

Selma Moidel Smith

Oral History, Session VII — November 10, 2014

Interview by Attorney Rosalyn Zakheim

Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project of the American Bar Association

Zakheim: Today is November 10, 2014, and this is Rosalyn Zakheim. I'm at the home of Selma Moidel Smith to continue her interviews for the ABA Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project. Selma, when we finished last time, you had just mentioned playing one of your compositions on educational television for the Docents of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Today, we'll be talking about your work with the Docents and other music organizations. Would you begin by telling us about the Docents?

Smith: When I mention *docents*, I think I should explain — we're not talking about people who will tour you around the building. This was a group of *music* docents. These are volunteer musicians who have to show first that they are well trained in whatever their instrument may be, or voice perhaps, and they are going to be presenting previews of the Philharmonic concerts, and "Concerts for Youth" as well, and introduction-to-music programs in schools — public and private schools. After auditioning, you had to present a program to be approved, that they would see what you would do when you got to the school, and once they saw that you could in fact represent them properly, then you were sent out to the school, and the school sent back an evaluation — it was done very carefully.

Zakheim: I have before me a letter that says, “Selma, Fantastic!!!” — with three exclamation points — “How lucky the children are to have you. Such talent, ingenuity, and a warmth that would make anyone interested in music.”

Smith: So, that tells you something about the fact we did indeed have quite a careful structure. It was supervised very closely by the associate conductor of the Philharmonic who was present at all training sessions. It wasn't just that they approved you, and then you never came back. Quite the contrary.

Zakheim: And you were a Docent for quite a while, from 1971 to 1982.

Smith: Yes. I was the first — and only — bilingual, Spanish-language Docent. A woman in Pasadena, Beverly Ballard, was president. Her husband was the vice president of the Broadway Department Store chain.

Zakheim: Oh, my!

Smith: She had occasion shortly after I became one of them to write me this note: “Dear Selma, you are an answer to my prayer for a Spanish-speaking Docent!” — exclamation mark— “Are there any more where you came from? [both laughing] My



At East Los Angeles Library — “Special Music Program presented by Mrs. Selma Smith of the Philharmonic Docents and [students from] The Los Angeles Music and Art School,” August 3, 1972 — Beverly Ballard (center), SMS, and Librarian Olga Mendoza.

husband and I enjoyed the article in *Classics West*.” That was a magazine of KFAC [classical music radio station], and I wrote an article on American composers for them. “The many fine things you do will certainly be a stimulant to our Docent activity. Sincerely, Beverly Ballard.” That was February 6 of 1972. One of the things that happened as a Docent was I had thought it was important in a city like Los Angeles with our constituent groups of people in greater variety perhaps than some of our states that are more homogeneous. It seemed to me that the Spanish-speaking students should also be, in the same way, enriched by the opportunity to hear music — to learn perhaps, *somewhere*. There are among us talented children who can be given the opportunity to have lessons. We would provide instruments. This was something that was part of the Minority Training Committee [of the Philharmonic], and I was very much on that committee, during the time of Zubin Mehta —

Zakheim: — who was the conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Smith: — who was our conductor, yes, for a number of years, and very well remembered, and still, of course, he comes.

Zakheim: Selma, to me, coming from Los Angeles, and I was born here, it’s very surprising that there was no bilingual, Spanish–English Docent before you. You *must* have been the answer to their prayers.

Smith: Well, I didn’t know she had made a prayer [both laughing]. It was my own thought, because I’ve always been involved in Spanish things, that that, too, should be part of their experience — and the opportunity to be recognized for talents that otherwise just go to waste. So, I felt it was essential. When I went out to these various schools, and

I have quite a list of them, they presented *me* the opportunity to give them what I wanted for them to know and share. This is now *La Opinión*. You can see a picture of Beverly Ballard.

Zakheim: And they mentioned particularly, “Selma Smith, miembro de la agrupación Philharmonic Docents.” And, “la señora Smith, prominente dama” — the whole article is about Selma and what wonderful things she did for the children as a Docent of the Philharmonic.¹

Smith: I also provided something they never had had. In addition to classes where I was the one and only teacher, I arranged that I would take an orchestra from junior high over to one of my schools, and have them play for them. As I told the children, “Watch very closely, and listen, and look, because when they finish playing, you will have a chance to come up and touch and hold the instrument you would like to, and you can make a sound on it, and so be sure that you’re looking and listening very carefully.” I had already preselected the kind of music that I thought would make an impression on them, nicely. And I played for them; I sang in Spanish, and accompanied myself with my Spanish guitar, which pleased them no end. In fact, the principal was always present. She stood guard, you know, to see everyone behave properly, and she almost got lost in the proceedings herself, listening to everything. Here is the photo. This is the orchestra leader that I took from the junior high school orchestra.² This is his little orchestra. She’s the one in charge of this school, that this was all brought to — she was the principal.

¹ “Vida Social,” photo and feature, *La Opinión* (Nov. 19, 1972) [photo on p. 2 above].

² “Vida Social,” photo and feature, *La Opinión* (May 13, 1973).

Zakheim: Now, was this the Nightingale Junior High that went to an elementary school?

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Do you remember which elementary school?



Nightingale Junior High School orchestra at Ford Boulevard Elementary School — SMS (center), Reginald Lee, orchestra director (right), November 22, 1972.

Smith: That would be Ford Boulevard School, and also there was Cortez Street School.³ As you see, I'm holding things that when we came for the photo the children had already made for me.

Zakheim: Oh, Selma.

Smith: After the event, they all wrote little thank-you notes, and they made colored things, flowers, you know. And I'm holding a bouquet that they made for me. I have to say that I have boxes full of things that I received from them.

When we got through with both my singing to them and the orchestra playing, I had the children in the orchestra stand and hold out their instruments, and they did.

³ Nov. 22, 1972, and Feb. 1, 1973, respectively.

They did it very graciously. The children came up and, of course, several wanted to hold my guitar. In addition, they got to make a sound. I said, “Now, do everything gently,” although when they got to the percussion, I said, “All right, you can make a sound, but remember there are other sounds being made.” All of this I said in Spanish, of course. It was a wonderful time. And the children who were in the seventh grade, who came with the orchestra, those were the ones who were looking at the fifth and sixth graders who were the ones in the auditorium, who could be the big brothers, big sisters, to look down and hand over something and watch the reaction of another child, looking at music for the first time, and the sounds of music. My eyes did not rest for a moment. I looked to see even the telltale things of someone who is coming from a possible music interest — and we would report this back, and the school would apply for the instruments that could be sent over. [looking at a letter] This is, “Dear Selma — ”

Zakheim: It says, “Dear Selma,” and it’s dated March 18, 1972, “Word of the marvelous work you are doing has reached my ears indirectly. Jay Heifetz, director of promotion for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, has requested that I put some publicity on the radio, TV, and newspapers regarding the visit you arranged for, of a junior high orchestra to an elementary school. I would appreciate it very much if you would send me the full details, date, background, etc., as soon as possible. Thank you and bravo! Most sincerely, Carolyn Gordon.”

Smith: “P.S. Please include names.”

Zakheim: Yes. Did you learn later that any of them had gone into music?

Smith: Oh, yes, because I knew that some of the Pasadena women took the children to their lessons with a member of the Philharmonic. I knew who they would be and, also, I sometimes heard from the musicians themselves. I know that they furnished violins, primarily, and there were some wind instruments, too, but primarily they were string. And so, we could make it possible.

I don't have to tell you that the evaluations that the principals would send — I guess, from what they told me, I received consistently — . I saw one upside-down when our president was reading it, and I thought, "My, that's just a few words." I thought to myself, "With all the time that I spent and all the things I did, how would this be possible? What was left out?" Anyway, she then handed it to me, and it said, "Mrs. Smith was outstanding in every respect." [laughing] And then, period. And that was her total —

Zakheim: You can't get much better than that!

Smith: It was at that point that I realized there are many ways, I guess, to show — . I never appeared anywhere that they didn't always request me to come back. In fact, I was out to all the [Roman Catholic] parochial schools. As soon as they saw me, you know — they didn't have any idea what they were going to have happen, and as soon as I started to speak to them, you could tell that this must be okay because [chuckling] otherwise they wouldn't be getting it. These are all my Latin-American audiences. Here's the list of some of the schools. Would you take a look?

Zakheim: "Riggin in East L.A., Rancho Santa Gertrudes in Santa Fe Springs, Wiley Canyon in Newhall, South Ranchito [in Pico Rivera], All Saints in East L.A., Saint Agnes in

L.A., Our Lady of Guadalupe in East L.A., Union Avenue in L.A., Yorktown in Highland Park, Saint Pius X in Santa Fe Springs, and Albion Street in East L.A.”

Smith: At any rate, I can tell you that they finally tallied up, I think, about three thousand students that I had had direct contact with.⁴ That was in addition, of course, to television. Ernest Fleischmann, who was the executive director of the Philharmonic, called me his “special, one-and-only, Spanish-speaking docent,” and took great pleasure in me, and arranged television interviews of me by having them come from different stations — once was KMEX. They interviewed me in the Music Center.

Zakheim: Oh!

Smith: Joan Boyett was in charge of education.

Zakheim: This is dated February 7, 1974, on the letterhead of the Southern California Symphony – Hollywood Bowl Association —

Smith: Before they ever took on the “Philharmonic Association” by itself.

Zakheim: It’s to Selma. “Dearest Selma, How can I say thank-you adequately for the splendid job you did on television last night. I thought KMEX’s coverage was quite comprehensive, although the Spanish was a bit fast for my faulty grasp of the language. We are much in your debt. Most sincerely, Joan Boyett.”

Smith: On other occasions, I went to television stations directly, in *their* studios — and spoke on behalf of the Philharmonic and these programs. And then, at one, the educational

⁴ In one series of school visits in April and May 1973, in preparation for the May 26 Symphony for Youth concert by the Philharmonic.

television program arose because that station happened to want to show something unusual for the general audience of people listening to ordinary English-speaking educational television. They wanted to show how music was being fostered. They went from one school to another to view different ones, to make a choice, of which one they were going to put on. As it turned out, when the television crew came to the particular school that I happened to be at that time — I was already seated at the piano, of course, and the children were around me — at the moment, I happened to be playing one of my own compositions for them, a Spanish one of course. When they were coming in, I immediately stopped, naturally, and I was told, “No, no, keep playing,” because, “oh, that’s good music!” So I did, and they then set up all their equipment and chose that one as the one that they were going to put on.

Zakheim: That very day?

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Oh, my! Now, did you use castanets that time? I understand you used them in some of your classes.

Smith: I always had them with me, and I certainly did when I took the orchestra. When I finally gave someone my guitar, so my hands were free, I picked up my castanets and did castanet rolls that only castanet players do. Oh, they all stopped and [clapping] made a big-big clap, so I had to do it all over again! [both laughing].

Zakheim: I’ll bet some of the children wanted to play the *castanets*.

Smith: Oh, well, I handed them over. And then they found out they are a musical instrument, and you don't just [laughing] — . You have to know the right hand from the left — one is lower, one is higher. You have to know the finger motion — which is going to be up, which is down. Well, it's a whole instrument, actually. They come in all sizes, you know, for little hands, for bigger hands [chuckling]. Certain kinds of wood are used. You choose the best wood for the best performers. They carve them out in ways that are especially advantageous.

Zakheim: For the acoustics.

Smith: Yes. And, of course, they're held only by the thumb on each hand. I'm about to give you a lesson in castanets [laughing], but I won't do that at this moment. Also —

Zakheim: I think there was a Saturday Institute at East L.A. College?

Smith: Yes, that was still a different kind of thing altogether. This was one where the orchestra was coming to the area — not having the people come to *them*, but coming to do their music right in front of them, bringing it into their home ground, East L.A. College, where I think it was probably ninety percent Spanish-speaking in the community there. And so, I came out as a preview to that concert that they were going to give.⁵ This was going to create the atmosphere, and the interest, that people would come when the orchestra was going to come and play for them, which was very soon — to interest them in coming. I did. In fact, the person in charge had been one of my piano teachers at UCLA. I spoke in Spanish entirely, since the audience was at

⁵ Preview by SMS, February 26, 1972; concert, March 4, 1972.

least ninety percent such — and told them all about the program, told them the pieces that were going to be played.

I had made *my* point to the Philharmonic that for those Symphonies for Youth — Introduction to Music, and that kind of thing — if they're coming from that area, you cannot expect the children to sit there and listen to Bach, Beethoven. I said, "Where are the Spanish composers, what happened to the Latin-American ones, where are the ones from Mexico? Where are the rhythms that they are familiar with, that they know have to do with music?" I said, "We have to build a bridge. They're not going to come from this area to listen to something that they haven't the faintest grasp of." In other words, I spoke as their representative. It began to take shape. And I said, "It wouldn't hurt, you know, if for the youth, the conductor could be one of the Latin-American conductors, somebody they can identify with. They have to be able to feel, "That is me, or mine, or something that I want to make mine," or, "I'm almost there, and this is another way to get there" kind of feeling, and so they began to do that. They began to make a few little changes.

Zakheim: Oh, that's great.

Smith: There were several things that I was encharged with. I had already become chair for the Latin-American community. And I was made chair for public relations altogether. In fact, I was sent by the Docent organization to represent them at every conference of every like kind of activity in the whole county, and beyond. It included Palm Desert as well. Caroline Ahmanson sponsored an arts conference there, and I attended. This was quite a conference. In fact, I have here some photos from the event.

Zakheim: Here is a picture of Caroline Ahmanson, the director, William McCann, the vice-president of the California Museum Foundation, and our own Selma Moidel Smith, “representing the Docents.” The picture was taken February 16, 1981, in Palm Desert, with the California Arts and Humanities Seminar.



Smith: Here’s another one, as chair of Press and Public Relations.

Zakheim: You were a presenter at the National School Volunteer Conference and creator of the Docent display at the Sheraton–Universal Hotel Ballroom in L.A., from April 8 to April 11 of 1973. Selma is quoted as —



Smith: That’s my quote.

Zakheim: Please read it — it *is* your quote.

Smith: “We cross the language barrier to reach the universal language.”

Zakheim: Were you still practicing law at this point?

Smith: Of course!

Zakheim: Yes, I wanted to show it was not two discrete parts of your life.

Smith: No.

Zakheim: They were always combined. Is that correct?

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: So everything you've been doing was very well appreciated. That must have helped you with your very, very busy schedule. At the same time you were practicing law, you were getting accolades for your contributions as a Docent of the Philharmonic.

Smith: But you know, I tell you something. Roz, whatever I have ever done, I have done simply because — . When you walk, do you think about how you're walking? Which foot you're going to put next, and so on? You just walk your way, the way you do. And that's the way I do. It's my only way to be [pause] in this life. I don't know. I just do most of the — . I don't initiate a lot. I mean, it may be for outward things that I initiate, but the urge to do it isn't something I initiated. It's just there.

Zakheim: It's how you live. It's how you are.

Smith: It's how I was put together. I guess, you could just say it that way. It's how I was put together. I once said, and you may have heard me say it, "Whatever you are, you bring to whatever you do." That's the only answer I can give you for the whole thing.

Zakheim: Well you were so generous of your time because, as a lawyer, working so hard, to also —

Smith: And in my office at 8:00 every morning.

Zakheim: I mean, I'd be interested in how you did that, because that's a very difficult thing to do all of this for the Docents and the children in East L.A. and also practice law.

Smith: Well, fortunately, like East L.A. College, that was on Saturday. I took them at times that would be good for me, or I couldn't. And I would let them know when I was available, when I was not. And there could be a passage of time when I was in trial or whatever, and they understood.

Separately from all this, I had a dear friend, Roz. Sylvia was my friend's name, and she married a Latino. Her last name was Vega as a result — very happy, a lovely couple. Carlos was her husband. We went to the Million Dollar Theater [where Spanish-language movies were shown].

Zakheim: On Broadway I believe, in downtown Los Angeles.

Smith: She was so in love with my music. It was due to her, her insistence — . I said, "Sylvia, I really don't have time. I really can't take time to do the things that music people do." And she said, "But Selma, you *have* to!" Your music should be *heard*. Everybody who hears your music will want to hear more." I said, "That's fine, Sylvia," you know, "some year!" I'm sorry Sylvia didn't live to see this, but it was because of her that I first got printed sheet music. And people who knew me bought it. I said, "I don't want you to pay for these." Sylvia said, "You let them do that.

You've got to get in training for that." She said, "You have to get out and do more things in music. Your music can't be neglected." And she, on her own initiative, wrote to the president of the California Federation of Music Clubs and told them about me. She told her to invite me. She didn't even know her, but she recommended me. She was a very articulate person herself. Sylvia told me once herself, "You know, when I first met you," she said, "I hated you." She said, "I worked so hard in Spanish," she said, "and I broke my head trying to learn Spanish," and she said, "and I still do. I hated you because it just flows out of your mouth." She said, "How do you do that?" I said, "I don't know." And she said, "I can tell you that now because I love you." [both laughing] And so, she's the one. I was invited, and it was at the Huntington Hotel in Pasadena. They had a weekend of their conference. As a result of Sylvia I was invited to it, and I was sitting at a dinner table. The president wasn't even sitting near where I was. When I got up to get something off of the dessert table, I found she's at my elbow, and she is saying, "Selma, I want to have you on my Board of Directors." I looked at her, and I said, "But you don't even know me." And she said, "I think I know enough." Whatever she observed, I don't know. She was obviously looking once in a while, I guess, at me. And here, she wasn't inviting me to be a member; she was inviting me to the Board of Directors. So, anyway, I became a Board member.

Zakheim: And what do these groups do?

Smith: Their sole purpose is to raise money to help educate in music and to help those who've shown talent to get them opportunities — to be heard, to study with so-and-so. This is what their goal is.

Zakheim: It fit in perfectly with your Docent experience.

Smith: Yes. As a result, as soon as I became a member there, I found myself — . As you see, in their publication, *Music Clubs Magazine* — this is the National Federation of Music Clubs — “dedicated to music education and promotion of creative and performing arts.”



Presenting award to San Francisco Mayor Joseph Alioto, October 3, 1975.

Zakheim: Since 1898!

Smith: Yes. As you see, [under the heading] “State Projects and Events”:⁶

Zakheim: “Joseph Alioto,” who I remember, “Mayor of San Francisco, receives an Award of Merit for his support of American Music Month from Selma Moidel Smith”! “In Los Angeles, Mayor Tom Bradley proclaims February 1977 as American Music Month.” And I bet you had something to do with that.⁷



Receiving proclamation from Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, January 14, 1977.

⁶ Photos and captions, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Spring 1977): 51.

Smith: I had everything to do with it.

Zakheim: Okay! What did you do to ensure these proclamations?

Smith: I also got it from the governor, and Pete Wilson who was then [mayor] in San Diego.

I — simply on my own — called these people. I introduced myself to them, told them what it was about, and I referred to the specific thing by which they had become eligible — that I wanted to thank them and that I have awards I would like to give them. And that was true for KFAC also.⁸ Here is *Classics West*.

Zakheim: “Classical Music Magazine.”

Smith: Yes. There’s Aaron Copland.

Zakheim: Oh, my goodness, there’s a handwritten inscription in the magazine, “For Selma M. Smith, cordially, Aaron Copland, 1972.”

Smith: Yes. And this is the article that appeared.

Zakheim: Selma had written an article called, “The American Composer.”⁹ And then you were state chairman, Parade of American Music, sponsored by the National Federation of Music Clubs.

Smith: Yes. That’s Gottschalk; are you familiar with him at all?

Zakheim: No.

⁷ Photo and caption, *Los Angeles Times* (Jan. 30, 1977): SF2; “February’s Muse is Music,” *Los Angeles Evening Herald* (Jan. 26, 1977); “February is Music Month,” *Van Nuys News* (Jan. 27, 1977): III-14; *Overture* (Feb. 1977): 4.

⁸ Photo and caption, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Spring 1974): 12.

⁹ Selma M. Smith, “The American Composer,” *Classics West* 3:4 (February 1972): 4–5.

Smith: Let me show you these photos.

Zakheim: Zubin Mehta, right?

Smith: Yes, as you see, we are not strangers with each other, either. We were on the same Minority Training Committee. That's in his office.¹⁰

Zakheim: Then, you were the national vice-chairman for the Western Region, National Federation of Music Clubs.



Award presentation to Zubin Mehta, conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, November 5, 1975.

Smith: But it wasn't the beginning. I mean, I was, for some time before that — and you can picture, I was a Docent at the same time.

This is at Cal State L.A. I represented the National Federation at the gala concert honoring composer Roy Harris. I don't know if you're familiar with him.

Zakheim: No, I'm not.

Smith: An American composer, probably one of the best. Gone now, of course. And here I became state chairman of the Parade of American Music for the National Federation — '72 to '75.¹¹ This is the auditorium, and podium. That's Roy Harris, and you see who is here.¹²

¹⁰ Photo and caption, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Special 1976): 15.

¹¹ "Mrs. Selma M. Smith . . . has been named," *Van Nuys News* (March 1, 1974): E-30A; "Music Award Presented to Selma Smith," *Van Nuys News* (Nov. 16, 1972): E-33C; "Three Star



Gala Concert honoring composer Roy Harris (at podium), California State University, Los Angeles, February 21, 1973 — (l.-r.): Charles Hubbard (chair, Music Department), Donald Mortenson (dean, School of Fine and Applied Arts), John Greenlee (president, CSULA), Maurice Polan (librarian), SMS, Professor Robert Strassburg (coordinator, Fine Arts).

Zakheim: And you were the only woman on the dais, I see. And you're holding the mayor's proclamation of February as American Music Month. And the Coordinator of Fine Arts, Dr. Robert Strassburg was also there with you.

Smith: Yes, there he was. And Roy Harris had just gone up to the podium when that photo was taken. There I was. Of course, this again was in an evening. This was never out of my office time. Do you remember Efreim Zimbalist, Jr.?

Zakheim: Oh, yes! Absolutely.

Smith: Well, as you see, I presented him, too.¹³



Presenting award to Efreim Zimbalist, Jr., at his home, May 8, 1977.

Award Goes To Mrs. Smith," *Los Angeles Evening Outlook* (Nov. 20, 1972): 14; "Music Clubs Award [to SMS]," *Los Angeles Times* (Dec. 14, 1972): SF17.

¹² Photo and caption, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Summer 1973): 50. "Music News," *Los Angeles Times* (Sept. 23, 1973): 51.

¹³ Photo and caption, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Autumn 1977): 16.

Zakheim: At that point, you were national vice-chairman for the Western Region.

Smith: That was '74.

Zakheim: National Federation from '74 to '77.¹⁴ And in these photographs, you are presenting him an award at his home in May of 1977. He was both an actor and a composer.

Smith: Yes, and a very nice fellow.

[pointing at another photo]

This was a television program.



Zakheim: Oh, my goodness:

“Appearances on ‘World Talk’ program, television channel KCOP, channel 13 — Panel discussion organized by Selma Moidel Smith, with composers Dorrance Stalvey, Aurelio de la Vega, and William Kraft, taped February 12, 1972, and aired February 21, 1972.” There’s also a picture of Selma presenting an award to host Florence Thalheimer — who I remember, actually —



Another panel discussion on “World Talk” organized by SMS — (l.-r.): composer Roy Harris, host Florence Thalheimer, Professor Robert Strassburg, SMS — taped June 30, 1973, aired July 23, 1973, KCOP-13.

Smith: Of course!

¹⁴ “Award Presented [to SMS],” *Los Angeles Times* (Dec. 29, 1974): SF6; “National Honor Given [to SMS],” *Van Nuys News* (Dec. 22, 1974): 31; “Mrs. Smith Receives High Award,” with photo, *Van Nuys News* (Dec. 16, 1975): 22; photo and feature, *La Opinión* (May 8, 1977): 6.

Smith: Yes, this was five months after that one [taped July 29, 1972]. That's my thanks to her for this program that I arranged. And as you see, this is what I did: I would arrange things, and it would serve the purpose of the National Federation, and music.¹⁵

Zakheim: And you were on the Lawrence Welk show as well!

Smith: Twice.¹⁶

Zakheim: Presenting awards, and oh!, now what is happening there, Selma?

Smith: What do you think?

Zakheim: It looks like Selma's receiving a kiss. I don't know who it's from, but — [laughing].

Smith: Yes, there's Lawrence Welk, and while he's doing this, Bob Rolston snuck in and [both laughing] — he's the one who was actually the performer of that particular piece [and received the award].



Lawrence Welk Show taping — (l.-r.): Welk, SMS, and Bob Rolston, February 2, 1976..

¹⁵ Other press coverage of awards presented by SMS for promoting the work of American composers (each with photo): conductor Carmen Dragon, *Glendale News-Press* (August 14, 1972), *Van Nuys News* (Aug. 29, 1972), *International Musician* [Amer. Fed. of Musicians] (Nov. 1972), and *Music Clubs Magazine* (Special 1973): 21; conductor André Kostelanetz, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Special Issue 1976): 14; composer Aurelio de la Vega, *Insight* [CSU Northridge] (April 1976); composer Abram Chasins, artistic consultant, KUSC-FM, *Van Nuys News* (Nov. 4, 1974): III-5; and *Beverly Hills Courier* (Nov. 5, 1974); composer John Vincent, *Van Nuys News* (April 28, 1977): II-7; Dorothy Chandler, Times-Mirror Co., *Music Clubs Magazine* (Summer 1976): 10; Van Nuys News Co., *Van Nuys News* (Oct. 28, 1975); E-20A; KNBC Television Studios, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Spring 1974): 21.

¹⁶ Photo and caption, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Autumn 1977): 16.

Zakheim: Ah! [both laughing]

Smith: And now, here is the brochure from the 27th Biennial Convention —

Zakheim: “California Federation of Music Clubs, at the Sheraton–Universal [Hotel] in North Hollywood,” May of 1972. At that point, Selma Smith was the general chairman of the 1972 State Convention Committee.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: And the theme, I see, is
“Music exalts life,” which
seems to be a theme of your
life as well.

Smith: Yes. And so I chaired the
state convention. It was a
two-day event. These were
all the people present.



Zakheim: You were moderator on a
panel —

Panel on music education — (l.-r.): Leslie Clausen (chair, Department of Music, Los Angeles City College), SMS (moderator, convention chair), Howard Rarig (director, USC School of Music), and Leonid Hambro (associate dean, California Institute of the Arts) — California Federation of Music Clubs Convention, Sheraton-Universal Hotel, May 12, 1972.

Smith: On music education.

Zakheim: — entitled, “Music Education, Today and Tomorrow.”¹⁷

Smith: Yes.

¹⁷ Photo and caption, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Autumn 1972): 35.

Zakheim: Something you have a lot of experience with.

Smith: Well, in addition, here is the music program. One of the pianists performed some music of mine at one of our events.¹⁸

Zakheim: It's interesting because you did some very serious composing, and you also made music popular.

Smith: Ah, yes.

Zakheim: That's quite an accomplishment. People can sometimes do one or the other — .



Euterpe Opera Club — SMS (left, Awards chair) presents awards to most promising singers of 1973–74 season, International Ballroom, Beverly Hilton Hotel, May 3, 1974.

Smith: Yes. [turning to another group of photos] At the same time that I joined the Federation, one of the people on the Board of Directors said, “You have to come to my Euterpe Opera Club, and I want you on the Board.” So, this is Euterpe Opera Club. I was not only on the Board, but I was Auditions chairman, and also Awards chair.¹⁹

Zakheim: Oh, my!

Smith: This was in the International Ballroom at the Beverly Hilton — the Awards Luncheon.

¹⁸ “Music Clubs Federation Will Convene,” *Los Angeles Times* (April 30, 1972): E6; “California’s Federation of Music Clubs Meets in Valley,” with photo, *Van Nuys News* (May 5, 1972): E-27A; photo and caption, *Music Clubs Magazine* (Autumn 1972): 35.

¹⁹ “Vida Social,” photo and feature, *La Opinión* (June 17, 1973); “Valley Members Aid Opera Club Program,” photo and feature, *Van Nuys News* (Nov. 29, 1973): E-1C; “Opera Club Sets Luncheon,” *Van Nuys News* (Dec. 5, 1974): E-3C.

Zakheim: In 1974, and you're presenting awards to the best-rated singers of that season.

Smith: Yes, in other words, it was all educational. And I will show you a picture of our Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, where — on Monday mornings — the Euterpe Opera Club would present their operas. These are the people I invited and introduced as my guests at the opera. I introduced all of these people, without notes, from the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion of the Music Center. I called these people and said, "Our Euterpe Opera group is performing an opera, and I'm inviting you to come." I had a row reserved for them.

Zakheim: And who did you invite?

Smith: Here they are: Dean Grant Beglarian — he was dean of the USC School of Music; Howard Rarig from USC — he was chair of the Music Department. I

had called each one individually, and when I spoke to Howard Rarig, he called back that evening and he said, "You know, I don't know why but my wife tells me that she would like to come. Is there any way I can bring my wife, too?" And so I said, "Of course, of course," and so I added her. All these were the people from USC [pointing at list]: Margaret Schaper, chair of the Voice Department; and this is Dorothy Jean Hartshorn [chair of Music Education]. This one is Dr. David Scott; he's from Cal



American Music Award presented by SMS to Dorothy Chandler (at her home), January 6, 1976.

State Northridge, head of the Opera Department. And here's Carl Princi from KFAC. Gerhard Samuel, associate conductor of the "L.A. Phil." Those were my guests. Carl Princi used to be the one who's on KFAC about opera, that I was working with when I wrote that article in *Classics West*.

Zakheim: This is the picture I love.

Smith: Yes, well this has to do with Plato.

Zakheim: Really!? Oh?

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Now, we should note that Plato is an organization at UCLA, maybe other places, too.

I don't know.

Smith: No.

Zakheim: Just at UCLA?

Smith: *At* UCLA.

Zakheim: Where people gather to learn, as senior adults usually.

Smith: Let me inform you. Plato is not one you join because you'd like to. There is an Admissions Committee, always was, because it was under the umbrella of UCLA Extension. And in fact, I was in the photo that they had in the [Extension] Catalog.

Zakheim: This one is just beautiful.

Smith: Well, —

Zakheim: You're in costume, with a fan raised to the heavens,
and obviously in a dance pose. You've been dancing..

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: And you look very happy!

Smith: What do you think my opposing counsel would think?

[both laughing] Anyway, I have to say that when you go to the Admissions Committee you tell them why you want to join. They tell you in the brochure that this is for executives and professionals. I remember meeting with the committee. They asked me different things, and I was a lawyer, I was this — . They had

doctors; they had a few other lawyers. And the point of the whole thing was, you're going to do something you didn't do in your main thing that you were doing. I said to them, "I want to learn." I said, "Above all, the thing I love most is *learning*." I never even got to take my foot out of the room. The committee all nodded to each other.

Before I even got up out of the seat, they had already made me a member. I remember I sat in on a few things, and I looked at their list of offerings, the courses and the days, and there were two-hour ones. They were all fifteen-member groups, with a coordinator. The object was, in that particular subject matter, these are a list of assignments, and you volunteer, you pick out what you will be responsible for preparing. And you get a card from the [UCLA] Research Library, because you're a



Plato Society Annual Party, Marina City Club, Marina del Rey, September 8, 1985.

member of Plato. You are expected to do research, and you're expected to make a presentation.

Zakheim: What did you coordinate? Because I understand it was a very popular class.

Smith: Well, they said, "We already want you to be a leader of a group." I hadn't even warmed a seat as a member. They already said the man in charge of UCLA Extension is going to be in charge of a weekend retreat, and that's when they're going to talk to the people who are going to be coordinators. Anyway, the long and short of it was that I said to them, "I'm sorry I don't see a subject matter that I would particularly want to really do my work in." So they said, "Well," and they look around at each other, "why don't you make up something that you really would like to coordinate." They never spoke to me about being a member. And they said, "and you'll go to the weekend retreat for our coordinators." It was at a convent.

Zakheim: It was outside of Los Angeles?

Smith: Yes, it was right in Montecito. So, as a result, I was there for the weekend. I finally came back and told them, I said, "I know what it is I want." I said, "I want to combine a couple of things. It's got to be music, and it's got to be my Spanish. It's going to be 'The Music of Spain, from the 6th Century to the Present.'"

Zakheim: Oh, my goodness!

Smith: They were fourteen-week courses, two hours at a time, in a week.

Zakheim: Now that's an ambitious class for fourteen weeks.

Smith: Yes, but I knew that these were people who're going to go to the library. So they put it on the catalog. We had part of a session in which everybody had three minutes to tell what theirs would be — and all the members are listening. That's when they all convene to find out what's for the next term. And you could put a first choice and a second choice, because they would see who got in first, and you could be on a waiting list, or you'd go as a second choice into some other group this time, and try your luck next time. So, I got up and gave my little spiel for "The Music of Spain." I wanted to make it clear that I was just referring to a very narrow slice, and I said, "It's one more way to enjoy music, one more way that you can have to broaden your interests in music." Because I realized, who knows Spanish necessarily? Anyway, they filled my enrollment.

What I did was, I made a big map of Spain, I would put it on the board — you know, the ledge where the chalk goes — to which I would point, with every composer, where they came from in Spain. And if it was music that had something that was of that particular region, I would point to that, pronouncing everything correctly in Spanish. And so, I'd say to them, "When we are within these walls, I will correct your Spanish, because if you are not familiar with it, I don't want everyone thinking by my silence that that is the correct way to say it. I don't want you to not learn it correctly." So, that's what I would do. That was fine with everybody. And then, the first session, everybody picked their things. And then, you see, when they give it, they have to be open to questions from the group. And I remember the first ones — they would give their presentations the best that they could and had researched, and of course people who had been to Spain had an interest in it even

more — and I remember like I’m sitting there right now, they’d finish and then say, “Now, if you have questions, give them to Selma! [both laughing] She’s the only one in this place who will know the answer!” And I got very kind reviews. They wrote wonderful things about the whole course. And there was a waiting list. In fact [pointing], you see that glass bowl, that crystal bowl?

Zakheim: Yes.

Smith: That was from my assistant at one of the courses — Seba [Kolb-Tomkins]. She became a docent at the Skirball [Cultural Center]. She passed away some years ago — wonderful dear soul, wonderful person. Anyway, the person in charge, when we would all be signing up for things, had an admonition, “You may not repeat Selma’s course. Everyone has to have a chance.” Seba managed, don’t ask how [laughing] — she waited a few years, and she took it again. And no one said anything, and she said to me, “When you see me, it’s all been arranged [laughing].” At the time that my music was performed by the Brentwood–Westwood Symphony Orchestra,²⁰ while I was teaching there — they opened their [1986–87] season with my music — on that occasion, Seba said, “I’m going to make a party at my home, a reception after the concert, so all of the Plato people can come to me.” Because you can imagine *everybody* came, and she made a lovely party. She was up in the hills right there, not too far from the performance. Seba just wanted to do so many nice things for me. And, by the way, these works of art [on the wall] were from different people in my Spanish music courses. Even though they were in Asia, they wanted to bring me

²⁰ “Composer Tuning Up for Premiere,” *Los Angeles Times* (Oct. 16, 1986): WS4.

something. And I have gifts from my students in that course, “The Music of Spain.”
This one gave me this, and gave me that — .

Zakheim: How many times did you coordinate this class?

Smith: Oh, my gosh, well, I guess, once a year, for ten years.

Zakheim: How did the music appear in this class,
because you said that was the major
reason you wanted to give it.

Smith: I played the music that they learned about,
that somebody composed. I collected
some of it in Spain, and I got tapes from
other places. I took a lot from the UCLA
Music Library. If I opened those drawers
[pointing], they’re packed with those
cassettes. Packed.



At the Plato Society, August 27, 1990.

Zakheim: Ohhh! Well, those students were very lucky, very lucky.

Smith: Yes, and I would put them on, and time and again, they would say, “How do you time
it that the last note is just at the end?” And I said, “Well, just works out.” [both
laughing]

What I also did, whenever there was something doing in town that was a
Spanish performance, either dance or a Spanish program that was music — . And you
know the Romeros, the family, the guitarists, “The Royal Family of the Guitar”?

Pepe Romero, one of the sons, still does a lot, and I have a photo with the Romeros [showing it].

I introduced to them the name that was unknown — and played the music — of Plácido Domingo!



With the Romeros at a Hollywood Bowl rehearsal, August 1968 — (l.r.): Angel, Celedonio (father), SMS, Pepe, and Celin.

Zakheim: Oh!

Smith: With his photos and all about him. Yes! With a number of others. Alicia de Larrocha — the Spanish pianist — marvelous pianist — she passed away a few years ago. And would you believe, I had an encounter with her, too, at the Hollywood Bowl, in her dressing room. Seba was a good friend of someone who was a friend of *hers*. And so Seba had arranged for me to meet her because she also knew she would be delighted with my Spanish. And so, I had gone down to the dressing room during the intermission. Seba just waited outside. So I came in, and I met her and so on, and we certainly did exchange — . And then, she said, “Excuse me, I have to use the ladies’ room,” that is, her own bathroom there. It was in her dressing room area. And while she’s in the bathroom, a man comes to the door of her dressing room, and he said, “May I come in?” And I said, “Oh — ,” and he said, “May I take your hand?” He said, “I just want you to know, I can’t thank you enough for that wonderful performance.” She had changed her hair to blond, and he had a seat far enough back [both laughing] that he couldn’t tell one from another, and so being that it was her

dressing room that he was directed to — he came and wanted to have the thrill of his lifetime. And so he was holding my hand and telling me what it *meant* to him to hear the piano played so beautifully, and he said, “You don’t know what you’ve done for me tonight.” With that, he turned and walked out. I didn’t tell him — .

Zakheim: It was okay!

Smith: It was his luck because, he, forever after I’m sure, told people of his meeting with Alicia de Larrocha. This is the kind of thing that can happen to you, and it happened to me, with her. But I had my bunch there to hear her, and whenever anything was going on — . We had something at the Greek Theatre. They had once a whole Spanish production that came to L.A. I told my “Music of Spain” group that I arranged the whole thing for them, that all they had to do was show up, and we had our seats. These were always, as you know, nighttime or weekends, so this was something I could do and not interfere with the fact that at eight o’clock in the morning I’m going to be down in my office interviewing some witnesses for a trial. This is how I have lived my life, Roz.

Zakheim: This was wonderful, Selma.

Smith: And, of course, Tuesday I leave for San Francisco.

Zakheim: For the Society’s meetings?

Smith: Absolutely, the Board meeting. And also, I have a winner of our competition.

Zakheim: Oh, Okay!

Smith: Yes, who is going to take a photo with the Chief Justice, that I have already arranged. That's what I do: I arrange all of it so it can all be at the same place at the same time with the Chief Justice and Justice Werdegar.

Zakheim: Well, Selma, it's hard to believe, but we've covered all the subjects you laid out when we started our sessions a year and a half ago. I know you've saved one last topic for a final session with Justice Kathryn Werdegar next week. It's just perfect that you'll be able to bookend your oral history this way, finishing as you began, with a conversation with Justice Werdegar. So now that we're finishing the last of our own sessions together, I want to tell you what a delight it's been to have this time with you for a year and a half, learn about your life, and especially learn about a treasured friend who's done so much with her own life.

Smith: It's been quite a time reviewing all of these things and bringing them fresh to mind again. One never expects quite what the process will do, but that *is* what it does, and here we are now at the end of what we are doing together. Thank you so much for your patience and your cooperation and your, well, just being a good friend. And thank you again for all the time that we have spent together.

Zakheim: Thank you, Selma, It's been very special.

And now to conclude this session of Selma's oral history, we'll hear one of Selma's piano compositions. It's your very first piece, Selma, the same one you sang for us last time, "Tango in A minor, Opus 1." [\[Click below to play music.\]](#)