



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Victor
Alessandro, 1965 May 12

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by
a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National
Park Service.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Victor Alessandro on May 12, 1965. The interview took place in Santa Fe and was conducted by Sylvia Glidden Loomis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2021 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Mr. Victor Alessandro, Director of the San Antonio Texas Symphony Orchestra on May 12, 1965. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe Office of the Archives of American Art and the subject to be discussed is Mr. Alessandro's work for the Federal Music Project in Oklahoma City in the 1930s and '40s. But first, Mr. Alessandro, would you tell us something about yourself? Where you were born and where you received your art—your music education?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. I was born in Waco, Texas, lived in Houston until the age of 16. Went to the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester New York. And from there, I studied at the Salzburg Mozarteum Academy in Salzburg, Austria, and at the Royal Saint Cecilia Academy in Rome, Italy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what had you done before you worked on the project?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Mainly I'd been a student. Um, I had done quite a bit of conducting at Rochester. And there, when I was 19 years old, I conducted the New York Civic Orchestra, which was a WPA project in New York City, several times. On that particular series I did All American Concerts, and it is quite interesting that at that time, some people from Oklahoma had heard me conduct. And then, that's when I left Rochester, I went to Europe. At— I had just returned to this country and the people in Oklahoma were hunting for a conductor for their Federal Projects orchestra. And they had remembered my conducting in New York City and were trying to locate me in Europe, not realizing I had just returned—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —to the States. They finally located me in Houston, and I went up to Oklahoma City and conducted the orchestra at several rehearsals and then was offered the position. I was 22 at the time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was very young. Well, that would've been three years previously that you were in New York when you conducted?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And let's see, so, it was—do you remember what year that would have been that you came to Oklahoma?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: 1938.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: '38?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yeah. In about September, October, I don't remember the exact date.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well, that's, that's close enough. And you said that the—before that the orchestra had been at Tulsa previously?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. It was—originated in Tulsa and was there about six or eight months. And then was moved to Oklahoma City. I think the reason was there were better working facilities and auditorium and rehearsal space and office space and such things as that were the main reasons for the changes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you know when that change took place?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Well it took place about, I believe, six months or so before I went there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Okay.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: So it must have been in May of '38, somewhere in that area.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And my, my next question was how you became involved in it, but that was, that was how. You were really sought out—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —for the, for the position.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: That was—they're idea was that they were hunting for a young, American conductor who could come in and to takeover, to build it up, and they were willing to start from scratch with an inexperienced conductor—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —who would be able to learn. Now this was a great advantage that you don't even find in this day and time. And you were able to learn in the process of doing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Um. Also, you had the advantage, only through the Works [Progress] Administration, of having far more time for rehearsal than we have in this day and time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And, so, you could work at a pace where you could be far more thorough—or even eliminate mistakes. And not be pressed and not having to fight the clock, as we have to do in this day and time, to prepare—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —for concerts.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I can see that.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: This was a very important advantage. And also it meant that, I'm sure in every field—young actors, young artists, young musicians had a chance to do a trial and error period—

[00:05:05]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —that has completely disappeared—in our day and time. So, young talent that was extremely gifted had a chance to grow and to flower into something—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —because they weren't pushed for time, they were not under the pressures of immediate success as we have in this day and time, and to me this is one of the basic things that had helped so much. Actually, to me, it's almost a disappearing philosophy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well do you think, then, it was very helpful to you personally to be able to have this, an opportunity of this sort—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Well—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —as well as the other—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —musicians?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: It—it was a tremendous advantage because, at the age of 22, I had the opportunity to conduct innumerable concerts—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —with a tremendous amount of rehearsal and to cover a repertory that young conductors can't do anymore. For example, conductors my age would go into a city that has four to six concerts a year.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And they're lucky if they have three or four rehearsals, and when they do, they have to bring in half their orchestra, professionals from a larger city to even do a concert. So, they don't the advantage of being able to rehearse thoroughly and prepare thoroughly any longer. And this means that a person in my position could obtain a tremendous routine, a tremendous repertory, so that in the future—I mean, I've—in other words, I was about 15 years ahead—of most conductors as far as age is concerned because of this advantage and experience that I had.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Hm. How long were you—were you the director of the orchestra? How long did the project last? Did you stay all the way through?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Well, the project—yes, stayed all the way through. And what happened, which again shows the value of this particular project, was the fact that when the support through WPA was withdrawn and when WPA was discontinued, the orchestra was so well-established that it was taken over by the people of Oklahoma City. And within three years or two years after that, it became a major symphony.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Wonderful.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: So, from this initial step on the part of the government and over this period of time it became so indoctrinated in the people there—that it became a self-supporting organization.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And I believe this without—goes without saying, it proved the value of this. And you know this happened in several other cities, not only in Oklahoma City.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Could you tell me what some of those are?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. Well, Buffalo—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —was an excellent example of this. And San Antonio, for example, uh, they had a smaller orchestra here, but it was a germ of the orchestra that was organized a few years after the war by Max Reiter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And so, I'm sure that if this is checked into, you'll find several other places where this was possible.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I— just looking at my notes that I took from Mr. Moore [ph] yesterday and, mentioned San Francisco, Boston, and, then—but I think those were the operas—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —when they took over—when the music project took over the operas—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —and he said there were—there were several very good conductors and then he mentioned you as the—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —one in Oklahoma, City. [Inaudible]—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Of course, Izler Solomon—Izler Solomon was the one who conducted the Illinois symphony.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Who is now the conductor in Indianapolis.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: He got his start the same way.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. He did.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, this is the kind of information that we wanted to get, you know—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —find out just what this did accomplish. And how many members were there in the orchestra at the time you took over?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: There were 78 and it was full-time, you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Wow.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: There were 78 players and it was a very high-playing standard orchestra, played extremely well. And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —had a wonderful ensemble, which again was built through WPA, so when it became a privately-supported orchestra, these men just automatically took the positions in the Oklahoma City Symphony as it became known after those times.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. How—how long were you there in Oklahoma City?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: I was there a total of 13 years—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —beginning with the WPA and straight through until 1951 when I came to San Antonio as the conductor here. And I've been here now 14 years. So, my whole experience of 27 years in conducting has been in these two cities, Oklahoma City and San Antonio.

[00:10:04]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And you said that San Antonio also started an orchestra during this period?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. They had a—an orchestra here at that time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that was the one you took over when you, when you came?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: You see, the WPA had closed down here, too, and for a year or so there was very little activity that way. Then came Max Reiter, who reorganized. But it was due to the fact they had a foundation here from the WPA that made it possible for him to put together an orchestra that, naturally, is supported here as all orchestras are.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Do you know any other musical programs that were carried on during that period under the WPA?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Well, in our own organization, we had, for example, a very fine copying department. We had a ballet division. And our educational program was rather fantastic. We would do close to a hundred or more student concerts a year.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And when the war first began, we had requests, for example, from the superintendent of the schools to double in on the concerts because they felt this was a very important thing for the children. They were being very disturbed about the talk of war and problems of this sort. And we also did a number of war bond concerts, treasury concerts, things of this sort, and recruiting programs. That was—it—then also the military bases in the area. It became a very important use in this area too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Also, it was possible to play in the colleges and universities, which was very important for the young people at that time. It served many purposes. And, also, there was a series of summer concerts besides. So, the orchestra actually operated 52 weeks.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What were some of the problems that you had to confront?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Well, the main problem were the type of regulations set forth as to how you operated. And not for something this large and you write one book of rules for every organization in the country, you're bound to run into problems. Also, a lot of it depended upon the type of person who had to interpret the meanings of these rules.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And, just quite frankly, if you had a stupid person doing it you had a great number of headaches, and if you had an intelligent person, it worked out very logically. And we had some who were very logical in their thinking, others who were not too bright. I believe this was the main problem. There were certain rules and regulations about, um, the type of person you could employ—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —that did make certain things difficult. There were certain things we were unable to purchase because of rules and regulations that were sorely needed. For example, there was nothing in the budgets, if I recall at that time, for certain types of equipment that were needed. Or to buy a set of chimes or a gong that you might need in the orchestra. This type of miscellany—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —was not done. And so, we had to get some contributions to obtain this type of equipment.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was there a percentage of this material is supposed to be gotten by the local, by the community, or the local sponsor?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: No. There was nothing that was required for them. But this was just the way we'd get it because we couldn't get it through our regular channels.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, in the art program, for instance, the sponsor of a particular program or a mural, or, you know, some of the easel paintings, or art education classes, the sponsor was required to put up the cost of the materials.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But that apparently was not the case here.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Oh.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It was not a requirement.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You just had to get it any way you could.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You know, Mr. Moore [ph] spoke about that, yesterday about that being one of the big, major problems—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —of the Music projects.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Another thing was that we were anxious to try to produce some opera, but the way we were set up, it was as a symphony orchestra. And, consequently, there was no way of adding an opera project. There were opera projects in other places. But this would have been an ideal place to have started a combination of symphony and opera because it was really virgin territory—

[00:15:09]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —at that time. And I think that whole area since then has suffered because it was unable to start this type of work. My idea at that point was to take the art project where you had all your painters and designers and to collaborate with them and let them design our scenery and execute our scenery and our costumes and to be able to put on the project a certain number of singers.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And if we could have done this, you see, we could have carried all of this a step forward and we would have had —there were so many gifted people in the arts there that could have worked in this field. Also, been trained in this field, heaven knows what we might have come up with in the way of some geniuses—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —from this.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: So, we did miss the boat in—in these areas.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, now, they did have opera companies in other cities.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. But I believe they were set up in much larger cities than Oklahoma.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, oh, I see.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And, for example, like, the Boston produced fine opera and so did Los Angeles and certain other places. But for some reason we were unable to bring this about.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How large was Oklahoma City then?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Just, let's see, I imagine it was 190, somewhere in that area of population. It's hard to recall. I think when I left there, the city in '51 must've been about 250, 260,000, somewhere in that area.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's amazing how these cities have grown just in the last—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Oh, yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —25 years.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Oh, yes, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So many of them. I know, I was talking about Houston, I think, that was about that size in those days.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Well, Houston has had a phenomenal population growth.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. I know, it's one of the largest cities in the United States. Well, the—our next question is what do you think was accomplished by the projects, which I think you have—have covered.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: There's one thing I'd like to add to this that's very important—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —is what happened to many of the individual musicians who gained their playing experience through this project. One of these people is now the first flute in the Boston Symphony who came there as a second flutist, first professional job. One is a first bassoonist in the Cleveland Symphony. Several play in the New York Philharmonic. One is an oboist in the Boston Symphony, and I'm just recalling these offhand.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: One is the Principal viola at Warner Bros. Studios. Two harpists are on the staff of the studios and television and Hollywood right now.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Several of the arrangers are out in California, Los Angeles area. And there are many more that I can't even recall at this time. In other words, a fair percentage of these people who went through this experience, when things settled down after the war, were able to command very fine positions. And it was due to the fact that they were able to have this really comprehensive training and experience.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: This was really of great value to these people.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what about that copying project? What has happened to that material?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: That material was turned over to the University of Oklahoma after the project was closed down, and they were the trustees of this music, and it was then lent to various organizations who wished to use it. Unfortunately, several years after that, the University of Oklahoma engaged a musicologist—whose name I don't think we need to mention—who worked on the theory that anything in manuscript was useless and had all of this material burned—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —as I understand.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, my god.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: So, some very valuable editions were lost, that you can—actually they're very hard to obtain in this day and time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, Mr. Moore [ph] spoke about another tragedy along the same lines, said that they had a tremendous copying project in California.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But apparently the material on which they did it was not permanent, so that it faded.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Oh yes, I remember that type of reproduction, yeah. They were—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And so that that was, he said, that was extremely valuable. A great deal of that material did not exist anywhere else in the United States. And he—so that was all lost

too.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: It's too bad we didn't have microfilm—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —in that day.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. If they had, those would've all been saved. I don't know whether in some other parts of the country, they may have been more successful in their copying than these apparently. Both these two instances they weren't.

[00:20:03]

Well, how do you think that these projects increased the music appreciation in America?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Well, I think it was probably the greatest boon we had because in that day and time, let's think back on—electronics was just starting. It was strictly in the labs or used by military. In that day, you had the old 78 record.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Breakable. And if you wished to buy a Tchaikovsky symphony in that day and time, it would cost you, oh, \$12, \$13. An opera was very expensive. And not too many people had the money to afford such recordings.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Of course this has all changed now with the LP and hi-fi and whatnot, and you can get a LP record of a symphony for as little as 99¢ in this day and time. But in those days, this was impossible. And consequently, if you wished to listen to music, it had to really be live music. And, of course, there were no admission charges for practically everything we did. And so it was free to the public. And consequently, a large listening audience was built.

Now, one other thing happened that's very significant, which is since we were not dependent upon the public for supporting and also because you didn't have a Board of Directors who would try to stymie such activities, the possibility of playing the music of American composers and other contemporary composers was very great.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Therefore, we were able to play the music of our alive creative artists far more than many places can do in this day and time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Now, the result of that is very interesting. In Oklahoma City, their audience is rather erudite when it comes to contemporary music. For example, far more than they are here in San Antonio in this day and time. And the consequence and the results of that was a series on mutual broadcast after the WPA days in which we played contemporary music that was broadcast not only nationally but through the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, all over the world. Another thing is that—this has still continued there under the direction of Guy Fraser Harrison, who is now the Musical Director.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And that audience is more amenable to listening to new music than they are in most places.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: So, you see, there was a great advantage, for the American composer particularly, under that setup. Also, we were able to play works of a lot of young composers. They were composer who were still students. We would take their music and read it for them at rehearsals because we had the time to do this and they had an opportunity to hear their scores live, which they would not ordinarily have had.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: This was another advantage of it. It was a great educational force in this way. So we, not only helped to educate a public, but we also contributed towards the development of a lot of composers.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you recall the names of any particular ones?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Well, one of the outstanding is Spencer Norton. Another one is the gifted Cherokee Indian composer, Jack Kilpatrick, who had practically everything he wrote played by us first and it was at least he could write his music, we'd play it at a rehearsal, he could take it back and change what he wanted, bring it back again with the improvements he had made, and finally, get his music to exactly where you wanted it before it was performed other places.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And, of course, this was a great advantage.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who was your immediate superior? Do you remember?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. Dean Richardson was the administrator for the music project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was that for Oklahoma, you mean, or was that in Washington?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: No, in Oklahoma.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It was in Oklahoma?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. He was the, I believe, the state supervisor for the music project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. And do you know how many other projects they had in Oklahoma at that time?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Um. In music?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: I don't recall. They had a number of—not a number, they had several dance band units.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: But not too many. I think most of it was centralized in Oklahoma City because it could be moved throughout the state very easily where it was needed and put to good use.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, you did go out? You did go throughout the state?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Oh, yes, we did. Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Wasn't just in Oklahoma City.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:25:00]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I remember Mr. Moore [ph] spoke about the—how valuable it was to have this happen at that—this particular moment because this was just when the sound movies were coming in and that a great many musicians were out of work that had been in the orchestras in movie houses and places of that sort.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. And we had quite a few of those professional musicians in our project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Really it was a salvation at that time. It was an economic necessity.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Particularly so for these musicians that were put out work because of the introduction of sound.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. And also, let's don't forget that there a lot of them who were just coming out of colleges and universities with no place to perform and no jobs to be had.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: So, it was important from both of these points of view.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And did you feel that you really had an abundance of talent to draw from?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. The talent in any area, I think you'll find, with—is percentage-wise. Out of so many hundreds of thousands of people, there are so many people who are talented in music and in this specific field. And all they need is the opportunity to study and to gain experience and to grow. And our job still is to provide these facilities for them, which we're not doing as well as we did in that day and time under the Works Progress Administration. It afforded this opportunity on a large scale. So that those who really had the talent and the ability were going to have this opportunity.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Another interesting point Mr. Moore [ph] made was that having these standards established in Washington, it was difficult to apply them throughout the country because a—a high standard, for instance, in the large cities would be too high for some of the outlying areas. And they—they had to compromise with their standards, because a good musician in Nebraska, he said, would not be considered a good one in New York.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. That's quite true except for the fact that when Nikolai Sokoloff was the head of the Music for Works Progress Administration, he would tour all over the country. He found the orchestra in Oklahoma City as good as the one in Illinois.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Now, I don't think the credit goes to any one individual. Some of it does have to do with the conductor, this is quite true. But it also has to do with the talent in the area.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And how hard everybody works at things. And how efficiently things are operated. But, uh, I think that is—you can have a great artistic [blossom up (ph)] any place if you have the right people doing the right things and that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, you've spoken about the Oklahoma City orchestra being one of the outstanding ones—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —[inaudible] so, this didn't apply there, but I thought that you might have known something about other areas where they did have this problem where a good conductor would come in and find that the talent had not been developed to the point where he could use it.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes, well, I can tell you this. I found this to be true when I went to Oklahoma City. In fact, I was so upset after the first rehearsal with the playing that I want to pack my bags and leave.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And, naturally, I just returned from Europe where, you know, things were very advanced that way at that time. Of course, we're ahead of them now. And then I decided, well, we'll have to put in a training program here and develop this standard. Because in analyzing it after the first reaction, I found out that there were many talented people, but they had to be trained.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And what I did was put in a very severe training process, in which I would practically work with individuals. And where they were technically deficient, I made them complete their courses of study—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —during this time. So, within a couple of years, you had a very fine playing organization.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's—that's interesting to find that you were able to improve it to that— to that degree and found a standard, however, that—that was not up to your own.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: There's another thing in talking about the problems, I believe that a person in the music project at that time in Oklahoma, and I think it was different in various states, was—received a salary of \$80 a month. And I just like this to call this to whoever's attention it is that's going to listen to this or read what will be written about it. Even in that day and time, it was almost impossible to get by on, particularly if a man was married and had a family, you see.

[00:30:11]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And also had to supply his own instruments.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Well, yes, and supply his own instruments and all of this. And even then, it just didn't quite make it on that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, of course, the, the wage scale was so much lower, but it did provide, at least, some of the barest necessities—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —just about all.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes, it did. That was just about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, what, what are your ideas about the possible future federal subsidy of similar projects?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I believe this, and I've been studying it quite a bit for the past 10 years, that we're in a very strange position in this day and time where we have far more interest in the arts than we have either the desire or the ability to support them.

We're running into this problem now, the younger generations coming up, young people from 18 to 30 years of age who are raising families now and on modest incomes who cannot always afford to even buy a ticket for a performance because in this day and time we have to charge such a price for a ticket to keep our earned income at a high level to maintain the playing standard that is required nowadays. So, it goes in a vicious cycle. Where it's, people want better performances, so you have to charge more to maintain a higher standard. And then what you are doing is depriving certain income brackets from really attending concerts, or at least as many as they would like to. Now this is one of the problems we have. This is going to get worse with increased cost in living.

It is true that incomes are going up, but they are, for example, they're not going up on a parallel level. As far as symphony musicians are concerned, our salaries are way behind what the norm should be for the cost of—of living. And this is really true, I believe, in practically all of the United States. So, this is a problem that is becoming desperate. In fact, there are many highly qualified people who would love to make a career as a symphony musician, who will completely give up playing their instrument and go into some business or something because of the security situation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And until something is done to guarantee to the professional musician, who is a performer, an annual income that is what you call livable, then we're

going to have this problem.

And I think it is becoming more serious as we go along. Therefore, some type of supplementary aid is needed. Now, some of us have received grants from foundations, for example, Ford Foundation. Here we have an opera grant. Dallas Symphony has a small grant from the Rockefeller Foundation in relation to contemporary music.

But we find that to carry out these projects, it actually costs us a little more money because it's—it is true, it does increase our seasons a little bit. But also earned income is not reconciled with the cost of doing these things.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: So, I hope that the day will come very soon when some type of incentive and reward plan is worked out in relation to the arts. And I believe you can apply to your theaters, your art institutes, and almost anything in the art where, if a city or community is willing to raise certain amount of funds for this, that they will get some supplementary aid from federal sources, state sources, county-municipal sources, to make it possible for the performing artist in the various fields and the creating artist to function. And to function with some dignity from a financial point of view.

Now, how this should be worked out, there are many theories and many ways and many ideas. But I think the basic philosophy has to be this, there's a theory that goes all the way through the history of civilization in regards to the arts and that is this: that the possessors of the major portion of the personal, surplus income have always been the patrons of the arts.

[00:35:19]

In the time of the Egyptians, it was the Pharaohs in the government body and the religious groups. Medieval times, it was strictly from the religious groups in most instances. The Renaissance, you had an entirely different type of people supporting. And then came your monarchies and your so-called aristocracy support.

And in this country, the first supporters of the arts were economic buccaneers, the men who made tremendous amounts of money at a certain time. Then it became oligarchy in this country. There were a few people who footed the bills for these things. Then came our taxation schedules, which got higher and higher, and our inheritance taxes, and this type of support, in most instances, is now disappearing. So that people are actually being deprived of the privilege of supporting the arts because of taxation. That is, inheritance, income, and the many other ways. There should be something in our tax set-up to create an incentive for people to be able to contribute more into the arts.

So, at this time, in the United States of America, the possessors of the surplus personal income is the federal government. But historically, they are not supporting the arts. So, this is where our basic problem is, I believe.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I think this is something that must be faced up to, because of all the automation that is coming on, when people are going to have more leisure time and they're going to need to creative arts as a—as an outlet.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes. And you—you see with the development and automation of electronics and with this leisure time, the cultural center is now in the home. In other words, you can get slides, beautiful reproductions that are from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to show in your own home. There's all types of courses of study in the arts now.

In music, I mean, look at the advantages you have with the LP record. There's no such thing as a provincial listener anymore because of geography. Because all he needs to do is to order these things and put them in his home and listen to them or look at them or study them. And he has his cultural center there. But, because of this, the desire is now to listen to music live—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: —but at a higher standard than it was in the past. Also, if you look at a beautiful painting on your slides, as my children do, their desire is to go see that painting.

They really want to see it. Of course, if they had the opportunity, they'd like to touch it, too. But the point is they do want to see it in its original form.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: So, you see, from this they want the culmination of this artistic experience. So, the demand is greater and the need is greater. And actually it boils down to the fact that we need the proper support now for these things.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do they have any Fine Arts Commission in the state of Texas?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: As I understand, and I have been out of town recently, that the governor's announced the beginnings of a Fine Arts Commission in which there will be a committee. This is healthy insofar as at least we're thinking this way from a standpoint of our political scientists and professional politicians.

But I believe it's going to be some years before this will develop into any kind of constructive support or aid. These are mostly study groups; they're mostly groups to see what is needed.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Needed. Yes.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: But, as to what can be done about it, this is a problem and this is still not solved. Although I think this is a very healthy indication.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: A lot of us were wondering if this Economic Opportunity Act might be involved in this in any way, if musicians and artists are in—in need to the point where—where there could be some funds granted from,—from that act. Have you studied that at all?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: I have not studied the Act. I don't really believe it should be put any longer on the basis of need. With the standard of living we have in the United States, I believe if it is ever put on this level, that we could consider that in this country civilization has taken a horrible step backwards.

[00:40:01]

It should be only on the basis of what I call The Truth, which is that the desire and the interest for these things is here on the part of your average citizen. And he has a need for this. And in our future beehive civilization, he's going to need more of a need for a release through the arts due to the pressure that's going to be put on him from an emotional standpoint. And as we develop scientifically, we must develop in the humanities. And if man loses the desire for beauty, in whatever form he may be interested in it, or if he's deprived of the opportunity of having this available to him, then we might as well go back to the caves.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I think we've sort of reached a critical point and something must be done—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —one way or the other if our civilization is to be saved as we know it and as we love it. Well, are there are other comments that you'd like to make about your—about that particular period?

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: No, but just to [cross talk] summarize that I believe that this—the Works Progress Administration in the arts has been the one basic, primary factor that has caused the interest of the cultural bloom of today.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: And it gave us the opportunity to train performers, creative people that could function in a time when they may have given up their careers. And in doing this, I believe it is the factor that has caused this country to reach its artistic prominence, as it has now from the standpoint of creative artists and performers. And believe me, I think at this point, on the whole, we have the best of any place in the world.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's interesting to hear you say that, I think this has certainly accounted for the—the preeminence now of the, in the art field, in the art—in

fine arts that the—the center has now shifted from Paris to New York or to this country—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —at least, because I know when I was an art student, if you didn't go to Paris, I mean, you just weren't an artist.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But now, I don't think people feel that way any—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —longer. And—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Not at all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —so I have watched that very carefully as I've interviewed artists, to see what they feel about it and generally they do, even though they say that the—of course the war situation interfered with it temporarily. But it did, say with the musicians, it gave these artists an opportunity to develop themselves during a period when they would have had to turn to something else in order to survive. And as such, they were allowed to develop.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yeah. I don't want to be presumptuous and to get into your field, but I think we also are missing the boat in our day and time in relation to art and functional structures, like buildings. For example, expressways. What we're getting now is cold relief patterns that are all the same color. They look exactly the same no matter where you go. And this is very unhealthy for people. What I can't understand is like in our area here, when we do an expressway, why can't we decorate these expressways? What is the reason they all have to be the same color?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Because we even know from a psychological standpoint, this is very bad. I'm sure there's an accident ratio in relation to this. And you find out by different colors you have different stimulations. So why can't we have our artists start to help design these particular types of—of structures with engineers and to realize that the outer covering of it, in other words, is just as important as the structure itself?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: What are we doing with our buildings in the way of mosaics and such things? How many buildings with all this glass we're creating nowadays, how many—how much room is there for a mural anymore?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: This is what disturbs me.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it does me very much and I hope the time comes when all—it'll be necessary for all public buildings to have something in their budget—

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —for—for decoration.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: For example, how many cities have put water fountains in? I mean, beautiful, designed water fountains in their parks and in their areas. Of course, they are beginning to do this right here and now. They've put in a good half a dozen fountains here in the last three or four years, some of them very beautiful.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: There are so many things like this we need. We need more artists in regards to landscape architecture. And people and our governing officials who have a desire to make our cities more beautiful as well as for them to get larger.

[00:45:07]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, well, I just hope that the point hasn't passed. Because when I—when I travel around, I see very many, very ugly cities and they don't—some of the modern architecture is beautiful, but a lot of it is very sterile, it seems to me, when you compare it to the architecture of the past.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: It's not very creative at all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, it seems to be that they just put these buildings up as simply and starkly as possible.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: Yes, they pull a blueprint out of the—out of a drawer, which has worked some other place, and slap it down. And whether it has any relationship to its environment is not important.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's true and that's too bad. Well, I certainly thank you very much, Mr. Alessandro, for giving me your time and giving me this very informative, very interesting interview. So, and I wish all success in your future work here. And we'll all try to work to get America a more beautiful place.

VICTOR ALESSANDRO: That's a wonderful thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Thank you very much.

[END OF TRACK AAA_alessa65_2004_r.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]