

A Tribute to Leon Knopoff *May 5, 2011*

by daughter Rachel Knopoff

In 2005, my brother Michael and I recorded a series of interviews with our dad about his life. He was a wonderful storyteller and entertained us for hours with stories that are full of amazing detail and good humor. In preparing for today, I spent a lot of time listening to those tapes. It was both heartbreaking and wonderful to hear my dad's beautiful voice again, almost like having him in the room with me, and I know that I will treasure those tapes forever.

One of the things that came up repeatedly during the interviews was his life-long love for classical music. Papa's parents were both musically inclined, and so even during the early part of his life growing up in Los Angeles, he was surrounded by music. He described his father's "marvelous" bass voice and how he enjoyed hearing him sing in a local chorus. His mother played the mandolin and was part of a Yiddish mandolin club. And when his family got its first radio in the early '30s, his family and friends used to sit around it on Sundays after a heavy midday meal and listen to concerts by the NBC Symphony and the NY Philharmonic.

His parents took him to concerts at the Hollywood Bowl and at the LA Philharmonic. Of course, given Papa's amazing memory, he was able to recount during our interviews the names of the performers he had seen and the exact pieces they had played. He described how thrilled he was when his dad took him at age 8 to hear Otto Klemperer conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the LA Philharmonic. There was only one seat left in the house when they tried to buy tickets, so they took the one seat, and he heard the entire concert while sitting on his father's lap.

One of my favorite stories was Papa's story about the piano. During the Great Depression, Papa's father went to work delivering milk, in order to make ends meet. One of the clients on his delivery route couldn't afford to pay his milk bill, which was something like \$35, but he did have an upright piano. So to settle the bill, he gave the piano to Papa's father, who brought it home and refinished it beautifully. And so starting at age 9 ½, Papa started playing the piano. He studied piano for 6 years, first with lessons at home and then at the Conservatory of Music and Arts. At that point, he was graduating from high school, even though he was still only 15 ½. (He was always very precocious.)

In his usual modest way, Papa described being "pretty good" at the piano, which was obviously a gross understatement. He also said he was "good" in math and science. So at the end of high school, he had to make a serious decision either to continue in music or go to college. He and his parents decided that it would be more practical for him to go to college, and so that's what he did.

While he was at Cal Tech (and later on in life), he surrounded himself with friends who were also musically inclined. They played music together and performed for others. They went to symphony concerts and the opera. He once taught a college course on the physics of music, after being encouraged to do so by a music professor friend. He found that the music students weren't "quantitatively inclined," but they apparently really loved the class.

Much later, at UCLA, he was associated with the Institute of Ethnomusicology, which was created in 1960 by Mantle Hood. He enjoyed his involvement in the institute, teaching classes and working with students. He was appointed Research Musicologist in 1963. In the 1970s, he became a composer of sorts, combining two of his

greatest interests. He used catalogs of earthquake data to make musical notes, creating a work he called "Das Lied von der Erde," or literally, "The Song of the Earth". Apparently, it didn't sound all that good, but it exemplified his creativity and good humor. The piece actually had its premiere at a live concert at Yale in 1974.

Music was one of many interests my parents shared with each other. Mom also grew up in a family that treasured classical music, and she sang in the Roger Wagner Chorale. On their first date, Papa invited Mom to go to an opera at USC. As he was driving her home, they discovered that they shared a passion for the music of Gilbert & Sullivan. They started singing songs from operettas and having a grand time, and he got completely distracted. That night, Papa got lost while driving in LA for first and only time in his life.

While I was growing up, I remember being surrounded by wonderful music in our home. The house was often filled with the sounds of live chamber music, with Papa playing either harpsichord or piano and various colleagues playing the other instruments. For many years, he played four-hands piano music with Bill Hutchinson, a very good friend and a professor in the Music Department. I remember going to bed quite a few times (either at the Hutchinsons' house or at ours) with the sound of great music being played in the background.

Papa had a vast knowledge of music and could name pretty much any piece of music that was playing on the radio. He would usually be able to name the composer, the name of the piece, the key it was written in, and some interesting history about it. If he wasn't sure of the composer of some totally obscure piece, he would guess, and his guess was pretty much always right.

He was a gifted musician who shared his interest in music with many of the people around him. He and my mom were lucky to find in each other someone who shared that passion, and I will always be grateful to both of them for passing that enthusiasm on to all 3 of their children. I treasured the times I played four-hands piano with my Papa, and it means the world to me that I now have his childhood piano, the one refinished by his own father, in my home. He was brilliant, generous, witty, brave and kind. He was my hero. I was lucky and proud to have him as my Papa.