Excerpts from American reminiscences of Erwin Bodky and from interviews about him

Angelica Bodky Lee (1929-2012, named after Fra Angelico), assisted by her husband, Roger Kenneth Lee, 2009-10:

Q: What can you tell me about your father in Germany?

A: I recall several things that my parents told me. Ragnit, where he was born, was a small town, with so few Jews that there was no temple or synagogue. My grandfather had a job there; he was a lawyer. The mayor suggested that the family attend the Lutheran church, and my grandfather agreed. The mayor made a point of being seen walking down the main street of the town with my grandfather so that people would consider us accepted. (But we never joined any religious organization.)

My father abandoned an incipient career as a composer because he noticed that another composer was writing very similar music and he felt there was no need for two such composers. When the hyper--inflation after the First World War wiped out the family’s wealth, he supported himself by playing piano in a movie house. Fürtwangler gave him his first big opportunity as a concert pianist – to replace a soloist who was unable to make a scheduled appearance. Later, his harpsichord pupils included Edith Weiss-Mann, who I think had begun to play harpsichord before he did.

Around the time that he was dismissed from his professorship, some keyboard instruments which had been put at his disposal in our home on Leistico Strasse – a Steingräber harpsichord and a clavichord – were taken away, and Moser told my mother it was time for us to leave. He and his wife were good friends. It wasn’t their wish that we leave. After the Second World War, his wife and their daughter Edna were guests in our home in the USA.

My [paternal] grandfather wouldn’t come with us. (But he did later visit us in Amsterdam.) He was a quiet man who radiated nobility. He said “Germany can do no wrong,” and died in Theresienstadt.

Q: What do you recall about him during the next few years after the departure from Berlin?

A: We lived in Amsterdam until 1938. He gave concerts and had a lot of private pupils, and visited my mother’s brother in England once or twice. Danny [Daniel] Pinkham, whom Ken knew before meeting me and who was one of Landowska’s pupils in the USA, confirmed a story which my parents told me about a visit with Landowska and some of her students: at certain point she facetiously asked him to “play something for us – play the Goldberg Variations!” – and he played the whole set from memory. She was very annoyed.

When it became clear that the Nazis would take over Holland, my mother said, “Go to the USA, get a job,” so he went. After a little while in New York [City] on a tourist visa, he visited Cuba because to immigrate from there into the USA involved fewer legal problems than from Europe. My mother and I arrived in New York in September and we all moved to Cambridge because he had found a part-time job at Longy.

Q: What can you tell me about his years in the USA?

A: For quite a few years he was the only harpsichordist in the Boston area (as far as I can recall) except for Danny Pinkham, who wasn’t much interested in doing chamber music.

Ed Lowinsky arranged for him to teach at Black Mountain College in 1945. He told us, “You can’t take your dog.” I said, “Then we won’t go!” So he relented.

The Cambridge Collegium Musicum had mainly three players, with Wolf Wolfinson playing the violin and Iwan D’Archambeau playing the cello. They were Longy people. The Cambridge Society for Early Music usually had more than three, and sometimes even a chamber orchestra. The cellist – Samuel Mayes – and most of the other players were from the Boston Symphony Orchestra. They liked to perform early music which they loved but never got a chance to play in Symphony Hall. My father would choose the pieces and lead the rehearsals and performances. The rehearsals [of both groups] were in our apartment – and later on in our house – since that’s where the harpsichord would be until it was moved to the concert hall. Henry Owens was the harpsichord-mover. He was glad when we bought the house [after the Second World War], because the apartment had been on the second floor and the stairs were curved. The players were all so good that if even they didn’t know a piece, they would have to rehearse it only twice or maybe three times. My father would

1. Alfred Mann’s mother (see below).
set the tempo and demonstrate now and then on the harpsichord how to interpret a passage. My mother would serve refreshments. At the concerts, some school-mates and I would be the ushers and give out the programs. The spirit was wonderful in those days, there was very little competitiveness.

Q. What can you recall about Luise Vosgerchian?

A. The Vosgerchians lived in Watertown, where we moved in 1946. I remember her coming to the house to play for my father and be coached by him. Later, she befriended me in Paris, and we walked arm-in-arm along the Rue de Seine. That was in 1953. I was visiting Paris for a few weeks on my way from Southampton to Florence, where I got a scholarship to study sculpture at the Scuola Statale d’Arte.

Q: Anything else?

A: He used to say that in order to play Bach’s keyboard music expressively, you have understand his vocal music with its tone-painting – the representations of sighs and exulting and so on.

I remember the first two lines of a poem that he dedicated to August Wenziger [1905-1996]: “August, der nun neun und vierzig, / Ach, wie sind die Jahre würzig!”

He named me “Angelica” in homage to Fra Angelico.

Alfred Mann, 1996:

We served on the same faculty at Berlin’s State Academy for Church- and School-Music; in later years I had the privilege of appearing as a soloist in the concerts of the Society he founded in Boston, as he did me the honor of appearing as soloist in my New York concerts.

In his book [Der Vortrag alter Klaviermusik] on the performance of early keyboard music, written more than sixty years ago, he speaks of the clavichord – whose place in modern music practice he virtually reinstated – as one of the finest and most intimate instruments we have, though its status might seem modest to the modern observer. His career and achievement could be similarly described.

Adele Borouchoff, 2010:

I became Erwin Bodky’s student at Longy when I was first enrolled there in 1946 as a piano student. He arranged for me to attend the Black Mountain College summer session in 1947. Later, after I had changed my main subject at Longy from piano to voice, he accompanied me in my senior recital. That was in 1951.

He taught at Longy a two-year course of lectures entitled “Orientation.” It was an introduction to the history of music and of its genres. Each lecture would include a lot of examples, but he never had to use phonograph recordings in class. He could apparently play on the piano any part of any historical work that one might care to mention. He had it all from memory. Not just the keyboard music – all the other music as well. It was phenomenal. He was a walking encyclopedia.

I had piano lessons with him once a week at Longy and twice a week at Black Mountain College. He would coach me in how to play this or that passage by singing or by speaking in a certain way as well as by playing it himself. We worked intensively on certain pieces, but in such a way that I never got into a rut with them. One way he managed this was by assigning other pieces for me to sight-read each weekend – Mendelssohn’s songs without words, Chopin’s preludes, mazurkas and waltzes, most of Beethoven’s sonatas, The Well Tempered Clavier, and so on. Then he would ask me which ones – which movements – I liked best, and why, and he would tell me which ones he admired most, and why. This was how he taught me to love and understand great music.

His teaching was very personable. One time he sent me a postcard saying, “Here’s to a happy relationship between your fingers and the keyboard.”

In his own playing there might be some wrong notes here and there, but it didn’t matter.

2. See http://www.esm.rochester.edu/faculty/mann_alfred.
Laurence E. Berman, 1996:

Except for Anton Kuerti, I was, I believe, the youngest person to take private piano lessons with Erwin Bodky. Tony had been Bodky’s student for about two years when I came along in the fall of 1946, age 14. At that point I had had four years of lessons under the careful tutelage of a distinguished and devoted young Boston teacher.... I considered myself fairly advanced technically, and I also had some experience in playing publicly – both solo recitals and state competitions. Looking back on it, I think Bodky was less impressed with me than I was with myself. He was out to sharpen my perceptions and also to broaden my knowledge of the literature.

He went about this in the least threatening way possible, for he was the most unintimidating of men. When my mother and I arrived for the weekly lesson at their house in Watertown, both Bodky and his wife were at the door to greet us, faces wreathed in smiles. First it was Bodky’s turn to shake hands, bubbling out fifteen hello’s while pumping one’s arm up and down. Then Mrs. Bodky, a person of rare charm whose smile and dancing eyes simply enveloped you, would finish off her husband’s work with one shoulder-dislocating thrust. Following this ritual, my mother would turn left with Mrs. Bodky into the dining room for an hour or more of coffee and conversation, I with the maestro into the living room.

Taking advantage of my sight-reading abilities, Bodky virtually threw music my way, giving me as many as three new pieces a week to learn. The German literature was the central focus – Bach WTC, Beethoven sonatas, Schubert impromptus, Schumann character-pieces, Brahms rhapsodies. I usually managed to get the material into creditable, albeit rough, shape within the week. By the end of two weeks the piece in question was dropped and we were into something else. Sometimes, what I produced during a lesson manifestly showed that I hadn’t put in the requisite time the week before. But Bodky found it impossible to scold me. The most he could bring himself to say, beaming from ear to ear as he said it, was “Well, we haven’t worked as hard as we could have this week, have we?” My father thought I should be dealt with more strictly, and one time questioned Bodky in my presence about giving me so many things to work on and not allowing me to perfect any of them. Bodky’s answer was that he felt that at my age the extensive approach was best: I needed to get my mind and fingers around as many types of music as possible. As to perfecting anything, the pieces he was giving me were of such a serious nature, he felt, that they would take several rounds through, at different stages of my development, before I had a strong enough personal sense of what to do with them.

Judith Davidoff, 2010:

In 1948 I was invited by Mr. Bodky to spend the summer at Black Mountain College as a sort of cellist in residence. I played in a piano trio which presented a concert every week for eight weeks. We went through the standard piano-trio repertoire and I had a wonderful time.

I remember vividly his performance that summer of all of the Beethoven piano sonatas. He must have played four each week! He added commentary, and what he said has remained with me all these years, so that when I hear a performance of one of the sonatas I can usually dredge up a remark or two from way back then. His piano technique was not impeccable, but it didn’t really matter.

Caldwell Titcomb, 2009:

During the five years that Erwin and I were colleagues in the Brandeis Music Department we saw a good deal of each other. He was one of the chief reasons I decided to join the faculty in the first place. I was immediately struck by his unusually warm personality. His roly-poly physique was nicely matched by his unfailing jollity; there emanated from him a joie de vivre and optimism that were genetically built into his psyche. When he served as department chairman, and the rest of us were throwing up our hands at some seemingly insoluble problem, Erwin always maintained that a good solution could be found, and he was invariably right. A host of personal qualities were marvelously joined to his phenomenal knowledge of the music repertory.

3. Professor emeritus of music at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

4. Recipient in 2010 of the Lifetime Early Music Outreach Award from Early Music America. Founded the New York Consort of Viols and created at Sarah Lawrence College a master’s degree program in the performance of early music.
During the early 1950s I attended many of the concerts of the Cambridge Society for Early Music and never left one without both savoring the beauty of the performance and wondering about some aspect of the presentation, which was at times considered at least experimental if not radical. One outstanding cause for debate was the performance in 1954 of The Art of the Fugue “arranged for strings by Erwin Bodky.” In an uneducated fashion I had played some music by J. S. Bach and Scarlatti on an early replica of a double-manual harpsichord equipped with six pedals (!) but was not successful at finding out much about their appropriate use. Like many at the time, I knew even less about the clavichord.

A telephone call one morning in September 1953 presented the opportunity that was to provide an important part of my musical education, not only about these early keyboard instruments and issues of Baroque performance, but also about new ways to investigate other musical problems. The caller was Erwin Bodky, who asked whether I might consider helping him prepare his manuscript, The Interpretation of Bach’s Keyboard Works, for the Harvard University Press. That afternoon he dropped the typescript off at my apartment. It did not take me long to become fascinated with the unusual approach and contents, and we soon had a working relationship. I was to edit the text and we would meet once a week to go over what had been done.

Frequently I worked with the scores open, following the discussion measure by measure. At the time, this kind of writing about music was rare and therefore especially important.

Our meetings were fascinating. Bodky read the edited and occasionally reorganized text with a keen eye, always wanting to be sure that in the rewording nothing of his intent was changed. Often he asked the exact meaning of my word or phrase. Sometimes he went back to a German word that he might have used in a particular place and we discussed the comparative meanings of his word and mine in English. These sessions were laced with his humor, with his many insightful comments about music in general, about performance, editing, editors, and whatever else might come to his brilliant mind.

Shortly after I started this work my husband, Louis, and I were invited with a small group to the Bodky home for a German supper. During the evening their Bauhaus furniture and their collection of keyboard instruments were the focus of discussion. After Erwin demonstrated each of his instruments he gleefully related the story of their entry into the USA. The customs agents at the ship’s dock in Hoboken, NJ, were skeptical of the requested duty-free importation of these unusual instruments based on their necessity for the owner’s profession. In true Bodky spirit, an impromptu concert on the spot saved the day.

I often refer students to The Interpretation of Bach’s Keyboard Works and try to introduce them to the kinds of approaches to performance issues of which Erwin Bodky was a pioneer.
Sylvia Staub, 2010:

As a 19-year-old sophomore and voice student at Brandeis, I sang the role of Belinda in “Dido and Aeneas” under Mr. Bodky’s direction. The fact that I attempted to sing that role – my first solo singing performance – after less than a year of voice lessons is probably as much a testament to his encouraging and confidence-inspiring tutelage as to my youthful and naïve confidence. That was 57 years ago, and the way I remember it is that if Mr. Bodky thought I could do it, then I could do it. The orchestra was made up of Brandeis students. We did it, and it was a marvelous musical experience, and everyone loved it. His enthusiasm was infectious.

Elise Sigal, 2010:

Classes with him [at Brandeis] were fun as well as educational. He called transition-passages in music “applesauce,” which we thought delightful. There was a piano in the classroom; he was always able to illustrate from this. He said his life wish was to be a top-rank performer, especially of Bach, but that he knew he was not skilled enough.

One of his solo piano concerts at Brandeis consisted largely of music for the left hand – the very thought of which astonished me.

He told us that the music commonly in use as wedding-marches led to unhappy marriages! I was to be married in December of that year (1954), so I wrote to him and asked for suggestions as to better choices. He recommended Clarke’s Trumpet Voluntary and the “March of the Priests” from The Magic Flute.

He spoke often of Busoni and Mahler, but I no longer recall the specifics.

One of the best things about being a student of his was the opportunity to be entertained by him and his wife in their home in Watertown. We would be treated to a delicious spread and an evening of music on original instruments – a harpsichord, and clavichord and a Stein piano – all of which were new to us.

Wayne Shirley, 6 2011:

In the Fall of 1956, I was the M.C. for “Classical Round-Table,” a weekly program on a college radio station. (The college was not Brandeis.) On the program we played, without identifying them, one- or two-minute excerpts from pieces in the Western classical repertory for a panel of “experts”: knowledgeable undergraduates and sometimes, when we were lucky, a scholar from another institution. Our “experts” would then comment on what had just been played and would try to identify it. (The comments were often excellent; the rate of exact identification fairly modest.)

On one program, late in the Fall, Erwin Bodky was our guest scholar. At that time I was preparing a Christmas gift for a young lady whom I was (very hesitantly) courting. The heart of the gift was to be Irmgard Seefried’s wonderful recording of songs from Hugo Wolf’s Italienisches Liederbuch and of folksong-arrangements by Johannes Brahms. The recording (American Decca DL 9743) was and remains one of the great Lieder recordings; but it had one flaw: no song-texts or translations came with it. I had determined to repair this lack by doing my own translations, typing them out together with the German texts, and including the typescripts in the Christmas present. The Wolf songs posed no problems for my rough-and-ready German, nor did five of the six Brahms folksongs; but one of the Brahms folksongs was in deep dialect, and its second verse was beyond my ability to translate, even with the aid of an impeccably non-dialect German-English dictionary. I mentioned my difficulty to Erwin Bodky in conversation before the radio program went on the air. (In those days we would broadcast “live,” not pre-recorded.) The next day he called me with a fine translation of the entire text, and chatted pleasantly about how “Kirchweih” had come to mean “fair.” This was my only contact with Erwin Bodky, yet I remember him as I remember no other guest scholar who appeared on “Classical Round-Table.” I am married to the woman I was courting.

A former student of Bodky’s who wishes to remain anonymous, 2010:

Not long ago I was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease and had to be hospitalized. The treatment was devastating. As soon as I came home, I listened to a recording of a beautiful performance of one of my favorite pieces by Mozart. I wept and said to myself, “They can’t take this away as long as I live, this love of the greatest music.” Erwin Bodky gave me this.

6. Senior music specialist (emeritus) at the Library of Congress.