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**INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

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**AMY KAISER INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL**

**Blanche Touhill:** Will you introduce yourself?

**Amy Kaiser:** I'm Amy Kaiser and I'm the Director of the St. Louis Symphony Chorus.

**Blanche Touhill:** Would you talk a little bit about your childhood, where you were born, your parents, did you have siblings, did you have cousins or grandparents and in elementary school, was there somebody who said to you, "Amy, you're really talented in a certain way and you should go forward and do things that you want to do. So just talk in general about your home life and your grade school and who really set you on a path to do what you're doing today.

**Amy Kaiser:** Well, both my parents worked for the New York City Board of Education. My father was, first a teacher, then an elementary school principal. My mother was an English teacher and a guidance counselor. So both parents worked. I had no siblings. I've been an only child. Cousins, yes; family, all in New York City. My parents were first generation immigrants. They were each the first of their family to go to college. They were very security conscious, very aware of how their good jobs in the Depression, their secure jobs in the Depression and their pensions were their lifeline and they did very, very well living this life. I went to public schools in Brooklyn, New York. We lived in a lovely area of Brooklyn and I always had a good time in school. I took private piano lessons, private dancing lessons, art lessons. I really had those advantages that my parents had never had. We spent our summers in the Adirondack Mountains of New York where I went swimming and hiking and had a wonderful time, from the time I was very, very small. So that shaped my life in a different way. In school and at home, I was a good student. I took piano lessons but I never had any inkling that I could be a musician. This was not serious. I was going to be a teacher, most likely and the surprise was that when I

was 11, my parents saw the original cast *My Fair Lady* production on Broadway. They brought home the album and I listened to that. I'd always been drawn to great singers and my first memory was Marion Anderson singing spirituals on my mother's old 78's. So I loved music. They were not musical but when I heard that recording of *My Fair Lady* and Julie Andrews' voice on that recording, all the light bulbs went off and I became a star struck music, theater maniac and I went in and saw the show and went back stage and found two other little girls the same age and we met there every week for a year and we saw all the stars go in and we got all their autographs and I just fell in love with singing and that distinctive quality of a great voice, of the wit of words and music and that set me on a path. It was a real passion and I got to know lots of other Broadway shows which I loved, of course, *West Side Story* at that time, I knew all the songs. I then became very interested in Gilbert & Sullivan and knew all of those operettas by the time I was 12.

**Blanche Touhill:** And did you sing them?

**Amy Kaiser:** I would play them at the piano and sing them and my piano teacher fed this. He was actually my first mentor but no thought of professional anything in this. It was just, he knew I was interested in this so he brought me things and I then became very interested in opera. By the time I was 13, I was an opera buff and I went and stood at the Metropolitan Opera every Saturday afternoon and saw everything and you could do that in those days. You could take the subway by yourself from Brooklyn to Manhattan and I did that. I was one of the only kids but I was not the only one and I would just stand and take it all in and I loved it. The first opera I saw at the Met was *Don Giovanni* and I was 13 and I saw behind a pillar and I remember it...

**Blanche Touhill:** But you could hear the music?

**Amy Kaiser:** Oh, and I could see if I looked around and it was a historic performance because they took a special photograph of the hall and I still have that photo which became a historic photo before the old Metropolitan Opera House was torn down. So by the time I graduated from high school...and I was young because in New York, you could take several years, you could skip basically. I graduated from high school when I was 16 and I was a pretty decent pianist, certainly not of any professional gifts but I still had

this passion for singing and for music theater and for opera. Then I went to Smith College.

**Blanche Touhill:** How did you happen to choose Smith?

**Amy Kaiser:** My parents took me on a little tour. I was one of the top students at Erasmus (hole?) High School in Brooklyn. Barbra Streisand went there; Bobby Fischer went there, and there were 1500 students in my graduating class and I was number six. So I had the opportunity to apply to some very good schools and we went around and I loved the Smith College campus. I went to a French class. I had been very good at languages in high school and had some wonderful French teachers and had won a scholarship to do French language drama. That was a great opportunity. So that was a direction I thought I might go in.

**Blanche Touhill:** Did you actually perform in plays?

**Amy Kaiser:** Yes.

**Blanche Touhill:** In French?

**Amy Kaiser:** Yes. This was a French woman who was hired by the New York City Board of Education and for enrichment on Saturday mornings of excellent students all in the city public schools who had to win a competition to get...and I did this for two years and we did *La Malade Imaginaire*; we did...with all us kids, doing the roles in French. It was fabulous. So I went to a sample French class at Smith and I thought it was very good and I just liked the atmosphere, but no thought of music and when I did go to college, I applied early decision. I got in, there was never any question that that was where I wanted to go. So, I took all these classes in History and French and English Literature. There were a lot of requirements and I sang in the freshmen choir which I enjoyed but there just wasn't enough music in my life and sophomore year...actually, it was sophomore year that I...I had done so well freshman year that I took more advanced courses and I kind of overdid it and then I got pneumonia and when I got out of the hospital for pneumonia, having missed two weeks of school, I realized I had to do more music. I really missed it. I had been singing in the choirs and there was an amazing choral director at Smith, a woman named Iva Dee Hiatt.

**Blanche Touhill:** Now, does that mean that you had to have time to think before you could make that decision?

**Amy Kaiser:** Well, I was singing in the choir freshman year and sophomore year and I enjoyed it. This was extracurricular, no credit and then...oh, I did take voice lessons. I signed up for singing lessons as a sophomore, not as a freshman and I'd always wanted to study singing and sound like Julie Andrews or other opera singers that I loved: Roberta Peters. I had spent several years in high school playing through all the Mozart operas, teaching myself Italian at the breakfast table so that I could translate *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* and I did that and it was just for myself. Then I got to college and here was this opportunity to take voice lessons at minimal extra cost and there was a wonderful voice teacher. So my sophomore year, I signed up for that and I was singing in the chorus with this astonishingly charismatic and gifted choral director, Iva Dee Hiatt who was legendary at Smith and I had a wonderful voice teacher. I did this for a couple of months and then I got sick and that's when I realized I had to have the focus be on music and not on these high level Political Science classes or French classes where I had really gotten in over my head. I just wasn't interested in that as much and I missed the music. So the second semester of my sophomore year, I took many more music classes and became a music major then.

**Blanche Touhill:** And you say that singing would be your specialty or was it...

**Amy Kaiser:** Singing was my instrument.

**Blanche Touhill:** Singing was [inaudible 10:53:4].

**Amy Kaiser:** I never took piano lessons beyond high school but I still played the piano but the singing was where my dreams lay. It was words and music.

**Blanche Touhill:** Did your teacher say that you had a gift?

**Amy Kaiser:** No, no, I just had a pretty sweet little voice. I did not have a professional quality instrument as a singer. I had the mind; I had the ability to interpret songs, understand the languages, but I was in no way a natural as a singer. I had a very good teacher, however, and so she was so supportive and so encouraging that I was able, in the three years that I studied with her in college, I was able to make the most of what I had. Then, of course, after college, I continued. I went to New York and I

studied singing there but the choral director, Iva Dee Hiatt, was the inspiration and she gave opportunities to students to conduct the choirs and singing in choirs at Smith was a big deal. She had built this up to...and she was a pioneer. She started as choral director at Smith in 1949. This was a women's college. They had never had a woman choral director and she was the first woman to conduct all kinds of things and went way beyond being a typical chorus director. She worked with orchestras and she was a dynamo and very inspiring to all the students, got great results from us and a very high professional standard from the student singers but she went beyond that. She did actually encourage us to choose student conductors for a competition every year. So I did not win this my freshman year but my sophomore year, I did and I took her class in choral conducting and then I studied conducting with her at Harvard summer school that summer. I began to see that this was totally suited to my abilities because it involved teaching which I came to naturally. That, I think, is in my blood and it involved singing and I just took to it and I learned so much from her so that I really knew what I was doing, in how to run a rehearsal, how to time things, how not to waste people's time, how to be demanding but also encouraging, how to put the music first and raise the level of the abilities of the people in your group beyond what they thought they could do, which is the essence of working with a chorus. Then my junior year in college, Iva Dee was on sabbatical and I was chosen to take her job as the director of the local prep school girls' choir in Northampton, Massachusetts. It was the Mary A. Burnham School and they had a girls' choir there and she did this as an extra thing. When she left for this sabbatical, they needed someone to take her place for one year and that was me and I was 17...no, I was 18 or I was going to be 18. So this was my first job, my first professional job.

**Blanche Touhill:** How did it go?

**Amy Kaiser:** It was wonderful. This was a very controlled environment. These girls were chaperoned. They had a chaperone sitting in the room all the time. I had no discipline problems and, of course, they were a very well behaved group and they loved singing. The fun part was, we did these joint concerts with the boys prep schools and this is not my background. I went to public school so I didn't know about Avon Old Farm School or the Pomfret in Connecticut or all these places in the rolling hills. Suddenly I was directing these concerts with the boys' choirs and their conductor

who was...I don't know, maybe he was in his 30's or 40's, he sees this 18-year-old kid get off the bus. So that was the fun part. I think I got about \$1,000 for the year which, in 1963, was not so bad. It was a fabulous experience for me. Then my senior year, of course, I felt like a pro and Iva Dee Hiatt was back and I was very fortunate to have another year with her working with her as her assistant then. So we did a tour of Europe that was an amazing tour that summer with the Princeton Glee Club and I conducted lots of things in Europe at this festival and that festival as the assistant conductor of this group. So I graduated from Smith at age 20. I was a music major. I was magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa. I was very interested in the academic side of musicology. I studied singing. I did a senior recital as a singer but the main thing was that at 20, I knew I was a professional quality chorus director at that time which amazes me in retrospect.

**Blanche Touhill:** What did your family say?

**Amy Kaiser:** Well, they still thought I would be a kindergarten teacher and/or a high school English teacher or a music teacher or maybe if I got a graduate degree, I would be a college professor and that is the direction I went in. I got a Fulbright grant, I went to Oxford University. I studied musicology and spent a lot of time in the library. I did some singing but not much.

**Blanche Touhill:** Did you do conducting?

**Amy Kaiser:** No. I was observing. I was watching all kinds of people. I actually sang a part in a school production, university production of *The Magic Flute*, sang the first spirit and they fired me. I wasn't very good. I looked for a voice teacher in London. I didn't like anybody that I was introduced to so I just put it on hold. The next year, I was in New York. I had gotten a five-year Woodrow Wilson fellowship to get a PhD at Columbia University in Musicology and so I did that and that way I could study singing at the same time in New York. This worked out very, very well. It worked out very well except I did all the course work and then quit because that was the revolution and it was 1968 and students were occupying buildings and I was studying my 13<sup>th</sup> century (Motets?) in the library and it just did not seem so compellingly important anymore. I guess I had, for the first time, an awareness that I really was more of a performer. I loved making the music and not so much researching it and writing about it. So I didn't know what I was going to do. I got my Master's in Musicology, finished all

the PhD course work but gave up the scholarship and continued studying singing and explored other things. I had my personal crisis. I taught kindergarten and first grade, music and phys ed at the United Nations International School. I taught a year of nursery school at the Jack & Jill School. These are not on my resume but it was important at the time, just to...

**Blanche Touhill:** ...give it a try.

**Amy Kaiser:** ...give it a try and it was the '60s and, as a woman, even coming from Smith College, which was so empowering and having had this amazing mentor who was a chorus director, there was no path to conducting. There were no role models professionally. It was not a possibility. So I was feeling quite lost actually and I was quite surprised to get a phone call from Smith College that they had a vacancy for their assistant choral director. This was not a tenure track position. It was a rotating three-year position to conduct the freshmen and sophomore choirs while Ms. Hiatt conducted the Glee Club and the chamber singers and they wanted to know, was I interested in auditioning for this, and I thought, oh, no, I can't go back there. It's a girl's school. Oh, I love New York. I don't want to leave, but, all right. I don't know what I'm doing so I'll go do this audition. I went up there and I'll never forget it because my audition was to conduct a piece with the Smith College Glee Club and I stood up there. I hadn't been conducting in years and I stood up there and it was like I rediscovered this part of myself that I had lost. It was total joy. I was offered this job unanimously by the Music Department and I decided, with some trepidation, to accept it. I moved back to Northampton at age 27 and just loved this job. It was amazing. Then I got serious about conducting and did some more training at Aspen Music Festival in the summers where I worked with another great teacher, John Nelson who really taught me the real fundamentals of being a good conductor, not just a choral director. So I continued with that in the summer and then got all this priceless experience for three years at Smith doing joint concerts with Williams and all the men's schools which have now gone co-ed but then the women's choir and the men's choir could combine and so you could do some really wonderful, wonderful things. One of the highlights was a concert with the MIT Glee Club. They could count and together we did a major work of Stravinsky, *Les Noces*. We did it in English for a chorus with percussion and four pianists. This was hugely

ambitious and I got the students to come back early from their vacation. We had a Stravinsky winter camp. We put this together. I'll never forget, that was a real turning point. It was so thrilling and it was such an accomplishment and the conductor of the MIT Glee Club at that time was John Oliver who's now been the director of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus with the Boston Symphony. So we were early colleagues back in 1971 and here we are, all these years later, doing professional Symphony Chorus work. It's pretty amazing. So I couldn't stay at Smith. It was a rotating job and I didn't want to stay there. I was the secondary person and so on. I applied for a position at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and got a tenure track job, assistant professor as director of choral music at this major university on Long Island and I was, at that time, I think, 29. So I moved there and that was extremely challenging. That was a whole different situation.

**Blanche Touhill:** Why was it challenging?

**Amy Kaiser:** Well, I was the head of the whole choral program. I was the fourth choral director they had hired in four years so there had been a lot of turmoil and the program was a mess.

**Blanche Touhill:** Were you the first woman?

**Amy Kaiser:** Oh, of course. I was also the head of a graduate program in choral conducting and some of my students were just two years younger than me and they were women, two of them...I was there for four years...two of them at different times, gave me a terribly, terribly hard time. That was a very, very interesting experience. For the first time in my life, I was hated by some of the students that I was working with.

**Blanche Touhill:** Women as well as men?

**Amy Kaiser:** Oh, absolutely, women more than men. The women were the instigators, a couple of them. I was doing, again, some very ambitious and interesting projects and those were quite successful so the performances went very well and since I was there for four years, the program solidified and became much more visible and the quality went up and so on but I had to deal with having some very, very difficult personal relationships within this program.

**Blanche Touhill:** They liked the old way better?



**Amy Kaiser:**

This one first student was in love with my predecessor and this is something that I then came to experience as I've gone on, throughout my entire career, that there are often people in choruses...choruses become very attached to their conductors. Singing is visceral. There's no barrier between you. It's not like playing an instrument in an orchestra where you have your violin and your relationship is to the violin and then perhaps to the conductor as well. When you're singing, you're directly...you're face-to-face and I found that several times I have succeeded a beloved man who is either alive or dead. I mean, there have been several who died so I consider myself an expert now at what I call "SBDF," succeeding the beloved deceased founder. This is a long process and my experience at Stony Brook was the first of, I think, five times in my life that I've had to go through this process. At first it seemed like I had to prove myself in some way but one of the things that I learned at Stony Brook was that it wasn't about that at all. It was simply about survival. If you simply persist and do your thing and establish the relationships with the people that do like you and forget about the rest or try to make things better with them if you can, if you're stuck with them, then you will prevail and you do quality work. You will prevail. After seven years, seven years is the magic number...

**Blanche Touhill:**

It comes across...

**Amy Kaiser:**

After seven years, it becomes your chorus. Now, of course, at Stony Brook, I was only there for four years because I came up for tenure and there was a new chairman of the Music Department and all the people that had hired me who really liked me, they were all gone. One had died; one was on sabbatical in Paris, and one had become a very jealous colleague, because by that time, I was also doing opera. I was conducting opera and, you know, this goes back to my childhood love of opera and music theater and I was working with some local companies on Long Island using some wonderful instrumentalists in the pit. These were stage productions. I did about five of these with this rinky dink little company on Long Island, but amazing experience and I was able to commute to Manhattan and take some more conducting lessons, this time from George Schick who was a maestro at the Metropolitan Opera and I prepared all these Puccini operas for him and conducted them for him as he played, the way he would at the Met and I got his pointers and he was very encouraging to me. So my work with him let me know that I knew

how to conduct *La Boheme* and I knew how to conduct *Tosca* and those are two of the operas I did on Long Island. But one of my colleagues at Stony Brook also wanted to conduct these things and so anyway, he didn't want me to get tenure and all the others had gone and so I had really no support and there were these students who hated me. So I did not get tenure and it was horrible, horrible proceedings. If I had wanted to, I could have probably brought a suit against...you know, something, but I think I was very smart actually not to have done that because I did realize that this was a turning point and by this time, the women's movement...this was now 1977, because I started at Stony Brook in 1974 and came up for tenure in '77. By that time, the women's movement had made some real changes. I graduated from Smith in 1965 so it was 12 years later. By that time, I had actually seen a woman conduct a major ensemble in Carnegie Hall and this was Eve Queler (sp?). She was an opera coach for New York City Opera where she could not advance as a conductor and she had the means and her husband had the means to start this company and so she was an entrepreneur and she started her own opera company which was the Opera Ensemble of New York. So three times a year, she would conduct these operas in concert form and she was a true pioneer and I went to see one of her productions and I will never forget the thrill of excitement, coming back on the Long Island railroad to Stony Brook, having seen someone who looked like me leading this ensemble at Carnegie Hall. So, then a year or so later, when I didn't get tenure, I thought, okay, I'm going to move to New York and I'm going to see what I can do in the big, bad professional world. My epiphany was, the big, bad professional world couldn't possibly be worse than academia. Thirty-five years later, it never has been.

**Blanche Touhill:** It has not changed?

**Amy Kaiser:** It has never been worse than academia, the politics. I have been able to advance and realize my dreams in the professional world which...

**Blanche Touhill:** And that's (what?) Woodrow Wilson (said?)?

**Amy Kaiser:** ...opened up only with the advent of the women's movement.

**Blanche Touhill:** So, talk about where you went next.

**Amy Kaiser:** I had a lame duck year after not getting tenure and I used that. I stayed but meanwhile, I'd been going back and forth, visiting friends in New

York. I had family in New York and so on. I used my network. I had not consciously made a network. This was just a spontaneous thing. One of my friend's husband was the director of choral music at Mannes College of Music and he moved on to Julliard and that job was open. These were never advertised but I auditioned for it and they hired me in 1978. So that was an excellent...

**Blanche Touhill:** And you were the first woman there?

**Amy Kaiser:** Sure, of course, in any conducting capacity. There were no women. There were, in high school choirs and so on, but even at the college level, my mentor at Smith was a pioneer. So, at Mannes, I had a good part-time job and then...this was conscious networking...I had had another singer who was an inspiration to me. Her name was Judith Raskin. She sang at the Metropolitan Opera. She was a New York Jewish girl who went to Smith College and became a Metropolitan Opera star and she lived in New York and I had met her at Smith because she had come and done a little master class for us. I had studied with her voice teacher in New York. So she knew who I was and I picked up the phone and I contacted her and asked her, would she be willing to meet me for lunch and she did and we had this wonderful, wonderful time. Then I dared ask her, would she and her husband be willing to come and see this opera that I was conducting on Long Island. I can't believe they did this: they dragged themselves out to Long Island...quite a trip...and watched this sub-standard production. She was singing at the Met and all over the world! She was kind enough to do this and was impressed with my conducting enough then, when I needed the job, to recommend me for a fabulous part-time position at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y in New York where I had my own community orchestra. So I got regular conducting experience with the orchestra. I had a chamber chorus run by the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y with regular performances there and, best of all, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y School of Music was starting an opera series called Jewish Opera at the Y. So these were all new works that were written based on Jewish stories, Jewish composers, to create a repertoire that would work. This doesn't exist. So anyway, I went to New York and I had these two wonderful part-time jobs. I stayed in Manhattan for 18 years as a freelance conductor and I kept adding, adding, adding, adding work. One time I had five or six jobs. At the Y, these operas were phenomenal. We commissioned major composers who wrote works based on stories by I.B. Singer, Bernard Malamud, some Biblical things,

some traditional stories. It was wonderful. We used professional singers, instrumentalists. We had beautiful productions. I got reviewed in the New York Times. I worked for the Metropolitan Opera Guild, the educational branch of the Met doing their programs for school children which were full productions, same orchestra that you'd have in a Broadway show, fabulous singers. I did that for five years. I did some opera at Manhattan School of Music and at Mannes. Meanwhile, being the choral director and teaching conducting at Mannes, teaching conducting at Manhattan School and I was music director then of another independent chorus called the Dessoff Choirs which had a long distinguished history in New York and they had an endowment and a budget and wonderful, smart adult amateur singers and we did concerts at Lincoln Center, Merkin Concert Hall, churches all over the city. We expanded to do things with the New York Philharmonic. I prepared choruses for Peter Schickley (sp?), PDQ Bach in Carnegie Hall. It was a rich experience. I was at the center of musical life in one of the greatest musical cities in the world. The only problem was, I couldn't make enough money and I had no pension and I had no health insurance.

**Blanche Touhill:** Were there other women doing the same thing?

**Amy Kaiser:** No. No, there were not, in fact. There were some who tried but I was the only one...

**Blanche Touhill:** ...that lasted?

**Amy Kaiser:** ...that lasted and that had these high profile positions. There were women conducting other groups, yes but no one was able to put together choral music, opera and orchestral music. That is really one of my claims to distinction because, although I'm a specialist in choral music and that's what I've been doing here in St. Louis, I really have a lot of experience as an orchestral conductor and as an opera conductor. I have conducted over 25 operas, including 8 contemporary premieres. I had my own orchestra. It was not a professional orchestra but I've worked with some of New York's top professional orchestras. So there are very few choral directors who can be equally skilled or nearly equally skilled in these other things.

**Blanche Touhill:** When you started this, my memory was that most of the members of orchestras in those days were men.

**Amy Kaiser:**

True. In the early '60s...and just a few years ago, I went to the Museum of Radio and Television in New York and I watched the opening program of Lincoln Center, New York Philharmonic. There were a number of things about it that were startling but one was that it was 1962, I was already starting college. There was one woman in the orchestra and she was the harpist. So, of course, how could you have a path as a professional when there weren't even any women in the orchestra? And there were no women in the administration of the orchestra. No women were in positions to hire anyone. So you couldn't even network in any way because there was no one to network with. So, by the time, though, I was there in New York as a professional, which was from 1978 to 1995, things were changing, bit by bit by bit by bit but the music profession, the classical music field is still one of the most conservative, one of the most...reactionary in terms of acceptance of women in high positions. I did have two honors from Smith College that I treasure. One is, they had a program, Remarkable Women, 30 women of particular years and I was in that group and the other was, I received the Smith College Medal for Outstanding Professional Achievement and that was in 2004 and Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan were honorees in that same group. Now, I'm certainly not in their category by any means but I'm so rare, I am so rare in that field but Betty Friedan had seen me take a bow with the New York Philharmonic because I prepared a chorus for Fort Mazur (sp?) and he gave me a solo bow and Betty Friedan was very critical. She said, "But you weren't the head of it. You weren't..."...you have to understand that if you want to wait for a woman to be the head of the New York Philharmonic, first of all, wait for a woman to be president of the United States and then wait another 30 years, that in the pecking order for orchestral leadership in this country, foreign men come first; American men come second, and then everybody else comes last, a distant last, and if you look around, you'll see American orchestras...Chicago, Muti, Boston Symphony. Most of them are foreign.

**Blanche Touhill:**

Are the Broadway orchestras, they're still led by men, aren't they?

**Amy Kaiser:**

There was one woman who did very well in that field and she had quite a lot going. I don't know what's happened to her but, yeah, sure, there's still...first of all, there are so few opportunities. In order to become capable, experienced, qualified at all, you have to learn on the job. In order to get the job, you have to have the experience. There are other

fields certainly like that but I will always be very, very grateful to Smith College because they gave me my first professional job.

**Blanche Touhill:** Well, go on then. What happened after 18 years in New York?

**Amy Kaiser:** Well, 18 years in New York...I had some surgery in my late mid 40's and I had to miss several weeks of work. Well, I was a freelancer; therefore, I risked losing jobs. I lost income and I also was angry because a lot of the people I worked with, the volunteer singers, they worked on Wall Street. They had secure jobs elsewhere and if they had surgery, their insurance covered everything and they didn't risk losing anything. I realized that I couldn't continue. Also, the only way to make more money was to do more work, but at the same time, you get older. So I couldn't quit a job I had outgrown because I couldn't replace that piece of the puzzle. I knew the New York scene very, very well and I knew there was nothing that would work like, "If only I had that job, then I could rearrange this!" So I knew I had to leave and I gave myself a five-year window of opportunity to get a real job and I applied for many things all over the country that were in places where I thought it would be livable and the quality would be very high and that I would be happy. I was usually one of three: Chicago Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Eastman School of Music, Yale School of Music, Los Angeles Master Chorale, things like that, and I'd be one of three and I didn't get the job. Finally I got two jobs: the St. Louis Symphony Chorus position and the directorship of a choral program at a major university with a full professorship with tenure. I turned them down in order to come to St. Louis because I wanted to remain in the professional arena, and by this time, I knew I was not an academic. I didn't want to go back to that environment. I wanted to be around my professional peers and when I auditioned for the St. Louis Symphony job, Powell Hall was...I just loved it; I loved going in there and everybody was so welcoming. It turned out to be home.

**Blanche Touhill:** How many years have you been here?

**Amy Kaiser:** This is my 19<sup>th</sup> year. I cannot believe it. I started at 50 and I hope to stay for a good while longer.

**Blanche Touhill:** How did the crowd react to a woman choral conductor?

**Amy Kaiser:** Well, it was a big non-issue. By this time, 1995, the Symphony has had women conductors as guest conductors and I was able, when I started, to

do quite a lot with the orchestra. I did educational concerts with the orchestra; I did some...they had a program, Classics in the Loop; I did an all orchestral...not just choral things...I did an all orchestral program with the St. Louis Symphony; I did *Messiah* three times with the chorus and orchestra; I did a Schubert mass with the orchestra and chorus at the Cathedral Basilica, all together, probably about 20 things over the first seven or eight years.

**Blanche Touhill:** So you were accepted?

**Amy Kaiser:** Absolutely.

**Blanche Touhill:** Were there women in the orchestra by then?

**Amy Kaiser:** Oh, there were, definitely. I mean, now the orchestra is at least half women and the New York Philharmonic is as well and there are women who are executive directors, presidents of major orchestras, major, several of them and they have been incredibly successful. So the scene has changed enormously, and yet, there are still no women conducting the biggest orchestras in the world. Marin Alsop has achieved the highest position and she's done very, very well. She is the only one. So there's a lot of times...Betty Friedan still has to wait. It did take me a while, however, to be accepted here. My seven-year rule applied in St. Louis as it has elsewhere. I did succeed the beloved deceased founder here in St. Louis and I paid the price. There were people who left, singers in the chorus but most of the people who came since I started, of course, they formed different relationships and it's all changed. I've been incredibly gratified by the success of the chorus. It's just grown and they sound gorgeous. We, just a few weeks ago, did a performance here of Benjamin Britain's opera, Peter Grimes in honor of Britain's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and then we were presented by Carnegie Hall a week later, did a repeat performance at Carnegie Hall. We got such ovations. There was a 10-minute ovation that was so stunning, it was videotaped. It's on YouTube. We got all out raves from the national press that was there in New York, all these senior critics from all over the place, including, of course, the Post Dispatch, but the response for what we did...and our chorus played a major role in this production. So this was quite an affirmation that the chorus is truly on an equal level with the orchestra and is nationally recognized as one of the tops in the country, which we've known for a while but it's nice to have that acclaim. The singers in the chorus, which is

a mixture of paid and volunteer singers, they are so dedicated, they're so gifted, I'm incredibly proud of them and we have, in the 19 years that I've been here, we've maintained what was a strong tradition and we've really made it grow. Of course, the fact that David Robertson is our music director, for me, has been the icing on the cake. That was sheer good luck.

**Blanche Touhill:** Let me talk a little bit about the International Women's Forum. How did you happen to connect with them?

**Amy Kaiser:** Through the Smith College network, which has, when I moved to St. Louis, I didn't know anybody and the Smith alums were wonderful and several of them, of course, being members of the Forum, so I think it was Joanne Griffin and Gail Jackson that recommended me and I had the highest artistic leadership position at the St. Louis Symphony and so...I mean, there are 130 in the chorus so you could say I'm the head of an organization with 130 members that's a subset of the St. Louis Symphony. So I joined and it's been wonderful because I'm always looking for and interested in meeting wonderful new friends here and that's really what it has been for me, not so much a networking thing as a social thing, to meet people who really are quite fascinating.

**Blanche Touhill:** Did you get any awards that you want to talk about? I know you got a lot of awards but are there one or two that really...

**Amy Kaiser:** Actually, the Smith medal...the two awards from Smith: the Remarkable Women citation and the Smith College medal is the award I'm the most proud of. I did get an award for community service from the St. Louis Historical Society which I'm also very happy, to have that recognition. One of the things that I missed when I came here was teaching because I had always taught conducting and so I started some classes for adults, kind of like lifelong learning classes. They're during the day but they're privately organized and one was an opera club and one is a symphony lecture series. So the opera club, we study all the operas that are being done by the Opera Theater of St. Louis and some done by the Met Live in HD. The symphony lecture series, we study repertoire that's being performed by the St. Louis Symphony to encourage people to explore more kinds of music and to listen differently and those classes have been going for 10 years. We have long waiting lists. There are 60 people in each and they've expanded so that I do the opera one now at Opera



Theater of St. Louis also, and I've also been doing pre-concert talks for the St. Louis Symphony. So this has satisfied my love of teaching and given me a real new direction in the last 10 years.

**Blanche Touhill:** And I guess you get to meet a lot of people?

**Amy Kaiser:** And I've made more friends and that's part of it, that's right, that's right.

**Blanche Touhill:** If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would you be doing today?

Amy Kaiser: I would probably be a teacher like my parents. For them, that was a great opportunity and I still think it's a wonderful thing to do. I do love teaching and I suspect that's probably what I'd be up to. I'm sure I'd be working though.

**Blanche Touhill:** Let me pause. Would you talk a little bit about your future in New York, let's just say, will the New York scene ever change? You're saying it has to be a woman president and then 30 years after that. Is that about it?

**Amy Kaiser:** Well, first of all, I'm planning to continue working here for as long as I can, well into my 70's, is my hope, assuming...hoping that good health remains but right now I have a contract through 2016 so we'll see what happens after that but that's my hope. After that, I have a big question. I have a real following here with the classes that I teach and I probably would stay here and continue teaching and possibly teach a new class, one I'd love to do would be on the American musical theater, coming back to my old loves of that, which, of course, was popular entertainment back in the '50s but has now become classical music. So, that's probably what I'm going to do. I doubt that I'll go back to New York. Will New York ever change? It's really the whole country; it's not New York. New York, in some ways, is ahead of other places. I think, absolutely, and it is changing, as I said, bit by bit. The change that I see is that there are now more women that are coming up through the ranks in the time-honored way, the way men have; that is, you go to a music school; you get your credentials; you study conducting...first of all, you're accepted into that music school, which women never were until the '70s. They weren't even accepted in conducting programs. They were basically told: "You can't do this. There's no future for you in this. Don't do it!" But now that's all changed. So then they can get jobs conducting small orchestras. They can get assistant conductor positions with major orchestras. That is already happening but the other way in which women are coming up through the

ranks the same as men is that foreigners in this country are still preferred. So if you are a Finnish woman or a Canadian woman or a Chinese woman, you're much more likely to get an opportunity with an American orchestra than any American woman. Now, these two Americans, JoAnn Falletta and Marin Alsop who have achieved a good position in this country. They've made real careers. There are other women now conducting ballet orchestras and some opera but even there, very few and they're mostly foreign and tall. So, to be short is another strike against you. So, for myself, I have put that to rest and when I moved here, I traded in being the head of a B-level organization in New York to being a team player on an A-level organization and especially in my 50's and 60's, that has really turned out to be a thoroughly satisfying move. I love being part of the top quality organization, of the St. Louis Symphony and working with David Robertson with all these fabulous musicians and the great singers in the chorus. It doesn't bother me at all anymore that I'm not on the podium. In any case, I was never primarily an orchestral conductor. I always was inspired by singers: Marion Anderson, Julie Andrews, all the opera people. It was always the voice that was my main instrument and there, in order to have a full professional career, you'd really have to be an opera person primarily or you'd have to be an entrepreneur and start your own chorus and orchestra, and there are more women doing that also, which is how Marin Alsop started.

**Blanche Touhill:** Do you have a better ear for music and for voices than a normal person?

**Amy Kaiser:** Well, that's an interesting question. Of course, I do, absolutely, but I don't know that it's necessarily a better ear; it's just a tremendous sensitivity. I mean, there are lots of people who are touched by a particular singer or there are violinists who will hear 10 different soloists and say, "Oh, I love his sound" and I don't hear a difference between his sound and the other one's sound. One might be playing a Stradivarius and the other one might not be and they both might have Stradivarius instruments and still have totally different sounds. So people have sensitivities to these things.

**Blanche Touhill:** So your conducting is also based on the piece and the voice of the person who can translate emotion to that piece?

**Amy Kaiser:** Well, that's my preference when I'm listening but if I'm working with a chorus, of course, I'm working with many voices. So I have to try to create a sound that is unified and interesting and capable of doing many different styles and I've been doing that for over 40 years now so I feel like, I would love to pass that on more to people.

**Blanche Touhill:** Well, thank you very much.

**Amy Kaiser:** It's been a great pleasure, Blanche. Thank you so much.