoo and getting them refreshments

HEATHER THAYER: Sounds she liked to spend time with them and enjoyed them.

DENA EPSTEIN: She knew my sister too I don't know how much time they spent together because I wasn't here. My sister was quite a bit younger than I was.

HEATHER THAYER: Was she pretty close with her sister?

DENA EPSTEIN: I think so yeah. They talked on the phone together and things like that. The only resource I could think of is the Musicians union. And I go to Newberry library but I don't know that they have anything of value.

HEATHER THAYER: What I was hoping to get from you as well was some personal reflection on her and what you thought of her as a person.

DENA EPSTEIN: She was a very good friend and the sort of person you could call on if you needed help.

HEATHER THAYER: Do you have memories of a specific time when she helped you?

DENA EPSTEIN: Not really.

DENA EPSTEIN: When we were in college she wasn't as famous as she became. She hadn't achieved it yet. But she never changed her personality, when she became better known. She was the same person. The women come in June to play for this memorial concert told me they went to the hospital to play for her.

HEATHER THAYER: What do you know of the accident?

DENA EPSTEIN: She was apparently crossing the Stony Island Ave and she was hit by either a car or a bus. I don't remember the details. She was walking and had apparently parked her car. She was notable in my college years because she owned her own car. She apparently needed it for transportation. And for a while her father loaned her his car. And it was satisfactory to her so she got a car of her own and in my day in college that was remarkable for her to have her own car.

HEATHER THAYER: So she actually bought it?

DENA EPSTEIN: That's my impression.

HEATHER THAYER: How long was she in the hospital?

DENA EPSTEIN: I don't remember.

HEATHER THAYER: Do you know what hospital?

DENA EPSTEIN: It may have been Northwestern I am not sure. Incidentally I was asked to give a talk at her memorial at the church.

DENA EPSTEIN: I don't know of her participating in any local community activities. She may have after while she took on the finances of the church.

HEATHER THAYER: I am trying to find ways to dig out old memories.

DENA EPSTEIN: Well I imagine finding information about women musicians in the first half of the century is difficult. Some of them are still living but not all of them. I knew the names of a lot of them.

HEATHER THAYER: Do you remember any of those names?

DENA EPSTEIN: Well there was Marian Lickenheim, pianist asked to play bassoon. I know that they played a lot at the world's fair in 1933 because the orchestra didn't want to play. I know because they complained about it a lot. Blanche something was a well-known musician.

HEATHER THAYER: Did Helen go to the lab school?

DENA EPSTEIN: No She lived out in the western suburbs.

DENA EPSTEIN: Her father was a printer. They were Czech and I don't know that their being Czech affected the suburb they moved to. But she graduated from High school there and possible Junior college because she entered the university as a sophomore.

HEATHER THAYER: And her mother worked in the home?

DENA EPSTEIN: I believe so.

HEATHER THAYER: Do you know anything about her relationship with her mother and father?

DENA EPSTEIN: I think it was a very warm relationship. But when she became better known she personally moved to Chicago. Her parents may have objected to that but when I visited them to take my children to the zoo.

HEATHER THAYER: One sister?

DENA EPSTEIN: As far as I know. I know she had a nephew but I don't know anything about him.

Randall Faust

Interviewed by Heather Thayer

October 7, 2009

HEATHER THAYER: How did you meet Helen Kotas? What was your initial interaction with her?

RANDALL FAUST: Some of this I have written down in a Horn Call article. And that can help document stuff. But I have also pulled a bunch of stuff in files. I knew of her back when I was a senior in high school. The Minneapolis, MN Woodwind Quintet came to Mancado, MN which was my home town and they performed there. I was going to every possible event there. I ended up studying there for a few years. Bob Worth who grew up in Chicago was the hornist with the Minneapolis Woodwind Quintet. I really enjoyed his playing on this performance and told him. I asked him who he studied with and he said Helen Kotas in Chicago. That hit me as identification. That was really the first time I heard of her. She is on the recording of the Hindemith Horn Quartet with Christopher Leuba. They did the Hindemith and the Cherpnin. Christopher Leuba also worked with Helen in the Grant Park Symphony. There was a fellow named Carl Simmons in that section as well. He wanted to do the Hindemith Sonata for Four Horns on his master recital at Northwestern University. So Christopher Lueba, Helen Kotas, Bob Worth and Carol Simmons played the Hindemith on Simmons's recital at Northwestern University. Leuba said that he and the people in the section spent two hours a day after their Grant Park rehearsals working on the Hindemith, getting ready for that recital. He said the tricky part was working out the details of the rhythmic notation. Their performance was

the first performance of that piece without a conductor. Prior to that Hindemith had performed it at Yale but it was conducted.

So I had heard of her way back then. I had seen her name in a conservatory of music catalog. That seed had been planted way back when. In 1992 my wife was working as the director of education at Sherwood Conservatory in Chicago. That was during the summer I was teaching at Interlochen. It was a good career thing for her as far as her administrative background. After I finished summer camp I went down there, I was teaching at Auburn University in Indiana. I asked her who the horn teacher was and she said Helen Kotas Hirsch. Helen Kotas Hirsch, what? I was shocked. It wasn't too long after that I got a lesson set up with her. I think it was about December. So several times throughout any given semester I would fly up to Chicago to visit my wife. And whenever I did that I would schedule a lesson with Helen Kotas Hirsch and Arnold Jacobs. They were within walking distance of my wife's apartment. So I managed to get some study with both those people at the same time. I had some study with Jacobs in the late 70's but this was on a more regular basis. That was interesting too because Arnold Jacob's career overlapped Helen Kotas Hirsch in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. That makes an interesting story as well. One of Helen Kotas Hirsch's students came down to see Arnold Jacobs for lessons and he said in all the years in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, I never heard your teacher miss a note. She said actually I missed a note once in, I cracked a note in Beethoven 4 but there was no tuba part so he would not have heard it. But they were a similar generation that way. They both came to the symphony in the 40s. There is Brian Frederickson's book that has the time line of all of that. There are a lot of people who overlapped in their background

there. There were other people who were around in similar time periods. Ethel Merker, Nancy Fako who did the biography on Phillip Farkas. She commented that one of her biggest frustrations was that she never got to know Helen. Nancy is closer to my age.

In the 1992-93 academic year, I started going to Chicago to see my wife for the weekend and I would have lessons with her. There were several things. I had been teaching for several years so it was not the same as if I were a freshman in college. But I wanted to find out how a person of that generation thought because she had the same teacher, Dufranse, as Phil Farkas and there are plenty of stories you can find out about that as well. They were from different parts of town. Nevertheless they had that in common. The old Sherwood conservatory, which they are not using anymore, had the old ornate woodwork in it like some old churches. Nancy Fako said her husband did a lot of work there and they would refer to it as Sherwood Forest. It had an historic feel to it. Not only in appearance, when they moved and shut down they found things in the library that had been there for ages. Mr. Sherwood was the same generation as Frederick Stock.

She thought that Fred Stock was the greatest music director and it wasn't just that he was a great conductor and had had a lot of contact with Strauss. He was not only a great conductor but he was also the musical leader of Chicago. Theodore Thomas was the founder of the Chicago Symphony and Stock was the next one. But he also got the Civic orchestra going that is still going today. The Woman's Symphony Orchestra was started by Fred Stock. He realized that there were a lot of people like Helen Kotas who had come up through the ranks and were real fine players but did not have an orchestra to play in. He created that for them. She had been principal of the

Woman's Orchestra and they had an opening in Chicago and he urged her to apply. She had good feelings about Dr. Stock because of that but also apparently in terms of the corporate structure. What was the Woman's Orchestra later became the Grant Park Symphony. Eva Heater did a presentation on the Woman's Orchestra.

When she was here we had a horn festival in 2003 in memory of Helen Kotas. We had a lot of pieces played that had been written for Helen, Sonata for Horn by Ernst Levy (Ellen Campbell), Sonata for Horn by Hugo Kauder, Arne Oldberg's *Le Son du Cor* (Virginia Thompson). *Le Son du Cor* was later published as *Serenade*. The Oldberg Serenade was originally an ensemble piece for 6 horns and two bassoons. It was later published for 8 horns.

So anyway I was studying with her in the 90s. I wanted to find out how she would teach based on her background because she was a direct pipeline to Dufranse and people of that generation and also find out the historical frame of mind that she had. And you know, it was interesting whenever a teacher starts working with a student they find out what they are interested in. Some are going for a degree some are looking to fix something. She knew I wasn't looking for a degree she realized I was interested in learning about her background and she shared some of her background and she also shared some of these older pieces. One of the pieces was Kauder's *Kleine Abendmusik*. I did a recital here in 2001. I have the program and my verbal program notes.

If I had been smart I would have tried to figure out. Do you know the name Jack Riddle? He was very close to her and he has some information. He sent down some of the piece from her library and we put them in the WIU library. Some of the ensemble

pieces that other people felt they couldn't use. There is a copy of the Carl Chavez Quartet is in our library with her signature on it.

She shared copies of manuscripts with me. These were people who were part of the school of composition in Chicago. That was her background. Some of the people in Chicago area came from Northwestern or Roosevelt. But she came from University of Chicago and she lived down in that Hyde Park neighborhood. She had a lot of personal friends at Hyde Park Union Church. She was very active in that church. She was very vital to the end. The day that accident happened she was in route to a CSO Alumni dinner. When the day came for that luncheon she didn't show up. She was going strong to that point. She was very active in church related activities and she had private students in the area.

We named one of the horn choirs at the conference after Helen Kotas. We were trying to honor people who had not been honored before. But Helen, here is a person who is from this state and this is the first time a conference has been held in this state since her death. So we needed to honor her. Jack Riddle let me know that June 7th would have been her 93rd birthday.

HEATHER THAYER: Can you talk a little bit more about your lessons with her? Can you talk a little about the structure of things?

RANDALL FAUST: I think anytime a teacher has someone who comes in who has been teaching themselves they want to hear you play and see what your needs are. She had me do a lot of warm up and arpeggios etc and I thought, "This is a lot of what is in the Farkas book wanting you to do things on the F side of the horn." I played some Gallay for her and she said ok now do that on the natural horn. She said that is what Dufranse

had them do too. I was thinking that isn't this logical that Lowell Greer, one of her former students, ended up where he was. I don't know if she had him do that but that was definitely in her thinking.

We did some solo things and I remember I happen to have a copy of the Labar book and a bunch of excerpts. I think I played just about everything in the book for her. By the end of that session I was dead. She put me through the paces. She had a lot of good thoughts. Her point of reference was with Stock on solos she always had an interesting historical frame of reference. That is something that I think is significant. She probably had more of a scholarly approach to literature than people who are players tend to say play it this way because this is the way I play it. She wasn't playing lessons at that point but she was very much on top of the sound in terms of what she wanted and she had good reasons from a historical stand point for everything she was looking for. If things had been different or she had been in a different location and if she had gone through the programs like people do now she probably would have had a PhD in musicology. She always spoke with a point of pride that she went to University of Chicago on half orchestra and half academic scholarship.

HEATHER THAYER: Since you were teaching at the time, do you remember any specific changes you made in your own teaching?

RANDALL FAUST: It sharpened my awareness on a lot of these fronts in terms of what I should be looking for in orchestra literature for example and paying attention to a lot of details and details of the score. I started doing Gallay also on natural horn. I had done natural horn before that and had done Gallay but never Gallay on natural horn. It took things to the next level. I performed things from the pieces she shared me. When we did

the festival here in 2003 we did some work featuring those pieces. I did *Le Son du Cor* by Oldberg on a recital at Auburn University. That was kind of interesting in several ways. She had this connection to the Oldberg family. There was a fellow, Eric Oldberg, who was on the board of the symphony and he was Carl Oldberg's son and either a father or uncle to Dick Oldberg who later became a hornist in the Chicago Symphony. Arne Oldberg was the composer, he wrote *Le Son du Cor*. In the process of doing this festival I did some tracking down to find some descendants. I talked to Mary who was the widow of Eric Oldberg. I found her number. So I called this number I didn't even know if it was the right number. So I called the number and a lady answered the phone and I said I am trying to find a relative of Eric Oldberg who had been on the board of the Chicago Symphony. She said Mrs. Oldberg is here but it will just take a couple of minutes. I heard some sounds in the background. I realized the lady who answered must have been a nursing aide or something. The more I talked the more animated she became. "Eric Oldberg was my husband. When my husband was on the symphony board we did this and this, as opposed to what they are doing now. As if when we were connected with the symphony, we did it right."

The people who you talk to who studied with Phil Farkas during the Reiner period they say that was the golden era of the symphony. But people there during the Stock era see that as the golden era. So it is interesting to have heard that perspective from this person. The perspectives she had were similar to the ideas I had picked up from Helen.

In the 1940s it was new. For example she was auditioned for third horn in the Pittsburgh symphony for Fritz Reiner. Reiner wanted her there and she had a contract.

Someone from the Oldberg family heard about that and got the word to Stock. Stock who had been conducting her as principal horn in the Woman's Symphony, said "we can't have you leaving town" and had her audition for the symphony. She played a Strauss Concerto for the whole orchestra. It was a European style audition. The concert master said "you have got to hire her." Reiner wasn't going to let her out of the contract at Pittsburgh. Stock talked to him. Reiner said the only way I will let her out is if you find a suitable replacement. That means it was a pretty tight fit to find someone at that same level. Apparently that same year there was the All American Youth Orchestra that Stokowski had taken on boat trips down to South America. Helen Kotas Hirsch, Mason Jones, James Chamber, and..... were in that section. When all that happened Helen Kotas Hirsch got in touch with some of those people. It worked out for Chambers and he went and auditioned for Reiner under Helen's recommendation and he got the job. He went on to have his own great career. I asked Mason Jones about this and he corroborated all this information about the Youth Orchestra and the connection between the two symphonies. Of course that trip with Stokowski had been a great trip in his career and he has some great stories about that as well. That must have been a great section. I would have loved to have been the fourth person in that section.

HEATHER THAYER: Can you describe your impression of her philosophy of playing the horn?

RANDALL FAUST: The point at which I was studying with her, I wouldn't have the same information or background. Because I was a college teacher coming in once a month or so it was not the same experience as Lowell Greer. She was actually fairly traditional, wanting to touch all the important things, all the basic skills. She always had a strong

interest in new solo material and for example if you want to talk to Ellen Campbell. Ellen Campbell played the Ernst Levy Sonata on the recital here. She indicated it was one of the most challenging pieces she ever had to play. Virginia Thompson played *Le Son du Cor*. It was the 50th anniversary performance. 1953 Helen was the guest soloist to do the premier of the Arne Oldberg with the Tri Cities Symphony. She came out from Chicago and rehearsed and did the performance in one day. The person who would actually have done the understudy stand in was Paul Anderson who was Virginia Thompson's teacher. That orchestra is one of the biggest regional orchestra in the area. They have played standard literature but also have a reputation for doing unique repertoire. That is the thing about Helen, she was a very strong supporter of the composers from the Chicago School. They had all these pieces without bar lines. I contacted the son of Ernst Levy because the problem is the pianist doesn't have as much time to rehearse so with his permission I created an edition with meters and bar lines. So the meters come out kind of crazy. You have a 27/64 bar and you see why he decided to do it without bar lines. To prepare that I had a photo copy of the manuscript Helen Kotas Hirsch had given me. In a couple of spots it was not very clear. So I found a copy on World Cat and compared my edition.

HEATHER THAYER: As person can you talk about her character and her presence how she interacted with people?

RANDALL FAUST: She was definitely a classic person from her era. And it was very special taking lessons with her in the historic old Sherwood conservatory because you could picture her from that era. She wore classic clothes. And even though it may have been a dress she purchased in 1990 it was an extension of what she wore 50 years ago

instead of something new and hip. That maybe is an indication right there. She was the same person all the way through. She was treated poorly by Rodzinski and she was a victim of the mentality of that era. But she never once in all the time I studied with her said a semi negative word about anybody. I hadn't realized myself that Rodzinski had shoved her out the door and somewhere in the course of my lessons, in my naivety, I said something about the Farkas book and she looked up at the ceiling and said "well that's very nice and went on." Later on I found out the story and thought..oops. But she never let on that there was a bad experience that was related to him. She was a classic person who had a lot of dignity, intelligence and elegance. She was a person that one could respect on a lot of levels. If you have had a chance to meet Eva Heater and Lowell Greer, they were more in an inner circle and had been to her house for parties etc. They could tell you a lot more about that.

HEATHER THAYER: It is good to hear everyone's impression. It is very consistent with what everyone thinks of her. She seemed like a very honest, sincere person.

RANDALL FAUST: She did a lot of playing in the Lyric opera. That was what she did after she left the symphony. There were probably more people that knew her through that. The other thing is the Grant Park Symphony. Christopher Lueba could probably give you more information on that. I remember in Switzerland in 2007 we were there for the symposium, were you there for the symposium? I have seen you other places but I can't remember. My wife was there looking at some music books. She said don't you need to go check on registration? There was a huge line and I saw Christopher Lueba. We had two hours and we just talked. He had some interesting stories about Helen.

(Dr. Faust gave me copies of papers related to Helen Kotas Hirsch. He talked through the files.)

This is one of her great stories. There is a recording in the CSO Store there. It is a re-mastered RCA label. It is Federick Stock conducting with Arthur Schnabel. It is the Beethoven Piano Concerto 4 and 5. That is when Schnabel was in his heyday. The Chicago Symphony and Schnabel were performing at Ravinia. Szell was guest conducting and Schnabel thought the performance was so great that he wanted to record it at Ravinia. Szell was on contract with Columbia but the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Schnabel were on contract with RCA. Stock drove over night from Wisconsin during his vacation to record those two concertos. She said most conductors wouldn't do that.

(Picture when she was 24) I was studying with her 40 years later and she didn't look much different. That does tell you something. When I was first studying with her, I had the presence of mind to jot down a few things on the computer. And this is a copy of that.

HEATHER THAYER: Any last favorite memory or neat experience?

RANDALL FAUST: Well I opened the horn call with that. It was in the early lessons. The Sherwood conservatory was a beautiful old building and we were in a room looking over Grant Park. She was standing there looking out the window. I played a passage and she says Randy why did you play that fingering on the Bb side of the horn. I thought man her ears were working really well. She wasn't playing anymore but she had that sound in her ear and she could tell exactly what you were doing just by listening to you. It wasn't really about one side of the horn or the other. She suggested both fingerings.

She was not militant about the F horn but she had a really good ear for color. So whether it was about the fingerings or something, you better know what you are doing. And if it was different than what she wanted you better have a reason. She was very soft spoken about it and you said well ok I need to practice that. I would see Arnold Jacob in the morning and her in the afternoon. It was a great experience because they both came from the same era. Jacobs wasn't just about physiology because we were working on interpretation of some things. But he has that in his monologue. He automatically talks about respiratory function. You get that exposure being in the same room with her. She never talked about anything physical in that way. But she at the same time had a lot to say about music. Sometimes you know she wouldn't say that much. You would play a whole movement. Then she would remember some spot in m. 29 while she was looking out the window. She was a person that had a very good ear and very good mind and was a great person. Here was somebody who was very important in the US and except for these few articles there was very little documentation. It might be interesting to listen to recordings of her and people of the same era and play them side by side. She must have been an incredible player with some of these pieces she premiered. My students want to be able to find a recording they can download. Many of these pieces, no recording existed. She had to do it on her own. Talk about a trailblazer in every respect.

Lowell Greer

Interviewed by Heather Thayer

September 26, 2009

HEATHER THAYER How did you first meet Helen?

LOWELL GREER: We had just moved to Wisconsin, my family, and I joined the Waukesha Symphony which at that time was rumored to be the best symphony in Wisconsin. I don't know why. It might have been a self-congratulatory propagated description. But the idea was that they had the best players in the Milwaukee Symphony and some from Chicago. The Milwaukee Symphony season was short and so the Waukesha Symphony also having a short season did not suffer from fiscal comparisons. Helen Kotas was playing first horn in the orchestra. I got to hear Pines of Rome, Shostakovich 5th Symphony, and the Beethoven 7th Symphony. There were about 4 concerts I got to hear her play in. And her swan song was Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 5 and of course it was everything you would hope it to be and with that little extra something that brings you to your knees. I introduced myself. I had joined the orchestra as a second violin player and played two concerts there and then mid-season there was an opening in the horns. It was actually after she left and Vernon Bulow, who was third horn moved up and I became third horn. Apparently my horn audition was memorable enough to get me considered for third horn. And it was a very good kind of metropolitan orchestra. They played much better than they had any right to. If it was a good hall they would have sounded wonderful. At any rate I sort of had my eyes turned toward the horns from the second fiddles and I noticed that she was doing a good deal of mentoring in the section. And she had an assistant maybe that needed a little bit of

coaching, just the running of the section, the coaching of the section, bringing things together. She was involved in that. And I remember the conductor who was a guest conductor, Erwin Hoffman he came in and at one point he was going to address her and he stopped and he said...please...she finished and then he addressed her and affected his desired change. I thought that spoke very highly of a great deal of admiration. I think that her reputation as a player in the symphony in Chicago, in the opera, in Grant Park, etc. remained with her.

You know in those days there was a whole lot that went on that just wasn't fair. It wasn't fair towards women and often wasn't fair towards men. After Farkas left the orchestra there was a period of a decade when no one plays with Phil and they kept bringing in horn players and firing them. You can't tell me that everyone who wins the audition is unsuitable for the orchestra. Clarence van Norman left the Met and move to Chicago and it didn't work. Nancy Fako moved up and took first horn and people did not think she was ready for the job even before she started playing. In a way there were self-fulfilling prophecies that came true with her. She is a fine player, but there is kind of a cast iron inner being that has to be in place and she was young. She was Farkas's assistant brought into the orchestra under his reign and she didn't have that extra help. David Krehbiel and Frank Brouk were co-principals. And everybody thought that worked well but the management let Dave go and Frank said I am not going to stay on 1st without Dave. They were co-principals and it worked well between them. They both played great but at that time there was a critic in Chicago named Claudia Cassidy. He called her "assidy" Cassidy and she would rake the horns over the coals to show how atune her ear was. Well if you are going to have horns on the stage you are going to

have clams. So you can report in the review that the horns missed notes. You can say that with impunity because if there are horns there are missed notes. By the same token if there are woodwinds there are going to be intonation problems. If there are strings there are going to be stridency and ensemble problems because there are so many of them they are spread out all over the place so there are going to be ensemble problems. So a critic can report all three of those and they can also report that the percussion are too loud. There is no pianissimo in percussion. So right away a music critic has a very easy job. I went to the concert, this is what they played, the horns missed notes, the strings were ragged, there pitch problems in the woodwinds and the percussion was way too loud. Other than that it was fine. The conductor did a great job. I think the straw that broke the camel's back in Chicago was the point that Frank Brouk was reported by Roger Detmer in the Chicago Sun Times as having bobbed his way through the concert as usual. And Brouk had the night off. It was Dave Krehbiel that played and he played flawlessly. So when Brouk saw the review he said no more and he gave his resignation as principal and then he worked out the thing with him and Dave being co-principal.

When Helen played first horn in Chicago there was a period of time when she and Farkas shared the book and they were very happy to do so. She had played first horn there for 10 years under Stock who treated her like a daughter and a Belgian conductor named Desire Defauw. Defauw brought with him a recording project on 78's . And they were high tech 78's. So they felt like the work they did on those was groundbreaking and very important. Of course they got superseded by 33s and then stereo and everything that had happened since then. But they recorded several things

for the very first time. There are very wonderful recordings of her playing in the orchestra on Water Music Suite, the Birds by Respighi, the Accursed Hunter by Cesar Franck, Brahms Symphonies and Strauss Tone poems especially with Stock. Stock knew Strauss and got his training cues from Strauss and knew a lot of the little secrets like the beginning of Till Eulenspiegel that it should start slowly and increase all the way through rather than just the one measure getting faster. That becoming faster gets transferred right and left on the page so the whole call becomes an accelerando. So anyway, that was ground breaking work but it is interesting when a very well-known major symphony principal horn player retired a few years ago. I asked the fourth horn player boy it must be a real shake up to have a different head on the organism. And he said you know Lowell it was as if he was never there. I said really I would think you guys would be adjusting like crazy to the new guy. He said no. Business as usual and I think when a great player like Helen Kotas Hirsch left and was replaced by another great player like Farkas that is was business as usual. The rest of the section was the same. Edgewood in those days it was Barrington on 3rd and Joe Morick on 4th.

Now what happened with Helen was that the new conductor whose name was Artur Rodzinski. Rodzinski had conducted in other places, Cleveland, New York Phil. Rodzinski was a genius but he was certifiable too. Among other things he carried a revolver in his pocket. Out of tune...bam.... He had a big paranoia problem. So one of the things that he did was never having heard a note he wanted to bring his first horn player the one he had brought to Cleveland for his enjoyment, Phil Farkas, to Chicago. Farkas was a man with a lot of business acumen. His orchestra of choice was Chicago. He didn't care for New York. He thought Philadelphia was ok but they had their own

traditions in Philadelphia. You came from the Curtis institute and you studied with Horner and then subsequently you studied with Jones. Now they are no longer in bred like that. So you had a lot of stylistic divisions going on. But he was in Kansas City and he just wasn't earning enough money so he took the audition and went to Cleveland where Rodzinski was very happy. But in Cleveland he knew he wasn't earning enough money there. And so he took his old Kansas City contract and pasted over Kansas City Symphony and said let's see I am going to visualize my next job. Where would like to go? Chicago of course. I am in Cleveland, Chicago wouldn't really have me, not yet. New York eh, Philadelphia... Boston, I have always enjoyed Boston. Boston will have me. And his old Kansas City Symphony contract just said first horn. Well let's kick that up a notch, principal horn, no no no solo horn. And he looks at the salary which was something like 75 bucks a week and he thought I need to have much more than that, it should be 300....400 a week. And he framed it and put it on another stand next to his music. Now on that other stand he had a mirror and a mouthpiece visualize, etc, the tools of his practice but he put that framed contract. And every time he looked in the mirror he saw Boston Symphony Orchestra, solo horn, \$400 a week. And you don't play the same when you see that kind of thing constantly reminding you of the standard you have set for yourself. And about three years into the process he got a phone call. Yes this is the personnel manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and recently our principal horn player was taken ill and unfortunately it was for our once a year Carnegie Hall Concert. We distributed the parts and we made it through the concert, the other players played admirably but we have seen the merit in hiring another solo horn player here in Boston and checking around your name has come up more than any other.

Would be interested in coming to Boston? And he looked over at that fake contract and he said I have always really enjoyed Boston I believe I would be interested in coming to Boston as solo horn. Well great what kind of money would we be talking about. Well I think that solo horn in Boston should be paid about \$500 a week. And the personnel manager said well that is fine I will send you a contract and welcome aboard. And so he went to Boston and stayed there for a while. And then Chicago opened up. The former first horn in Boston coming to Chicago was like a marriage made in Heaven. Now of course Rodzinski wanted Farkas there but he was encumbered by Helen Kotas being there. So before the first rehearsal, Farkas was there and Rodzinski said yes Ms. Kotas, I would like to introduce you to Phil Farkas. Well yes we know each other we played in youth orchestra together we had the same teacher. Hello Phil how are you? Nice to see you. And he said well Mr. Farkas is our new principal horn here in Chicago and you will be assisting him. And Helen without missing a beat replied well let me be the first to welcome you to the orchestra Phil but with all due respect, I played first horn here quite successfully and you have heard that, I have played here for ten years, and at this point in my career I do not think I want to be assistant to anyone. And Farkas said immediately that's alright we'll split the book. We'll be co-principal and Rodzinski said no if you are not willing to play assistant then I want to see you in the first row of the audience for every rehearsal and concert for this your final season in the orchestra. In other words he couldn't fire her without hearing her but he could declare it was her last season. And so she sat there week after week enjoying herself and she was taking psychology classes at the University of Chicago. I surmise she was trying to find out

what made Rodzinski tick, you know. But anyway that is the story of Helen Kotas in the orchestra.

Playing in Waukesha in Wisconsin, I was studying with John Barrows which was wonderful but in the course of a year I ended up only getting one or two lessons because he was ill. It was during the period of his first big illness with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. And every Saturday I would be in Madison for youth orchestra and I would go up look on the studio and the sign would be up because of illness Prof. Barrows will not be here today. So I thought well he must have gotten the flu it's been bad this year. But then one of the other players said don't you know he's been really sick. He's been in the hospital. And no one knew exactly what it was that he had. Just that he wasn't there and that he was really sick. And I think in medical situations like that people are a little cautious and will play the cards close to the chest. In order to not have information revealed too early or to not have the information used against them. To keep their options open. I remember the last time I saw him. I was on my way up to the studio and there was a bald man in front of me and he went down the hall and stopped in front of Barrow's studio and when he turned sideways I realized that it was Barrows and that he had lost his hair because of the treatments. I turned around and walked back because I felt like I had walked in on someone while they were changing their clothes, that I had violated his privacy by seeing the top of his head. And of course there are lots of bald people but he had not been one of them. He had always had lots of luxurious hair. At that point I realized how sick he had been. He had only come out of the hospital because he had to play a Mozart Concerto with the Madison Symphony, Mozart 2. And he came out, got a hair-cut, got groomed, practiced a little, played the concert and went

back in the hospital. That's how your treatments went in those days. So I was not going to go to Wisconsin even though it had been my dream. The other students were studying with Nan Backnell who was a very fine teacher and a colleague of Barrows in the orchestra and they worked well together. But I didn't know her or her reputation. And I thought well my study at this point needs to be with someone remarkable. So I went to Chicago and I studied with Helen Kotas at the American Conservatory. Now I was not registered at the American Conservatory as a student. I was studying at a small college outside of Chicago that had a conservatory with no horn teacher. So I would take lessons from her, or whoever, I also studied with Frank Brouk at that time. And I got a tuition rebate to pay for the lessons and they would submit the grade to the conservatory and I would get the credit. It worked out really well. It was really the only thing that did work out well there. I was never very happy there and the staff at the conservatory because I was active playing in the Civic Orchestra, playing in Milwaukee, the Lyric Opera and even playing extra with the Chicago Symphony. They got tired of my not being in class because they were small sections so they wanted to make an example of me. So they were on my case all the time. My grades suffered and even though I considered that I learned a great deal at the school. That the curriculum was fine and well thought out and that those were good teachers I never got good grades there. And someone said something about that once and I said well I recently heard that 75% of people today cheat and they do things we would consider cheating in the past, you know text messaging during exams you know palm pilot computers to research information they don't know. We would have called that cheating. You can look at my grades and know that I never ever at one time cheated...

So I finally finished at other schools in Milwaukee and in London. I did a distance study because in London they had that for a long time. They do it very well and they are responsible. You take your exams in real time on the computer and either you know it or you don't. And you can take any exams without taking the course. So if you know it you can get credit for the course, perfect, perfect for me. Instead of a dissertation I had a major project. And the major project consisted of things I had already done. Extracting editions of the Mozart Concerti from the Urtext, reconstruction of a replica of a soloist's horn such as those a player in Mozart's ear might have used and a recording of a CD with a major label of those editions on that instrument. So once the committee approved the project it was two weeks and they had photographs, graphs and a finished CD in their hands. It's the easiest PHD ever earned. Well my parents both had PhDs from bricks and mortar schools and I have taught at several bricks and mortar schools but if I had to do it over again, I would do my education on my own studying on my own schedule. Then take the exams and graduate that way. The thing was during that period of online education, well I graduated cum laude which I never would have done with teachers that hated me because I was always somewhere else instead of in class and the guys never in class how much can he know. So even if you learn a lot your grade will never reflect it because the teachers will give you the grade they think you deserve to have.

Anyway that's how I came to Helen Kotas and my two primary teachers after Aronoti Ansoluchi were Helen Kotas and Frank Brouk. Brouk and Farkas and Helen and the whole Chicago gang all studied with a Belgian player, Louis Dufrasne, he played beautifully. He was one of the early players to recognize the excellence of the Geyer

horns therefore most all of his students played on the Geyer horn. Helen had a particular dislike of the green hand, the un-lacquered brass turning your hand green so she had the inside of the bell of all of her horns silver plated. And Geyer would stopper up the bell bottom and put the horn in a rack and fill it with an electrolyte solution and he would use a sponge around a silver electrode to plate the whole bell interior. I don't think she is the only player to have had that treatment but chances are if you see a Geyer horn with the bell interior electroplated that that was one of her instruments. And I once had one of those horns. A five valve single Bb that she owned. And I know Gus Sebring in Boston has her main Geyer horn that she liked to play on.

HEATHER THAYER: How long did you study with her?

LOWELL GREER: 3 years. And my first year was with Barrows.

HEATHER THAYER: What kinds of things did you work on with her?

LOWELL GREER: She believed strongly in the importance of a solid warm-up so that was Joseph Singer Embouchure studies. And she loved the Maxime Alphonse Etudes. So we studied those. All my teachers used Maxime Alphonse.

HEATHER THAYER: I am assuming you did excerpt work with her as well?

LOWELL GREER: Yes she did excerpts. The one thing that she did that nobody else did was solo work. And she kind of knew that I had a pension for that. Well after she left the orchestra, she was a soloist. She commissioned new pieces. We also have to remember that that was the era of the Jacob Concerto, the Britten Serenade, the Hindemith Concerto things like that. And it was also the era during which the archives were being gone through by doctoral students and music historians. So new pieces were being added that had been forgotten for 200 years, Rosetti, Stamitz, Punto, Gallay

Dauprat and so on. So she had made it a practice to travel to Europe. She had married Edwin Hirsch who was a local doctor and with the medical profession comes a certain amount of fiscal stability and travel to Europe to hear the premiers of several pieces. When she was in England she heard the Jacob premiere. She said it was interesting, he played it twice, once before intermission and once afterwards and that way people heard it twice and they could appreciate it. With the Stamitz Concerto in E-major, called Rosetti at that time, she went to Germany to hear Penzel play it for the first time. She had good solid connections all over Europe and she brought her knowledge of those pieces back to the US. She connected me up with the Malcolm Arnold Fantasy, the Concerti, the Jacob Concerto, The Stamitz concerto, Punto, Rosetti Concerto. That particular piece is interesting because it is almost certain that it was composed by Stamitz. Well Punto published it in Paris under his own name. Before it was published he had a student named Beatty Corponi. She was the daughter ofCorponi who worked in a couple of places, Reagensburg and Ertier Wallenstein. And we know that Beatty Corponi played a Punto concerto in EM to popular acclaim at the Concert Spiritual in 1770s. So here shows up a concerto in the Uttern Wallenstein collection probably delivered there by Corponi but attributed to Rosetti because it was in a stack of Rosetti's music. So there you have the attribution to Rosetti. Now Punto claimed it as his own concerto. Now he published 14 horn concertos. Every single one of them in a different compositional style but he would improve them with virtuoso passage work of his own construction. So when you hear those concertos some of them are wonderful. It's like being in a room filled with art and then someone turns off the light and you are in the dark and then the light comes back on again. And you think what was that and the

passages go nowhere. They have no reason to be there in the piece but Punto decided it was time to show off. (he sings one). We pretty much know that Punto was a fine virtuoso player and had an engaging personality in front of the public but he was a fraud in many ways. He was one of the early self-promoter. He talked himself into many posts including being concertmaster and then after a couple of weeks He finally got enough never to say the Emperor has no Clothes and this guy Punto is no violin player. So he humiliated himself then. He was big on the patriotic band wagon proclaiming himself, Citroien Punto, a Czech man masquerading as a French man and he continued that claim by spreading new music composed by him. If it was in Russia it would have been Comrade Punto. Go with the flow, don't fight the field.

HEATHER THAYER: How would you describe her philosophy of playing?

LOWELL GREER: Well her concept of sound was definitely F-horn but it was old world F-horn. Not so noisy. You cut through and made your presence felt within an orchestra with color not with volume. And you can hear that on those old 78s, once your ear gets used to the scraping. You know you hear the strings and they are kind of scratchy and you hear the winds and they are kind of squawky and out of tune. But when you hear the horns play its golden and the tone floats. You know they are playing in the back but you can hear them very well. And she made a comment to me once about Dennis Brain and she came to it because she was trying to tell me about myself. And her comment was that I would do well recording. And she said that was Brain in a nutshell. Often when people would her Brain play live they were disappointed because the sound was very contained but the microphone loved Dennis Brain. The focus in his sound made it ride up. It made the ribbons jump around. She used different phrasing than that but that

the microphone loved Dennis Brain because it was not a hardness but...she linked it up with metal somehow. Not that Brain had a metallic sound but that the tone was that of a metal instrument and it was being listened to by a metal instrument. And she said you have a similar quality in your playing. Not that people would be disappointed hearing you live but that the microphone will respond to you a little better than other players. I thought ok I think I can live with that. And she did not tolerate, she was always kind, but when you played and it wasn't as well prepared as it should have been she would say well I think that one could be looked at again for another week. Not that there weren't good moments but a lot of it was I would say unacceptable. See you have already set a standard for yourself here. You have played Mozart for me and your work on Mozart was very brilliant but what you did now was not up to that level and you are going to have many things to play in your career that you don't care for but you have to decide if you are going to go through it willy-nilly or you are going to have to establish your standard and your standard will be your standard whether it be Mozart or Joe Blow composer. So you may not reserve your talents for one or two composers only. If you are a horn player you reserve your talents for the horn. It's the whole package because you can get hired on Mozart and get fired on Brahms....Yes mam.... Another occasion I played Mozart 2 for her, she was silent for a while and to fill in the silence I offered a commentary that was something like...I kind of like this concerto....I have some kind of hope that someday I will record it... I would like to record the Mozart Concerti and she turned and she had found her point of entry into what she wanted to say and she said by all means you should record the Mozart concerto. What you just did right now, that was absolutely brilliant all except letter P that was unacceptable. But the rest of it was

absolutely brilliant. If you get letter P worked out. I don't know of anyone in this country maybe not even in Europe now who could do what you just did. She says I am not just talking about playing the notes and you did that very well. Other people can play the notes very well but beyond the presentation of the particular harmonics there has to be an element of creativity an element of interpretation where the listener was engaged and you just did this. And I don't care if I get paid for today's lesson because I just got paid. I just got a salary from you. So you should record the Mozart Concerti and probably many other things too but I am just trying to think. There are lots of recordings of them now and why would a record company take a chance on an unknown horn player. And we know who you are around here and you'll get a post and you'll achieve some fame but there are lots of horn players with posts. There has to be something that makes a recording company think that you are worth hearing again. I don't know maybe preparing new editions of the Mozart's again, having urtext, the original version or perhaps if you played them on the natural horn. And I thought natural horn and I had always had been interested in the history of the horn. Ever since my first teacher he showed me how he played a scale on the hand horn on his valve horn and I thought you mean I didn't really need to learn the fingers. And he said they used to play everything without valves. The valves have only been around for 170 years, they haven't been around that long.

So I was always interested in the natural horn. So when she said that, I thought, she's talking my language. So I said where can I get a natural horn? She said oh well Carl Geyer could make you one. He can make anything. And I said well that is going to cost me a lot of money. She said well you do get what you pay for but if you are worried

about money as they say making horns is not rocket science so you could make your horn. So she sort of outlined a career. I didn't immediately think oh that is what I am going to do. But you know you plant a seed and you don't see a plant for a couple of months. And it first comes up is that a weed or seed I planted. Then it gets bigger and you can tell. But yeah everything I have done she sort of prophesied, including the literature. I still have a copy of some music she gave me. In my college days I used to keep music in my car so I wouldn't have to lug it back and forth. So one day my car broke down and it got towed and the engine was blown so it was going to need a new engine. So I had a buddy tow it up to my parents' house in Wisconsin while I figured out how I was going to get money for a new engine and during that time my parents decided it had to go. But they went through it and took everything out but my music went into my mother's music collection somehow. You know things get cleaned up and the person cleaning up don't delineate between. So after my mother died I got boxes of music and there were five or six things that I had, they weren't mine but I had them. One was a copy of the Rosetti E-major Concerto with Helen K Hirsch name on it and I had borrowed it from her and she never got it back from me and also there were a couple of woodwind quintets I had played on my junior recital from the conservatory library and they kept telling me Lowell you checked out this music and we haven't gotten it back from you. I kept saying. I am sure I gave it back to you. I know I don't have it I have looked in my locker I have looked in my car, in my dorm room. I have looked everywhere. I don't have it. Well why don't you look again I am sure it will turn up. It never turned up until 30 years later in my mother's music. It is tough not to end up with...you collect stuff and other peoples' things get mixed up in it. You finally locate it

20 years later and you are too embarrassed to go back. Oh by now they have replaced it. And the last time I saw her I mentioned I found some music that I couldn't find for a long time and one of the pieces was the Rosetti concerto. She said oh that keep it. I replaced it a long time ago in fact I think I am on copy number 5.

After I went to the Detroit Symphony, I went from Chicago into Milwaukee and played principal horn there without a contract that is how small the budget was there but it was a good orchestra. From there to Detroit from Detroit to Mexico City from Mexico City to Antwerp Belgium and from there I came back to the US and began playing the natural horn and the valved horn in Toledo and jobbing, lots of E-minor mass etc. I got called up by a group in Chicago by a group called Basically Bach to do the b minor mass on the natural horn. Of course I had done that a lot and I could usually do it with no fewer mishaps than a valved horn player. And after one of the performances in Chicago, she came up with like seven of her students. She had heard that I was going to be in town and she said oh without fail you've all got to come hear this. Yeah I know he is a gifted player. I haven't heard him in a long time but it is on the natural horn. Where are you going to hear the b-minor mass played on the natural horn? I don't think it was my best performance but it was a good enough one. You know some of those runs in there once you get off on them you can't get back on until the last note (He Sings an example). Anyway I was very impressed that she came and that she brought her bevy of students and some of them had been very good friend. Eva Heater was student of Helen Kotas Hirsch. Ann Logan Shipley, Loralie Lundsel, Mike Zuchek, Lois Zuchek, most of these people have a very active musical life whether or not they chose performance.

Going back to her methodology, I think she understood that not everyone would join a symphony. I think that she knew a big part of her job was to help a young person find their niche. That we all would find something to do and that we needed to learn skills beyond fingerings and phrases and things like that. A good teacher can teach you facts and data. A great teacher can teach you how to think about facts and data cause let's face it you can read a book and learn a lot. And this is one of the greatest downfalls of distance learning is that you must know already how to think, how to connect the dots, how to interpret the data because if you don't do that you just learn a whole bunch of useless things. The whole point of studying history or philosophy any higher level discipline is that you have to know how to evaluate it, what relevance does it have. You have to know how to apply it and that was very big with her. And everything that she said tended to put you in that direction that there was a kind of orientation that there was a revealing of a new horizon, a direction in which you might consider looking. And I don't think I ever, Barrows was a little bit that way. Barrows was highly intellectual. So if you didn't have any brains about you, you would miss half of what he taught. But I think Helen Kotas was one of those people that taught you how to make sense of it all. She was an interfaith woman. I don't know what her religious practices were early in her life. Her husband was Jewish so there were a lot of Jewish feasts, etc in their home. After he died I know she was attending a Unitarian church. And of course the Unitarians are very thoughtful and evaluate things in life in very philosophical terms. So that is something she would have enjoyed. There is less mysticism of the altar and more worship of God as revealed in nature, the cathedral of the world.

HEATHER THAYER: What do you know of her activities away from the horn?

LOWELL GREER: I didn't used to know anything. But she was, I think she was an orchid fan. And she served as president of the international orchid society. But she was responsible for educating and uniting and recruiting of a large group of people. I mean there are more orchid people than horn people.

With all the issues of gender bias, it doesn't seem that Helen Kotas gave any sort of thought to it that would have disabled her or given her a negative attitude or a why me attitude. Either to herself or the women that she taught, I believe that whatever disappointment that she faced she was able to turn her back on them. You know we talk about hurdles in the way of a runner. A runner has two choices you can go over it, under it or if you really need to you can crawl under it. But there is always a way to get past it somehow. But we are very impatient human beings. We want it our way and we want it now!!!! And I think that she had had enough successes early and she understood the human psyche substantially enough to put those things to rest so she was not angry. She would say well of course there is a long story there but nothing that needs looking into now. We need to look forward not backward. It was very simple forward not backward. And she could have been angry with Farkas. She could have been angry with Wedgewood, Barrington or Mooraker. You know anybody could have staged protests against Rodzinski. But he was the new conductor. And the law of the land was that conductors could and often did fire people on a whim. And those people they merely walked across the street and took another job. Today you have one big employer, the symphony. Well the operas have started to catch up. In her day there were radio orchestras, there was the Grant Park Symphony, and the Lyric Opera. Now

of the problem of gender issues. While she never made a wave she did strongly get behind the Woman's Symphony movement. In Chicago there was a substantial Woman's Symphony. I don't know if they got paid very much but they had really, really good players and they played really well. And I don't know if there were union difficulties it started out with a big bang and then fizzled with times. The ensemble was ahead of its age. Because womens' rights are not the issue they are now. In those days I don't think they got together to complain and try to get legislation to regulate the world into a fairer more ambient environment. I think they basically said so are you playing anywhere, no I really miss playing well let's start our own group. Good idea. They did it to play, to play the notes and hear the notes and to bring music in front of the public. These are not Helen Kotas's words to me but they are thoughts that I have devolved from her training. As human beings we exist in an environment that is filled with injustice, illness, sadness, disappointment and by artistic contract the public comes before an orchestra or an ensemble who are going to play music by a composer in which in that performance there will be phrases that balance with other phrases. There will be dissonances that resolve to consonances. There will be orchestrations that induce the feeling of serenity. And for that brief moment we have the ephemeral result of us forgetting how bad things are. It is our little glimpse into heaven. And it is restorative. And we go home feeling great. We might even recall how great we felt during the week following it. But we face once again the injustice and inequality, the unresolved conflict and so forth. So we have to go back to the symphony, theater or art institute. But we have that semi-divine function. In some ways a musician is like priest or a prophet, someone who delivers something with a spiritual content, something that cannot be proven, something that is

taken on faith. And it brings us a little closer to our creator. And I think very simply that every musician who loves music has experienced that and made the commitment to involve him or herself in that action which bring about those little moment s of glory. And that's the reason we do it. We might not have words to describe it but we are drawn into it like moths to a flame. And we endure all kind of disappointments. We live in a symphony ghetto. We don't get the type of recompense that other professions with a similar amount of training get. If you consider a symphony musician who takes private lessons in high school, college, graduate school. That kind of investment of time and effort is only seen in legal and medical professions. And maybe in high level science, cancer research but the pay is a decimal of what those fields receive. In prestige which is so often linked to financial gain. I think musicians are kind of in limbo. People are intrigued. They admire what you do. They are glad you do it but then they turn around and ask you, what do you do for a job? What is your living? As if a musician is not entitled to a fee. Currently orchestras all over are taking pay cuts. They are doing it to stay afloat. The only thing is that when managements realize that balancing the budget is so easy. It is as easy as saying there is fiscal duress and requesting a pay cut they will do it again and again until the musicians finally can't function anymore and that is the danger. We are in a pickle right now because in the very best sense of trickle-down economics, the people for who symphonic music has been a passion who were fiscally viable enough to form a support for us. Those people are not reaching into their pockets deeply because they may need that money to keep themselves afloat. It is the tendency of human beings to go for me, me first. And there is even a lot of pseudo philosophy. If you don't take care of yourself who will take off you and you can't take care of others.

Well if you stop taking care of others what is your validation for having existed. You are not going to take that money with you when you die.

When you studied with Helen, when that period ended you realized you weren't going to get anymore pearls on a regular basis but you realized that if you reflected and thought and behaved sensitively that you would probably do ok. There are some people whose studio you leave and you think what now? You see a lot of young players and they go to a job and they collapse. Because they don't get a weekly spoon feeding from the teacher. They don't get the power of the outside critical observation or the motivation and they crumble. So Helen did tend to make her students self-reliant. I point out another teacher with that reputation was Mason Jones. I love asking this question of Mason Jones students. So how was it studying with Jones? Was it really great? Was he like the ultimate guru? Well no no no. I mean it was alright I guess. You know he taught us to teach ourselves really. Well what is a better thing to teach them. You know none of you guys say Mason Jones man, what a teacher. I owe it all to him. Nobody says that. But think about it you all have big jobs. You are all playing in orchestras. You are all active and playing at the very highest standard. To me that would indicate that Jones was a really great teacher. You know in that connection there was an AAYO that Stokowski organized. Angaluchi, James Chambers, Mason Jones, and Helen Kotas. Helen played first and they toured South America.

HEATHER THAYER Do you have any specific memories of how she helped you learn how to think?

LOWELL GREER: Actually, she did it in a lot of little ways. At one point and it was the Malcolm Arnold Fantasy. She said ok you are going to play it from memory so you won't need this. And she said you play and I will listen. (He sings) I played and every so often I would see her make marks and after a while she stopped and said well it is going pretty well. Let me show you my marks. It's always the same note isn't it Lowell. Yes it is I am missing the same note over and over and over again. Well there is something you learn from that isn't there. Now play it again and don't miss that note. (he sings) And she said there that is the kind of playing that you are capable of. The other way perhaps you were absent minded. You were allowing the notes to fall out of the horn however they felt like. Maybe the lip was tired but maybe you just didn't focus it down small enough to achieve that note in its most perfect resonance. Oh yeah resonance I am supposed to play with resonance. I thought I could just play with any old noise. The choice of words. She was just very very intelligent. And she would just pick the right word to get you oriented. There was also the cold shower of declaring something unacceptable. Everything was brilliant except letter P and that was unacceptable. Oh ok don't beat me....And if you are going to do it use a stick, words hurt too much. It was all about having your orientation toward the music toward the art. Or whatever other endeavor you were involving yourself.

She premierd the Oldberg with the Tri City Symphony.

Christopher Leuba knew Helen from Grant Park. He joined the symphony and she was playing first. He says that he was young and full of himself and he said that she tolerated him and he couldn't ask for any kinder treatment from anyone. She wouldn't take guff but she was an aristocrat. I don't know if it was a product of her up-bringing or

of privilege or of playing symphonic music and deriving moral principles from that. But the best way to describe it is an aristocrat. And the name Kotas is Hungarian.

I remember it would have been about 1969 when EH died. I was during the summer months.

Helen Kotas would actually put together horn ensembles. The first time I played in a horn big band was at the American Conservatory. The cross section of her students was interesting. There was a fellow from Israel Ellie who had this great big as life personality and played on this beat up Alex. She had this black students Dewayne and he had some terrible horn but played pretty well on that. But the Horn players nest transcriptions and some excerpts, Hansel and Gretle were the staples of that. I think at her funeral the horn choir played Hansel and Gretle and I think that took people right over the edge. She believed strongly in that type of preparation.

The lesson was never about her. You learned very little about her in the lesson. The lesson was about the student. She did not regale me with stories about the old days in the orchestra because she needed for me not to exist in her shadow but to be someone who developed my own umbra. To be someone who developed my own skills to be a thoughtful interpreter. She never played in lessons. She never even brought her horn. You could ask her questions about her horn and she would answer it quickly.

HEATHER THAYER: Did she teach any younger students?

LOWELL GREER: Mainly college students. She had a few younger students but they would have been people from her neighborhood. She lived in the south part on Stony Island Ave. It's what Michigan turns into down there. I think it was an exclusive

neighborhood, but when I studied with her. She was teaching at American and Sherwood. At one point I think she taught at Roosevelt.

Susan Johnson

Interviewed by Heather Thayer

October 10, 2009

HEATHER THAYER: If you could, start with how you first met Helen?

SUSAN JOHNSON: When I came to this church to be the interim minister and then was asked to stay on the full time minister in 1980. Well, I need to go back further than that. At first I was campus minister for the University of Chicago and my office was here (Hyde Park Union Church). And as part of my work with the campus, I preached here did pulpit supply once a month and Helen was the treasurer. So I got to know her because my office was here and we just socialized. At that time the church was in a tough transition between pastors. Helen had been really close to the pastor who had been here for 30 years, William Schloerb. And I believe in her eyes no one could replace Dr. Schloerb. This was not only true for Helen but about half the congregation at the time. He had not only been here for 30 years but he was also a really lovely person and well known in the community. She really grieved his loss as well as the changes to the neighborhood. It was going from being a more university enclave to being a broader urban community with residents not affiliated with the university. There were a lot of changes through the 60s and the 70s. So that is when I got to know her. She was not close to the minister that was here prior to me. I would say that they really didn't get along well.

So when her sister died which was before I became even the interim minister. When she died she came to my office and burst into tears. She talked for a long time about her sister Bea and asked me not to talk to the minister about it. She wanted

someplace to talk about her sister and how much she meant to her and how sudden her sister's loss was. But she really kept things close to the vest. She didn't want to spill her grief more broadly in the church. Or certainly with a minister who didn't sort of reach the bar for her. Reaching the bar for Helen was tough. She had very high standards for everything.

She was the treasurer of this church for at least 25 years. I am not sure exactly because she predated me by so much. And all of the office space was configured differently at the time. Behind you was a smaller room that was her inner sanctum where she kept the books. And she put in a lot of hours. She did things the right way and she cared a lot about it. That is where I first got to know her. I don't really love figures the way...Helen really proved the relationship between math and music. But I do figures and I respect the finances of the church in a way that I think is hard for a lot of clergy. We are not trained in business management and a lot of clergy are kind of overwhelmed by it and are reined in by their trustees. And I think that is what she had gotten used to and annoyed with over the years after Dr. Schloerb retired. So she and I got along because I understood the numbers and I was willing to plan within the resources we had and push gently for more resources. So she and I got along. I also enjoyed classical music and took care to pronounce the names of composers correctly and made references to musical works when they were appropriate in sermons so in that respect she really... She loved and understood the arts, was well read and educated and that was a part of what she expected from church life so we got along fairly well from the beginning. Even though it was a hard time for the church, the church did not have enough money.

Helen was interestingly, umm not entirely enthusiastic about me staying on as the permanent senior minister of the church, even though she and I were getting along quite well by then. The reason was she wasn't sure women should be ministers which I thought was interesting for the first woman in the Chicago Symphony. And you know I don't punch congregates in the nose. But I did say to her that it was surprising to me because she was a ground breaking presence in the Chicago Symphony and she said, "Well, that was that and this is this." It was not to be discussed. She actually voted against my being called as the senior minister and she had served on the call committee that called me to the church. But I think she was the product of an era. It would be great to say, "And she was a ground breaking women's liberationist." But she wasn't. She was a very serious musician and when she was playing the French horn she didn't consider herself male or female. Which is how I feel when I am preaching the gospel, but it didn't necessarily transfer for her. Given when she was born and the lives of her parents, this doesn't really surprise me also given the man that she married. He was a very stayed, highly respected scientist and pathologist at the University of Chicago. You know there were traditions that were not to be broken. You know I was eager to win over all people in the congregation. There were some people who lost track of our relationship. They saw her opposition to me and she was such a known character, so firm in her opinions. I would say she was an introvert. But when it came time to speak the truth she spoke it anyway. So I think sometimes she came across as more stern than she really was. Anyway some people lost track and years later when she and I were quite close they were stunned. Years later when my daughter, who was not even born yet when I became interim minister here, after my daughter began taking

horn lessons from Helen. People said, "Hey you just sort of put your daughter in the breach to see what would happen?" A) I would not do that to my daughter and B) that wasn't the relationship I had with Helen at that time. She was a person you had to prove yourself to. But she respected people who proved themselves. She never relaxed with any of her students because that is what it meant to be a teacher. She had very strict standards. My daughter was terrified of performing in public. She actually was a very good little horn player and she didn't mind playing in orchestra or band or an ensemble. But solo horn...Helen made her do it all the time in church. She would say this Sunday you are going to play such and such. And Sarah would say I don't want to do it and Helen would say and after a few times you are going to get over that. Sarah never did get over it but Helen never stopped.

Helen was also the president of the Women's Society here. Many churches have a Women's Society and this one was not atypical. But this was an aging organization because the younger women all worked during the day and this was a Thursday afternoon luncheon and program. But Helen felt very strongly that these women needed programs and that this was a fine thing to do. She did it as an offering to women who were 15 to 20 years older than she was. And she really respected them and loved their company and thought older members deserved our respect and care. So this very exacting musician and philanthropist, because she had her husband's estate to distribute, also believed in the little things like the Women's Society. She was very generous toward it.

By the time I got to know Helen she no longer played herself. Part of her exacting standard was to know when to retire. And she had a usually casual but governing

influence over the musical life of the church. She had a very close relationship with the former musical director of the church, who retired while she was still living. She really kind of bossed him around. No matter what the senior minister thought she was doing about the music program, Helen really ran the music program. And she did an extremely good job and while she was living she continued to bring in friends of hers from the Chicago Symphony. We had harps, and violins and brass ensembles whatever she decided to cook up. She didn't always pay for these things. Some of them were in the budget and sometimes she sort of raised many on the side to pay for them. And they were for services like Easter and the beginning of advent and special services like that and sometimes they were just in the middle of the month Helen just decided to do this. At the same time she would pull the music director aside and say you know Vern so and so needs to retire. That voice is getting... you know. To her it was business. It was just the good business of the way musicians really talk about their craft. She expected no one to take offense and she was offended when someone did take offense. She was offended if they took offense.

So when it came time, things in the church were changing and there was a real struggle for leadership. When it came time to consider what kind of leadership the church needed to move forward. And we had older members who were holding tight to the reins and younger members who were coming up in the church and couldn't get involved because older members were holding tight. We decided at a meeting that Helen was not at that we couldn't have a treasurer who had so much informal power because she had been treasurer for so many years. And if the trustees decided something that Helen didn't like it might just not happen. And if she wanted something

to happen that wasn't in the budget she would just go raise money from people in the church on the side. So in a way she was kind of subverting the real congregational power and governance. So people himmed and hawed and finally this one very benign, lovely younger lay leader, a scientist at the university, who at the time was on the board of trustees when this vote was taken and we were ready to change the rules of the church so the treasurer could only serve five years. He broke it to Helen. And everybody expected her to march out of the church but we really didn't know what to expect. But people planned for the worst. We were going to get her a really nice fruit basket and make a big ceremony about her retirement from this position. But we were definitely moving on. She took it like a soldier. She came to me and said, "I assume this was all done with your blessing?" And I said, "I think it is the right thing for the church." And she said that she had long ago, meaning when my predecessor was here that she didn't like, decided that this was her church and that she had seen a couple of prominent older members get their nose out of joint and leave and she said this is my church. This is the church I want to take care of me in my old age and this is where I want my family to be. I am not going to leave this church. It is my church too. In a sense she was saying even if you sting my feelings I am not going. And I thought that was beautiful. Because we get our feelings hurt from time to time. And if we pick up our toys and leave then we only have ourselves to blame when we have no one left to play with. And she realized that. In a way from that time forward, from the time she was no longer treasurer she and I were even closer.

By that time my daughter was studying horn and couple of years later Helen started to teach her. She was the only real child in the group. She was like 9 and

playing in all these groups with adults. And Helen gave my daughter her horn. So Sarah has Helen's and a platinum mouthpiece that Helen thought was the best mouthpiece. They, not I, Helen and my daughter exchanged Christmas presents every year and my goodness what we had to go through. Helen didn't need anything and she was so appreciative of even the smallest thing. And here was this 13-14 year old child casting about for what could she buy for this old world teacher. It was really very beautiful. Sarah went to Interlochen for several summers in her early adolescent years. Helen called ahead to find out who was teaching French horn. And got Sarah pre-introduced. And that's the thing that was just so striking about her, her personal loyalty.

When she was in your corner, it was forever. She really believed in long term relationships. As precise as she was, she was not calculating about friendship or devotion. She was utterly devoted to the music director who has retired but is still living. He had a problem with alcohol which became quite pronounced after his partner died and sort of pushed his retirement. So as we had kind of pushed Helen out of the treasurer position. We really did push this music director out of his position. She said it was the right thing. She was 110% behind it. And she remained his steadfast friend. You know over and over again, someone would underestimate her and think that she was going to cut someone off at the knees. She would show that having an exacting standard was different than being mean. She did not have a mean bone in her body. When I first started at the church she would lord Dr. Schloerb over me as the standard. She would tell me over and over again that Dr. Schloerb had died on a Thursday with his sermon written. It was the Thursday before Easter and his sermon was based on the text "Into thy hands I commit thy spirit." She must have told me that story a dozen times

before I turned to her and told her, “Helen if I die on a Thursday you are going to have to get a sub. Because I have two little kids at home and I don’t write my sermon until Sat when they are in bed. I think about it well in advance but I don’t actually do the work.” And she got this funny sly smile on her face and it was kind of facing her down in a way. But I didn’t hear that story anymore. She really didn’t mind if people disagreed with her but she was such a strong personality that people didn’t see that in her. And I think if there is any sadness for me for her life it is that people cow-towed to her rather than having a more bold relationship with her. She really didn’t mean to turn people aside. She just expected them to be more like her. For example, if they were introverted, to speak boldly anyway. She was really something else. She was delightful.

She continued to attend the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She used to go to matinee performances all the time. She was very involved in the building she lived in. She was really... she didn’t just expect things of people she really expected things of herself.

HEATHER THAYER: When did you start at the university?

SUSAN JOHNSON: 1979

HEATHER THAYER: Do you have any other specific interactions that come to mind from the early days?

SUSAN JOHNSON: Well I have a number of sort of funny stories, more on not being much of a gender liberal. The secretary when I first started here was a young man who was ABD at University of Chicago in the English department. He was very talented and he had to work very closely with Helen. He was very good at what he did but he did not iron his shirt. So he came in with a wrinkled oxford shirt. He always wore the same

thing. It was either a blue or white oxford shirt, and usually put the sleeves down and khakis. And in the summer he would wear sandals. And she thought this was completely outside the bounds. So she would talk to me about how he needed to iron his shirts. This was just unacceptable. In summer he would wear sandals and he would take them off behind his desk and pad around barefoot. She was in this inner office and she could see his bare feet padding around. She found this so invasive of her dignity that I finally had to talk to him about it. He said it's none of her business. And it wasn't any of her business except we could have standards about how people dressed and I finally said, "You know actually I think you need foot covering while you are here. What am I going to tell workman's comp if you step on a tack while you are here and get an infection? Let's just compromise with Helen. Why are we trying to make a big deal out of it?" That is just again her very traditional standards.

She took me to the Bohemian national cemetery one time. I can't remember why, I think it was the nature of a field trip. We went to see her parents' grave. That may have had something to do with her sister's death. Her sister went to Antioch College which I understand is closed. I am glad it didn't happen in Helen's lifetime because it would have made her incredibly sad. It's in Ohio. It is very avant-garde. It is a school for special students. Students that like to live outside the box. And that is a good description of Bea. I don't know because Helen was too discreet to discuss this with me. I don't know her sisters sexual orientation. But I know that Helen's husband would not let her sister in their home. I don't know that because Helen told me I know that because the music director told me who was openly gay. So I believe him but I never actually heard it from Helen. But Antioch was the first place her sister sort of came into

her own, really found herself. But her sister would come into town and get a room downtown. And Helen and Vernon the music director would spend hours with Bea, going out to dinner, doing social things whenever Helen's sister came to town but Helen's husband would not abide her. And Helen respected that as one of the limitations of her marriage but she was not going to disown her sister. Helen could actually maintain both of those life-long relationships with her husband and her sister and if the two worlds wouldn't meet then she would spend time in the two worlds because she just believed in relationships that way. So when she died the church received a small I shouldn't say small it was significant bequest. The university received a larger bequest and Antioch received a very large bequest. I don't know the numbers I just know the relationship. The church was the smallest, the University of Chicago was medium and Antioch was the largest. And that was because she felt that institution had really befriended her sister and had been what her sister needed as a college. I thought that was really stunning.

When I came here, Helen gave me a stack of little tiny pamphlets of very, they were colored paper almost flannelly colored paper and they were Dr. Schloerb's sermons. And they were reprinted in this tiny little format. I think they had been sent out to a press. And they were like these little pocket things. Like I would think you would carry these around with you as a devotional aid. And she gave me a packet of them. She said these are extras that I have of all the sermons so you can read through them and you can come into a sense of what we expect of ministers here. She said I use them. I keep them on my bedside table and she pointed out two or three of them that she read regularly till they were just worn out and she kept them on her bedside table.

So there is this blend of this exacting Helen who is saying to me, this is the standard of sermon we expect from pastors in our church and you better get used to it and rise to meet it. And also saying this is something that is very important to me that I use all the time that is sort of a spiritual guide and compass for me. And I want you to have this too. So it was also an establishment of a relationship. It was also a gift. She could have just sat back with her arms folded and waited to see if I could rise to her personal standard of what Dr. Schloerb did but that was really not the kind of person she really was. She was very generous.

There is a woman who is three or four years older than I am so she is not quite 60 who came to this church when she was five and still comes to this church 50 some years later. She had a beautiful soprano voice. She sang in the children's choir here and took professional lessons over the years. All arranged by Helen and I suspect all paid for by Helen. Although I again wouldn't know that I just think it is true and every year they exchanged Christmas presents. So I mean she really was in her own way, the worst barriers something like race and classism she could completely past through personal relationships. Now what she expected Ingrid to sing, was perhaps only the best negro spirituals, but then also things out of a whole classical repertoire that Helen considered good music. So in other ways she was not going to break with, she was not going to let Ingrid have her own musical interests. She was going to draw her into her world but they were really quite close and when Helen was injured, the injury that eventually she dies from, Ingrid was one of the readers. We had a group of readers that read to Helen every day. And because she was in a coma and we really have so little idea of what people are able to perceive. So we all read to her. And there were people

who could bear to do this and there were people who could barely stand to be in the room. She looked so unlike herself and the longer it went on the sadder it became. But Ingrid was at her side every week. I think two or three times a week. We would take turns going down to Helen.

HEATHER THAYER: Do you know Ingrid's last name?

SUSAN JOHNSON: Wallace

HEATHER THAYER: How long was she in the coma?

SUSAN JOHNSON: She was injured in October and she died in December. And she never came out of the coma. Do you know the story of the accident?

HEATHER THAYER: I know bits and pieces. Everybody has slightly different versions.

SUSAN JOHNSON: Yeah so she lived at the corner of Stony Island and 59th Ave. and there was a bus stop. Her apartment building was on the east side of Stony Island and the bus stop was on the west side. She could drive. She continued to drive up until the day of the accident. She had this Mercedes. She had a car was the envy of anyone who saw it. But she did not drive downtown. She would drive around Hyde Park and she would drive distances like out to Vernon Stutz's house, the music director. But she did not drive downtown she would always take public transportation. So she was taking the bus. She was crossing the street. She wasn't going to the light because no one from the building went to the light. It was like 20 feet from it but not actually in the crosswalk. And she crossed the south bound lane and as she crossed the north bound lane, a man who was driving his sister's car, hit her and she was immediately unconscious. He was not even slowing. He never saw her. He pled guilty to all kind of things in court and sobbed the day that he appeared. His sister was also unconscious at the time that he hit Helen

at Mercy Hospital. I don't know the nature of her disease or what put her in the hospital. But he had not driven in years. He did not have a driver's license anymore. He got his sister's car out of her garage and drove to see her. It was the first time he had been behind the wheel in years. And he struck Helen. And he was devastated. It was just an all-around horrible tragedy. I was here at church. Mary Schloerb, who is the daughter-in-law of Dr. Schloerb, lived in the same building as Helen. The building had a doorman and so I heard immediately from Mary because the doorman immediately called Mary because she and Helen were very close. And Mary called me and I could barely understand what she was saying on the phone, she was sobbing. So I went and picked up Mary and we immediately went down to Northwestern Hospital and they worked on Helen for quite awhile. She had a number of broken bones, ribs. I can't remember if she had a fracture in her pelvis. But she had severe head trauma. And after almost 8 weeks they moved her to the hospice floor at Northwestern. Recognizing that she was not going to come out of this coma and that the measures they were taking to revive her out of this coma were not very appropriate or even kind. And to tell you the truth I am not sure why those arrangements were made by Dr. Schloerb's son but they were. Bob was her attorney. He may have had a kind of power of attorney literally from her in the event she ever became incapacitated. If he did I never asked. So I don't know that. But I imagine that to be true. And he was the one to make the decision to move her to hospice. And as I said there were people who gathered consistently to be with her, to read to her, to play music for her. And that was certainly encouraged, but I think everyone expected that once she wasn't being given oxygen or assistance in breathing and all the things they take away when you go into hospice to let you die naturally. I

think we all thought phew the vigil will soon be over and she will be out of this awful twilight state. But she didn't, she didn't die. And I remember it well because I preached on it to the congregations after her death. I came to visit her in late December. And it was snowing outside and I looked out her window and I always talked to her about the weather and what people were doing today. And that day I told her that it was snowing and that all the decorations were up on Michigan Ave. And the hospital had begun to put Christmas decorations up and it was really beautiful. This was the way she liked to see Chicago dressed finely and looking very dignified. And it was beautiful. And then I told her, I usually read scripture, I figure everybody read all kinds of stuff so I was going to read scripture. I read a couple of psalms and I said you know it is the time of year I should just read the Christmas story. So I read the Christmas story waffling back and forth between the gospels and I read all the way to the benediction of Simeon when Jesus is brought into the temple to be circumcised when he is 8 days old. Simeon takes Jesus into his arms, he was a prophet and priest, he holds him aloft and says, "Now lord let us thou thy servant depart in peace because I have seen the salvation of the people." And I looked up from reading and I said, "Helen if it is time you can go. We will be ok and this story is a sign that people can die and leave this earthly life and know that they leave people who can live without them. That is God's promise to us." I took her hand and said, "When it is time it's ok you can go. "She died the next day. It was a story that was so beautiful not from anything that I did but for everything that was happening and all the anticipatory grief that we had all had for this great lady that I shared it with the entire congregation. It was just so, it was the kind person she was. That you would have to tell her that it was time to go.

After she died and several of us were asked by the Schloerbs to take the responsibility of looking through her things and making decisions about things that she owned. I took all of her correspondence related material that she had. Birthday book she never forgot anybody's birthday. She had a couple of different kinds of address books and she had some bundled letters. And I took it and created one database out of it. I created a card with a black border around it, something I am much more accustomed as a European tradition, announcing the death of a family member. And I started working to let people know that Helen had passed away because she had this network of people all over the world. She kept in touch with. And I sent out an announcement of her death to every single person. So the church was the recipient of so many condolences. And it was a very sweet sad time. Again I had this feeling that there was this standard about how things should be done. And if I thought about it I knew what this standard was. And if I didn't do it the way she wanted. It wasn't about what she wanted but did I rise to some immutable standard that was out there, that was dignified, that had an aesthetic, that appreciated relationship that didn't go into a lot of morbid detail because that is not dignified. But that let people know. And some people did not even know she was injured in a car accident. So it took me 24 or 48 hours to craft wording that when I went back and looked at I was willing to live with. But for me it was a way of paying homage and saying goodbye and my daughter helped me address all the envelopes and get this entire mailing out. So even in this sadness and even though she was gone, her legacy was that she had really taught us something about the way the world might be. A kind of dignity and loveliness that was really possible even when you were feeling terrible. There was a lot of anxiety about where her ashes should

be put. The Bohemian National Cemetery was not being kept up anymore. And even though she had a lot of reasons to be tied to that cemetery, I remember Mary Schloerb talking to me about whether or not that was the appropriate place anymore. I remember there was also a crypt here in Hyde Park which happens to be under the First Unitarian church which was just the first place where ashes could be stored, where many people from her generation, where their ashes were interred. To tell you the truth I am not sure if that is what the Schloerb's decided to do. That may be where her ashes are. There was no separate ceremony for that. A call to them would tell you. I just don't know. But there was a lot of back and forth about where her ashes should be put and I know Dr. and Mrs. Schloerb's ashes are there and a lot of members of the church. I would regularly go down to have half of every ceremony here. Then we had a beautiful memorial service here. At which it was a concert of all her students. There was a circle of 10 or 11 horns at the front of the sanctuary. There was a solo call from a horn which was played with the soloist out of sight of the congregation. It was just beautiful. It was all the music that she continually had people work on because she thought these were the finest french horn solos.

HEATHER THAYER: I am continually in awe of her.

SUSAN JOHNSON: She had a favorite expression. It was the only nasty thing I ever heard her say. She said it over and over again when she had something nasty to say. This was her utter dismissal of something. It was just beneath any standard you could bear. She would say "That's for the birds!" I took great pleasure researching it for her and the closest anyone could get was that it was probably biblical and it had to do with birds of prey or picking carcasses. You know in an era when people were using the "F"

word. The most she could say was “He is for the birds.” But that was like he is off my radar. That idea does not deserve the time of day. But you knew it was time to change the subject if she said something was for the birds.

Let me tell you about the cream colored Mercedes. It had no seatbelts because it was an antique. It was a gorgeous car. In the 70s it was an antique. It didn't have a scratch on it. She kept it in mint condition. She would drive it over to the church and park it in front of the church. She had it washed and polished regularly and had it tuned up regularly. She had her own mechanic. They loved the car. It had leather interior. And she would drive my daughter around. My daughter was terrified that there were no seatbelts and then she said, “But then I realized that Helen only drives 5 miles an hour.” The car was old enough that for my daughter's generations, the steering wheel that was huge and was probably manual, I don't think it had power steering. But it was a gorgeous car and people were indiscreet about asking after the car after she had died. I would refer her to her lawyer. But I would think, please people, but it was part of her character. It was as classic and precise and dignified and beautiful as she was.

She could seem so severe and didn't smile often but when she smiled she would break into this slightly child-like giddy laugh and smile. And it was so gratifying to see her do that. Older members of the church could make her do that so easily. It was really sweet. But after she died I think it was Ingrid that said I just don't know how she would have aged. Not that she was a young woman but she was still doing everything she wanted. She was still running around, and she never walked by the way, it was something brisker than walking, she didn't jog but she wore those little two lace tie up shoe they have like a little crinkly seam right here and they have a crepe sole. And she

would just jet around wherever she needed to go. And I am sure she was actually going pretty quickly when she was crossing the street because she just moved around like that. And you would watch her move and do calculations and plan events and you would think man, when I am in my 70s I want to be half of that. But Ingrid said I just don't know what if she had lived to be 95 and been infirm. How would she have handled being infirm. It's hard to imagine. That's not fair to Helen because she conquered a lot of other things. But then at 95 she may have just been what we are at 70. But part of consoling ourselves after a loss is trying to imagine someone is in a better place. Or that something happened for a reason. It was Ingrid's way of saying, "In any respect could this be ok?" And maybe the only way to look at it is that it would have been hard for us to see her inabilities. Maybe she would have handled it ok but how would we have handled it, having less and less of her each year. Because she was this force to be reckoned with.

There were a lot of old machines when I got here. Like there was an address machine which had metal plates which people would have peoples addresses stamped and you would send each individual envelope through to get stamped and yes it was a machine but it was a pretty low mechanism and it was made of iron and it weighed a ton. And when it came time I said to Helen there is a lot of stuff here that we can't use anymore and it is just catching dust. And we have to get rid of it so she said yes which surprised me because some people just can't get rid of everything. But that just wasn't how Helen was. So I had the janitor come up and this guy was strong as an ox and he could barely move it 5 feet. I don't know how they brought it upstairs. Probably four men brought it in. So he got it as far as the fire escape and pitched it off the fire escape. We

thought it would break. But it was fine. And Helen came out of her office and we were standing on the fire escape laughing and she came out of her office and said well that isn't what I meant. But she was so sentimental about certain kinds of things and so exacting about other things and it was easy to not really realize which way it was going to go.

There was a school professor, very well-respected named Langdon Guilke whose father had been pastor of this church before Dr. Schloerb. Charles Guilke was also very well respected and he became the first dean of Rockefeller Chapel after the chapel was built when he left here and Dr. Schloerb came in 1928. In his later years Langdon, Dr. Guilke's son, who was teaching at the divinity school, joined our choir here at the church, he had a very nice voice but he wore, he was a very exotic personality, his ascots, very bright colored ascots and had a kind of full beard and his graying hair was probably shoulder length but he wore it in a pony-tail and he had wire rimmed glasses but in the winter he wore his boots into the sanctuary. He didn't wear rubbers or boots that he would then exchange for shoes. He would just wear his boots all morning. They weren't leather boots. They were like seal skin and ribbons you know they were like muck lucks for Eskimos, very decorative very much like his personality. He had a very nice voice and sang in the choir every week and was an extremely well respected theologian internationally. Helen said he was for the birds. And the reason was, he had not lived up to his father. C.G. was much more generous toward the community and was a kind of statesman. And here Langdon had the possibility of being an elder statesman and instead he was a professorial goof ball who continued to write

professionally very well but just did not behave. So that is what I mean about her standards did warp with tradition. What she expected having grown up a certain way.

I don't know anyone who worked harder than she did. She just always had energy and needed a project and she had plenty of projects. But in a sense if the cause was right or the work was good nothing was beneath her. For example, she was very generous toward the Baptist Children's Home. It was an organization that this church contributed to from very early on probably from its beginning. It was an orphanage to begin with and then it got into foster care and a lot of the other social services, day care and things like that goes along with child welfare. And she went out on tag days. She organized all the tagging for the Baptist Children's homes. She had all the best locations for all the commuters, all the people shopping at Marshall Fields. She had the whole thing psyched out. She worked very hard and in all the negotiating, all the hard-nosed negotiating. She got these spots over a period of time. She didn't have them all initially and then she would strong arm people into manning these slots from like 6 am to 7 pm. She had my husband who was a lawyer downtown do it for his lunch hour and the hour before he went into work and a lot of his friends and colleagues and I did it even though it was in the middle of my day. She said I think it would be a good example. And then we would all bring our little cardboard boxes back to the church and hand them to Helen and she would sit in the office just like she did with every church offering and count it all up and drive over to the bank with it. There was no job that was beneath her if it was the right job. She would stand out there in any kind of weather she would stand out there.

She was a plain dresser. She did not spend money on herself. She dressed in a dignified way, wool skirts and blazers and pant suits but very plain and she had a,

probably more precise than I realize, but she had a regular rotation. You know you would see the same clothes over and over again in a season. And she had a beige raincoat she always just sort of threw on. I can see her standing in front of Marshall Fields, the best spot she would say. And if you didn't know how to beg for money she would teach you. You have to be cheerful and insistent. If you didn't believe in your cause no one would believe in it.

I don't know whatever became of the car.

HEATHER THAYER: You talked about earning her respect. Can you talk about some specific instances where you accomplished that?

SUSAN JOHNSON: Well not too surprisingly, Helen had a concept in mind for how you treated a family when a loved one had died. That was definitely an area where she and I shared a similar standard. Whatever the reasoning was behind why she thought it should go a certain way we didn't talk about but from my standpoint a family deserves the very best hospitality of the community they live in and worship in who knew this loved one. I would say because she was always in the office, she really influenced and helped me developed what it was we wanted to get out of people. So, on an occasion like that, I had trained up ushers, on a Sunday morning ushering was very casual for us. At a memorial service or funeral ushering was extremely precise. There was always a book to be signed that the family could take home. So that they could correspond with who had come or just so they knew who had been there. The family was ushered in separately after everyone was seated unless the family requested that they be able to greet people in the sanctuary. I would always tell them that they were free to gather in the parlor and come in together because sometimes it is overwhelming to be with so

many people. And at the end of the worship service the ushers would come right up front as soon as the benediction was over because I didn't want people flocking around the family. Because often at the end of a memorial service the family members need to blow their noses and dry their eyes and do a little bit of, I am about to see the public. And nobody should be seen in their grief until they are ready. And Helen was always very clear about that. So I was always very clear that the ushers are going to come forward. If you want to stay in the sanctuary please tell me but otherwise the ushers will come forward and guide you out and they will hold everybody back just for that critical moment of here is your Kleenex or get out your handkerchief and we will form a receiving line. Some families don't want to do that and that's ok but its best to have a receiving line. When the family is standing in the receiving line someone has to come with a tray of beverages for the family. Otherwise they are greeting a 100 people and by the end they are dry mouthed. Everyone has been eating and drinking while they have been standing and greeting the public. So there were all these little things. They all sound like little things but also we had to have a bulletin for every memorial service and it had to be absolutely correct. You just didn't do half baked measures for these things. You were actually creating mementos for people. And I agreed with all of that and it was easy for me to meet that standard and unfortunately in the life of the church when I came as the senior minister in the Spring of 1985. At that time we had lots of elderly members, people who had come to the church from the Schloerb years and even back to the Guilke years. And I did, one Jan, I did 4 funerals So I must have been doing one a week or two in a week, one every other week. I think in my first three years I probably did thirty. It was just an aging congregation. Fortunately it was also a revitalizing

congregation. That is where a lot of the tension came from. Helen had her own role in that tension because she sort of stuck with a tradition. But she and I really agreed about how people were to be memorialized and how families were to be cared for. And this church owns because these items were bequeathed to us beautiful silver tea services and I always got them out days before a memorial service. I always had the janitor polish them within an inch of their lives. And there was an Amari punch bowl which had been given to the Schloerbs by someone who had traveled to China and the Schloerbs had in turn given it to the church. And there were only two people who were allowed to carry it from the vault upstairs down to the kitchen. And I turned out to be one of them, which meant that I always had to go get it but... But on the other hand this was the standard. Just like if the service was during the daylight hours we did not have candles but if it was 4 pm we had candles on the table. I had a grandmother who was not that different from Helen in terms of liking things a certain way. So I vaguely knew that 4 pm rule. So, I did not disappoint her. The first memorial service that we had later in the day that would be appropriate for candles, I got the candelabra out. We had this little three candle candelabra that matched the silver tea service and you know then we were friends. And you could think that was all about being elitist but it wasn't. It was all about relationships and hospitality for that family. If you didn't put your best out at this moment when they needed to be treated gently and kindly, when would you get it out? So it was a big thing to her. Also the janitor at the time had a drinking problem himself. He was a poorly educated man, he was a very kind man but we had major problems with him and I figured out how to work with him and figured out how to get him to work for us and I think Helen was really surprised that I could actually do that because maybe I looked

really young. I was only 27. In a lot of ways she gave me backbone. It was easier to be what I supposed to be when there was someone sort of nudging you in that direction.

About church bulletins, there was a church bulletin every week. It was for a time typed up and reproduced on a mimeograph machine and then later on different a copier but it was done by the church administrator who didn't wear shoes when he didn't have to. And that church administrator and several that came after him would come in on a Monday morning and would find slipped under the office door a bulletin from the day before with corrections in red pencil. And if they got their nose out of joint and I was silly enough to say to Helen you know people kind of find that insulting she would say, it's just a fact. You either spell the word right or you spell it wrong. You either get the hymn number right or you transpose it. It's just a fact. And she saw no reason why the clerical person should take offense at finding out that they had done something wrong and having the opportunity to correct it next time. Which actually is not recognizing something about a relationship because if she had come over and she was going to come over and count the money and deposit in the bank anyway. If she had come over and said, here is Sundays bulletin I am sorry to say we are still having trouble with getting the announcements right or whatever I would like you to really work on getting the hymn numbers right. You know that would be different but she was disgusted that she was at a worship service where someone hadn't taken the time to really proof the bulletin. So you got her disgust under the door.

HEATHER THAYER: Can you talk about the church affiliation?

SUSAN JOHNSON: Sure. During her lifetime it changed. It was a Baptist church in its founding. It was called the First Baptist Church of Hyde Park. That was when Hyde Park

was a suburb of the city or a small town outside the city. But the town was annexed into the city before the 1900s and the name of the church changed to Hyde Park Baptist Church. And I believe that Helen came to the church because Dr. Hirsch worshipped here. So when she married him she came to the church. She and Dr. Hirsch were married in Dr. Schloerb's study. I never asked her why she wasn't married in a wedding ceremony. I think Dr. Hirsch had been married before. I doubt but I don't know if he was divorced. I think he probably survived his wife. That is my sort of vague notion. He was considerably older than she. He had died before I came here so I didn't know him and I don't precisely how much older. But I would say a generation older. So she joined the church when it was Baptist and my assumption is that either Dr. Hirsch was Baptist or Dr. Hirsch really belonged to the Hyde Park university group that was associated with the church. But in the early 1960s that church affiliated with the United Church of Christ and one of the reasons they did that was because the attendants of the church was much broader than Baptist and it is possible the Dr. Hirsch was among those people who came to the church all the time and didn't really belong because they certainly weren't going to be re-baptized and even though this church stopped re-baptizing people in 1925 out of respect for other Christian traditions, that was a very strong statement to make in a Baptist church at that time. For a long time it was casually said if you wanted tenure at the university you had to belong to this church. There was a very strong affiliation for a period of time. Certainly nowhere true now. And I think it's one of the things that the older members were kind of sad about when I got here, that there used to be this kind of common turf between the university and the church. It was this very elegant and dignified kind of place and I think Helen thought it had come down a

notch or two or three. And at the same time we tried to remain relevant to the community we lived in and still remain a kind of educated standard that was a part of what she wanted. We affiliated with the United Church of Christ also because Chicago Theological seminary is affiliated with the United Church of Christ and a number of the faculty worshipped here. And as a matter of fact the UCC which was up on 53rd street no longer suited their needs for various reasons which I wouldn't try to characterize but they were unhappy up there. So they came down here and infiltrated and then wanted to belong. So there was a push from outside the church to belong to the UCC. That happened during Helen's time as treasurer. I don't really know how she felt about it. What happened after that is that the same kind of clique of UCC professors from Chicago Theological Seminary didn't really get along with the vision here either so they went to university church which was a Disciples of Christ Church and affiliated that church with the UCC as well. So by the time I got here we were both denominations and there were two other UCC churches kind of within a stone's throw of each other. I don't think either denominational affiliation was as important to Helen as the kind of embodied community here. It was a community church. It still is very a community church.

In the Women's Society, Helen not only opened the Women's Society to non-members but she also enfolded a group that Geraldine Guilke the wife of the pastor before Dr. Schloerb had created called the Business and Professional Women's group. So she started this group because there were professional women, generally single sometimes married and without children who worked full time but they were in such a minority that they were kind of left out of all the women's activities that were for genteel women who stayed at home. So Geraldine Guilke started this group which itself had

gotten quite elderly by the 70's so under Helen's leadership the two groups merged. They were all retired at that point and the things which had kept them apart supposedly went away although they didn't quite. Professional women of that era sort of had an attitude because it was survival and they thought a lot of things, the women who had stayed at home with kids had been part of the auxiliary of the university that they were kind of silly and they conveyed a lot of that. Not quite contempt but some snobbishness. Like we were professional women and you were not. And we have master's degrees and you don't. And I hadn't thought about it this way but Helen was a professional woman and she did not belong to the Business and Professional Women's Group. I don't know why I am sure it had more to do with Mrs. Schloerb who was the president and she was close to. But she was this bridge person. She brought the two groups together and she was equally comfortable in both groups. And she loved people in both groups and she would lay down her life for people in both groups. So I haven't really thought about her bridge building capacity because it isn't something I have knowledge of besides that. But it was of necessity the two groups couldn't survive apart. So they had to come together.

She also said there was one woman who is now deceased who annoyed everyone. Her husband worked for Standard Oil Company. They had a lot of money and they were very stingy. She was a world traveler and she used to keep count of how many countries she had been in and she was rather extravagant and self-centered. And Helen was very consistent about her relationship with Mildred. She said she's getting old too. Mildred lived in the same building with Helen and a lot of the older members Her attitude toward Mildred was it didn't matter if she was a pain. She was getting old

too and she was very gracious. I don't think Helen enjoyed her company anymore than half a dozen other people did. She was I have to say... The woman was a great story teller and every piece of jewelry she wore came from some exotic place and she could tell you all about the person she bargained it off of. And she was hilarious but she was very self-centered. But Helen gave her rides all the time and I know Helen didn't like her but that wasn't the point. Helen was just something else.

HEATHER THAYER: There are a lot of people who hold others to standards but she also held herself to those standards.

SUSAN JOHNSON: Yes that is really true.

HEATHER THAYER: It was not a matter of being critical but of holding everyone to that level.

SUSAN JOHNSON Yes

Lisa Targonski-Cisneros

Interviewed by Heather Thayer

October 12, 2009

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: Oh when they were bringing the airplane to the Science and Industry Museum. Because where her apartment was situated she could see the north side of the city, she'd get the whole skyline. Out of that skyline window you could see the north side of the city, hung her vermilliads. She was president of the vermilliad society. Do you know what a vermilliad is? It's a flower that you can actually hang in a pot. It has long skinny leaves that come out of one another and the water gets held in the leaves and there is a red flower that comes out of the top. You see them at hotels. They usually put them outside and they are usually plastic. I think its succulent. It almost looks like a cactus but it's not. But she loved her vermilliads. I know because I had one once that was dead. I took it over there and said, "What can you do?" I came over a couple of weeks later and there it was. So was very interested in planting. She had her garden outside of her apartment over there too. She was interested in a lot of things. Mostly she was interested in promoting her students and even me just being a flute player. She really took a lot of us in. Joanne Rueben and I were the flute players that would attend the parties. We played everything that was written for flute and horn which was good. Even in classes she would challenge us to look up composers that we didn't really know about.

We spent a lot of time over by her. Usually she was like, "no no I can get everywhere by herself." When she had her surgery, her eye surgery, she said, "no no I am just going to take the L." I said, "No, I will be there and I will pick you up." So I took

her and stayed overnight with her that night. She was very strong willed. When we went to the hospital downtown somewhere, they had to take everything from her because she was going into surgery. They said, "Well did you eat anything." She said, "Well I had my cup of coffee." "Well we told you not to eat anything." I wish you could...you had to know her. You have to take your wedding rings off. You have to take everything off. So I had her rings and hose and purse and everything. It was quite an ordeal. So when they were bringing her back. They were wheeling her back in a wheel chair. I could tell who she was because of the orange lipstick coming down. Then she was fine. She stayed in recovery for a while and then she was fine. I just stayed overnight with her which I did sometimes because if we had a late performance with her downtown we would stay with her. We would get up and she would make tea and grapefruit with honey, always the same thing. She was very regimented, always neat, and very organized but a very good teacher. That was more on the personal side. She was always challenging us. That is why when we do these performances in June we always try to dig up things that don't get played very often because that is what we are supposed to do. We aren't supposed to play all Bach. We do every once and awhile because everybody appreciates that. But we have to pull out the Tittle and the Serenade for Flute horn and timpani we did one year. We had no timpani. I told her well I have a station wagon I can't get the timpani in it. Well you are just going to go rent a truck. She said well we'll get the timpani. And we just did it. And Eva, have you met Eva?

HEATHER THAYER: I am going to

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: She was there this year?

HEATHER THAYER: Yes

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: Ok she missed last year. Even Eva who is out at Yale working and playing comes in to do these concerts because that is what we do. We often put it together the month before but we get it done. I figure if Eva and Joanne can't come in then they are going to listen to flute the whole time. There are some horn players out here. Did Peter play this year?

HEATHER THAYER: Yes

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: Have you met Dena?

HEATHER THAYER: Yes, I have actually already spoken with her in June when I was here. She said she wanted to come to the concert but had somewhere else she had to be.

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: That's how they are they are so busy. Joanne and I were like man she is running circles around us and she's a lot older than us. But she always had to be somewhere and always willing to help other people and her friends. So you probably got a lot of background from her. She was always dressed very nice in her little trench coat. But she was always very put together.

HEATHER THAYER: Do you remember when you first met her?

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: That was in 1981 because that's also when I met Joanne. We were in class together with her. It was woodwind and brass literature and we had it every semester until 86 because it was 101, 201, 301, 401. The class would... what she would do is we would go through a list of composers. Each week we would do a certain amount of composers. We were each assigned one. You had to look up stuff in Groves or any other encyclopedia. You couldn't copy it and bring in a copy. You had to read it and summarize everything. There was a trumpet player that made her crazy.

She liked him but he made her crazy because he came in with a copy. And she'd say, "Why didn't you look this up?" We had to know our composer and when they were born why did they write this piece. She would even sing a horn part to a piece and be like now where did that come from. And we were like man now we got to know the horn stuff. And things like who did he write that for? All these composers that were kind of obscure, people that she knew, people she would corresponding with in New York and different places. It was a long relationship and we would do recitals based on the composers we were researching. So they were always different recitals they weren't always the same. We looked at the women composers. So it was always an interesting concert. And that is why I really liked to do it. Then it got to be more than just class. We started going over and visiting her and doing things by her. So it's been a long time, a little over 20 years. It was a long time.

HEATHER THAYER You were at Sherwood?

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: American Conservatory. Later she went over and taught at Sherwood as well towards the end of the American conservatory because American Conservatory changed a lot. It turned to mainly jazz. And they didn't have as many students there and she went over to Sherwood. Jack could probably tell you that. He could probably tell you which years. I know because I would go over there to see her and he would be in a lesson. We usually tried to meet when she was downtown because it was convenient. Sometimes we would go to the Art Institute. Like when they had the big Monet exhibit. She and I went to that. We went out to lunch. She loved the Art Institute. So it was nice to go with someone who was like your guide. You didn't want to say anything because she knew a lot but it was interesting. So it was a lot more

than just class. It was a little bit of everything. It was life. It was practicing. She told me you don't have to practice 4 hours a day. I used to practice all the time and on flute you can. She would say you are practicing too much. You have to practice less and get more done. Over the years you learn that. Because we just don't have that many hours in the day.

HEATHER THAYER: How about some favorite memories or funny stories?

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: The hospital was a good one because her eyes were covered. She says I am fine. No you are not. You can hold on to me. It's ok. And in class whenever Ken was the trumpet player would come in unprepared. Joanne and I would be like she is just going to give him heck. He was more of a jazz guy. He was very nice and blond and very good looking. And she would say Ken you just have to do this. And we knew when she walked out she would be frustrated with him. But he was a good musician also. About things in everyday life that we were unsure of ourselves, she would say well you just have to do that. You just have to try it. Not being afraid to do things. When I was buying my new flute, I took it over there to her. I was purchasing an instrument from Jean Burkenstock who played with the Lyric Opera. And she had a gold head joint with it. I played both head joints. And she said well you just have to have that gold head joint. And I said no it's a couple thousand dollars. I am really not going to do it. I just thought I would play it because she let me try it. She said, "Well I am going to go to the bank tomorrow and I am going to cash in one of my bonds and I am going to loan you the money and you will pay me back. I said no no no. But she was very insistent. She was very insistent about helping her students. So that is the instrument that I have today. And then I had my payment to pay her back and she took a little from me but

then she wouldn't take anymore. You couldn't argue with her. This is the funniest thing that Joanne would tell you. We would be at the table going out to lunch and she would argue with us. Here we are going to put some money....And this was a grown woman arguing in a restaurant. I think those are the best memories that Joanne and I have of her that we laugh about. I don't know about her other students. We were just very relaxed with her. We were real comfortable with her. Joanne could talk to her on a different level. Joanne went to the Paris Conservatory She spent a lot of time in Europe. When I would talk to Joann, it was in 1981 I was just out of high school, I would be like....what is she talking about because she would use different language. And then as I kept talking to her I started understanding what she was talking about. And we just get along so well now. We have a long standing relationship. She lives in Ohio now. Her husband is a doctor and got a job out there.

HEATHER THAYER: Do you know where in Ohio?

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: Yes she is in Toledo I have her number and everything. She is dealing with breast cancer.....

After the accident happened, I can't remember how many years ago, I remember because Joanne still lived here. Joanne and I went to the hospital. I was there every day or every other day. I remember my parents coming out to babysit my son. Someone always needed to be there between all the students. We had a CD player there. There always had to be music playing. Someone always had to be there. Joanne and I took our instruments and played flute duets for her. She was in a coma and she wasn't moving. And we were like she moved and we swore she heard us playing. The nurses came in and said, "What is all this music?" We were playing Telemann and Handel,

nothing that is going to wake up the whole place but we were like she has to hear this and I think she did. We tried to arrange so there was always someone in there and I think there was. I don't even remember seeing family but someone should have been there. But her family was her students.

HEATHER THAYER: Well let's see, Do you remember her talking about her past at all? Her childhood?

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: Not a lot. We didn't really ask her a lot. Maybe she did with Joanne. I don't know.

HEATHER THAYER: That's alright, nobody seems to know very much.

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: I know and we should have.

HEATHER THAYER: I did find an address for her home.

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: That's right because we lived in Forest Park which was close to there. I can remember sitting there having tea but I can't remember the details. I do remember her talking about living there and her talking about.....We even knew the doorman over at her place. They would say how ya doing. We're taking care of her.

HEATHER THAYER: What kind of impact did she have on your professional career?

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: Really just to persevere and keep going, to learn about the music and not to practice hours and hours and hours. I was like I got to be in the practice room. She also taught us to learn all about the composers and career wise just keep trying for things. There things that I would say no I shouldn't and she would say no you just have to do it. I can hear her saying that. Just to keep trying things and that followed along with other things. She never met my daughter, my son was born in 98. I remember taking him in the little carrier up to the apartment. I think I have a picture of

her holding him. That was at one of the concerts because I actually brought him. Ingrid, the singer, pushed him around while I was playing. Do you mind if I take a picture of it? She never got to meet my daughter. But....(that obviously bothered her).

I have other pictures. I can dig through more things. I have all my pictures upstairs.

She came over by us for Thanksgiving. She was very allergic to dogs. But she came anyway. We went over and picked her up. Christmas we would go over and see her. I would bring her one of the potted evergreen trees. Eventually I brought one that was decorated. Because I knew she wouldn't decorate it. She was never alone. She was fine if she was. She got along really well with my grandma. When I gave my graduate recital, she came out for my recital. She flew out for the day. My husband took her back to the airport. That's how much her students meant to her. She supported her students. That was her family. I always thought that was great. She knew when it was but I didn't know she was coming.

HEATHER THAYER: Did she ever talk about her playing career?

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: A lot of it. I think is in the other. How she had met Mr. Stock and there was a real personal relationship there. The auditions were different then. She just happened to be playing for him and he said why don't you come play for my orchestra. They probably were not very happy because she was the first woman to sit in that chair. The Women's orchestra was very important. She was very strong in that and organized programs for that. There weren't many women even in the European orchestras. But she must have really impressed the conductors. But the recordings say it all I think. Toscanini? When she would tell us her long distance memories were incredible. But she would call me sometimes and tell me the same thing two or three

times. But the article, the one at the Newberry Library. But I knew she did recordings in the 40s.

HEATHER THAYER: It seems like she kept things very compartmentalized. (she agreed)

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: She was a big fan of Nadia Boulanger. I don't know if there were any letters. That was one of the books she had given me was the biography of Nadia.

HEATHER THAYER: Was she playing anymore when you knew her?

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: I didn't see her carrying her horn around. She didn't play for us. She listened to us, when I was getting ready for auditions. She wasn't a big fan of the piccolo but she always listened. I just always tried to play musically. She encouraged us to think about the other instruments , "Try to sound like a horn here."

HEATHER THAYER: Other people's perception of her.

LISA TARGONSKI-CISNEROS: A lot of people are really similar. She was a mentor and a lot of people really looked up to her because of what she had done for women first of all. She really went out to get something done. She didn't wait for someone else. She really liked her flowers and she really took care of them. She wasn't big into animals. She appreciated that but she couldn't be around animals. I think her students that thought the world of her even Willy Pikins who was a jazz pianist. She wasn't a big jazz person but she respected him. And he supported her.

The Women's Society used to be a big crowd. And she would organize those tables. When I get there and the table cloths aren't on... I am like...This wouldn't be like this. She had everything running on time. There was an African American guy in the city

that would always come and cook. I think people respected her for that. She always had everything organized. In the last couple of years she would call and then call again.

Where was she going that day? She always took the bus. It must have been her bad eye.

She gave me her China that has gold all around it...Magic Flute. She got it I think when I was in Germany. So she was starting. She was doing that for students. I have a parasol from I think her mother. We found a box of clothes from like the 1800s.

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