

Interview with Elda Tate

1995

ET: Okay.

James Vasek (JV): Your first name, and will you state your name for me?

Elda Tate (ET): My name is Elda Tate, I am in the music department, I came to Northern in 1968. I am currently a professor of music and also head of the music department. What do I do? I primarily, since I came here, teach flute is the main thing but again, my position at the moment is a combination of department head and teaching. Why did I come to Northern? Originally I was in New York City, initially studying with some flutists at primarily opera flute players. And a friend of mine was teaching at Northern and at the time it was the, the high point of growth and they had two woodwind people and wanted to add a flute person so I got a call saying would you want to interview for this, and we started out with a term position so I came and interviewed and got the job. Eventually the position turned into from a term, or a temporary position into a full position, and I liked it here. I like the cold, and basically like most things about it. What positions have I held? At Northern?

I: Uh huh.

ET: Okay I first came as an instructor and I came during a period when they began to require a doctorate, but everyone who came didn't have it, so we had to leave and finish the doctorate, so I came as an instructor, went to school in the summer, finished the doctorate, with one year's leave of absences, went to assistant, went up through ranks from instructor all the way to professor and then after that became a department head. My job as I said, basically has been teaching and frankly I like teaching, in fact I am going to go back to teaching, I have been head for 14 years, and I feel like it is a lightning rod and I am tired of being the lightening rod so I am going to return to teaching, I think there is a lot that needs to be done and I think that I am the person that can do it so I will go back to that, but I have taught flute continuously the whole time, I have also taught chamber music I am teaching currently as well. I have taught music history and I have taught music theory. Just this year with the idea that I want to return to teaching, put in a course in world music that will alternate cultures that I am very interested in teaching.

I: So will that be a new class?

ET: A new class next year. And I will alternate, initially with Native American music and Japanese music, which are two areas that I have been really interested in a long time and can't really do everything that I want to do in administration. When I first came here in the department again was in its heyday, you have probably about sixteen full time faculty and now we have ten, there were roughly around 150 majors, although students who went here seem to think there were 300, people have sort of an inflated idea of how things were when they were here. But we had, the conditions were such that we all shared studios which is almost an impossible situation if you are teaching, I didn't share one because I had 20 something students with a mix of woodwinds, but a lot of people were two faculty in one studio and it was very crowded and very cramped. But at the time I think, probably compared to today because of culture in general students were somewhat better prepared in music when they came to school, this

was also the period in the right to try policy and so we had students from all over the country who couldn't get into school in their state but perhaps were talented but had not applied themselves in their high schools, so they got in here and a lot of them did very well, I can think of some graduates, I can think of one in New York State that has gone back to his home state and is very successful and taught there ever since. I think I took care of two of those at once. As far as the goals of the department, we became accredited, I can't remember what year, I know it was after I came here, I would say the primary goal from my point of view is to have a very strong curriculum and be as good of a music department as we can be from my point of view again, I like students to, if they go to school at Northern, I would like that they could go to another school and know exactly how they stand. There is a lot of sort of, insular things about the upper peninsula where I think change is sort of difficult or they like to think of themselves as different in a sense, there are a lot of wonderful things about the Upper Peninsula but sometimes, at least in my field, people like to act as though they are exceptions and they don't have to rise to the occasion compared to other parts. I feel like in festivals for example, they don't want to be judged as hard as they might be judged in Ann Arbor, and I don't happen to think that way I think they should, can rise to it just like anyone else. I know that from performance students, that I have taught, it doesn't matter where you live if you actually study and learn things you can compare to anyone. And I feel like for some reason people are a little bit afraid of that. But, the curriculum I think, a goal would be to have a strong curriculum. Other goals are we would like to have more students at this time, we certainly have a lot less students than we had in the '70's. There is not a lot that we can do about their preparation unless we are teaching some pre college students individually. I think music is something were people, other people in university if they have been involved with it, everyone tends to know our business more than, seems to think that they know it more than we know it ourselves, so I think other people have other goals for us. Very often we are cast in the role of entertainment and while we do some of that it is not usually our primary mission.

I: Do you get a lot of support from the administration?

ET: I think so. I think over the years we have had good financial support, there was one aspect of the budget that changed a number of years ago that was very helpful when they let you carry something over so that people didn't spend funds stupidly and so I was able to save for some really large items, we have a truck for example because we have to go so far to practice fields and haul equipment and a piano lab, things that are big ticket items that we couldn't have bought before. As far as the department itself if I could change anything I don't, I think the think that people would like to see the most, we lose faculty periodically because of the number and quality of students, and it is not something that we can really control it is sort of the name of the game today, people are interested in other things culturally and there is so much to do that they don't spend the time playing an instrument that who knows maybe archaic especially to a lot of younger people. Sometimes I think maybe this is like Latin and we should be writing all of this down because some of the electronic music is continuing to replace a lot of things and so the whole music picture is changing, has changed,

I: Do you teach the, electronic music theory?

ET: Yeah in fact we have a new technology lab, a new computer lab that has just started, we have three stations and quite a bit of software we have a new person this year, we have also applied for a grant that I hope we will get, but students are able to study a lot of things using computer programs, year training and jazz, we have something called a jazz practice room, programs that they can turn on and

practice improvising with a background, or writing and composing and just everything. And that aspect of today's world is just marvelous, just fantastic the things that you can do. Some of the other things like playing and instruments and really there are a new way to play a synthesizer successfully you still need the other skills but people haven't figured that out. The music department, again is ten faculty roughly around 35 majors and again as I said that is quite a bit smaller than it was in the 1970's which was probably its most successful period in terms of numbers. Again nationally, I think less people are majoring in music, they still want to do it, we have quite a few people taking our courses and I think most of the minors of today, even ten years ago, would have been music majors. The department consists of again ten faculty, full time faculty, students, basically what we do is teach a curriculum where a student could become a public school teacher or they could follow another track and if they were interested in say composing or performing they could not follow the education track and pursue something else that would probably have to lead them into a graduate program somewhere to specialize in what they are interested in doing. We also have a lot of performance ensembles such as marching band, pep bands, we have a symphonic band, jazz band, a variety of choral ensembles. There is the choral society which is the larger community group, university choir and at times arts choral which is a select group and a small chamber orchestra and in addition to that we have chamber ensembles. That can indicated the size of those. But to answer the question, what do we do? Basically we are here to offer degree programs that honestly basically serve the region if you are training teachers or serving the people of the region if they have some musical interest and find their way into some musical field, in addition to that we do have a certain amount of, we call it service, marching band, music teachers have to know something about it. There are many universities that offer a course in that and don't have a marching band, so that would be something I would consider a service, providing music for a football game or for pep bands, definitely service. The size of ensembles generally varies according to the numbers of students, there are non-majors in it, and we try to get as many non-majors as possible to participate but obviously the ensembles were much larger in the 1970's than they are today. I think the marching band, the biggest marching band that the university ever had was probably about 120 people. And we have been having about 60 or 70. But again I think students soon, I don't know if they are burned out in the Upper Peninsula but they don't want to do it anymore after high school and it's a difficult, world to try to convince that this is different, the dome has a certain attraction. They seem to like hockey and basketball, and maybe its because they don't have to do anything physically, anyway the size of those, we would like them to be as big as possible, pep band we have been running two so that is smaller. Our symphonic band again sort of depends on number of students available and it is fairly small now too. The choral society is an extremely large group but the size varies depending on what they are singing, it is larger community people so we might do a Handel Messiah or something in December and so everyone likes to sing that so there might be well over 100 and other times there might be 70 or 80 people singing it. We do have scholarships for music majors and currently have stipends for marching band and pep band, the service organizations so that at the end of the season the student gets a small amount of money for having participated in those.

I: You mentioned pep band, what is a pep band?

ET: A pep band is a, they play music somewhat like in marching band but actually really short fragments, they might do like a little fanfare and they go to a sports event, largely hockey or basketball or girls volleyball or any of the sports, a band of, I think he has them divided into maybe groups of about 25 or something like that at the moment, and there is two of them they go and they sit in the stands and they

really probably are the core of the spirit in the sense of pep organization because the coaches really complain if they are not there, they play a little fragment of something to get the crowd going, and I know in hockey they can't play during any of the action but it is basically to get the team going and I think Michigan Tech's pep band is largely extensities that they have their own little cheers and their own little things that they do. But it is to play music and to get everyone going. But they prefer that I think to the marching around, it's physical, it's a little bit more work than just going and sitting and playing the same tunes. The events, basically I think I answered the sports events, the bands have to play at graduation for the students and faculty etcetera. Marching band, those are probably the sort of command events, we do all kinds of other things, we have faculty groups that played at various events for the president or whatever. We have a trio now that if you are put on hold on the telephone you hear myself and two other people playing. So all kinds of things, I think there is a jazz band that has been playing in the food court on Friday, occasionally on Friday afternoons. NMU's music department I think compares to other schools, of comparable size, and I consider that very___ because we are accredited which means that our program is approved nationally by a national organization, our accreditation actually occurred last year when two people came on campus for I think 3 or 4 days and they visited classes, they heard the students preform they watched faculty teach and then go over our program. They did note that we need a recital hall which we have needed for, since the place began. And then our hall is too hot and our air is not the freshest in our hall. Again I think the accreditation, we are in good measure of the quality. As far as the selection of our faculty members we are, our band directors are not hired in the same manner that coaches are, by terms of band director or ensemble director is a faculty member so they are hired through the same process as any faculty are but in music depending on what they aclined for they might have to teach a lesson or teach in front of the whole faculty, preform in front of the whole faculty, and work with students in front of the whole faculty. So it is shows that in the department itself, it is largely responsible for the selection but there is some measure of approval obviously by the administration and to some degree by students too and appointment, unless we come into a situation where someone left in the summer, we have gone through a whole lot of these, which makes it appear that people are leaving more quickly than they have and we have been given, or sometimes given term appointments when someone resigns in the summer and the school administration wants its adversities over all year and when that happens you may have someone that is not really qualified they might not have the doctorate or some other reason they come in and teach a year and then you have someone else coming in and it is very difficult because you are going through a number of instructors in a couple of years, a student could be here for three years and they are going to have three different instructors when that happens, but generally appointments are, our tenure earning appointments are so that they come and stay forever they have to work through all of those steps but if that is not the case it could be a year term or two years or three years. Can you think of any other?

I: No, thank you very much.

[TAPE STOPS, STARTS AGAIN]

I: This interview is conducted by James Vasek.

[MUSIC BEGINS PLAYING]