Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Mina Miller

SUMMARY

The daughter of Lithuanian refugees who arrived in New York City as the Nazis were moving across Europe, Mina Miller was born into a world irrevocably shaped by the Holocaust. But faced with that tragedy of inconceivable proportions, she has created an ongoing memorial to its victims in the form of Music of Remembrance, which pays tribute to the artists who were lost to the Holocaust and the artwork they both created and inspired. Mina's musical journey began alongside her mother, a talented pianist in her own right, and continued at the Manhattan School of Music and New York University, where she earned her Ph.D. Thereafter, she divided her time between academia, as a tenured professor at the University of Kentucky, and performance, playing concerts across North America and Europe. Moving to Seattle in 1997, she founded Music of Remembrance the following year, and has continued to lead the organization as Artistic Director ever since.

Jeff Schwager: Which readily available on the internet.

Mina MIller: And so I assume we're recording this.

Jeff Schwager: Yes, we're recording this in so many different ways, you just can't even believe it. Two recorders and a microphone.

Mina MIller: Oh my goodness. Okay. Um. I can tell you about my life and work. Absolutely. But maybe you can give me a context of how you're going to be using this, so I know. Sure. I mean, yeah.

Jeff Schwager: How we're going to have an exhibit in a physical space. Uh, it'll be, uh, premiered at a community event in October.

Mina MIller: October 2018.

Jeff Schwager: Yes. Uh, which will also be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Jewish Historical Society. Uh, and then we're also going to have a digital museum on the website, uh, that will include an expanded amount of the content. So at the physical exhibit, uh, it'll, you know, there'll be boards like these that you see around here. So you'll have a board that will have some photos of you and some quotes. And a little biographical information, but the website will have a long version of the interview that we do today. If there's music that we can put on the website, we might want to do that. Um, and just sort of anything that will give context, uh, and allow people to know more about the work you do.

Mina MIller: Sure, sure. Okay. That's helpful. Um, so my life and work. Well.

Jeff Schwager: Let's begin. Um, tell me about your background first of all.

Mina MIller: Okay. I was born in New York City. I, uh, my parents were refugees, and they settled on the Lower East Side. So Delancey Street in the pushcarts were part of my childhood memories. And my parents moved from the Lower East Side to Queens when I was three years old, but still all their landsmen and friends and sense of family. Was still on the Lower East Side. So even as

you know in my. I think they're age ten, 11, 12, we were still going to the Lower East Side to go shopping to the Essex Street Market, to the push carts. It was certainly the old Jewish world. My parents were refugees. Today you consider them Holocaust survivors. They managed to come to America in 1939 because my they were in Lithuania and my mother had an uncle living in New York who sponsored her. Everyone else in their family was murdered. They were never in a camp. They came in 1939. It coincided with it being the World's Fair, and it was sort of a honeymoon present. And they never returned. So it was traumatic. to leave your home and family thinking you were going for a short period of time, knowing the world was changing, but still feeling that nothing could happen in Lithuania. Nothing happened Lithuania until two years later in 41. But it was very clear they couldn't come back. And then they everyone was murdered. And I remember my childhood, um, my parents always putting ads in the forward, uh, which was then was only in Yiddish. Um, now it's bilingual, looking for trying to find relatives and, and so I that was how I learned about the Holocaust because we had no relatives. It was just the nuclear family. My parents and my sister, who was six years older than me. Um, and, um, I would say the impact of the Holocaust on my life has been huge. one because I never had a sense of family other than the nuclear family. To the point, today I have trouble identifying relatives. So if someone says to me, oh, my second cousin or my cousin by marriage, or my nephew, it's like, I don't know what they're talking about. I have to. It's like I have to go in the dictionary of my mind to look up what it is. And I say, oh, okay. So that must have been so and so, you know. And, you know, you you realize that that's it's a small price to pay really for. But it's, it's an example of where the history has impacted me, just in terms of regular knowledge of, you know, it should be on automatic, you know, to know what an aunt is. I didn't have any, you know, I just how am I supposed to know, you know, something I never experienced firsthand. So.

Jeff Schwager: Uh, let me let me just ask, was there a specific incident or reason that your parents chose not to go back, or.

Mina MIller: There was something to go back to?

Jeff Schwager: But in 39, I mean.

Mina MIller: They came in 39 and things were very bad in 40, and already there was nothing to go back to in 41. The Nazis came. So my, my, I said my uncle was there. I don't know exactly what date it was in 1939, but they didn't get married until the beginning of January, so I don't think it was immediate. So it was probably closer to the end of 39 to 40. And the message was things are difficult. And then there was nothing. I mean, they didn't come with just a suitcase. Obviously they came with some things. My father was a physician. He had finished medical school and his internship. He had trained he did medical school in France in Montpellier and his internship and residency in Geneva, Switzerland, and then came back to Lithuania and even while they were in Lithuania in 39, they lived in the part of town that was the Jewish quarter, which was called. They lived in Kovno and Kaunas. Kovno and the Jewish quarter was called Slobodka, and it was over the bridge. And so you cross this bridge, and that was the Salonika was the Jewish quarter. And the other side of the bridge was the Gentile quarter, but it had the a hospital where my father worked. And my father had to walk across that bridge to go to the hospital. And so when the uncle proposed coming to America, my father was reluctant. And my mother said, well, look what it's like when you go over to work. I mean, you get hit by stones. I think we should consider that. So that's how she motivated the move. And, um. And the thought was maybe they could stay in the States for a while. Bring the family over. The family did not want to come. They didn't want to leave their surroundings for whatever reason. So, I mean, maybe there was an attempt at that point to perhaps relocate to America. So they came with some items, some, you know, a few wedding items, a few things of, you know, a few suitcases, not just a single one. And, uh, her uncle did help establish, get them established and on the Lower East Side. And my father worked in a Jewish nursing home, um, at first.

Jeff Schwager: So he was able to practice medicine right away.

Mina MIller: He was as, uh, in these Jewish nursing homes, not as, uh, because he didn't speak the language, and he needed to get his licensure. But when he first came, it was in, like, the Jewish home for the age and it was called Beth Israel or something. I have to check that. So, um, the Holocaust was part of my life before I could articulate it. And, you know, my parents didn't talk anything more about it because they didn't experience firsthand, except the fact that of loss and of never going back and of friends who made it and some who didn't. And, you know, just having it all come together. I was born in 49. My sister was born in 43. So I probably it was more vivid to her as they learned of loss. Um, my mother was a concert pianist. My father was a physician. I moved to my mother's footsteps of being a pianist. And my sister studied medicine. And she is a physician. Um, So I did all my studying at school in New York City. I went to the Manhattan School of Music for my bachelor's and master's degree, and then I did my PhD at New York University. So I was based in New York the entire time. And, um, I have my PhD was in music performance, but I had to do dissertation, and my dissertation had nothing to do with the Holocaust or anything that I'm doing now. It was, um, it was a study of the music of Carl Nielsen, a Danish composer. Um, and even that choice of subject, um, there's a small relationship. Why choose a composer from Denmark? And even as a young person, I was very interested in traveling. Um, and my parents said. That told me where I could go, where I couldn't go. I could only go to countries that were good to the Jews. So Denmark was okay because the Danes were good to the Jews, you know. And you couldn't go to France. They weren't good to the Jews. You couldn't go to Germany. I mean, it was just like it was history being rewritten in the name of their experience and the war and who which is

understandable to some extent. So, um, that was my project. And then I had, um, I finished my PhD, I was on a fellowship. I met my husband at the time that we were both in graduate school, and we were both together living on fellowships in New York City. And you can't go very far on fellowships money in New York City. The year was 1977. We'd gotten married and we were both looking for academic jobs, and lo and behold, I got one before David. And it was at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky. And it was already April. It was Easter Sunday than I went to interview. And it was the end of April when I was over at the position. And if if you're familiar with the academic world, the academic calendar for hiring sort of ends in the spring. So I realized that, you know, that's probably going to be my only opportunity for a real professorship for this coming season. And so I thought, well, you know, let's be adventurous. We'll try it out. If it doesn't work, we'll move on. So I took the position and David found something, um, while we were there, and we stayed for a number of years, more years than either of us really wanted to. But we got engaged with the Jewish community in Lexington, which was wonderful because it was an academic Community, and everybody was a transplant from either the West Coast or the East Coast. And it was a Havre, and it was it was great. It was an oasis in the desert. And years went by. Time went by. And then. David's parents, who lived in Philadelphia, they had very serious medical issues. And he's an only child. And he felt that he had to be back east to help. And so he was able to. Find a position back east. And I tried to find something back east and I couldn't. We began a commuting marriage. And the commuting marriage then went when his mother died from a stroke and his father was seemed to be okay for a while. David got a wonderful offer for a position in Seattle, and that was 1990, and he accepted it. And the understanding was that I would try to relocate and I was able to after a number of years. So we had a long distance marriage for a long time. And when I moved to Seattle, which was in the spring of end of the academic year, May 1997. I made a commitment to making Seattle our life, and I wanted to see what I could do that would make a difference. And in all my years of performing and being a music educator teaching at the university, I always felt that music had to reach. I don't want to sound highfalutin, but I really felt it had to reach a greater humanity cause of humanity. I didn't feel music was for entertaining. I didn't feel that I wanted to use my art just to play a Beethoven Sonata or Chopin piece. I mean, I could and I did, but number one, I don't feel that I'm one of the half dozen pianists in the world that I feel can do that. And I felt that. I wanted to do something that would make a difference, that would speak to me and use my art in, in a very in a way that would have a voice. So I. Developed this thought about playing music related to the Holocaust. And that came through another research project. Having done the music of Carl Nielsen and having learned Danish to do it, and having spent years in the libraries there, I felt okay. I did my Nielsen thing. I did it for close to 20 years. Wow. I recorded all the piano music, I published books, I did a critical edition, and then I felt I'm ready for another composer. So my next composer was a Czech composer. It was Janacek. And I thought, you know what? I can't learn Czech and I can't spend the years I did in Czechoslovakia, in the Czech Republic, as I did in Denmark. I'm going to do a project as best as I can, learn the music, do some research. So in the course of doing research is when I became very aware of the Terezin concentration camp, which was 35 miles north of Prague, and I became knowledgeable about how that camp was used as a transit camp, but how it also held the most erudite and talented Jewish musicians, composers, teachers, artists, writers who for a period of time, whether it be a couple of months or two years, the Nazis used that camp as a as a model ghetto. And they let these These individuals create in addition to slave labor, they could perform, they could compose music.

Jeff Schwager: They used it for propaganda films.

Mina MIller: Propaganda purposes. Yes. If you know the propaganda film Hitler's Gift to the Jews, and that's its own tragic story. It was filmed by a great talent, Kurt Gerron, who landed up in Terezin at the very last stop, even though he had the possibility to have come to America earlier. But he didn't want to go on anything but a first class ticket. And so he thought, by producing this film for the Nazis, he would save his skin. But in fact, he didn't. He did what?

Jeff Schwager: Write that.

Mina MIller: Down. He did what he needed. And. And then he was sent off to Auschwitz, to the death camps. The end of October of 1944. A very powerful film about Kurt Garrone's sellout is called Prisoner of Paradise. And it's it's very compelling because you see him using his talent to produce this film, and his talent was to get the prisoners to act and look as if they were in this model camp and to the point of of him. You know, he he had this potbelly because it diminished in size during his time in the camp. But of, you know, getting these little kids to giggle so that he could capture their smiling faces. I mean, and giving them candy. And and so they decorated the camp and painted the camp and fattened people up. Certainly sent off the ones to Auschwitz that needed to wouldn't be good for the show and fatten them up for a couple of months to produce this. So, I mean, he used his talent for evil and still paid the price. So, um, to get back on track, I became very aware of Terezin. I became fascinated with the music concerts that were performed and the music that was played, and there was a lot of self-identification there. It could have been me. I could have been born on the other side of the ocean. Just a few years earlier, it was more than 49. Instead of even my sister was born 43. She would have been carted away. Um, and I identified with the programs, identified with the repertoire, and identified the fact that, yes, my my, I was born a few years later. My parents had the fortune and my mother the foresight to move them over. It was Lithuania, not the Czech Czechoslovakia. But still people in Lithuania were murdered. Yeah. So I saw, oh,

there's music here. And then I became aware of the music that was created there, and the composers that suffered and and sow the seeds of musical remembrance were born. And I, as I said, I moved in end of May 97th. And I the idea for the organization started to come together in the first year that I was in Seattle, and I basically didn't know anyone in Seattle because I just moved and I wasn't coming with a job. I was coming as an independent person, so there was nothing to latch on to. Um, but by the summer of 1998, I hadn't met half a dozen people. And I also sought the advice of Gerard Schwarz. I don't know how long you've been in Seattle, but he was okay. So he was the conductor of the Seattle Symphony up until the past five years, and Jewish and very involved in the community, and so I had the courage to ask if he would meet with me so I could tell him what my thinking was. And I said, you know, I'm new to the community. This is my idea. I want to establish at that time a concert series. I'm thinking of just concert in the fall, one in the spring, one to mark Kristallnacht, one to mark Yom Hashoah, and, um, over the year that I was in Seattle, from May to that following May, I was going to concerts, I was going to the symphony, and I was keeping my eye on musicians that impressed me. And so I just said, what do you think? Um, you know, my idea and, um, some of the players I might use. What are your thoughts? I'm thinking of putting it just in, maybe a community center or whatever. And he said, that's a great idea. Are you going to work very hard to do this. My advice to you, since you're working with serious performers and you want these concerts to be taken seriously, as music events put it in Benaroya Hall, Benaroya Hall was opening that fall. It was the fall of 1998, and we had this great concert hall. And the recital hall is fabulous, and that's what you should do. And then you said, all you can lose is money. Does your husband have a good job? And that became the very famous lines, you know, uh, when I, when I. Years later, when I told him that, I said, oh, did I say that, you know. But, um, so I started it as. So I developed it as a 501 C3 decided to file for that. End of August, we filed our Washington state certificate, and then we filed for federal 500 1C3. We got it in October, And I knew, as I said, half a dozen people. They became our Board of Remembrance. And I said, you know what? Um, just help me do this. You know, I nobody knew me from Adam. They were just taking a leap of faith that they believed in what I was doing, but they didn't know what I could do. Um, and I said, don't worry about the money. Uh, we will make sure that if it goes into a hole, we'll cover it. And we were in a position to put out a lot of money. Um, so our budget for the first year of those two concerts was $20,000. I worked for free. My husband worked for free. We only we didn't advertise. Except, you know, by letting people, you know, printing up stuff and telling the synagogues and by word of mouth. When we sold a ticket to the concert, the office was in my study. The phone rang at any time of day. I took every call. I, I sold everyone their ticket and we didn't have the tickets printed. I didn't even have a photocopy machine. We didn't have the tickets printed until we sold the seats. And then we went to Kinko's, and we printed out a few pages and cut off the ticket stubs. So for the first concert, I didn't know we were going to have 100 people or 500 people, because there was no way, you know, I mean, we had a full house and it was very rewarding. And after that concert, I got a number of people who called me, said, that was spectacular. I'd like to volunteer, I'd like to help. And then I developed a little bit of a workforce and a lot of goodwill. And the following year, since we had one year in operation, I started applying for grants. And in, um, it was in 2005 that we moved out of my study into an office space, and that office space is where we are now. It's an office in Magnuson Park. I was telling Lisa, just the city has a complex of nonprofit offices, and we hired our first employee. And then we've grown since then and developed the organization. But even from our second year was the mission of the organization to commission new works related to the Holocaust. And we made a point every year to commission a new piece that told a story and told stories that not were not limited exclusively to the voices of Jews. Of course, it's prominent, but to the voices of free thinkers, political dissidents, gypsies, gay people, women, children. So, um, now we're celebrating our 20th season. We have commissioned about 30 works. We've we've premiered and produced over 20 now, but we have a lot in the pipeline already. And in addition to the commissioning we have done, our projects have been increasingly huge. We've commissioned two operas that we've had produced and recorded that have been significant. And our third new commission, opera, is scheduled for a year from now, May 2019. These are fully staged costumed productions, and we've also expanded to performing in San Francisco. This will be our fourth year taking our production, our spring production to San Francisco.

Jeff Schwager: It's amazing.

Mina MIller: So we've, um, our budget has grown, the workforce has grown. But the responsibility of myself and my husband, who retired about, oh, I retired in 92,000. And I mean that I mean, I think we're still doing jobs of everybody. Um, it's been a labor of love. It's been an incredible learning experience. Um, this year we've expanded our scope so that we have been looking at the impact of war and persecution on not only Jews, but people excluded because of faith, ethnicity, gender, sexuality. And this year, perhaps you've noticed that we are paying tribute to Japanese Americans. Uh, particularly we have a new work that's commissioned about the Japanese American Incarceration, and that's going to premiere at our concert in May. So this is the really the first year that we have, um, commissioned and are devoting a significant portion of our work. And we see this very much as part of our, our work that the lessons of the Holocaust need to include others besides just Jewish voices. Jeff, I'd like you to meet my husband.

Jeff Schwager: Hi, Jeff. Nice to meet you, Jeff. Um.

Mina MIller: So does that kind of.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Mina MIller: It gives you more than you need. Give me a time limit.

Jeff Schwager: No. That's great. I'm just now. Now I'm going to look through my list of subjects and see what we haven't covered. Um. Uh, just for background, I'm curious if you came from an observant family growing up.

Mina MIller: No, no. Um, it's quite interesting. When I first made a trip to Israel and my mother put me in touch with someone who had left her hometown in Lithuania, who had settled in Israel, and I. It's the first time I ever met one of my mother's childhood friends. She told me, you know, your mother's house was the only non kosher house. And I when I came back home with that, my mother was quite embarrassed. Oh, but, you know, uh, she said we were very integrated with the community. And, um, her father was the president of the bank of a little town called Rietavas. And my mother was a midwife and delivered every baby in town. So, um, we were not. We didn't have a kosher home, but we grew up on the Lower East Side, and so my sister was sent to a yeshiva because they didn't feel the schools were going to be good. So my sister grew up to be rather conservative, not orthodox, but she didn't get it at home. She got it from her, you know, early childhood education. When my parents moved to Queens, out of the ghetto, so to say, we were in a middle class neighborhood, very Jewish, and my parents sent me to public school because it was good. And so I didn't get any Jewish education. I didn't even go to Hebrew school. And I'm embarrassed to say I my Hebrew is more by rote than by actually knowing what I'm doing. I've been to synagogue so much and we are. We belong to the synagogue. The prayers are in my ears, you know. And I'm a good fake. But, um, we're more culturally Jewish holidays and personal beliefs rather than any kind of ritual, uh, tradition. So.

Jeff Schwager: Um.

Mina MIller: Okay, it's a mixed breed here.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, absolutely. That's interesting. Um. You said your mother was a concert pianist.

Mina MIller: Yes.

Jeff Schwager: Um, so that must have infused your childhood. Um, I don't know if there's a question there, but was that a particular. Did you have a close bond with your mother as a result of that, or.

Mina MIller: It's hard for me to answer that, because if I answer it honestly, you might be printing things that I don't want to see. Um. But Unlike most Jewish mothers who, if they see a talent, will do everything they can to nurture that talent. And I see that now with not only Jewish mothers, but I see that with Asians that they seem to have the same characteristics, that they will really make every sacrifice to nurture an unusual talent. I think my parents struggled so much in coming to a foreign country, not really learning the language while really scraping it together. Um, so my mother was a concert pianist. She couldn't make a living as that in America. I mean, she was a homemaker. She, you know, she didn't have a livelihood of her own. My father, you know, was resigned to being a second class physician. But, yes, I mean, he's someone that should have had a practice on his own, but he was, you know, in a Jewish nursing home. So they were struggling, and the last thing they wanted for their children was to have professions that were not going to be lucrative. So my father always took his two children to the hospital with him, and he'd say, two daughters, two doctors. And my sister was very good. She followed in the footsteps. And, you know, frankly, I would faint at the sight of blood. So I didn't really think that was going to be a very good match for me. And I, I wanted to play the piano. It was very clear. And there was a piano in our house in in Queens. It was just an upright. I would sort of bang play by ear. And I was very interested in, in studying. Um, my mother felt that she could be the best piano teacher for me, although when we had lessons it was very clear that that wasn't going to be possible. But she said, well, you know, Van Cliburn had just won the Tchaikovsky Piano Competition, and his mother was his teacher. So, you know, that was proof. And so it was, you know, parents are usually not the best teachers, even if even if it's a driving lesson. Yeah. So when I was 16, I. Enrolled myself in a pre-college division of the Manhattan School of Music. And at that point, you know, I could play that year, I could sort of read music. But unlike kids that had been studying from age five and learning all this time, I didn't I didn't have that. And so at age 16, I became obsessed with becoming a pianist and Practicing 8 to 10 hours a day. And I chose at that point to go to a conservatory rather than an academic college, because I wanted to devote myself to playing. And so I went. It's amazing. I got into conservatory because I was competing with all these people that had been doing it from age three. So I went to Manhattan School of Music for my bachelor's, my masters, and then I did a PhD in performance. So to make a long story short, I, um my parents, as I said, wanted their children to be secure in life. And they didn't feel that music was one way of doing that. And some extent, they're absolutely right. Um, there are very few people that can make it as a performer. Um, and I certainly didn't. I took a position as an academic, and I knew that when I chose to get a PhD, it was so I could have a secure livelihood. Um, and, um, and I think, uh, I'm very forgiving now is that I'm older and I realize that every parent wants the best for their child, and maybe the best was that being a musician, you know, it

could have been a hobby, you know, which would have been would have been fine, and maybe it would have been that way, uh, had I started young and I would have realized aged 16. Oh, you know, I'm a good pianist, but I'm not like Rubinstein, you know? But I had to go. I had to make that realization, uh, as a as a young adult. So, um.

Jeff Schwager: I'm interested. You said your, uh, your parents saw two daughters as two doctors as opposed to marrying doctors. So were they were they feminist? Uh.

Mina MIller: I doubt it. I think they just took a lot of pride in their children. But when my sister went to medical school, it was very difficult to get in. Yeah, she went to medical school. She started in 1966, I think so, yes, or 65. She graduated medical school in 69. So I think it was 65. And it was very hard because, um, it was seen if you were a woman, you were taking up a man's place for livelihood, and medical school classes were usually about a hundred and a class, and she had to be so far superior to males that were applying. And she'd have interviews and she'd come home devastated. And, you know, they would they would confront her and say, we accept you. There are four men that we're not going to be able to accept who won't be able to feed their families. And today that's changed. It's at least 50 over 50, if not even more. Now, now, now they're more lucrative professions than being a physician. You go into high tech. That's right. But at that time, it was kind of a gold, uh, you know, a golden shoe or whatever. So, um, yeah, I think that.

Jeff Schwager: Was it like that in music at all?

Mina MIller: Maybe. Maybe, um, the great musicians were all male. Um, the pianists, the females were far and few between. There was Myra Hess, there was, uh, Alicia de la Rocha. There was, you know, thinking of that vintage when.

Jeff Schwager: You were getting your PhD, were there other, uh, women students in the program, or was it mostly male?

Mina MIller: Um, I'd say it was mixed, But, you know, I was getting my I got my degree in 77. Uh, my graduation was in 78, so, I mean, the tide was turned then. Yeah. Um, but certainly in the 60s to go to medical school in the 60s. That was a leap. Yeah, it's a leap even when. Yeah. I mean, she he'd walk into the I remember I would visit her. She went to, uh, Syracuse Upstate Medical Center and I visited her. And you go into at that time the anatomy lab, everybody had a cadaver and there was four students to one cadaver. And it's like they were all male. They're all white coats. I could just buy my sister immediately. Oh, there she is. You know? Um. Yeah. Um, and that day, you want to catch a doctor? Became a nurse. You. Yeah. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Right. That's. Yes. Um. well, let me ask you some a few questions. Uh, about the organization. Okay. How large is the organization at this point? Do you have full time employees? Uh, do you have full time musicians?

Mina MIller: Okay. Our infrastructure is that we have three full time employees. I'm. I'm employed. I'm full time. Uh, we have an administrator full time, and we have a development person. Um, and we have, uh, we expanded. We have two rooms in our, uh, Madison Park office, the original one that we moved into 2005, and another space that we use for the development office. And also we use, uh, conference space. Um, musicians are all on contract. So, um, I engage them for our concerts, and most of the Most of the instrumentalists are drawn from the principal players of the Seattle Symphony, not exclusively, but I find that the best instrumentalists in our city are affiliated with this. And so I've worked with them and we sort of have a core ensemble of that I use regularly. And these people are extremely loyal to Music of Remembrance, and even though they play 300 concerts a year, they make sure that their concerts are ones that they can handle. And then I use soloists from nationwide. When we have local talent, I use it. If I need singers, if we're doing the opera or recording when we really want names, I will bring them in. Um, but everything is by contract, so the only employees are for the infrastructure. Myself is, um, artistic director and president. I'm basically executive director as well. The admin person and the development person.

Jeff Schwager: And with the musicians are, uh, do you emphasize using Jewish musicians or is that.

Mina MIller: No, I emphasize using the best musicians. Most of them are Jewish, but not exclusively. Mhm. And, uh, I that's not a requirement, but it's very interesting that many of them are and many of them are Russian emigres who have an extra calling to this music because they came here in the late 80s, maybe even 1990. They basically political refugees. They could not play Jewish music at home. They couldn't even practice Judaism and to play music With this purpose is very meaningful to them. The non-Jewish players identify, I think, almost as Jews. I mean, it's really important that it speaks to them profoundly. Um. And the same thing for composers I commission. It's not based on being Jewish. It's based on their what I feel is their affinity to tackle the subject matter and their ability. So when we, uh, when we commissioned our first opera, it was with a composer who has has a track record for writing operatic music the way I would like to hear it. Uh, the same thing for our second opera Commission. I mean, these people are are one of our operas was composers Jake Heggie, who, uh, I don't know if you follow the classical music world, but he's probably the most performed 21st century opera composer. He's probably the most famous opera is Dead Man Walking. The story of Dead Man Walking and of the Helen Prejean story and Moby Dick, uh, his operas are performed worldwide.

He's kind of a household name for opera. We're very fortunate that we got to him. Our first commission with him was in 2007, and he, um, was very grateful for our commission. We first commissioned a musical drama. I wanted to commission a work that spoke about the persecution of gays in the Holocaust. And he was a gay man who identified with that very strongly, not Jewish. So he's an opera composer, has wonderful lyrical. Strain in him, voice in him. And the mission there resonated with him. And that was the beginning of a wonderful collaboration. And we worked on many other projects together. And then these works were combined into a full length opera called Out of Darkness, which we premiered in 2016. And to give you the idea of how prominent this composer is, this music is going around the world. So right now it's being performed in Toronto and, um, Brighton in February. This month it's being performed at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. And in April, it's being performed by Atlanta Opera. And next season it's been performed by Houston Grand Opera. So the work that we started, the seeds that we planted with Jake, were the first piece in 2007, and there was another piece in 2012 and then 2013, and then the full opera in 2016. Because of his profile and also because the music itself speaks to you, the music is going around the world and being performed by major companies and institutions. And the message is going across because, you know, I don't think people will necessarily be jumping off to see a Holocaust opera. That's what it is. It's a Holocaust opera. And, uh, but because it's an opera by Jake Heggie, people are going to hear it. And so it's getting a tremendous amount of attention. And it's and it's gratifying because these are stories that need to be told. The first story is about a gay couple in Berlin in the 30s, one that was murdered in Auschwitz and one that was not. Uh, and telling that story. And then the other act is about, um, a woman, an incredible true story. Christina, who was born to Jewish parents, escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto, changed her name to work for the Polish resistance. She was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau as a political prisoner, not as a Jew, and in Auschwitz she wrote secret poetry and songs that became anthems of defiance in the camp and survived, and she made incredibly difficult decisions that would probably compromise anyone's morals to survive. And the second act looks at those decisions that she made and how she survived. And it challenges you to think about memory and survival and what the prices were. It's not a story that's often told.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Mina MIller: Um, because, um, we think we tend to think of survivors as heroes, but survivors are survivors, and we can never really understand what they went through. and the decisions they made and the time they made them. And it's a profound work. It's profoundly challenging, and it's one that makes you think it's a true story. It's a raw story and it stays with you. And the music is unbelievable.

Jeff Schwager: And that's called.

Mina MIller: The opera is called Out of Darkness. And, uh, if if you want any additional information, I can provide it. I made a packet for you, but I didn't bring you the opera. I mean, I have the opera. It's a professional video recording, if you would like to experience it. And if these are things you want to show in the exhibit, we can certainly have that, because that. That's powerful. I mean, if and we're very.

Jeff Schwager: Definitely what we'd like to.

Mina MIller: Most proud of about Music of Remembrance is that when we started in 1998, we were pioneers. Nobody was performing Holocaust era music. Today, 20 years later, the music is out there for people to perform, to just continue performing. Holocaust era music by composers that were murdered is noble, but anyone could do it right. What music remembrance has done is to go beyond that, to commission new work. And this truly is a legacy of music, of remembrance is to tell stories that illuminate stories of hope and courage and inspiration and and illuminate memories from this time. So, um, what am I most proud of? I'm most proud of our commissions. I'm most proud of Out of Darkness, which is going around the world. I'm most proud of the first opera after Life, which, um, is a very interesting subject. Uh, it's a. conversation with the ghosts of between Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein about the artist's responsibility in time of war and what they did during wartime. And it's a very powerful work. It won the Best Chamber Opera award in 2017 by the National Opera Association. That's going around the world. And we recorded that. And there's a professional video. And that's where Maus made a difference, that anyone can play the music now of Hans Krasa and Pavel Haas and Gideon Klein, which is wonderful. And it's wonderful. The performers are looking for new repertoire that they're open to say, oh, this could be an interesting program. I mean, it's so interesting. People come across music remembrance, and I get messages from managers who are looking for dates for their artists, and they say, oh, our string quartet is going to be in your region. And they're playing this wonderful program. It just fits exactly with Music of Remembrance. I said, well, thank you very much. We've been playing this music for 20 years and we don't, you know, we don't present concerts, we produce our own concerts. So that is the mission of Memorial is we're self producing and, you know, self commissioning, self producing. And I choose the best artists at the right time for the right piece. And our premieres are here. The recorded here they go out into the world and um Seattle hopefully gets a lot of recognition for it and hopefully we can take pride in it since it is associated with Seattle and then goes around around the world.

Jeff Schwager: We're running out of time

Mina MIller: I think I told You everything more than.

Jeff Schwager: I just want to ask you one more thing, which is about the, um, the internment, uh, piece that you're working on. You're working on it now?

Mina MIller: Yes.

Jeff Schwager: Yes. Um, a Japanese composer.

Mina MIller: Uh, well, we we commissioned three works to address Japanese, Japanese, American wartime experience. Two of them were by Japanese composers. The third one, which is on the Japanese American incarceration, is by a French American composer, Christophe Seigneur. I don't know if the name is familiar. He is probably more known as a conductor. He's been the. He was a conductor of the Northwest Sinfonietta for 24 years, and he conducts the orchestra, and he's been involved with King-fm for a number of years. So, um, he he's a person that tackles social issues. And his last major work was on climate change. And I felt it would be very nice to work with local composer, because I felt that this story was more than global. It was really local. I mean, certainly the huge number of people that were sent from Bainbridge Island in Seattle to the camps. It outnumbers in California. Um, so it was very close to home. And I was impressed with Christophe's music and the way he tackled that subject. And I was impressed with his ideas and how he would handle it. So I engaged him and we talked about, I wanted this to have direct testimony to what happened in the camps, and maybe because of my experience of working with firsthand material in my other commissions, I suggested to him that he work with artists that were incarcerated in the camps and base it and have some artwork so that, um, diaries or, or actually artwork, physical artwork that was created. And so there was a wonderful historian that became our advisor. Her name is Barbara Johns and she is local. And she had written two books on two artists that were incarcerated in the Minidoka camp who one of them who kept a diary and also did artwork. The other one just did artwork. No diary. And she became our advisor and we and we looked at this artwork and we were really struck because the artwork itself told the story very revealing of daily life. And, um, I suggested that we have some songs in this piece. So because I'm very into words, I learned early on that pieces that have words can tell a story more directly than piece without words. So even if we had pictures, I wanted words. So we found poetry of a woman that was incarcerated in Minidoka who wrote poetry there, who's still alive. And he got rights to these poems. So the piece is is called jamon. Jamon in Japanese means to endure, to persevere among whatever. And he uses the diaries of one of the artists, Tokita, and drawings of those two artists, Tokita and Fuji, and poetry of Miyagi, the poet who's now 90, uh, alive. Um, one of the artists, uh, I think both artists are not alive. Their families are. But not the artists are not. So the piece is an instrumental work with two vocalists, and it blends Western instruments, um, as you would find in an orchestra. It has violin, cello, viola, double bass and clarinet, all Seattle Symphony players and two Japanese instruments. Uh, the taiko drums and the flute. So, um, the piece, in a way, kind of tries to take you from what life was like here and time, tranquil times and integrated times to after 1941. And so you have the Japanese instruments and first the integration and then the clashing and and the conflict. Um, so it's a very interesting concept, and it'd be very interesting to put together because it presents a lot of logistics because the Japanese musicians don't read music. You know, they they play their folk instruments, so to say, whereas the classical instruments do everything by music. But Kristof feels he's found a way to cue the artists that they can play their rhythms and their melodies and and we'll rehearse it.

Jeff Schwager: Wonderful. Well, I think that gives us a lot to work with, so thank you.

Mina MIller: That's great. Okay. I gave you too much stuff.

Jeff Schwager: No, no.