Interviewee: Jimmy (Cho-Liang) Lin
Interviewers: Chelsea Ward (Junior); Winifred Tung (Sophomore)
Date/Time of Interview: November 15, 2014 at 4:00PM
Transcribed by: Chelsea Ward and Winifred Tung
Edited by: Chris Johnson, Patricia Wong and Sara Davis (May 26, 2016)
Audio Track Time: 1:19:07

Background:

Jimmy (Cho-Liang) Lin is originally from Taiwan. At age 11, he moved to Sydney, Australia to further his violin studies at the Sydney Conservatorium. When he turned 16, he moved to New York City to study under professor Dorothy DeLay at the Juilliard School of Music. Now, Mr. Lin teaches at both Juilliard and Shepherd School of Music at Rice University. He is married to Deborah Lin and is the father of Laura Lin.

Setting:

The interview centers on the areas of labor and capital to develop a working history around the context of childhood experiences, family life, and daily activities. Lin discusses at length his training leading up to his career as a violinist. The interview was conducted in room 201 of Rice University’s Fondren Library. The interview took place on November 15, 2014 at 16:00:00.

Interviewers:

Chelsea Ward is a junior at Duncan College scheduled to graduate in Spring 2016. She is an Asian Studies Major and pre-med and speaks both Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. She is originally from Daniel Island, South Carolina.

Winifred Tung is a sophomore at Martel College expecting to graduate in May 2017. She is considering either a major in Chemistry or Biochemistry, with a minor in Business. She speaks Mandarin fluently and is from Cupertino, California.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

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 CW: So what was your childhood like in Taiwan?

JL: Um, I can tell you from, um, personal perspective and musical perspective. Personally, I love my childhood. I grew up in the, uh, town of, uh, Hsinchu, um, which is now the Silicon Valley of Taiwan. It’s one of the most technologically advanced areas in all of Asia. But in those days it was a quiet university town about, uh, 60, 70 miles south of Taipei. And, uh, my father was a physicist doing research, and my mom was a high school English teacher. So I grew up in a really, really peaceful environment in the, uh, housing, uh, compound of these research institute my father worked in. Um, and, it was—none of us were remotely rich or well off. I mean we—we lived—my—my parents tell me, they lived off, uh government salary and those days in 1960, um, 1961 etc. it was barely, you know—you barely get by even though they both made an income.

Um, but my house was small, tiny. I— I have gone back to see it. Uh, it’s an old Japanese-built wooden house. And it was subdivided in 2 parts. Um, and the—the interesting thing is, um uh, the, um, the other half of the house I remember, shortly before we moved in, it was the Wong family and they had justimmigrated to the States and, uh…. I mean Wu, the Wu family and, uh, as it turned out, uh, 35 years later or so, I bump into the former occupant of that house, um, in California at a conference and as it turns out it was, um, uh—ugh, I hope I—Richard? No. Richard Wu? You probably would know. He was the first Taiwanese-born US congressman. Um, and uh…his name will come back to me in a second. Okay, I’ll—I’ll correct. I’ll even Google it if I can before you leave. Um, and —Sorry my—my memory is suddenly drawing a blank on his name.

Anyway, so, um, I began, um, to learn the violin when I was 5. Um, you know, those wooden houses have zero soundproofing. So you can hear your neighbors talk or cook. And, this case, I could hear my neighbor, another boy my age, learning the violin. So I thought, you know, “This is so nice. What was going on?” So I would run to his house, watch him practice, um, and never got tired of it, you know. For a 5 year old to have such sustained attention span was rather unusual, or so thought my parents. Um, so they thought they should give me a toy violin so I could mimic my neighborhood buddy. And so that little cardboard carved violin was given to me as a toy with fishing lines as strings, and I was using a chopstick as a bow to mimic my friend. And so that was my favorite toy, you know. Back in the closet was, you know my trucks, and cars, what not. But it was this toy violin that was my favorite. So my—my parents thought, “You know, look. Maybe this kid really has got something.”

So, um, one day my father went on a trip to Japan. I mean this is Taiwan in the early days. It was even hard to find a violin. Um, so my father had to find one in Tokyo on a business trip, and he brought back a quarter-sized violin, which was slightly too big for me. But it was, you know, the nicest thing I ever got, ever. And I was so thrilled. And so of course I asked if I could go and take lessons. So my parents said, “Yes. We will find a local teacher for you and maybe we’ll start you.” And what they wanted to do is, you know, have this kid learn something about music, learn something about culture, learn something about arts. And he’ll grow up maybe to be a more decent person, and maybe, uh, grow up to appreciate the fine things—finer things in life.

[0:04:33]
Um, you know becoming a professional musician was certainly not at all in—in the forecast. Because in Taiwan, uh, music career, um, was not an option in those days. It was too poor, and everybody wanted to be engineer or scientist. Um, and uh, um, and it was—it was incredibly, um, outside the thinking to become a musician. I mean no—everybody said, “Oh you’re not gonna uh…. How’re you gonna eat?” you know, when I was a kid. And everybody said, “Yeah, yeah, you’re not going to make a living playing the violin or doing anything musical.”

But anyway I—I persisted, and Taiwan was, um, musically not very active in those days. It was, you know, occasionally a—a violinist or a pianist might come through. [sighs] It’s kind of like China in the early 80s. It was a rarity, you know. And uh—But unlike China, Taiwan was not a curiosity item. You know, people want to go to see the Great Wall, to see, you know, Forbidden City. So they would gladly go to tour in China for nothing. But in Taiwan, there was nothing to see. So people, you know, the big shots, wouldn’t come to Taiwan in the—in the 60s. So—and—and besides that, I lived in Hsinchu, which was so out of the way, you know. My—my parents would take me in a bus or in a train to uh, watch a concert in Taipei and then take me back late at night. I remember those trips very well.

But—but anyway, my—my interest in music clearly was immense and very focused. So I kept at it, and then gradually I got better. And then, next thing I knew, uh, I was beginning to win competitions. And—and—and at one of the competitions, which I didn’t win, uh, sitting in the back of the auditorium was a very famous teacher named Sylvia Lee. Um, and she was, uh, probably the best teacher in Taiwan then. We didn’t—I mean my parents didn’t think that I had any chance to study with someone so good. But apparently, she liked my playing. She sensed something musical in my playing. So she said yes when we asked if she could teach. And she did this very brave thing where she would teach in Taipei and she would dash on the train—the trains were very slow in those days—um, and stop in Hsinchu to teach me. My mom would go to Tai—uh, the train station in a little scooter to pick her up and take her back to my place to have a lesson. And then after the lesson, she would be driven back [laughing] on my mom’s scooter again to hop on a train to continue south to her home. So she was living this incredible comm—but unlike China for nothing. But in Taiwan, there was nothing to see. So people, you know, the big shots, wouldn’t come to Taiwan in the—in the 60s. So—and—and besides that, I lived in Hsinchu, which was so out of the way, you know. My—my parents would take me in a bus or in a train to uh, watch a concert in Taipei and then take me back late at night. I remember those trips very well.

And then I think at the age 11, I won the national competition in Taiwan. And, um, my teacher pretty much said, “Well, okay you’ve done all you can right now. It’s time for you to go overseas because I think your talent warrants that.” Um, and uh, and I thought maybe I should, you know. But unfortunately, at that very difficult decision making juncture, my father died, uh, from cancer. And so, um, suddenly I was left alone with my mom. I’m an—I’m an only child, so what am I going to do, you know? But then my mom said, “No. You’re gonna continue overseas. You must continue your violin studies.” And um, so in 1972 at age 12, I packed up and went to Sydney. And, uh—and Sydney was not exactly my primary choice. New York really was my, you know, top goal, but Sydney offered a wonderful, um, interim opportunity because Taiwan was still under martial law in those days. It was really tough. I mean, you know, they—they were, uh, um, imprisoning a lot of, you know, political dissidents, opposition people, um, you know, anyone who dared to question the regime of Chiang Kai-Shek, you know, would disappear. And it was very scary. So, you know, we were told not even to utter anything. You know, I would go to Japan, for instance, for my very first concert trip, and, uh, I would see all
this propaganda by the communists, you know, saying, you know, “Chiang Kai-Shek is a thug” and everything, you know? And I would come back and I say, [whispers] “Mom, you know, you won’t believe what I saw in Tokyo! This poster said, you know, President Jiang is a thug!” And my mom would say, “Shh! Don’t ever say that in school! Don’t ever say that anywhere! Just—just don’t repeat it again.” You know? “We’ll get into big trouble.” So y—those were the days, you know? So I had to try and get out of Taiwan, um, with an, uh, exit permit or to obtain a passport.

[0:09:50]

And so the only way I could get, uh, such a, uh, permit is to, uh, do, uh, like—like an audition, um, a competition in fact, to win a spot to be o—to be allowed to go overseas. So I had to do that, lots of bureaucracy in those days to get through that, you know? My mom was incredibly, uh, persistent and—and really, uh, nailed it. As it turned out that was the last, um, year the—the Taiwan government ever held such a competition. So, I got out just in time and Australia, um, Sydney, uh, is where my uncle lived so I could have a place to—to—to stay, you know? Found someone to look after me because my mom couldn’t get an Australian visa right away. And Australia that’s another matter because Australia had this terrible, racist, uh, policy. It was called “White Australia,” you know? So they welcomed European immigrants but almost no Asian immigrants back in the, you know, late 60s, 70s. And, uh—and—and so, yeah, now, you know, Australia’s like—they—they like to call themselves part of Asia, you know, and so they’ve come a long way. But in those days, you know, being a Taiwanese citizen, uh, it—it was tough to travel anywhere, but it was particularly hard to go to Australia. So my mom waited a half a year before joining me. So those were very trying, but very exciting days, I have to say. I learned a lot from that process.

**CW:** [laughing] Yeah. Wow. So what was life like when you got to Sydney?

**JL:** Oh I loved Sydney! Um, Sydney was everything that Taiwan wasn’t. [JL Laughs] It was—it was well-off; it was sunny; it was—weather was beautiful; the streets were wide, lots of cars, you know? Taiwan didn’t have so many cars in those days. Public transportation was awesome. I could ride in new buses and, uh, even got on a commuter train that was so much faster than the Taiwanese train. [JL laughs] I was loving it! You know, I went to this wonderful high school attached to the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. By the way, the Sydney Conservatorium is really weird you know because usually it’s “conservatory,” right? But somehow they decided to make a Latin name out of it. [laughing] So it’s—to this day I still think it’s called the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. I don’t get it.

But anyway, they had a wonderful little high school attached to it and, uh, I didn’t speak much, uh, English. My—my mom taught me English at home, but to make it as a full-time English speaker was different, you know? But I was young enough and, uh, I was willing to try. I was really eager to learn, to speak, and to befriend all my new, um, Australian classmates, schoolmates. And I remember one day—I was, you know, very new I was probably in the school for maybe 3 or 4 weeks—um, and a classmate asked me, “Would you like to—can you play something for us? We don’t know who you are.” And I could, you know, really not speak. People didn’t know. So I—I took my violin out obligingly started playing. Next thing I knew, the entire high school had congregated because they had heard the music through—down
the corridor, and it was a free, you know, uh, class period. So everybody just crowded the room and when I—I was done playing, you know, there were like a hundred kids stuffed in that room. They all burst into applause, going, “Yay!” And so I felt like for the first time I was accepted into their class, you know? And—and I had to—it’s—I—I didn’t think about it those days, but, um—but I was also the—the only Asian kid in the entire school. And in the upper school, the—in the—in the college part of the Conservatorium there was only one Japanese and one Korean student and that was it. And so, you know, I was bit of a curiosity, I think, for a lot of the students. And now you go into the Sydney Con, as we call it, uh, you know, half the student body is Asian like you would see at the Juilliard, or Curtis, you know, other top schools. So that’s the norm now, but in, you know, in my days I was, uh, [laughing] kind of like a pioneer if you want to call it that [JL laughs].

**CW:** A 12 year old pioneer! [laughing]

**JL:** Yeah. But Sydney was great, you know, I—I didn’t find, you know—even though the government policy was, um, very, you know, anti-Asian, but the—the Australian people were not, you know. I—I found, uh, the Aussies very friendly, very warm, and, uh, I certainly made friends easily among my age group. Um, and—and I had, you know, fantastic teachers, uh, on violin, um and I had great chamber music teacher. And I—I really loved it. But, what set my eyes and—or my gaze even further and higher was the fact that unlike Taiwan, Australia could afford top musicians to come.

[0:14:50]

So, you know, 1973 when I was 13, Itzhak Perlman came to play his very first and only Australian tour. And I just never heard anything like that, that kind of violin playing, except on recordings. And—and I was so mesmerized by Mr. Perlman’s playing, um, I—I talked my way into playing for him in a master class at my school. I was officially way too young to be qualified, you know, to be selected, you know, because they were asking basically only like, I don’t know, 16 and up, you know, what they would consider more advanced players. But I—I—I don’t know. I—I—I was pretty clever, I guess. I convinced my teachers that they should select me too. [JL laughs] So anyway, I got to play for Perlman. And—and—and he began to talk about his student days at the Juilliard and his studies with the 2 great violin teachers Ivan Galamian and Dorothy DeLay. And so I began to know, you know, first hand about these 2 wonderful teachers, and Dorothy DeLay was a new name to me. But it was very evident that Perlman held her in great great esteem. And also, he—he—I think he had a great deal of affection for this teacher, more so than what—than what he showed for Galami even though Galami was the more famous teacher then.

So I thought, “Okay, if Perlman loves this lady named Dorothy DeLay and she taught him how to play the violin like that, I gotta go. I need to go and—and work with this person.” But, you know, easier said than done! [JL laughs] So it was 1975, 2 years later, when I finally, you know, summoned enough courage and also I—my violin playing advanced to a level where my teacher in Australia thought I could get into the Juilliard and maybe mass with Ms. DeLay’s class. Um, but before I left I remember Leonard Bernstein came with the New York Philharmonic as well, you know. And I—I—I—upon hearing them I—it just absolutely reaffirmed my notion that I had to be in New York, you know. Sydney is an incredibly
comfortable place. Australia, very comfortable, very cozy, and I knew I could make a pretty good career playing there and perhaps teaching there one day. Um, and a lot of my teachers didn’t want me to go. They thought, “Oh, you know, stay here. Isn’t it wonderful here? Weather’s great! You know, you make a good living. Housing’s not so expensive.” Um, “No,” I said. “I—I—I need to go. [laughs] Thank you everybody.” You know? So to this day I—I—I love, um, my—my Sydney home now. I made so many friends and, uh, I remain, you know, in touch with them very closely to this day. But New York, you know, was this incredible beacon that just, you know, I was the moth, you know? [JL laughs] I had to fly towards the beacon or the light or the fire, whatever it is. And—and—and I finally did it and, man, that—that was—that changed my life. That was, as it turned out, a very wise move.

CW: So I’m curious as to what a normal class day would be like at the Sydney Conservatorium.

JL: Okay. It was, um—we had to wear uniform. Uh, all public school had to wear this, you know, British style flannel, uh, grey pants, and, uh, and white shirt with a tie, uh, yellow and grey striped, uh, tie, and uh…. So I would try to bring my violin with me. Classes begin like at 8:30 or something. And—and I’ll—I’ll go through all the normal, um, you know, what would be a British system of schools. You know, of course Australian history, British history, um, sometimes world history plus, you know, languages, science etcetera, math. Just like a normal high school. And then at about 3 o’clock or so when school got out or even 4 o’clock and then I would begin either my own practicing or try to find a room to—to practice, or I would go and take a lesson from my violin teacher, and sometimes, um, I think 3 times a week we would have chamber music rehearsals after school and we would get coached. Um, and, um, what was fun is that, you know, when I was younger my—my uncle, you know, who was looking after me wanted me to go home before dark, you know?

[0:19:26]

So I…but after I grew up a little bit and got used to it: I could speak the language; I knew my way around Sydney. I loved hanging out with the older kids, you know. Um, you know, 13 year old, 14 year old hanging out with, you know, 16, you know, like high school seniors and juniors. And—and not to do anything crazy, but they would lead me to the library, the school library, and—and have me listen to recordings they loved. You know, I would—you know, they would introduce me to Chicago Symphony, London Symphony, and they’re you know incredible performances. And we were all going goo goo gaga, and then I’ll in turn—I’ll play them my favorite violin recordings of, you know, Jascha Heifetz and Isaac Stern, and people like that. And they would go, “Wow! You know, that’s just incredible.” So it—it became this sort of this ongoing thing where I was getting more and more training in a way from not being in a classroom, but just from actively being engaged with other players, listening and, um, playing on stage with them. So—so that—that’s when I also learned how to be very proactive. You know, not waiting at all for my teacher to instruct me what to do, but I took it upon myself to—to initiate, you know, learning a new piece, to—to go to a music camp, or to, uh, uh, play—play a new work, uh, a new chamber work.

Uh, even, you know, I would go and sub. You know, I was dirt poor, you know? I really—imagine, you know, my mom was down to a single salary earning in Taiwanese dollars which was already very had to convert into foreign currency, and she was not earning a whole
lot. So I realized that, you know, I had no money. So of course, after a year or so, people began to hear that, “Hey, you know, there’s a talented Taiwanese kid here, you know, who can play, really can play!” So I would get some gigs from time to time, you know, playing an opera, or play—in a—in a—substitute in an orchestra. And then eventually, I was actually asked to play a concerto solo with one or two, you know, smaller orchestras around town. And I was—I was so pleased with that. You know, I actually made like 100 dollars, you know? 50 dollars! And I would open a bank account and I would put the money in and then I would take the money out, not to eat or anything, but to buy recordings. That was my favorite thing. I bought record after record, in those days the LPs.

**CW:** Mm-hmm.

**JL:** And I would listen to them day and night, you know? I just—that was my passion. Um, so to this day, you know, if you come to my—if you—if we were doing this chat in my studio, you would see wall-to-wall CDs. I mean that’s what I have, you know. This—this childhood habit of mine has not stopped. [JL laughs]

**WT:** Ooh. So can you kind of tell us, um, your experience in New York after you moved from Australia?

**JL:** Um, New York was simply, like, let’s say Taiwan was, uh, beautiful, pristine had a lot of personal worth but poor. Australia was clean, new, vibrant, and, you know, friendly, welcoming. Sydney was like the, you know, the Energizer bunny, you know just—just wouldn’t stop. And it was the most exciting thing ever in my life. I—I remember, you know, I—I arrived. I was taken in by a wonderful American family, Porter and Susan McKeever. Um, and they—I need to audition for the Juilliard first. So nothing was gonna get in the way. So one day, Porter McKeever said, “I’ll take you into New York and show you around.”

So we drove and he pointed out, “That’s the Juilliard.” I went, “Ooh! Wow that’s the Juilliard!” And then he said, “That’s Lincoln Center right next to Juilliard.” I said, “Wow! I didn’t know they were right next to each other! That is so cool! That’s Lincoln Center! That’s where the New York Philharmonic played! I just heard them 4 months ago with [indistinguishable] with Leonard Bernstein!” I said, “This is where they are!” You know, like, you know, you suddenly visiting these, you know—like suddenly being in the Sistine chapel, you know? [JL laughs] And then we swung by Carnegie Hall, and then I thought, [whispers] “Wow, Carnegie!” You know? So anyway, I was like, you know i—in—i-i-i-in heaven! Um, so, but I had to go through the hurdle of audition first. Juilliard auditions very much like Rice, uh, only 10 minutes each. And I had to show my best stuff. So, um, after I played the dean of the Juilliard called and said, “Well, I—I gather you wish to study with Dorothy DeLay, but I just want to tell that you she may not accept you so you should think about a second choice teacher.”

[0:24:08]

And I was… you know, I thought that meant I didn’t get in. Um, and—and—and I was so dis—you know—appointed I thought maybe I…all, you know, this long trip from Sydney; it’s wasted. I’m not gonna get to study with Ms. DeLay. Anyway, another week came by—went by
and I was officially notified that Dorothy DeLay had taken me in, and I thought, “Yes!” I was so happy and elated. Then I of course—I realized [laughs] then, only then—this was back in, um, right after Labor Day—um, that I had to find a high school because Juilliard, you know, for a 15 year old only offered classes and lessons on Saturdays. Monday through Friday I had to find a school. So, um, my incredible family, you know, the McKeever, made queries with—at Juilliard and they said, “Well you know there’s a boarding school up in Connecticut that has several Juilliard pre-college students, and maybe you can go to a boarding school. You can study. You know, really immerse yourself in—in—in sort of, you know, American life, and then come on Saturdays to take lessons.” So I went to this school called the Gunnery. Um, it sounds like—

CW: overlapping] Yeah.

JL: —a military school.

CW: I went to boarding school, too.

JL: Yeah?

CW: In Massachusetts, yeah.

JL: So you know the—

CW: [overlapping] I know the Gunnery.

JL: Yeah! You know the Gunnery, okay. [CW laughs]

CW: Yeah.

JL: And—and they had a sister school called Wyekham Rise, um, and so that was all-girls and Gunnery was all-boys. Um, I think it was named after somebody called William Gunn or something Gunn so it was called the Gunnery. And I always thought, you know… people asked me, “Oh, is (?) that must be a military academy?” I say, “Are you kidding! I’m playing the violin! I’m not in a military academy!”

[All laugh]

JL: Um, anyway so I really go to know American life, you know. I had, you know, dormmates and schoolmates, you know. I really—everybody was really interesting, you know? And—and, uh, yeah, even like moving into the dorm as a 15 year old, I remember my next door guy was a fellow named Darryl. He came out. He goes, “Hey welcome man.” I said, “Man? Oh wow!” Australians don’t say that, you know? They don’t say “man,” you know? You see that in the movies, you know? I go, [whispers] “Wow, I must be in America. Yeah! Great!” [CW laughs] They say “man,” you know? [JL laughs] And he asked me, uh, “Have you ever, uh, smoked dope?” I said, “What?” [CW and WT laugh] “Would you like some?” I said, “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” He said, “Oh never mind.” [All laugh] He probably thought, you
And that in turn inspired me. I worked very hard. You know, I felt like I was in the heart of music making. You know, I was also at the Juilliard more so I could mingle with more of my older schoolmates, you know? So that’s when I really felt like I belonged. And—and that was the most exciting year of my life. It was really exciting. Did (?) you know I was still 16 then? So, you know I was still a little kid, um. But—but then, you know, then the next year when I was 17, 1977 when things start to turn better and better for me because I begin to, you know—to—to get—uh, I would play an audition for a conductor or a manager, and they would engage me right away to play, and I won a competition in, uh, Madrid, Spain and that launched something, you know? The real concert tour began. I made a recording. And so suddenly, you know, next thing I knew, you know, as a college freshman, there I was, you know, already kind of with my foot in the door of a real concert career.

And—and uh—in those days I was too, what’s the word? Too thrilled just to be on that ride. I didn’t think about, you know, how hard it is to actually have gotten there. But now I’m a teacher. I advise my students about career moves and this and that. That’s when I realized it is incredibly hard to get a start, you know? And there I was, you know, in the middle—in the midst of it just being totally elated. I wasn’t even nervous. You know, I practiced hard. I—I really worked hard. I—I absorbed a lot of information, but I didn’t think that, you know, “I’m going on stage to play at Carnegie Hall, therefore I should be intimidated.” No. Instead, I was incredibly excited! You know, I felt like, “Okay, I might not be Isaac Stern; I might not be Itzhak Perlman.
That’s fine! But here’s my chance! I’m gonna enjoy it!” You know? It was one of those—maybe I was just too dumb to realize how much was at stake. [All laugh]

**WT:** And how was studying with, um, Mrs. Dorothy DeLay?

**CW:** Oh, yeah.

**WT:** Was it everything that Itzhak Perlman said it would be?

**JL:** Oh she was—well I—I’ll just tell you something very funny because Dorothy DeLay, according to Perlman, you know, back in 1973, always addressed her students as “sugar plum” or “sweetie.” You know, I mean these terms of endearment, you know, you hear maybe in, uh, *The Wizard of Oz* [laughing] or something! I don’t know what! [All laughing] You know? *Leave it to Beaver*, you know, one of those old TV shows. But, you know, I said, “There’s no way” because, you know, my teachers up to that point had been pretty serious, you know, very, you know, dignified people. And I said, “Who—who is going around telling—calling her students ‘sweetie,’ you know?” So, anyway—so I went to—for my first lesson with Ms. DeLay and then I walked in her studio, there was this huge portrait of Perlman in performance. I said, “Oh, [laughing] man that’s intimidating!” [all laugh]

And, uh—but Ms. DeLay turned out to be the nicest lady. You know, she—she’s very maternal. She really wanted to get to know me. You know, it takes time but it—it—she wanted to know me as a person, you know, to find out what my family was like, and to know what my cultural outlook is, you know, what my work ethics are. And—and at no time did she say, “Well, why don’t you play like Perlman?” You know? It was nothing like that. And she just worked with each student on his or her terms, um, but sweetie and sugar plum didn’t appear for about a year. So I was waiting for that and I was, of course, felt like, you know, I earned my first badge of honor when she called me sweetie one day. [JL laughs] And then sugar and sugar plum came soon thereafter. [All laugh]

Um, anyway, I—I genuinely, uh, like Pearlman, uh, adored and loved her as a person. She—she was very caring. She’s from Medicine Lodge, Kansas and people say, because of her upbringing on prairies, she, um, has this incredibly optimistic or perhaps American outlook. For her, everything was possible. Even the worst student could improve eventually given the right instruction. So she was this optimist and she radiates that and I think it rubs off on her students.

And so, you know, I—I thought maybe I will at the bottom of the heap at the Juilliard. I thought everybody at Juilliard played like Perlman. But she, you know, quickly boosted my confidence she got to work very solidly. And, uh, and next thing I knew I was playing better and better. And she not only became, uh, my violin teacher but eventually she was like my shrink. Like, you know, I would play a concert and she would analyze what I did or, you know, should have done for me, and then I would actively engage her in a discussion about what can make my playing better, you know, or what are the moves that I should make in a career decision, you know [indistinguishable 1 word]? What kind of pieces should I play as a 20 year old or as a 24 year old? What’s good? And what’s trendy? All those things.

She’s a very astute observer of those things, um, and um…. And I think I—I mean I remained very close to her until her death, um, and she, um, always came to concerts. She would even drive. I remember she drove from Nyack, NY to Hartford and she came to Boston. Um, she came to Minneapolis to hear some of my most important debuts. You know, for her, nothing
stopped. Nothing got in the way. And so, I—I—I admire her devotion. You know, I thought my
teacher in Taiwan, you know, taking the train ride, stopping in Xinzhu to hear me was, you
know, another very devoted teacher, and here’s another one. And so, you know, with Dorothy
DeLay, teaching was her entire life, you know? Right now I’m a teacher, but I also perform. So
there’s another set of obligations for me. But for Dorothy DeLay, her students were her life, and
she loved us, you know? Sometimes it was tough love, but she never yelled at us. She never
raised her voice, and I think she really learned how to cajole a student into being an over
achiever, you know? Not with fear or intimidation but with genuine encouragement and
affection. That’s hard. I mean, I’m sure you’ve seen teachers, you know, who are less than
patient, you know, or some of them are…but, you know—but you have to have infinite patience,
to—to bring up a student with just pure love. That’s really hard. [JL laughs]

[0:36:14]

WT: So during this time like, um, while you were at Sydney or, um, in New York did you also
like go back to Taiwan to perform?

JL: I didn’t. Um, I’ll tell you a couple very interesting stories about it. Um, number one: after I
left, uh—when I was in Sydney, I never went back because my mom was with me. There was no
need for me to go back. My whole family was right there. And after I left, uh, Sydney to go to
New York I think I had saved enough money for a Christmas trip to Sydney to visit my mom.
And that was it. And there was no need for me to go to Taiwan. But at age 19, after I’ve had
some success playing overseas, Taiwan invited me to go back for a formal concert tour, and my
mom met me there. But it was, you know, a rare rare thing. I—I—I didn’t see my mom for a
long time. And—and I got off the plane and there was like 2 TV station film crews ready to
interview me, you know? I was—I just got off a plane like bleh. [WT and CW laugh] And then
suddenly I had to speak Chinese and I couldn’t! I remember I was stuttering my way because I
had not really spoken Chinese for 4 years. And—and I was so embarrassed. I—I—I thought this
is just terrible. And I—my Chinese had deteriorated. And I—you know, my answers were half
mixed with English; it was all Chinglish, you know? And it was terrible.

So I made a, uh, resolution that day that I’m gonna, you know, improve my Chinese over
again. And so I—I—I finally went back to Taiwan and I was, you know very much welcomed,
you know? That’s when I think my wife actually heard me play, you know, as a high school,
middle school kid. Um, and so I think I caught on with Taiwan, but the thing is, um, I, um—I
regarded the U.S. as really my home. In those days, I—I wasn’t particularly proud of Taiwan
because number one: martial law was still in effect. Number two: Taiwan was beginning to
improve its economic…but not quite like what do they call—what do they call…? The little
dragons of Asia, right? That’s terminology? You know, they describe Korea, Singapore, Hong
Kong, Taiwan. You know, the big dragon was China and then the little dragons. But Taiwan
wasn’t quite a little dragon. Maybe it was not even, [WT laughs] you know, maybe just a little
earthworm in those days. [WT and JL laugh] So, I was much more of—you know, I—I
associated myself much more as an American? Um, and, um, and I well—I—I was, um, really—
I—I began to go back to Taiwan, you know, once every 2 years or so to perform. And—and in
1983, uh—I’ll fast forward a little bit to, uh, ’83—I was invited by the New York Philharmonic
to go to tour in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Now here’s the orchestra that, you know, I had
witnessed when I was 15 in Sydney [clears throat] and what an honor, you know, to be invited to
be their guest soloist. And Zunin Mehta was to be the conductor, and the concerts were sold out in 2 hours. And New York Philharmonic had never gone to Taiwan, you know? So it was a huge deal. And I was, you know, so proud to be that soloist.

And [clears throat], much to my horror, upon my arrival—you know the concerts had gone really well and the next stop was to be Hong Kong—the Taiwanese government would not issue me my exit permit. I had a passport, but you still need an exit permit to get a stamp, you know, exit permit at the airport that you can, you know, go to the boarding gate. And, um, the—the—the—short version of the story is that there were some false, uh, reports by Taiwanese embassies overseas that I had been hanging out with the mainland Chinese embassy people playing for ambassadors, you know, from Beijing, and I was a very left-leaning person. Of course, there was no truth to any of that. I didn’t even know any Mainland Chinese, um, embassy people. I had gone to China to tour as a groundbreaking artist in 1981. That was the very first—that was a very big deal between Taiwan and China, but that was under an official invitation from the Beijing Ministry of Culture, uh, and the Taiwanese government knew perfectly well about it. I told them about what was gonna happen.

[0:41:03]

But to have [clears throat] a exit permit denied because of these false rumors really really ticked me off. And only because I had an interview on the day of departure, uh, with a journalist, I told her about this difficulty I was having. I was on the phone calling the New York Philharmonic staff in Hong Kong, telling them I might not make it to the Hong Kong concert. [clears throat] They told me not to panic. “Don’t worry, you know. We’ll wait for you. If you can’t show up, we’ll have someone else, you know. Or we’ll play something else instead. Don’t worry.” [clears throat] The journalist upon hearing this said, “Wait a second, my dad is a 3-star general in the army. Let me call him and see what he can do.” So she called my—from my hotel phone. She said, you know, “Dad, I’m here with, you know, Lin Cho-Liang, and—and he’s having trouble. Can you look into this? Something wrong with this.” “You know? Because it was from the garrison command that issued these permits. And that was—garrison command was the—the—the—the—the martial law enforcer.

So an hour later, the phone call came back. Her father had pulled some strings, and the garrison command relented and gave me a, uh, uh exit permit. I had 2 and a half hours to make my flight. So I packed my bags up really quickly, thanked the journalist profusely, rushed to the airport, made my flight to Hong Kong. But I was so angry at Taiwan for being such a—just such a backward, you know, close-minded country. I told everyone who could—who would listen to me that, “I’m not going back to Taiwan again until I have a US passport.” And that’s what I did. I didn’t go back to Taiwan for 5 years, and I only went back proudly holding my American passport. And I said, “Here, stamp this one.” I’m, you know—I—I—I didn’t even go—I didn't even go with my Taiwanese passport. It—I—I—I nearly threw it away, but I—I put it in my drawer, which is a good thing because at least that retains my ID in Taiwan, which came in handy later.

Um, so anyway...so that was a very ugly chapter in Taiwan’s history. But I think soon thereafter, Taiwan, you know, started to pick up its economic progress, and soon thereafter, martial law was disbanded, and, you know, free election—open election, free press was really in place, you know? In 1994? 95? The first Presidential election was held. I was so proud that I went back and played for the inauguration. And—but then that in turn got me in trouble with
Beijing. So, uh, you can’t win. [JL laughs] Yo-yo Ma and I were on the blacklist for China. [WT laughs] For—for about 2 years, we were not allowed to tour China. I played for the, um—the—the—the inauguration, Yo-yo played in the soundtrack of *Seven Years in Tibet*. And of course, you know, Tibet is a taboo subject for the Beijing government. So even a fiction movie with Brad Pitt was not allowed—was never aired. Disney got into a lot of trouble, you know, the—the Chinese government refused to distribute Disney movies for like a year or so in China. And Yo-Yo was banned from entering, uh, China, and so, you know. You—you get once—one part of, you know, like Taiwan, you know into better—better shape and the other part [laughing] like starts to go, you know, a little bit gnarly, you know? [CW and WT laugh] So you don’t know what to do! You can’t win. [All laugh]

[0:44:40]

**CW**: Um, okay, well. So I’m curious—so you mention that your wife had seen—and she also told us as well, she said that you were like the—what did she say?

**WT**: One Direction.

**CW**: The One Direction of Taiwan.

**WT**: [overlapping] of Taiwan.

[JL laughs]

**WT**: And that all her classmates had crushes

**CW**: [overlapping] crushes on you and all this…

**WT**: [overlapping] Her best friend called dibs.

**CW**: So she can…

**JL**: Oh, wow!

**CW**: So I’m curious as to know like when did you guys meet? Kind of your side of the story.

**JL**: Oh! How we met! Oh yeah, yeah.

**CW**: [overlapping] Yeah, that whole…

**JL**: Well, I—of course I didn’t know she was in the audience—

**CW**: [overlapping] Right.
JL: —when I was, you know, a 19 or 21 year old performing in Taiwan. Um, however, um, yeah, it—it was really interesting because, um, in 1993? I went to Atlanta for a recital. And, you know, as you can imagine, the pianist who plays with me always needs a page-turner. And that—the first page-turner had gotten ill that day, and she was my wife Deborah’s friend. And Debbie has—had played the piano—had studied piano. So the page-turner asked her to step in for—to sub for—for this page-turning duty. And of course, page-turning is a very—it’s terrible job because you don’t notice the page-turner until he or she screws up, and then, you know, everybody suddenly turns their gaze to the page-turner. It’s so embarrassing, you know? And the musicians get really angry at the page-turner. But if all goes well, we barely say a thank you to the page-turner.

But so, Debbie wanted to do a good job, so she came to our dress rehearsal. And I took one look at her and said, “Oh, wow, this is great! What a nice person, beautiful gal.” So we started chatting, you know, between the rehearsal and the concert, and so we—uh, we I think hit if off okay, you know, that first time. And, um—and she asked for a photo to be taken with me. I even put my arm around her. I don’t know what got into me, but clearly something was not quite normal. And uh,[JL chuckles] so I, uh, wanted to, uh, ask for her phone number, but being, you know, Asian, Chinese, whatever, you know, it was not so appropriate to ask, “Hey, what’s your number.” You know? In those days, you know pre-iPhone, you just go here’s your number, you know? You communicate really quickly.

So, at the end of the reception, I waved good-bye to her, and then I—I went back to the hotel with my pianist, Lee Jian. And I said, “Oh, man. You know, Deborah, she’s a lovely girl. And, uh, I’d love to, you know, ask her out, um, but I don’t have her phone number.” And suddenly he said, “Oh, you want her number? I have it. She gave it to me.” [All laugh] So he pulls out a piece of paper from his pocket and says, “Here, you can have it.” [All laugh] So I said, “Okay, I think—I think maybe that’s a smart lady after all, you know?” She didn’t want to be too obvious in giving me her phone number. She gave it to my pianist instead. And if I was truly interested, I’ll probably mention her name, and then, so…

CW: Nice, Debbie, well done.

JL: Very, very smart gal, you know? So anyway, I called her and we chatted for an hour, and so I thought this was very exciting, you know?

WT: I heard that you had a headache—

CW: [overlapping] Yes, she said. Yeah.

WT: —when you called her? And she treated you with meningitis?

JL: Well, see this is still a point of contention till this day. [laughter] I insist, and my daughter agrees with me, that Debbie’s sense of humor is sometimes really lacking. And I’d call her, you know, I was using—I don’t know if you watch Monty Python—

CW: [overlapping] Yes.
JL: —clips. One of the favorite, you know, was this, uh, John Cleese character with—you know looks really dumb, and he’ll have a handkerchief torn—twirled around [indistinguishable], and he’ll come into a room, you know. [doing an impression] “Doctor, uh, my brain hurts.” [JL laughs] So I thought I’ll break the ice by saying, you know, since she’s—Debbie’s a doctor. So I said, [doing an impression] “Hey Doctor, my brain hurts.” And, of course, she didn’t get it. She says, “Oh, you probably have meningitis.” [All laugh] Okay, whoops. I just started on the wrong foot or maybe she—it’s better that she knows that I have a really warped mind to start with. Maybe that’s good. [JL laughs] But needless to say, we—we—we—still spoke for over an hour. So—so that was probably okay. [JL laughs]

[0:49:16]

WT: And how was the dinner that night?

JL: Oh, we didn’t—well we—we sat—I think was like 20-30 people, uh, big big, you know, dinner, and I think she was sitting like where you are [gesturing to Chelsea who was sitting across from him] and my pianist was here and…. That was fine! But, there were so many people around, you know? And so, I wanted to talk to her because I was really trying to zero in on. But I—I couldn’t. I mean that was part of the frustration because I wanted to [hits table]—to have more, you know, like quieter chats, but impossible so…. And suddenly, you know—you know how Chinese banquets all break up very quickly. Everybody suddenly just stands up and says, “Good night!” [All laugh] You know? It’s not like the American, you know, you stand around, and, you know, shake hands, and you do that. Everybody just like bolts for the door, and Debbie, you know, also got [indistinguishable several words] She went, “Bye!” and she went [makes sound]. You know? So I—I never really talked to her until we spoke on the phone. [JL laughs]

CW: That’s really funny.

WT: Yeah, it was an awesome story ‘cause she said that, um, eventually you told her that you liked her for her appetite. She had a b…

JL: Oh yeah. Yeah, that’s right.

WT: [overlapping] That’s funny!

JL: Because you know, at that time in my life, you know, I had like, you know, taken, um, girls out, and then, you know the—my most hated line’s, “Oh, no no! I’m just gonna, uh, have a salad. I’m on a diet.” Uh, I always thought this is like the worst kind. I don’t—okay, you know—I almost like want to—want to get up from the table and say, “Bye. Goodnight.” [All laugh] You know? “I’m not interested in you if you are on a diet. You’re have a salad.” Come on! You know? So watching, you know, Debbie eating with, you know, an—and obviously with a hearty appetite, I thought, “This is good! This bodes well.” [All laugh] If I want to spend a lot of time, including the rest of my life with somebody, I don’t want to be starving! [All laugh]

CW: I think that’s fair. I think, yeah, that’s understandable.
JL: You know, I love food and, um, why should I suffer, you know? [All laugh] “Yeah. I’ll have the filet mignon. She’ll have the—the salad.”

CW: [overlapping] Salad. [All laugh] Okay, so you guys met, and then afterwards you moved to New York? Or what was the…?

JL: I was—I was already in New York.

CW: [overlapping] Okay.

JL: So—so that was already really tough on her because, you know, as you can imagine, medical practice, um, is very often based on personal relationship with colleagues and creating a patient basis, you know. So she was very brave and very kind that she agreed to move to New York. ‘Cause I thought about moving to Atlanta, um, but at that time, I was teaching at the Juilliard and, uh, I really had—you know—I mean, New York had been home for me for a long time. So I thought living in Atlanta, you know, I don’t know what I’m gonna do. I’d have to quit the Juilliard and all that. Anyway, so she—she, you know—I went to, um, Atlanta to help her pack, and she got into a U-Haul truck. I got on a plane, flew back to New York; she drove with her mother and brother all the way up to New York with her belongings. And, uh, initially, she went into a—a hospital, uh, apartment. Um, she got an internship there, but then we realized that was just the stupidest waste of money because she might as well just, you know, come and live with me. And so, I think couple—3 months later, yeah…. And then, I think soon thereafter, I proposed to her and, uh—and that was it. Yeah. That was the beginning of the end. [All laugh]

And then, of course, you know, when I took the Rice job, she again had to move. So she’s moved twice, uh, because of me. So—so that’s very, uh—very kind of her, really. Um, uh, uh, I can imagine a lot of people with, you know, career established, you know, they may not want to do that. Uh, it’s a tough thing. Yeah.

WT: So how did you get into, um, Rice University—or like what made you want to come and help out here?

CW: Yeah.

JL: Okay. Um. [JL laughs] Uh, James Dunham, a viola—viola professor at the Shepherd School, just called me one day. Um, I was in my car, driving to our country house with my wife, and, uh, I was checking email and suddenly, there was this note from James asking me, you know—asking basically, “Am I barking up the wrong tree if I were to ask you if you would ever be interested to go and—to Rice.” Um, anyway, at that time, um, I knew of course, James Dunham. Um, I also knew Lynn Harrell, this great cellist, who, uh, at that time was teaching at Shepherd School. Also Jon Kimura Parker, a—a fantastic, great pianist. So these are very good friends, and also very very respected colleagues. So I thought, well look, if they’re teaching at Shepherd School, it must be a good place. Why don’t I, you know, maybe at least have a visit? And—and I was so warmly welcomed here by the dean, by the faculty, you know? I—I gave a couple of classes. I was, you know, taken to dinner and—and, uh, lunch, you know, every meal.

[0:54:26]
CW: No salads, though.

WT: No.

JL: Noooo, nice. [CW laughs] I even got taken to the faculty club. I’ve only been there twice, once with the faculty, you know, trying to, um, entice me and the other time was to have lunch with the dean to finalize our agreement. And then ever since I became faculty, I’ve not—I’ve not set foot [JL laughs] in the faculty club. Maybe I should go and revisit one day.

CW: [overlapping] Yeah.

JL: Um, anyway, so—[CW laughs] so you know, and—and the idea of—see I have to be also a little bit p—more prag—pragmatic because I was in my mid-40s then. Uh, I—I loved teaching at the Juilliard and being in New York was so wonderful, but at the same time I thought I couldn’t go on playing concerts forever. And what about my pension? What about medical coverage? At that time, Juilliard did not provide any. So I had to buy my own. And even though Debbie was working at a hospital, she thought I had better coverage coming from a big university like this. And so, um, you know, the musical quality, the integrity of the staff and faculty, and plus the—the facility was fantastic, first-rate new building, and, uh, so I said, “Yes,” you know? And—and, uh, I said the most politically incorrect thing, um, just like, you know, how I said to my wife—my future wife, you know, [doing an impression] “Hey doctor, my brain hurts,” you know, on our first phone conversation. Upon agreeing to, uh—to come here, I said to our dean, Bob Yekovich, I said, “You know, I hope you know that, um, the reason I just said yes to your invitation to teach here is because a Chinese can never say no to rice.” [All laugh] You know, this is my warped sense of humor. And—and I think Bob seriously didn’t know what to—didn’t know what to say because, you know, it’s just like so in—in—[All laugh]. It’s a terrible thing to say, isn’t it? [All laugh]

CW: He was probably like, “Ohh.” [All laugh]

JL: That awkward silence, you know? But I was love—I was loving it because, you know, I thought—okay, all right, you got to make, you know, some [indistinguishable]

CW: [laughing] Oh, gosh.

JL: See some sense of humor in every situation. [JL laughs]

CW: Did he end up say anything or did you just...

JL: No, I don’t think so, I think we went on to another subject. [All laugh].] I think he said, “Well, good, good, I’m glad you’re gonna join us.” [All laugh] Anyway, so—so that was a—a, you know, moment that I—I don’t know, but anyway, I—

CW: [overlapping] That’s too funny.
JL: Thank goodness that I wasn’t fired on the spot. [All laugh] Yeah. Imagine him, the dean, (?) saying, “Oh, sorry, I have to rescind our, uh, invitation, offer.” [JL laughs] “We’ll see—we’ll—we’ll see you to the airport, bye.” [All laugh]

CW: That is too funny. I feel like you guys have similar senses of humor.

WT: Yeah!

CW: Yeah, I think, from the interviews. [CW and WT laugh]

JL: Yeah?

CW: Yeah.

JL: Well, wait till you see our daughter, you know, she’s—she’s pretty funny too.

CW: Really?

JL: Yeah, she gets most of my horrible jokes. Yeah. [CW and WT laugh] Yeah, I think Debbie just pretty much tolerates my jokes. [WT and JL laugh] She’s very, you know, good-natured. [All laugh]

CW: [overlapping] That’s too funny.

JL: She just rolls her eyes, goes, “Oh, no, you know. Not that.”

WT: [overlapping] “Not again.” [All laugh]

CW: Well, how have you enjoyed your time in Houston, then?

JL: Very much. Um, you know, I had come here to play many, um, times over the years with the Houston Symphony, and I always remember only the sprawling downtown, which becomes empty after 5 o’clock and the enormous stretches of nothing, you know, when you just have like nothing—this, you know, weird moments of, you know, warehouse stores, some apartment buildings, you know, and a park. You know, I—I—I didn’t know how I was going to take to this kind of living. Um, and of course, that’s kind of—that’s what Houston is. But I—I’ve really really been—gotten to like this place, you know? Especially when it’s cool and nice outside, like today. It’s very nice.

WT: Mm-hmm.

JL: Um, but downtown is, you know—as you know, it’s not like the most happening place. [WT laughs] But here, around here, you know, Rice Village, Kirby, River Oaks. That's—that's nice.

CW: [overlapping] Yeah, yeah. It’s pretty groovy.
JL: Yeah. And—and, uh we live in the Galleria area, that’s also, you know—we're 2 blocks away from the—I mean, not 2 blocks—we’re about a mile and a half from a big shopping center. And so because of that, you know, Whole Foods just opened, and they have some very good restaurants nearby. So that’s all good, and that's between Rice and Chinatown, you know? It’s Galleria. So we can—I can go to Rice here, or I can go to Chinatown this way. [WT and JL laugh]

[0:59:30]

WT: That’s awesome.

JL: [laughing] It’s very good, yeah.

CW: That is really awesome. [All laugh]

WT: So where is your favorite place to perform? Like anywhere in the world?

JL: In terms of concert hall or audience? Both?

WT: Ooh. Both.

JL: Okay. I think the best audience in the world is in Germany. They're very serious, almost scary, you know? But they come to the concert dressed in jacket, tie, suits, you know, very proper. And they take their attitude, you know, but once they decide they like you, they—they—they—they will, you know, really love you. But the most passionate audience in the world is in Spain. As you can imagine.

CW: I was gonna—yeah.

JL: Oh my God, you know? Once I remember I played a concerto, and, uh, I had gone onstage—on-offstage, like 5, 6 times. I had played an encore, and it was (?)—they were (?)—and finally the conductor—who’s, uh, I remember it was André Previn. He pulled the orchestra off the stage because intermission had to start because otherwise the orchestra will never begin the second half. They can’t. So—so I went to my dressing room, you know, I was ready to, you know, undo my bow tie and everything, and the manager rushes in and she said, “They’re still clapping for you out there.” I said, “No, the orchestra’s come off the stage.” She said, [shouting] “It doesn’t matter! The stage is empty, but they’re still clapping for you! So go back out there!” [All laugh] So, I mean, I—I was just so taken by their passion, you know. It was great.

Um, and audiences in Korea also can be wild. I remember I went to play a concert and—and—before we even played a note, they were stomping, the—you, know, the floor, yelling, clapping. I—I felt like I was in a rock concert! It was really cool, you know? I mean it energized me immediately, you know? Um, I turned to my colleague. I said, “I think we should get off the stage while the going’s good.” [All laugh]

Um, and the best concert halls, though, I think there’s nothing that can, uh, duplicate Carnegie Hall. You know, it’s not only a beautiful hall, its incredible sound, but it’s also so full of history. Everybody who’s been somebody has played on that stage. So it’s wonderful to be a
Leonard Bernstein, a great musician, admired Ax, Fleisher pianists. In the 60s, I got to know personally Isaac Stern, whom I got to work with him a lot. Of course, most unique, the most powerful violinists, and then there’s Heifetz. He’s a class all by himself.

WT: C’est la vie.

JL: [laughs] Exactly.

WT: [indistinguishable] So who were your favorite musicians growing up? I know you talked about like Perlman, and like Heifetz.

JL: Oh! Perlman definitely is my hero, you know—

WT: [overlapping] Yeah.

JL:—because he is such an astounding player and he—to this day he’s still my favorite, you know, an iconic—and iconic violinist. I also grew up, um, yeah, you mentioned Jascha Heifetz. He’s [indistinguishable]. He’s for me, the king of them all, you know? There’re a bunch of great violinists, and then there’s Heifetz, you know? There’s no one quite like him, you know, the most unique, the most powerful presence I think on—on the concert stage and in recordings. And of course, I also, uh, a huge fan of the Russian, David Oistrakh, and Nathan Milstein, and, uh, Isaac Stern, whom I got to know personally and I got to work with him a lot. Um, I, um—but, you know, and then on a slightly younger generation, the Perlman generation, those who are in the 60s now: uh, Pinch Zukerman is another one. Uh, I think he’s an really really great violinist, in—in a class all by himself. Um, and I think, um, uh, older generation, also, I always include, uh, Fritz Kreisler and, uh Zino Francescatti, um…. I think my love though—or my—my admiration for musicians doesn’t stop with only violin. I—I think, you know, uh, my favorite instrumentalists include, um, the Russian cellist Rostropovich, and also Yo-Yo Ma. Um, pianists—I like Leon Fleisher. Um, I think, uh—I mean I—I—did—you know, I got to play with Fleisher. So, um, I really think he’s incredible. Um, of course, Horovitz, from an earlier generation, um, Rudolf Serkin, and, um—and the ones who are still active like Eman—Emanuel Ax, Yefin Bronfman, um, and, uh, Murray Perahia, Daniel Barenboim, you know, these are all great musicians. And of course, you know, conductors, you go—and composers you go to like Leonard Bernstein, you know, um, Simon Rattle, um, and the list goes on. I mean there”—there’s a huge array of musicians that I—I—I love and admire. Yeah.

[1:05:45]
CW: So, your wife actually gave us kind of her perspective on 9/11, um, and how she felt like she became more of a New Yorker. How—when did you think you felt like you were a New Yorker? Um and how—what happened during 9/11 for you?

JL: I felt like a New Yorker within like about 2 days after arriving. [All laugh] I’m serious! I—I just—as soon as I was able to figure out how to read a map and I realized how easy it is to navigate New York ‘cause everything’s numerical—

CW: [overlapping] Mm-hmm.

JL: —um, I just felt totally at ease. I never felt like I was scared or intimidated by New York City for one day. I just arrived—even though I had no money, you know. My first couple years in New York, I was dirt poor. You know, getting a Big Mac was a big, you know—it was a—it was a real treat for me. But, uh—but I didn’t mind the poverty [JL laughs]. You know?

Um, and—and 9/11, I remember I was in Sydney. I was on a concert tour. And, um, I remember reading email and somebody said, “Hey! I think there’s been an accident at World Trade Center.” And—and so I clicked on—I forget, uh—some news channel and then there was this smoke coming out of the tower. And then, my—that was an evening—my uncle was downstairs watching T.V., and he immediately came over and said, “You should watch this.” I went downstairs. And, of course, within a few minutes, you know, they—they they had, um, um, plugged into, um, uh, The—The—The Today Show. Um, this is an NBC, uh—they—they—they use the American Today Show often in—in their, uh—in their original format. But that day, they just went straight live through the New York feed, and then sure enough, the second plane went crashing, and I couldn’t believe it, you know? And uh—and so after, maybe 5 minutes, just for the shock to sink in to realize what it is, I—I tried to call my wife. Couldn’t get through, you know? The lines were completely, um, busy I think. I wasn’t—I wasn’t sure whether New York was getting inundated with phone calls or there was such a serious terrorist attack that the phone system was shut down, you know, was sabotaged. I didn’t know. So I just kept calling, kept calling and I—I, you know, really couldn’t sleep that night. I kept, you know, just trying to phone. I think finally the next morning in Australia, which was that night, I got through to my wife and found out what she had endured that day.

But of course, I didn’t know, uh, the full extent of her ordeal until I went back to New York, which was about 3 weeks later. And I remember, you know, arriving Kennedy airport. I wasn’t sure what kind of New York City I was gonna see, you know? I thought it was gonna be like, you know, like what Tokyo looked like after Godzilla had gone through it, or not, you know, it was…. But, of course, it was only that—those 2 towers that got destroyed. Um, but—but I was just so scared. I was really nervous, you know? Everybody was like, you know, looking over their shoulders. And then, it—it was a couple days later after I arrived that I realized, um—I—I felt the impact of 9/11. My wife and I were strolling up from midtown, and suddenly 5 police cars, you know, went up Amsterdam Avenue and suddenly stopped and turned their siren—you know, their, uh, lights on, and stopped all traffic. And I thought, “Oh no, another attack?” And no. It was, uh, a funeral procession for some of the firefighters. Yeah, there’s a fire station 3 blocks away from our house, and 2 firefighters were being buried that day. So there was a funeral procession that starts from the firehouse to a chapel or a church. And so,
in—and so—so the police stopped traffic so—for the procession to pass by. And—and that really hit me really hard at that moment.

[1:09:58]

And, um, maybe a month or so later, I went down to the SoHo area to visit, um, this, um, famous film director, Ang Lee, um, and his office looks out over downtown. And, um—and I looked at this huge window, and someone from the office said, “Yup, the 2 towers used to be right there. You know, they—it filled our window. That was, you know…. And now all we see is the sky.” And, so as I left the office, I suddenly smelled—I guess the wind blew in such a way—I smell this terrible, burned plastic smell. It was a unique—a—a smell I’ll never forget and—and that was from the remnants of the World Trade Center, you know, because the ash had scattered so many places, you know, once in a while from some corner, you know, the wind will still pick it up and you can still smell it. Um, and—and you can see it also, straight down Broadway, you can see, uh, machines, you know, the huge exca—excavation machines going to work at the site. Of course you’re not allowed to go past a certain point unless you live there with a driver’s license, you know? You can only go—but you can see the machines at work from afar. So that’s when it hit me really hard, you know? I felt like this is a terrible, just a terrible thing, you know? All your sense of security was destroyed. [quietly] In one instance, it was gone, you know? I didn’t know anyone at—working at the World Trade Center that day, um, but I know plenty of other people who saw, um—I mean, people who lived downtown who saw the actual airplane flying in and also those who knew people who worked there. So through, you know, different degrees of connection, I felt it.

**CW:** Um, [sigh] it’s a very heavy experience, I would imagine.

**JL:** Yeah.

**CW:** Yeah.

**JL:** Yeah. And of course, my wife can tell you much more because she did a whole follow-up study about the, uh, rate of asthma attacks, you know, in different kids from lower Manhattan versus upper Manhattan, you know, the fallout from all the contamination, you know, one of the most—I guess the most readily apparent symptom is respiratory stress, and asthma is apparently a very telling thing. So she did a whole follow-up. She even fought against the EPA. The EPA had agreed—I mean, had, you know stated that the downtown area was safe to go back to live in. Her study showed that it was not. So she—you know, her—her group got into a tussle with the EPA at—at one point.

**CW:** Hmm. [pause] Well, we are reaching the end of the interview, um. Is there anything else you would like to add? Thank you for chatting with us. This has been very insightful.

**JL:** Oh, I—I just want to add one more thing!

**CW:** Yeah.

**JL:** [overlapping] A short one—
CW: [overlapping] Yeah.

JL:—about the, um, development of—since this is Asian studies—

CW: [overlapping] Mm-hmm.

JL: —the incredible prominence and importance that Asian musicians are now exerting around the world. It’s incredible. Um, you know? I think of myself as more of a pioneer, you know? I said, um, in the beginning of this interview, that I was the only Chinese student in the Sydney Conservatorium of Music—one of the 3 Asian students. Now, you go and see competition winners—major competition winners, concertmasters of the top orchestras, you know, whether it’s the Berlin Philharmonic, or the, um, Philadelphia Orchestra. They’re all over, you know? Faculty at top schools. I used to be the only Lin at the Juilliard faculty. There are now 3 Lins teaching there. Of course, that’s another subject for another joke another day. But that’s [All laugh]

CW: [laughing] Oh, no.

JL: —which Lin are you referring to? Anyway. [All laugh] Um, but I just—I—I think the world has changed so much, you know, in—in—in the music world that is, in the last 25 years. You know? And I used to get asked, you know, by journalists, “Well, you’re from Taiwan. So, uh, how do you know how to play Mozart? How do you know get to know—play—play Beethoven? How do you know all that?” Especially from the central Europeans because they—they are much more tradition-bound, you know? They tend to think that their own tradition is the best in the world, and often they’re right—sure. [CW laughs] You know, Vienna, Berlin, Prague, you know, they’re—they’re very traditional. Good for them. But, you know, it’s time to march into the 21st century also, you know? And so they have, you know—Berlin Philharmonic has a Japanese concertmaster. So it’s—it’s incredible, you know, how much respect now, um, musicians from Asia or of Asian descent now have gained, you know, in—in this world of music. And I was watch—I was reading Friday’s edition of Wall Street Journal. There’s a huge, uh, entire section devoted to Chinese architects now designing, you know, the hot—the—the newest museums, residential areas around the world, you know? They’re hot, you know? Asian art now fetch some of the highest prices in—in auction. Um, so it’s a very different world, you know, from—from the poor Taiwan and the poor China, you know, that I saw in the 70s and the 80s. It’s incredible!

[1:15:40]

WT: Wait. So why do you—what do you think brought about that? Like even from like Japan and Korea, too, like, um, the musicians there like how come there was just almost like suddenly such a great surge?

JL: Well, the talent pool has always been there.

WT: Mm-hmm.
JL: Just that economic prosperity I think has opened the doors for them: number one, to get better teachers, better instruments, and more ability to go to the Juilliard, Curtis, and other—or Rice, you know? Because they can afford it now, you know? And—and, um—I remember, you know in the early days, after China’s Cultural Revolution ended, the first batch of students came over, including, you know, very famous Tan—composers like, Tan Dun. They had no money. You know, they would play in the subway to—to earn a few bucks, you know? They would work in a restaurant. And—and—and nowadays, you know, the prosperity, you know, Tai— Taiwanese, Chinese students, come here, they—they—they live in nice apartments and stuff, you know? I mean there’s still some very poor students, of course. Not everyone is rich in Taiwan or China, but at least the opportunities are much better, you know? And they—and—and—the Koreans, they—they play violin really well because they have really serious training. Parents are devoted, and they also—they go all out to buy a good instrument for their child. So they don’t play on junk violins. So, as a result, they sound good when they come over. And so that’s an incredible advantage to have. And—and the work ethics, of course, you know, we always talk about that, you know, tiger mom, and whatnot, you know? We all know about that. So—so we don’t need to dwell on that. But the thing is I think—I—in Asia, there’re just so many tiger moms, you know, that it’s not even like—you know, nobody's willing to even look twice at a tiger mom. That’s just, you know—that’s a given. [JL laughs] You know? “Tiger mom? Yeah, well we have twenty of them on this block.” You know? [All laugh]

Um, so I think—I think—I think that it’s a very, um, in—incredible transformation for such a short time because you think about classical music has been around for 2, 3, 400 years, you know? And—and in the earlier part of the century, it took about 40 to 60 years for the Eastern European migration, the Russians, the Poles, the Hungarians, um, and the Czechs, uh, and Romanians to migrate to the Western Europe and to America to establish what American classical music is. And in 20 years, the Asians have already done it. It’s incredible! You know? They’re fast, you know? Let’s hope they keep it up, [CW and WT laugh] you know? Because that’s another thing, you know. People worry about like in—in China, you know, the—the—the younger talents are there, but are they willing to work so hard to play the piano or violin well while they can actually, you know, go into business school and earn hell of a lot more quickly. So that’s a challenge—a challenge right now.

CW: Mm-hmm.

JL: So we’ll see how this, you know, phenomenon will—will continue or last. You know? That’s what I was—that’s the bit I want to add.

WT: Well…

CW: [overlapping] Yeah! Wow!

JL: Sorry I spoke so much for you to transcribe! So you—you can erase it all.

CW and WT: [overlapping] No. No.

[All laugh]
CW: Well, yeah. Thank you again for your time. It was really a great pleasure.

WT: [overlapping] Thank you so much!

JL: No! It’s a great pleasure! Thank you! Thank you!

CW: [overlapping] It was really good talking to you.

JL: Well this will be like—yeah, you should—if you want to hire a transcriber, I’ll pay for it. [All laugh] Save you some time.

[1:19:07]
End interview