ALEXANDER FARIS

Composer/conductor

Interviewed by Teddy Darvas, with Alan Lawson recorded 21 February 1994

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SIDE 1, TAPE 1

TD: Can you tell us where you were born, your education, your youth and now you came into music

Alexander Faris: I was born in Caledon, in what is County Tyrone, in what is now Northern Ireland but there is a story in that I was born, I was conceived under a united Ireland and born under a divided one. Because they made the border while I was in my mother's womb. And they made it about a mile south of us. They drew the line and so I'm a British subject by about a mile and a bit

We lived there for about 4 years, and then sadly my father died. My father was a Presbyterian minister there. I hasten to say he was not a member of the Orange order or any of what you might think of extreme Protestantism. We came from an extreme liberal tradition. My grandfather had been a Gladstonian liberal and all that. Well my father died when I was four, we had already moved to another village. And then my mother went into Belfast, we all moved into Belfast, where my mother who had been a teacher in Victoria College Belfast, a big girl's school over there, resumed her old job and very soon became the headmistress of that school which she remained for 25 years.

Td: What was the date of your birth

Alexander Faris: 11 June 1921

My mother was an absolutely brilliant woman. She could do absolutely anything and there were four of us by this time. My brother was 8 years older than my self and my sister 5 years older, and another sister younger. So I went to a day school in Belfast, The Royal Belfast Academical

Institution, commonly known as Inst, which was an excellent school. And we had a very happy childhood.

The first indications of musicality on my part was coming home from church on Sundays, and playing the piano, we had an upright piano and the keyboard was about at my eye level and I could pick out Rock of Ages, or something and find when I went wrong and correct myself. And I soon began to get good at that. So my mother got the local music teacher from her school, Miss Winifred S Bell, whom I remember with tremendous affection and respect, to come around. And she reckoned I was going to be very musical. And I had my first piano lessons before I was 5. Miss Bell was a Scottish spinster of tremendous musical sensitivity, and I still when conducting and so on remember how she would have phrased something. And it has lasted me all my life, god rest her soul.

I then moved onto a more senior man, Mr George Smith who was a great character. He introduced me to harmony and counterpoint and so on, a bit of a wider musical education. Miss Bell was basically a piano teacher. Then came the great moment of big question arose, was I musical enough to take music up as a profession. So I was sent to a top musician in Northern Ireland, Norman Haye, a composer and critic. And he put me through my paces and wrote a very nice letter to my mother which I found recently, long after she was dead, saying yes I had the ability to be a professional musician but warn him that there will be bad times ahead. And indeed there have been. Whenever a bad time comes up I always think of Norman Haye's letter and said well nobody told me there wouldn't be bad times. So I think of that without resentment. And I haven't a moment's regret about the decision to take up music as a profession.

I went to Oxford and read music, a strange mixture of music and Greek. It was wartime and you had telescoped courses, we did a short course and then you went and did war service and that counted towards your degree. I went in the Irish guards, in the war in a tank from Normandy to the Baltic, where I was the signal officer. I had 80 stations tuned into me and each station was a tank or ambulance or medical vehicle or escort car or reconnaissance vehicle. And I had to get up an hour before everybody else to get these, if I was on air, to get these sleepy guardsmen to tune in. So we all got on

AL: What college were you at

Alexander Faris: I was at Christchurch.

TD: When you were at Oxford, did you compose or write things.

Alexander Faris: I didn't compose much. I should have composed more than I did. But composing at that time was difficult for me. I never felt I was going to be a composer. But we did harmony and counterpoint and history so I learned a fair amount.

Td: What was your instrument

Alexander Faris: Basically piano. I played the organ a little bit but I was never a natural organist. I couldn't co-ordinate my feet with my hands. So then I went into the army and when the war was over we ended up in Germany and it was then decided that rather than go back to Oxford and finish my degree there it would be more sensible for me to go to the Royal College of Music where music was a practical affair. I wanted to be a conductor.

Td: Can I interrupt. Can you tell the story of the German you captured.

Alexander Faris: My prisoner. Yes it was a strange story of the thing that can happen between two people in the middle of a World War. We entered a town called Valkenswaard, anyway it was on the way to Arnheim where we were trying to get to and we were the people who never got there. And we came to this town and the Germans had scarpered out, having set fire to two cigar factories. I didn't know at the time what they'd set fire to but the sky was ablaze at the far end of the town. So we went in in our tanks and we arrived at an open square place, it might have been Shepherd's Bush Green, a bit of grotty grass in the middle and some grotty blocks of flats round the outside. But we received a tremendous welcome and everybody was told that they could get out of the tanks and go into billets. And the inhabitants all opened the guardsmen with open arms, and with many cases more than that. Anyway I was the last person left in the tank, because of my job I had to stay to see that we still had a wireless link to the brigade and everything was as it should be. And the tanks were parked along two sides of the road. And suddenly a

German half track vehicle came charging down the road. And this was one German who hadn't escaped in time. He actually had been let through by a colleague of mine who got into terrible trouble I discovered that 40 years later. Anyway he came down in this vehicle between rows of our tanks. And he skidded, either because he wasn't a good driver, or he was nervous or the roads were slippy. Anyway he skidded off one tank on one side and ricocheted off it and went crump into a tank on the other side of the road. He jumped out and came running towards me. There was nobody else to run to although he could have run the other way presumably. However he came towards me and whereupon I drew my revolver which hadn't been fired since we were trained, I suppose it would have worked properly. And I put up my hand and in fluent German I said halt, one of the few German words I knew. Then I said hande hoch, because I'd heard Errol Flynn say it in a film. So he put his hands up and then he gave me, I put my hand out, pointed to his gun, he had an automatic, much better than ours they were, much better made. P38 they were. And he gave it to me. He behaved very punctiliously. And then, and he was scared out of his mind presumably, then he put his hands up again. And then I gestured to him, pointed to go in there, pointing to the battalion headquarters. And he wouldn't go. I didn't know what to do because I wasn't used to this kind of social situation. Then I realised he was agitated in some way. And why he was agitated, he was trying to point to something in his hip which was difficult because he had his hands up. And however I realised there was something which had to be dealt with. It turned out in this hip he had a great stick grenade with which he could have blown up quite a few of us and he wanted to give it to me because he realised he was going to be a prisoner and he didn't want to be caught with this thing on his person because he would have got into terrible trouble. Not half as bad trouble as I would have got into for letting him go in with it. And then I thought how curious. There we were, he looked about 19, I was 23, just two youngsters who didn't want to harm each other, the West was fighting the Nazis and all this great thing was going on, and we were just 2 kids really having to behave in a way which we'd never thought of. I don't know who he is, he may be somebody famous, he may be Helmut Kohl for all I know, the last I saw of him.

Td: You were a captain.

Alexander Faris: Not at that time, I eventually became a captain. I was a lieutenant at that time.

Td: You came back to the Royal College

Alexander Faris: Yes, I came back to the Royal College. I got special leave to go and do the entrance exam for the Royal College which was a piece of cake. I did it, because I was advanced beyond the stage say required to be an entrant. And I went there, what mainly I wanted was to be a conductor, so I joined the conducting class, and also studied piano, I did an ARCM and I was supposed to be studying composition with Herbert Howells but I still found composition a great, I was greatly inhibited about composing.

Td: Who were your teachers for conducting

Alexander Faris: Richard Austin was the conducting teacher to whom I owe quite a lot I must say. And Sir George Dyson was the director, and Herbert Howells was the great composition teacher of those days. But I eventually went to the director and said I don't think I'm doing any good doing composition, and he allowed me just to continue doing piano and conducting. And I came out top of the conducting class, I got a prize of £10 I remember for that.

And then they got a message from the Carl Rosa Opera Company that they wanted a chorus master, and this was two weeks before I was due to leave. And I was asked did I want this job. And I spoke to the director who was quite a humorous man and he strongly advised me against it. He said what you want to do is be a music director in a public school, and then cathedral organist and go to an Oxford college afterwards, or whatever. And these theatrical people, they never send letters, they do everything by telegram. And I think you would be much better to take a church organist kind of line, which was the last thing I wanted to do. So I immediately went out and accepted the Carl Rosa job, and I think the old boy was very wily, he was doing devil's advocate because he knew perfectly well I wasn't going to take his advice or that if I didn't want his advice I wouldn't take it. So that was that. So I went and joined the Carl Rosa

AL: Who was running it

Alexander Faris: It was Mrs Phillips by that time, HB Phillips had died and old Mrs Phillips was running it with her Derry accent, and I could speak that as well as she could. And Villem Tausky was the musical director at that time. And I stayed there for a year. And she kept promising me a chance to conduct, I used to conduct all the off stage music and I trained the chorus and I coached some principals, and after a year she hadn't given me a chance to conduct and I had allowed myself a year for this to happen, I thought if I don't get a chance I will go off and do something else, be a music critic.

Td: Can you explain about conducting off stage, because now you've got television. But the technique of being a chorus master off stage. What did a chorus master actually do in conjunction with the conductor.

Alexander Faris: Well as you know in many operas for instance Carmen and Butterfly and Tosca, there is a lot of off stage singing which has to be synchronised with the orchestra in the pit. And so you gather, the chorus master gathers the chorus backstage and in those days you had no electronic communication with the orchestra in the pit, so you had to hear them. I had to be near the prompt corner or somewhere and hear with one ear what the orchestra was playing and conduct so the chorus off stage would be in time. Subsequently, we got the orchestra miked and so at least you had a speaker back stage so it made it much easier. But I got so used to doing it without the speaker, it did sometimes just annoy me. That was the way it was done, and eventually now there is television backstage which is a whole different proposition.

Td: Can you tell the story of Joan Hammond

Alexander Faris: Joan Hammond used to do Madame Butterfly, and she sang beautifully but as she was the British ladies golf champion or something like that, she wasn't exactly physically cast for the part. Anyhow she was very musical. But she used to terrify me because she would not appear offstage when she was going to sing the entrance of Butterfly say until about a bar before she was due to start singing. And she never missed, but you had all the chorus ready in a particular position and you wanted her to stand in a certain position and she never came in time for you to get her to be where you wanted her to be. However she always did it beautifully and she was alright.

Td: did you have problems being a young man in his first job with any of the better known singers

Alexander Faris: Not really, I don't think, if you were any good at your job they respected that. And singers just wanted to be coached in their parts. I had no problems with the chorus, I enjoyed doing that. The only thing was, I did so much, we did the same operas over and over again, and in the case of Trovatore and Traviata, I got to know every chorus part so when new choristers arrived I used to terrify them by going in on their first morning without any music and just sit down and say right 2nd tenors, from here. I knew every note they had to sing. It wasn't very hard actually if you were doing it so much, and I had a good memory. It would have been more complicated if I hadn't but those two the chorus lines were easy to remember and I hammered them out so often. So I struck dread into the hearts of new choristers. I'd been there a year.

Then came the moment when, it was a year

Td: What year was this

Alexander Faris: 1948. And towards the end of 1948, and Mrs Phillips did something which I considered nasty to one of my colleagues, it made me very angry. I can't remember what it was actually but I got angry and I realised it was a year to the day since I'd decided I'd give myself a year. And so I wrote her a polite letter of resignation and said as she hadn't seen fit to give me chance to conduct I would leave. I said I will stay to the end of the tour if you like or if you want me to piss off now I'll go now. The next morning, this was in the King's Theatre, Southsea, I was called up to Mrs Phillips and we went up into the dress circle and we sat there and she said what's this all about. And she said Mr Faris I have great faith in your talent, you know that, and I will give you a chance to conduct and you don't need to worry. I said Mrs Phillips, you've been saying that once a fortnight for the last year, why should it be true this time. And she said Mr Faris, I always thought you were such a nice young man. And the result of it was that I stayed on and she said she would give me a chance to conduct and then she tried to renege from that. And old Villem Tausky made her stick to her word, so I got my first chance to conduct and opera which

was Madame Butterfly which I did at the Lewisham Hippodrome.

AL: Who was cast

Alexander Faris: We had Elizabeth Teilman, Alitha de la Fuente, John Mervin, tenor, and Hubert Duncally, baritone, but one or two older people would come in, Gwen Catley used to come and sing Gilda in Rigoletto, and sometimes even old Headle Nash came in once or twice and he still sang beautifully, his voice was going but he sang with great charm, and Tudor Davis also came occasionally. They came as guest artists usually to rescue the situation, if somebody else. There must be more, that's all I can for now.

Td: What happened after that.

Alexander Faris: The Rosa ran out of money. They weren't getting any Arts Council support because Mrs Phillips used to antagonise the Arts Council, so they had to cut down and the two youngest members of the music staff, I was the youngest, got the sack. We got made redundant. I did get taken back a year later at twice my previous salary. So it wasn't exactly a disgrace, it was a money thing. This is when a big change came for me because I very soon got the job of conducting in the West End and this was a revival, not exactly a revival but a return to the West End of *The Song Of Norway* which had been a great success and had done a tour and was coming back to London for a limited season. So I conducted that at the Palace Theatre, that was my first West End show

Td: What year was that

Alexander Faris: That was in the summer of 1949. I did a long tour of that. And then I did a tour of Lilac Time. I was always doing these tours of decomposed music of classical musicians. But one learnt a lot and then I began to do new musicals. I went back to the Carl Rosa for another year and then they collapsed again so I went back to the West End. And the next main thing was

Td: Touring with the Carl Rosa and musicals, did you have to pick up the musicians locally. Or did you have a travelling orchestra.

Alexander Faris: Different in each case. With Carl Rosa we toured our own orchestra of about 36 and occasionally got in extra players. I used to go in and occasionally play percussion in Carmen for instance and Butterfly. Butterfly, this was if I wasn't conducting, there were 5 great cymbal crashes I had to do, I worked out at 1sh/7d per clash. Then with the musicals we normally toured a few and got the local orchestra, it might the Coventry Hippodrome Orchestra, one of the better ones actually, and we would have a rehearsal on Monday morning. We usually stayed two weeks in each of the big towns and occasionally longer. The first Monday there would be a rehearsal. And on one occasion, with a musical called Sally, we only took 3 people and we got the local orchestras, this was at the palace, Manchester, and on the rehearsal in the morning, I had arranged a special arrangement of the national anthem which we always played in those days to suit the small combination, 15 people, and in it the brass played the first 6 bars which they normally don't do, they normally come in da, da, da, Send him victorious, it was him in those days. So we rehearsed it and on the first night, the Monday night the brass played it, but on the second night they didn't play it, they didn't come in for their bit. So I said what was the matter with the brass, couldn't you see the parts when you were standing up, giving them a face saver. And the first trumpeter was an old man who had been a bit bothersome on the first rehearsal, he said a lot of bloody nonsense. 30 bloody years I've been here and the brass never played the first 6 bars of the national anthem and I'm not going to. I said will you please play them for the rest of the season which was 2 weeks or whatever, so they did, somewhat reluctantly. And it so happened I wanted a trumpet player to play a little demo disk that we were doing, some of us, so I approached the second trumpet who was a younger player who was quite good, he was better than the old boy. I said would he like to do this job, pay Musicians Union rate. He said yes he would love to do it. I said that's great, by the way it would be just as well not to mention it to the first trumpet because you heard the little row we had on Monday and besides you're a better player. And he said he's my father. I just wanted the earth to open up. He laughed and I said you know you're a better player. Fortunately I had said that first.

Td: This would have been 1950

Alexander Faris: 1951 or 1952. Then I got a chance to write some music for a documentary called *Robinson's England.*

Td: You started with god save the king, you'd started composing and arranging.

Alexander Faris: Started arranging anyway. And then John Hawkesworth who had heard stuff I'd written during the war, which was just tunes for the army which I didn't regard as composing at all. I just thought if they wanted tunes, they could have a tune. But John rang up and said would I do a documentary about the Robinson drawings. And it was called *Robinson's England.* I was really quite frightened of that however I did it and it went ok.

Td: Did you find it difficult, did you get measurements from the editor, did you find it difficult to work out timing.

Alexander Faris: In that case, I can't quite remember, I didn't have to do many fine timings, I think I wrote a basic theme and I think they edited the film to that theme. Robert Hamer directed it. And he said we want a tune that sounds like a cross between an English folksong and a Haydn quartet. And so I did my best. The ironic thing was that little film was used as the short for the Royal Film Performance of that year. So the very first professional piece of music I'd ever written was played at the Royal Film Performance. By this time I was in America, I'd got a fellowship to go to the States to study composition. And partly on the strength of this film which somebody in America had seen. And over there by this time I had grown out of my inhibitions about composition and I had a marvellous teacher there who nurtured me, a composer called Bernard Wagenaar. And I was there for a year

AL: Where was that

Alexander Faris: I studied privately with him in New York. He was a professor at the Julliard School but I studied privately with him and lived in New York. And I had introductions to many of the big orchestrators and somecomposers in the theatre world, in fact I got to know Aaron Copeland among others very well. But the great, Robert Russell Bennett was the king of orchestrators then, there were two Robert Russell Bennett and Don Walker and I got to know both of them extremely well. And Russell

Bennett invited me up to Boston to stay while they were rehearsing, or doing the out of town production of a show called *The Bells Are Ringing* with Judy Holliday. And I saw him, an amazing man, he had just finished orchestrating *My Fair Lady* and beforehand he had done *The King And I* and *South Pacific* and *Oklahoma*.

Well I was in Boston with Russell Bennett as a looker on while they got the show *Bells Are Ringing*, getting it into shape as always happens prior to a New York tour. We spent a number in the stalls watching a new number, oh Bennett was present to arrange additional music, at his invitation I was a hanger on, we spent the morning in the stalls watching a new number evolve. Bennett had taken precise notes of every change of tempo, each new requirement of rhythm and dynamics. They were making a small song number into a big dance routine. The rehearsal ended at 1 pm and there were 480 bars of new music. When do you want it asked Bennett. 10, tomorrow morning, replied Jerome Robins who was the director. Later that evening I knocked on the door of Russell Bennett's room, a few Martinis on the previous day's journey from New York had put us on Christian name terms. I said I won't keep you, I just popped in to say goodnight. He said, no, no, come in, take a seat. He was sitting in an upright armchair, a tall silver haired figure in his mid 60s. I attributed his evident fitness to the fact that in spite of a game leg he was an ardent tennis player. The score on which he was working was supported by a board on his knees. He used a fountain pen. During the next hour, he chatted as he wrote. Only once did I see him erase a note with a razor blade. He was writing for an orchestra of about some 40 players, using 24 staves scoring paper, first flute on the top line, double bass at the bottom. When he came to the end of a page he would end it to a copyist, working through the night in the next room. He would then write the next page with total recall of what had gone before. There was no referring back, the previous page had gone and he just remembered what he had written, the last note of every instrument on the previous page. This was something I could never have done, not at least with a score of that size. Russell said an orchestrator had to have a good memory. While writing he talked about old times, particularly of England going to Wimbledon with Ivor Novello and what the taxi driver said and former shows and stars and directors. Eventually we said good night and when we met in the morning he had written 60 pages of score, 8 bars to the page.` I was told he earned £25 a bar, but

perhaps it was dollars. And I had met one of my great heroines Judy Holliday. That was that little incident.

Td: Was Judy Holliday nice

Alexander Faris: She was charming, I only met her for a few seconds, she was very nervous about her voice and her part and everything. But she was awfully nice.

Td: How long did you stay

Alexander Faris: I stayed in New York for a year, exactly a year. I went by sea both ways on the Atlantic, I suppose it was the only sea you could go on really. And came back and in New York I had seen Bernstein's Candide and because of various connections, it was coming to London and I got the job of conducting it the following year, 1959. And it didn't run very long, it hadn't run very long in New York, but it was kind of a prestige flop. It was quite nice not having to go on and on doing it for years. It was great enjoyment, a wonderful score.

Td: Did Bernstein come over

Alexander Faris: He didn't come over until after we opened, he came and did a bit of a post mortem in Claridges Hotel the following morning, he was alright. And we did get a bit involved because we did a television show, was it called *Monitor* with Huw Wheldon. Yes we did the first part of the show on Monitor and Lennie Bernstein talked and was interviewed and he made a nice complement about the orchestra so that was alright.

Td: Did you meet Bernstein in New York

Alexander Faris: I don't think I met him until he came over here, I'm slightly vague about that.

Td: This is 1958.

Alexander Faris: 1959, in 1958 I did *Irma La Douce* with

Td: You've skipped, coming back from America you did *Irma La Douce* first.

Alexander Faris: Yes, that's right. Elizabeth Seale, Keith Michele, Clive Revill, Ronnie Barker, Julian Orchard.

Td: While you were in America, you had the offer of something to come back to when the scholarship was finished.

Alexander Faris: I think there was a bit of a gap, I didn't have an offer ready to come back to but the *Candide* connection had been established and then when later when Jeffrey Russell decided definitely to bring it over, he came to me to conduct it.

Then the next major move was going to Saddlers Wells, this was 1960, Norman Tucker whom I'd met before and didn't have a job for me on that occasion sent for me and said they were doing a new programme of operetta productions at the Wells, they hadn't done it before, well they'd done the *Merry Widow* but that was all. And they wanted a conductor and producer who had both worked both in the theatre and the West End and Wendy Toye was the choice of producer, director I think they would now call it, and I had worked with her and so I got the job. And we did Orpheus in the Underworld, which opened at Brighton on Easter Monday, 1960, one of the dates I can remember. The cast of Saddlers Wells had no faith in the show, it was something quite different for them until they heard the audience reaction and it became one of their favourite things to do.

Td: That production was musically and every way the most amazing departure, going to the Underworld and riding on the tube. And who as it danced, had the bath on stage

Alexander Faris: June Bronhill had a bath on stage.

Td: But it was the most amusing programme.

Alexander Faris: In its time in France, it did have topical jokes of the day then, so we had, when they went down to hell, in this case they went down in an underground tube and arrived in hell. Then there was a great argument about the can can which is never called a can can in the score, it's called the infernal gallop. And in the show, it was never a thing of girls with flappy skirts and garters and that sort of thing. It was all these devils in hell in mad costumes, so that we did. But because Wendy wanted something to make it a bit modern and I suggested why don't we just for 16 bars of the music, do 16 bars of jive and then go back to the original form of the music, the point

being when, in the original show in France the can can music must have come as a terrible shock. Immediately before it he does a very graceful 17th century minuet and then comes in this terrific what was then very far out pop music, the can can, but to us nobody is not a shock, everybody knows it, it's a classic. So we wanted something to indicate the shock the original audience must have felt. So I orchestrated a bit of jive on the theme of the can can and slowed the whole thing down, and it brought the house down, ever night the audience used to break into applause. So it achieved its purpose but it was strongly criticised by some po faced critics. Norman Tucker was never very sure about it actually, but it's success justified it. And then we played the rest of the can can as Offenbach had written it.

SIDE 2, TAPE 1

Td: we have been talking about Orpheus in the Underworld, you were a principle conductor at Saddlers Wells.

Alexander Faris: Yes, I was a principal conductor of that, I must have done it about 400 times because we took it out to Australia and New Zealand where we did it every night.

Td: You were also conducting the serious operas, they did.

Alexander Faris: Yes, I did Madame Butterfly again there and The Barber of Seville. On one day, I must have made a record because I did the Barber of Seville, the dress rehearsal of The Barber of Seville in the morning, which we did at the Scala Theatre which we were using as a rehearsal theatre, took a taxi to Saddlers Wells and had a sandwich and did a matinee of Orpheus in the Underworld and then had a bit of a rest and did an evening of Iolanthe. That was 3 operas in one day. I don't know if anybody else has done that.

Td: By now Gilbert and Sullivan was out of copyright.

Alexander Faris: that is a whole special thing. The copyright of Gilbert and Sullivan, the copyright of Gilbert actually was the crucial thing, expired on the last day of 1961. Sullivan's music was already out of copyright. So on the 1st day of 1962, New Year's Day, we did the first ever non copyright professional performance of a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, up to then it could only be done by **D'Oyle** Carte, because they held the rights. And we opened at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford on Avon. And it was a blizzard there, the ground was covered with snow and ice and I remember buying, it was a big break for me because there was tremendous publicity surrounding this and I remember buying a stud ash walking stick so I didn't great my leg on the ice. I was determined not to have an accident before this big first night. And on the night the trains were late coming from London, so a lot of the audience was held up. So they held back the opening and the show ran late, overran by 11 minutes, and the BBC Home Service as it was then held back the 10 o'clock news for Iolanthe to finish. I thought life has not bee in vain.

Td: Who was in the cast of Iolanthe.

Alexander Faris: Elizabeth Harwood, alas now dead, a lovely lady, and she was only 22 then. She was Phyllis. Patricia Kern was Iolanthe. Julian Moy was Stefan. Dennis Dowling was the Lord Mount Arrowrat. Eric Shilling was the chancellor. And so on.

Iolanthe was at Stratford and then came in to London and then went on tour, the Wells did two tours of the Continent and it was very questionable whether they would take Iolanthe to Germany, the main tour was in Germany. And they didn't think the Germans would like it, and the night before the decision had to be made the German ambassador to London came to see the show and he said you must take this show, the Germans will love it. So the decision was made. So we went and I remember we opened in Stuttgart, actually we opened this night before with *The Rake's Progress,* I think Colin Davis conducted that, the opening night. And the next night was Iolanthe, and I remember going down, being ushered down by a theatre usher from the prompt corner down into the orchestra pit where we had to wait for our cue to go in, green light or something. And I remember standing there thinking this is going to be the most embarrassing night of my life, they're going to hate the music and they're not going to understand any of the jokes. Anyway with stiff upper lip, a nice holiday in Germany and just go through with it. And I went in and I don't know what sort of overture they expected, I think they expected a noisy rumpty tumpty tump. And the overture to Iolanthe which is one of only 3 that Sullivan wrote himself actually begins with this beautiful misterioso thing and then does a Mendelsonian woodwind bit and it's absolutely charming. I realised about 20 seconds after we started we had the total rapt attention of the audience. And at the end the overture got a very good round of applause and when we came to the first funny line there was a big laugh on it. I thought it's all English and American diplomats and people but it wasn't that because throughout the show they didn't laugh at jokes where they had to know the reference but they did laugh at jokes where you only had to know English, so you could tell the Germans were laughing. And afterwards, at the end I had the biggest ovation that I'd ever experienced in any theatre for anything. And I spoke to, a friend of mine who was John Cranko who was then the ballet director at Covent Garden and I'd worked with him and I said why did they like it so much. And he said they love operetta but the standard here is so bad that they just didn't know what had hit them. And we had all our best singers and it was

our own orchestra who knew it and they were on their best playing. And so that was nice to know. And the same thing repeated itself, after Stuttgart we went to Hamburg and to Brussels, but in Germany we went to Berlin and then we went to, later we went to Vienna and Prague.

Td: How many operas were you touring

Alexander Faris: I think 3, it was usually 3 operas on tour. We did Peter Grimes, The Rakes Progress and Iolanthe.

Td: You only conducted Iolanthe

Alexander Faris: I only conducted Iolanthe.

Td: You mentioned John Cranko and you said you worked with him before, can you tell us about John Cranko

Alexander Faris: I worked with him at the Royal Ballet, the Opera House

Td: You skipped that. You didn't tell us you were at the Royal Opera House

Alexander Faris: I was, it coincided with, at the end of 1960 and the beginning of 1961, I was doing some nights of Orpheus or La Vie Parisienne at the Wells and other nights of ballet at the Garden

Td: Was La Vie Parisienne also Wendy Toye

Alexander Faris: Yes. We were regarded as a team and Malcolm Pride again designed it. We were a sort of 3 some.

Td: How did you get into ballet conducting.

Alexander Faris: I can't remember, I can't quite remember. I'd conducted for dancers in various West End shows and there must have been some choreographer who recommended me to conduct ballet or something.

Al: Wendy Toye

Alexander Faris: It could have been Wendy, she might have had a hand in it. I honestly can't remember. Anyway I enjoyed conducting for dancers very much. And in the end they offered me a permanent job as principal conductor of

the second ballet there but I turned it down because it was going to involve too much touring and the money wasn't very good and the chances of promotion were nil because Jack Lansbury were going to stay forever as principle conductor of the whole thing, and good luck to him. But also I was beginning to get film and television work to do. So I had a long talk with John Tooley who was the person in charge at the time and with regret I said no. So we parted on very good terms.

Td: When did you start doing films, apart from this documentary

Alexander Faris: The first one was *The Quare Fellow*, Brendan Behan

Td: What year was this

Alexander Faris: I haven't put a date on it here, but I can tell you roughly, because I know where I was living at the time, it would have been 1960, just before doing *Orpheus* or something like that

Td: Who directed *The Quare Fellow*

Alexander Faris: The producer was Otto Platschkes. Would the director have been Michael Truman. Definitely Otto.

Td: Can you talk about how you found that feature, music the coooperation and how you got measurements and decided on where music should go and the type of music.

Alexander Faris: The procedure normally that I experienced, I would be called in at the rough cut stage. I always wished that they had got me in at a much earlier stage, I had lived with the film a bit before it got to that. That did happen later on when we did *Priest Of Love*. So we would watch a rough cut with no music or occasionally with some music which had been laid on as a temporary measure. But actually it was better to see it with none because then you had a totally open mind. And then I would sit beside the director and maybe the producer and editor, and the director and we would see it and sometimes stop at a certain point, and say what do you think, do you think we need music in that scene. I always said no, if there was any question about it I always said no. Partly because I thought a lot of films at that time had too much music. And

partly because I was scared of the amount of time I had to write the music. If they wanted to overrule me, and usually there were places where you definitely wanted music. But I had some strong ideas. There was a scene I remember in *Georgie Girl*

Td: We'll come to that later.

Alexander Faris: So then having decided what sequences would have music and what kind of music, then the editor would then send me measurements. And I got quite used to writing music that would fit to measurements. The secret I soon discovered for myself was to write what Teddy and myself have both called elastic music. Because if you wrote one carefully constructed bit which couldn't be cut and you didn't want to be mucked around with, you then wrote long notes which could be of any length, and it didn't matter if they were a bit shorter or a bit longer, so that is where the cuts could take place. And sometimes if it was a complicated little fugal bit it would be very messy to cut and the editor wouldn't thank you for leaving him to that I think I'm right in saying.

Td: I think you call them elastic bars

Alexander Faris: Elastic bars. The slow bars in between, elastic bars. It's a bit like you have to have a the zip done up but you can have a bit of elastic spread round your trousers.

Td: Did you conduct your own.

Alexander Faris: I did. I think on every occasion, which I'm not sure is a very good idea. I would rather like if I were to do another one, I would rather like to have a conductor that I trusted and sit and hear the music and be able to do quick rewrites or adjustments. Or if an editor said could that be a bit different, if you're conducting you're too full of sweat and you have to make too quick a decision. If you're watching it objectively and somebody else is looking after the conducting, you can say can you just rehearse the next bit and I'll alter these 5 bars.

Td: It used to be very much that you had a conductor and most composers began to love conducting their own stuff and it has become very much

Alexander Faris: There was a bit of that, it was also that it was cheaper to have the same conductor as composer because you got a package deal. There was a touch of that involved.

Td: *Georgie Girl* followed Quare Fellow which was also Otto Platschkes.

Alexander Faris: Yes, there was some distance in time inbetween but Otto remembered the theme of *The Quare Fellow*, and that was directly why I got *Georgie Girl* to do.

Incidentally I did not write the credit tune for *Georgie Girl*. That was done by the Seekers, it was a special thing but I did all the background score.

Td: Meanwhile you were conducting at Saddlers Wells and doing the film music.

Alexander Faris: At one time I was conducting at Saddlers Wells and doing *Robert and Elizabeth* which was about the biggest musical I ever did. And some nights doing *Orpheus In The Underworld*.

Td: Shall we talk about *Robert and Elizabeth*. Because Ron **Grainer** I know was a great friend of yours. You arranged and conducted.

Alexander Faris: Ron Grainer was the composer, Ronald was Millar was the lyric writer and script writer. And Wendy Toye was the director again, the old team together again. It became evident at an early stage that a lot of rewriting was being done and Ron Grainer was going to do all the orchestration himself. And I was with him in his flat one day and he said there is so much new music to be written I don't know how I'm going to get the orchestration done and would you like do some. I said I would love to do some. By this time I was pretty well established as an orchestrator anyway. And so I did a certain proportion of it, I suppose about a fifth and I didn't ask for a credit for that because I thought I suppose it's part of a musical director's job, to help out. And I was pleased to be asked to do it. And when the credits came out it said orchestrations by Ron Grainer and Alexander Faris. And that was Ron's doing. He had asked for a credit for me. He had paid me out of his own money but I hadn't asked and he made the management give me a credit. It looked as if I had done

an equal amount to him. I might have done a fifth of the whole thing but not more. But that was typical of his generosity. He was an awful nice man. And funnily enough that credit has stood me in credit if you like over the years because people have remembered subsequently, oh you did the orchestrations for *Robert And Elizabeth*, and it's almost helped me get more jobs. I've been eternally grateful to dear old Ron for that.

Td: You were still at Saddlers Wells

Alexander Faris: I left Saddlers Wells in 1966. I did a bit more of La Vie Parisienne at the ENO where they'd moved in 1967. I was got in to do some performances because they had a lousy conductor and the staff were practically in revolt, the cast. So somebody said bring Sandy back, so I did some there which was very nice.

Td: Were you still on *Robert And Elizabeth*

Alexander Faris: *Robert And Elizabeth* was off by then.

Td: What did you do next

Alexander Faris: Then I did *He Who Rides A Tiger* with Tom Bell and Judy Dench, directed by Michael Truman. And then it wasn't long before we came to *Upstairs Downstairs*, that was 1972. And that music got an award, the Ivor Novello Award for the Best Theme from TV or Radio in 1975 and 1976. I had to wait for one when there wasn't one better.

Td: Tell me about writing the music, I believe the theme song was changed.

Alexander Faris: I was called into a production meeting at which there was John Hawkesworth and the people from Essex Music and people from London Weekend, Harry Rabinovich. There was a whole group of people sitting around, and Freddy Shaughnessy, the scriptwriter, so they said we would like a tune, we have this Edwardian story and at that time it was likely to be called 165 Eton Place, because somebody didn't like the title *Upstairs Downstairs*. Anyway we'd like a tune rather Elgarian in character, Edwardian in tone, rather Elgarian. And then we would want another theme. That would be the so to speak upstairs theme, and the downstairs theme we don't know. We'll leave that to you. I went away and I wrote a theme as best I could in the

manner of Elgar. I took it in and I wasn't terribly happy with it. Nor were they. And somebody said it's a bit too Eric Coates and not enough Elgar. So I wrote another one overnight which was the one they used. I think I knew in my heart, I was lucky to get a second chance, they made it clear to me what. Then they said we don't know what to do for the downstairs servant hall tune. I said I think you should have an Edwardian music hall type of tune. And I wrote them one, and somebody suggested the title *What Are We Going To Do With Uncle Arthur*, I can't sing in tune, anyway I wrote that and they all loved that. There was no problems with that one. And the two have remained in use ever since. Got some royalties coming next week they told me.

Td: Talking of Elgar, you told me once as a young man you actually heard Elgar.

Alexander Faris: In January 1934 in the Ulster Hall in Belfast, I was a school boy of 13, and Elgar came and he conducted the Enigma Variations, among other things. And it was the first time I ever heard that work and Elgar died about a month later. I know it's strange to think the Enigma Variations should sound strange and modern but to a 13 year old Irish schoolboy it did. And Elgar died at the beginning of February I think and Holst and Delius also died the same year. It was a bad year for British music.

Td: After *Upstairs, Downstairs* what happened then.

Alexander Faris: I went onto the *Duchess Of Duke Street*, another and then I went on

Td: Can you tell us a bit about *The Duchess Of Duke Street*.

Alexander Faris: The music was actually a rewrite of a piece of music I'd written before, for the show called *R Loves J*. There must have been quite a time lapse because *R Loves J*, a Ustinov show which went on in 1973 in Germany, and then it went on at Chichester and it didn't.

Td: Let us talk about *R Loves J* which was the Ustinov *Romanoff and Juliet* wasn't it

Alexander Faris: Yes. After *Upstairs Downstairs*, I got the idea of trying to write an operetta myself. I approached Peter Ustinov to use his play *Romanoff Loves Juliet*. Also

Julian More who had done the lyrics of *Expresso Bongo*. We produced this musical which was eventually called *R Loves J*.

Td: Who as the we

Alexander Faris: Peter Ustinov, Julian More and myself. And it was first performed in Germany in Munich and it didn't do very well then. And then it came to Chichester, John Clements who was directing the Chichester Festival wanted a show and he wanted Wendy Toye and he had Topol on the backburner and we did this musical at Chichester and it got pretty bad notices. It went well with the public and Harold Fielding wanted to bring it in to London but it never happened. It had changed so much in character during all this time that I was glad it didn't come in because I didn't think it was what I ever intended it to be and I think we were well out of it. So then I was asked to write The *Duchess Of Duke Street* music and there was a theme in *R Loves J* which seemed suitable and I got the other collaborators to agree that I could use it, in case our show was ever to come in again, which it hasn't, and that became *The Duchess Of Duke Street* music.

And after that came *Wings*, a different gang of people altogether. The producer was Peter Cregeen and various directors doing different episodes. The cast included Tim Woodward, Michael Cochrane, Gemma Jones' brother Nick Jones were the three flying people, two officers and a sergeant. That as that. And it was working with a completely lot of people. It was a lovely show when it was in the air with the old First World War planes. It was an amazingly expensive show to do because they had some real planes flying a few yards and then they had these terrific models flown by radio, operated by radio. And that I believe is about to come out again on Sky or UK Gold.

Td: With these series did you have lots of sessions or did you pre-record so many things and they used them all the time.

Alexander Faris: We pre-recorded, there would just be one music session and they had a whole lot of, they decided on that, on the sequences.

AL: Almost like library music.

Alexander Faris: Almost except it was specially written for the series before.

Al: They suddenly didn't recall let's do for this episode, we need some more music

Alexander Faris: Not in that case, not that I remember. The trouble is that these things aren't quite in order and I don't remember when.

[pause]

In 1977 I was asked by Decca Records to do orchestrations for an album for Luciano Pavarotti and these were to be orchestrations for a full symphony orchestra which in the end was the Philharmonia of 17th, 18th and 19th century songs, mostly Italian, not all which had originally been written with a keyboard accompaniment, either piano or earlier ones harpsichord maybe. So I did this and we recorded it, I had a few meetings with Pavarotti and rehearsals to show him what I was doing, and we recorded it at the Kingsway Hall in 1977. The conductor was Pierre Agamba, in this case I stood by to make any necessary alterations in the orchestrations which fortunately were few and far between but those that were needed were good and helped. And I wouldn't have wanted to have been conducting and dealing with that sort of thing at the same time. We had 3 nights at least of recording and recorded, about, maybe it was 4, I think it was 3 nights and we aimed to do 4 numbers at each session, and on the last night Pavarotti got a terrible gastro-enteritis. And he was really in a terrible state, agony and the whole orchestra was sitting there waiting and he was in the dressing room, and somebody offered him a cup of tea and he couldn't take that but he got a kettle and held it on his great tummy to keep it warm and he was going ah, ah, ah. And two doctors were sent for. And he said to his secretary cancel the doctors, Anna Maria I'm dying. It was like the torture scene in the second act of Tosca, with his great yells of agony. He was in agony poor man, but he was dramatising it a bit as well I think. And then however, he pulled himself together eventually, he came on stage, he was standing on the stage, the orchestra on the floor and I was standing on the floor with the music spread out on the stage just near him. I said to him how are you. He said how are you. Then he did, the point of the story is, he did the recordings and everybody thought he was marvellous. But later on he

refused Decca permission to put these things on record, to issue the numbers he sang while he was ill. They kept doing remixing, when he was in New York inviting him into swankey studios, saying we've got a wonderful remix. And they had all the best equipment. And nothing would move him. And six years went by before, after six years Decca finally agreed to re record the 3 numbers that he didn't like his own voice on. I think they got an ad hoc orchestra, a session orchestra and a different conductor and he redid them. So the thing was not issued until 1983 but it's out now and it's made a bit of money.

Td: We're at the Pavarotti thing, this was more or less after *The Duchess Of Duke Street* and *Wings*, was it.

Alexander Faris: Yes, indeed. About the same time I also did an arrangement of Silent Night for Placido Domingo and the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the Chichester Cathedral Choir which was put out on BBC 1 at Christmas Eve of 1980. And in the meantime I had been conducting a revival of *Kismet* which I had reorchestrated based on the original orchestrations.

AL: Where was that

Alexander Faris: that was in the Shaftesbury Theatre in 1978. I conducted *The Great Waltz* in 1970, that was at Drury Lane. I did that for about 18 months. And I conducted *Billy* at Drury Lane with Michael Crawford.

Td: *The Great Waltz*, wasn't that a thing you had to take over at a moment's notice.

Alexander Faris: I had to take over the whole show at about 48 hours notice yes.

Td: Problems with the original director

Alexander Faris: Yes. *The Great Waltz,* I had been offered it originally to conduct and I didn't want to do it for various reasons

Td: Is this the theatre version of the film

Alexander Faris: Yes. The same thing. And I had been offered by Harold Fielding the job of conducting it but I was either busy with other things or I didn't particularly

want to do it. And then suddenly one night, at midnight, Friday night, Harold Fielding said we're in terrible trouble, our conductor has resigned, and could you possibly conduct *The Great Waltz* on Monday night. And this was Friday night. So I said, he said could you even do it for two weeks. So I went in on Saturday morning and worked solidly over the whole weekend with the two composers, and members of the cast

Td: It was the premiere

Alexander Faris: It was the first preview on Monday night and Fielding offered to cancel it even. I said go ahead we'll do it, but I don't want any recriminations if things don't go quite right. Anyway we did it. And it went remarkably well in the circumstances, nothing went badly wrong. But we were able to get it better in the next few days. The first night was on the Thursday and that established a good relationship between myself and Harold Fielding ever since and I stayed with that for about 15 months. It had Sari Barabas who was Hungarian.

Td: Did she sing every night, that's remarkable for an opera singer.

Alexander Faris: Yes she sang every night. And then at the same theatre, I did about 18 months of that and a few years later I did another 18 month stint of *Billy*, the musical with Michael Crawford

Td: Didn't you have to take that over as well because Michael Crawford had problems.

Alexander Faris: Yes Michael Crawford had a great hate relationship with the first conductor.

Td: Shall we talk a bit about Michael Crawford because he was supposed to be very difficult but you found

Alexander Faris: He was a great perfectionist, and he still is no doubt, and he was always having trouble with the music and accusing the conductor. And the previous conductor would argue with him and say it was exactly as it should be. And so when I came along, he began, obviously, there were tiny discrepancies in tempo to begin with and I wasn't used to getting it spot on immediately and he had to do some dancing which he found difficult. But he used to

expect the same row from me as he would get from the previous conductor and I just didn't, if he said something was too fast or too slow I just said oh really Michael, you think so, we'll do it a bit faster tomorrow but don't blame me if it's too fast. Gradually instead of coming up to me with this aggressive approach he would come and say Sandy, I don't know if I'm wrong but was it a bit slower tonight and one night he finally said, he went on for a few minutes talking, oh I found it so difficult to do, he had what he called the Gene Kelly dance and the Fred Astaire dance, I found it so difficult to do those. And he went on and on a bit and I didn't say a word but he ended up saying, well maybe it was only me. So he knew I would always assume it might be me. That was the whole thing, as it always might. But in the end we had a very good, well before long we had an excellent relationship and indeed I did his next musical with him which was *Flowers For Algernon* which only ran a matter of weeks.

Td: What was *And So To Bed*

Alexander Faris: That was way back, in 1952. That was a tour.

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SIDE 3, TAPE 4

Alexander Faris: I thought we could talk about Gilbert and Sullivan. At the age of 11 I played the role of Katisha in the *Mikado*. And I've since conducted the *Mikado* in Turkey and Canada and with D'Oyly Carte and I don't know where else.

Let's jump over the years and go to *The Yeoman Of The Guards* which I conducted at the City of London Festival in the moat of the Tower of London, outdoor production, 1978, with Tommy Steele as Jack Point. And various other opera singers, mostly from Saddlers Wells in fact on that occasion. It was directed by Anthony Besch and the choreographer was Gillian Lynne. And that was very moving because we used in the funeral march of the finale of the first act we put a search light on the church tower and used the actual bell which tolled at the execution of Ann Boleyn and things and we timed it to the orchestra. It was a very complicated business because only four people were allowed to toll that bell, four special Yeoman of the Guards, not just any yeoman, and we had a music repetiteur standing by him and another one in the orchestra giving the beat to me, because there was a delay of several seconds before the sound reached us. First of all there was a delay from the moment the man pulled the rope to the moment the bell rang, and then there was a delay before the sound of the bell got to the orchestra. But it all worked amazingly well and it was very moving because it always happened just as dusk was falling and that lovely funeral march is going along with the bell tolling.

Td: What was Tommy Steele like as a singer

Alexander Faris: He was extremely professional and very good. I remember he came to my flat to rehearse once and he started, one of the numbers which is very precise and quick words, and he started jazzing it around a little bit. I said Tommy if you do that the critics will tear you to shreds. He said thank you for telling me, I won't do it.

And he didn't. He was most punctilious and very anxious to sing in the style of the period and not to do his own sort of more modern style. He was very consistent throughout and extremely professional and we never had a cross word. After that it wasn't long before, that was 1978, it wasn't long before Freddy Lloyd, apart from Dame Bridget, the boss of the D'Oyly Carte invited me to lunch at the Garrick Club of all places and asked if I would like to be the musical director of the company's upcoming London season. So I was rather thrilled by this and it did indeed come to pass. It was painful in some ways because it meant overriding the existing musical director who took it very well and subsequently became a great friend and still is

Td: This is after Isidore Godfrey.

Alexander Faris: Isidore Godfrey had long since gone.

Td: What was the name of this

Alexander Faris: Fraser Goulding. And he has got his own career now. He does a lot of concerts in the Barbicon. He stayed on as associate musical director or something, but they'd had a bit of an unfortunate time the company at that stage.

Td: Were the productions still as stilted. Did they have to keep exactly to the way Gilbert had done it or had they relaxed

Alexander Faris: No, they'd relaxed that a good deal by then. And that season was very successful actually but it was not successful enough to keep the company going so it wound up and then a few years later a new company was formed which is still going now, successfully I'm glad to hear. But I don't have anything to do with it.

So we did that season at the Adelphi, meantime, or concurrently Brent Walker company decided to make a Gilbert and Sullivan series of 12 of the operas, the only ones we didn't do were Utopia Limited and The Grand Duke. And we had this extraordinary dynamic woman, Judith De Paul came over from America and her way of doing things was not our way, I tell you, because we had to do them like a pop record, record the orchestral track first without an singers, and then the singers were given tapes of this recording and they had to perform to the tapes. And so I

had to conduct the things with no singers singing and I had to just know it and imagine the singing myself. Fortunately I knew the operas pretty well. Also after the first day we got somebody else in who knew them very well who went in a box that I could hear and he just did all the parts, Jeremy Samms, a very talented guy. And I could hear that in my ear. And then the singers took these tapes away and recorded them, and they used to play them in their cars so they got used to the tempos. The recitatives were the hard bit, because you had a chord bonk, bonk, bonk. And between that you had to fit whatever the line was.

Td: You had a bit of a set to with Judith De Paul when you met her, she wanted somebody else more famous.

Alexander Faris: He wanted everyone from Herbert von Karajan down. And a lot of those people couldn't have done it, a) wouldn't and b) in certain cases couldn't no matter how brilliant they might be at their own thing. Because you've got to know, at the speed we had to do it you had to know it. I'll tell you about the speed we had to do it was that we did 5 successive days, 2 x 4 hour sessions each day, one opera per day. The *Gondoliers* on Monday, Iolanthe on Tuesday, *The Pirates* on Wednesday and the *Mikado* on Thursday, *Yeoman* on Friday, or whatever it was. And we got the London Symphony Orchestra who were absolutely brilliant. After the first, in order to save time, we would do four hour sessions, after the first few minutes or the first half hour, the leader Michael Davis said to me, Sandy may I suggest that we record the rehearsals, that we put the red light on every time we play. And the result was marvellous because that orchestra is going to play one take perfectly. So every time we went for a rehearsal the red light was on so we didn't really have any rehearsals and we got pages done, simple thing, strict tempo, of course the orchestra would play it beautifully if they knew the red light was on. It's not difficult music, some of it is. Then when it came to the more complicated bits, the recitative and the interjections and so on we did have to rehearse and so on. But I'll tell you a nice story connected with that, it contains the great F word, I hope it's not going to offend anybody but it's essential. On the first day the principal trumpet was Maurice Murphy, brilliant player but he couldn't play on the Tuesday and Wednesday and was away and John Wilbrahim another brilliant player played those days. But Maurice came back on Thursday and it was the *Pirates Of Penzance* and he had those beautiful cornet

melodies to play in the overture and later and he said to a friend of mine afterwards, oh it's great to be back on real music, the last two days I've been doing nothing but fucking Beethoven, which sounds a funny remark, but there is an element of truth in it. However much you admire Beethoven the trumpet parts are pretty dull to play, no tunes, and that was what he meant, it's all ta, ta te ta….. So that was a little incident.

So we did one opera a day and then eventually went down to Shepperton. No first of all we went to Twickenham. And the music was played back at as loud a level as they could afford into the studio without giving a feedback and the singers had to hear this rather dim music and just go with it. There was one time when the singers had to follow the conductor, they had no ruddy alternative. It went 99% extremely well.

Td: Also quite a lot of the leads were taken by non singers, Keith Michele you had, all sorts of strange.

Alexander Faris: Yes, Vincent Price. And he was marvellous, Keith Michele and Vincent Price were both in *Rudigore* and they were excellent. Clive Revell who had been the star of the *Mikado* at Saddlers Wells at my instigation before but Clive is very musical, Keith is actually very musical, and Vincent Price was pretty musical

Td: Keith Michel was in *Pirates* wasn't he, the Major General

Alexander Faris: Yes

Td: Whom else did you have, can you remember

Alexander Faris: For *Yeoman*, we had Alfred Marks for the gaoler who was wonderful. Now he is very musical and also acted it more movingly than I've seen that part done for many a time. And the lovely soprano. For Jack Point in *Yeoman* we had Joel Grey who was the mc in the film *Cabaret*. He was a pain in the neck I tell you.

Td: Can you tell us why.

Alexander Faris: Because he didn't learn his words. In the end he had, he took so much time because he came on, he was the only artist in the whole thing who came on not knowing

his words and they had to have so many idiot boards around and so many takes which the other artists needed. It was the most selfish, I'm going to be into libel, I take it back.

Td: Those were all issued on video and I think you can buy them today. They were done on tape I think, were they done on tape

Alexander Faris: It was recorded on tape originally

Td: It was a very strange thing that she insisted on of having the music played on the stage which made it very difficult as you said for the artists because you had to listen to it very softly otherwise you heard it on the soundtrack. I was not involved with it but I was horrified when I heard.

Alexander Faris: It was a nightmare. We subsequently, we did five in one week, and there was a few months gap and they were successful and they decided to do seven more, so we did seven, one opera a day. I gained a few grey hairs and lost a few pounds at that time. However basically it was a happy and successful time. Nothing ever goes 100%

Td: Eventually you got on with De Paul.

Alexander Faris: Yes, I got on very well with her, because before long she came to trust me. She could be pretty tough but she had, she had a very tough veneer but sometimes late at night she might give me a lift back from Shepperton, as I'd be one of the last to leave for whatever reason, and she would give me, she had a limo to take her back to Grosvenor House where she lived and she would sometimes unbend. She would be tired and she would be a little bit more confiding and so on. I'd like to see her again. Her mother came to London once, there was a party, George Walker gave a party, and George said to the mother have you got any other daughters. She said yes, I have two but they're not mad.

Td: You were on the floor while the shooting was going on, what did you do

Alexander Faris: Mostly I wasn't on the floor, mostly one of the repetiteurs conducted with earphones on, got as near as he could through gaps in the scenery and conducted and I

was in the sound van listening whether the take was coming across alright. And I had to pass every take for music before they would print it.

Td: It's very interesting because it was very difficult for them not to be slightly behind the music, the singers.

Alexander Faris: That was really up to the coach conducting them, they were really young conductors actually, and they did it pretty well. There was always this thing the music is not loud enough for the singers and then it was too loud because it was coming on the soundtrack. And it was a permanent knife edge decisions. This led onto an association for me with the London Symphony Orchestra whom I now knew very well and I did a couple of concerts at the Barbicon with them which were very happy occasions.

I don't remember anything particular about that except the difficulty of finding your way both in and out of the Barbicon, the architecture of confusion.

Td: Were you composing during this time. We better say he only composes to order.

Alexander Faris: Going back now to talking about writing, this is writing words and not notes. I had over the years written some articles on music for various journals including the Times, the Telegraph, the Observer, New Statesman, Opera, etc. I was approached, shortly after *Orpheus In The Underworld* came on at Saddlers wells I was approached by the music editor of Faber's who was also a critic of the Daily Telegraph, Donald Mitchell, and asked would I like to write a biography on Offenbach because he knew I'd been buffing up my Offenbach having got interested through conducting. And I said I would and then I funked it. A second time I said I'd do it and I didn't to it. And a third time I was very short of money so I rang up, my heart in my mouth, and said is it too late to write the Offenbach book. He said it's not too late but you've got to do it this time. And so do it I did. That I started the research immediately after leaving the show *Billy* in the summer of 1976 and I spent 4 years, I spent time in France and time with members of the Offenbach family. The book came out on 5 October 1980 which was the centenary of Offenbach's death, it actually came out on the 6th because the 5th was a Sunday. That was that, but in the course of doing research I wanted to get in touch with Offenbach's

descendants, some of whom had many of his scores and would obviously have family information. I met one of them in Paris and he told me a lot, he was very proud of his, he was regarded as an Offenbach expert. And then he said there were descendants living in England but he didn't know who they were. He knew perfectly well who they were and where they were and he wasn't going to tell me. But he said he thought one of them worked for the Cunard liner shipping company. And I did a bit of detective work with them and I got onto a personnel officer. I said I'm looking for a man called James Buckley whom I believe once worked for the Cunard Line and I don't know if he was the chairman of the board or a cabin boy but if you are able to help. He was marvellous and in 24 hours he came back and said we have a not of a man called James B Buckley and his middle name is rather peculiar, he said it's b, I said is it Brandejean. He said that's it. I said we have our man Watson. I got on to him and we became great friends, and I became great friends of his family. I've been to the weddings of two of their daughters and I've stayed with them in France and they let me spend time in their house in France pouring over the scores. Sadly he died of heart attack suddenly and a very nice man. Sot the book only came out in 1980

Td: Were these scores which hadn't been published and why hadn't they been published

Alexander Faris: Very often with operettas and musicals, although the vocal score will be published, the voice and piano score will be published, the orchestral scores are not published because there is no sale for them. If anybody wants them, they hire them from the publishers. That's it.

Td: I thought that you found lots of stuff which has never been performed that he wrote for cello. I think it is fascinating why nobody has bothered to investigate

Alexander Faris: Antonio de Almeda who is one of the great Offenbach experts who helped me on the book, he spent years sorting round and finding manuscripts which were unknown, in peoples houses sometimes. And since my book came out more manuscripts have been discovered. Although my book was absolutely up to date till 1980, more new material has been discovered, bits which he intended to use in the Tales Of Hoffman, so there is time now for an update of my book or some kind of long essay summarising the new stuff.

Td: Have you written anything since then.

Alexander Faris: Yes. I was approached by Boosey and Hawkes to write some library music in a Victorian or an Edwardian style, this was some years ago, I don't know the exact date but it must have been at least five years ago, it must have been about 1980. And they had a most unusual situation which you wouldn't have got in a recession, this producer I was introduced to, music producer for their library, who recorded our music, said we've got some money in the budget and it is now November and we've got to use it before the last day or the year or our budget will be reduced next year and could you produce an album of Victorian pieces for library music before 31 December. So I did. And we had, that was recorded by the Royal Philharmonic. We had one session with 39 players and another with 10 and another with 5, mixture of big group, small and very small. They liked that so much they produced some of their new budget at the beginning of the following year and did another one. So I wrote 24 pieces, 24 tracks and they've transferred them all now onto a CD and they're doing very nicely, bringing in a few pennies.

Td: Can you talk about the problems of library music which can be cut or lengthened or however, the technique of writing for library,

Alexander Faris: I write in, I'm always aware they might want, I write say a 16 bar section and maybe give it a repeat, but leave a quote, rest, at the end of it before the next one, so it's being kind to editors really

Al: Tabs

Alexander Faris: Yes, tabs. And try and make the same piece sound nevertheless sound as if its all one piece. But you don't actually always have to leave a quaver rest, if there is a definite lead into the next, as Teddy well knows, any good editor will cut it on the best note. But I'm always conscious of the fact that they may want to do that and it's not very hard to write the music in that way.

Td: You also other recordings of Gilbert and Sullivan overtures.

Alexander Faris: Yes a recording a Catelbi, which is very popular in Japan I'm told. We recorded it in Watford town

Hall with a huge orchestra. It was recorded by Dutch Phillips, or Polygram International.

Td: What year was that roughly

Alexander Faris: I don't remember dates. Mid 80s. I did a nice series of Sullivan overtures with the Socttish Chamber Orchestra and they were recorded digital from the start and then onto CD, Nimbus.

Talking about Catelbi and his orchestration, he was a very practical man and he wrote music for the silent cinema, music to go with silent films and of course you never knew whether there was just going to be a piano or a trio or 12 players or sometimes his music was played by a big orchestra. So he wrote music, he orchestrated music in such a way that if you have 3 or 23 or 93 players, it will sound alright. It was what used to be known as commercial orchestration, it works according to what you've got. But we had a huge orchestra in Watford Town Hall.

Td: Did you have to arrange.

Alexander Faris: No, now there was a composer whose stuff was all published a long time ago and published so you, anybody who had an orchestra of whatever size could get the score and if you didn't need the third clarinet part you just left it out.

Td: In 1976 you were asked to do the theme for *Woman's Hour* radio programme

Alexander Faris: In 1976 I was asked to do the theme for *Woman's Hour* radio programme and the lady producer told me we usually run the same signature tune for one year and have a change. After about 3 years they were still running it and I met her. I said why have you run it for so long. I thought it was going to stop after a year. And she said somebody said as we're having no complaints why don't we just leave it alone. So it ran altogether for 4 years which was quite nice, it brought in a few shillings.

Td: And you also did other things for Brent Walker

Alexander Faris: Yes, after the Gilbert and Sullivan series we did *Orpheus In The Underworld* and *Treasure Island* and a show called *A Night On The Town* which was a mish mash of

pieces of ballet. The best thing in it, it included a ballet of an American in Paris. That was done in conjuction with the BBC concert Orchestra.

Al: That was for Brent Walker

Alexander Faris: That was for Brent Walker in conjunction with the BBC. A united effort. It was a video, it went out on the box but was available as a video.

Td: You did other musicals, like *Barmitzah Boy* and Vivien Ellis

Alexander Faris: Vivien Ellis was a long time ago. We're filling in some gaps now, Vivien Ellis in 1952, I did *And So To Bed*, that was with Leslie Henson, and Webster Booth and Ann Ziegler were in it when I did it. And then *Barmitzah Boy* I did much later. That was a great trial for everybody. It ran into trouble as musicals will do and there were a lot of hard feelings floating around.

Td: It was an adaptation of a television play

Alexander Faris: It was an adaptation of an excellent television play by Jack Rosenthal. He subsequently wrote another play about the making of the *Barmitzah Boy* called *Smash* which I've never seen but I believe was very funny. It didn't come into the West End.

Td: Who wrote the music

Alexander Faris: Julie Stein wrote the music and he wrote some lovely music as he always does but the director proved to be very difficult and kept wanting to change. We spent 5 weeks in Manchester as a pre London run and fortunately the management were paying for me to have a room in the Midland Hotel and that made it slightly better but not much. But there were so many changes in the music that we, in the course of 5 weeks we never did the same show twice until the last Saturday when the matinee and the evening show were the same. There would be a new number every day. Or a new scene every day, or a scene transposed every day. But the music was never the same for 5 weeks, that's 40 performances which were different every night.

AL: Did you have your own orchestra.

Alexander Faris: I think in that case it was all our own orchestra. It may have been all our own orchestra in that case, because there was a fair amount of money behind that show.

Td: How did they take it, the orchestra and the cast.

Alexander Faris: Everybody just got very fed up and disheartened. They all worked frightfully well, but the show somehow missed in its transference from television play to big musical, it got changed, it lost something.

Al: It lost it's way

Alexander Faris: It lost its way, that's exactly what it lost

Td: Did you have to rehearse all day and then go straight

Alexander Faris: Yes, it was a nightmare.

Td: Can you tell us how it happened in the morning when you went in

Alexander Faris: You see there would have been a copyist sitting up all night, Julie Stein would be home late at night writing a new number. Irwin Costal, a marvellous American orchestrater would have to orchestrate it, and then a copyist would have to start copy it at 4 in the morning. It would arrive at the theatre about 12 in the mean time we were rehearsing something else. We would rehearse a new number and then performed it that night or maybe at a matinee. And it was quite awful. The worst experience I've ever had in the making of a new musical. And tempers got very frayed

Al: Who was the producer

Alexander Faris: The director was Martin Charnin who had a great success with *Annie* which he wrote and directed and he could be pretty unpleasant.

Td: How did the audience take it all.

Alexander Faris: The audience took it fairly well, but they seemed to like it but they didn't come and see it after a bit, after quite a short time.

Td: who was in the cast

Alexander Faris: Joyce Blair. The boy who did the barmitzah boy, I've forgotten his name now. And Harry Taub was the father, Joyce Blair was the mother, they were the 3 principal parts.

Td: Harry Taub played it in the television

Alexander Faris: I think he probably did. We recorded it, there's quiet a nice record except I don't think I've played it through because it has so many unpleasant associations

Td: With the recordings of Gilbert and Sullivan, why did Judith De Paul insist on having just the orchestra backing and not actually recording the voices and singing to playback which is the proper technical way of doing it.

Alexander Faris: She was violently opposed to lip synching and going to, doing it that way, producing the recording with singers and then them having to act to a complete thing, because she thought it made for stilted acting and she wanted them to be singing live on the occasion and she determined that they would sing live to an existing backing track which we had recorded, one opera a day, god help us. And she was an extremely domineering personality, she wouldn't be where she was if she hadn't been, and she was absolutely adamant that this was the way this had to be done, against the opposition of almost everybody else I could think in the whole organisation.

Td; Was there any problem about pitch and things with the artists, and as you said recitative coming in, there must have been tremendous problems.

Alexander Faris: There wasn't so much a difficulty about pitch, although the play back in the studio to which they had to perform had to be kept at a very low level, in case it was re recorded on the final sound track and it was hard for them to do. I don't remember much problem about pitch but there were problems about timing where the orchestra would play one chord and then there would be silence and then the orchestra would play another chord, in a recitative. And the singer had to fit in a bit of recitative inbetween those two chords. The only reason they

were able to do it is that they had been supplied with cassettes of these backing track recordings which they'd been playing in their bathrooms and cars and everywhere in the mean time and they'd got used to timing it. And it was amazing how well it worked 95% of the time and just occasionally it wasn't all that wonderful, or they felt they had to hurry, but there was no way they could change it. For once in their lives singers had to follow the conductor. I would much have preferred to have been following them in cases like that. But it was not to be and madame was totally adamant. I don't know if it was cheaper but that was the way we had to do it.

Td: The recordings you have at home are not running exactly to speed, so they must have had problems when it's running at proper speed, the playback.

Alexander Faris: Yes, indeed, I think they did but it didn't seem to make too much difference. Somehow we managed and it was about 95% success rate and the failures were not disasters. They were things one would like to have had a little bit better, a little bit more time for a singer to express a line before the next orchestra chord suddenly came in on top of them.

Td: As a Gilbert and Sullivan expert, do you believe that these videos are the sort that Savoyards would enjoy, or do you think it's nowhere near true to the original intention.

Alexander Faris: I think they vary tremendously because they were all directed by different directors, one or two directors maybe did 2 but they, I think some of them come off well and some of them just don't. And some of the casting is good and some of it is not.

Al: You haven't talked about the directors

Alexander Faris: We had people like David Putney who became the director of the ENO and he did *Iolanthe*. You see in each case, we had what they called the stage director who directed the thing in the rehearsal room and then we had a television director who directed the takes in the studio. So they had to cooperate that it didn't always quite work.

We had wonderful, I always remember when Vincent Price, who just recently sadly died, arrived, everybody knew who he was of course, how could they not. And the director

introduced him to the company and gave us a little pep talk on the first morning and then we separated into studios. And we were in a big studio and they were doing the first scene in which Vincent Price was not involved. This was Rudigore, and the whole of the chorus was sitting round the side of the studio waiting for their turn, and Vincent price was there waiting for his turn, and he went round all of the chorus and said good morning, I'm Vincent Price, as if they didn't know, nice to be here, and he had such charm. And modesty in a way for such a brilliant man, because he wasn't just a brilliant actor, he was a brilliant art connoisseur and then when on one occasion there was a big hold up on the studio floor, trouble with the lights or trouble with the cameras or trouble with something or other, it was one of those. And everybody was sitting around waiting for something to happen. And Vincent Price just sat among the company and regaled them with stories of Hollywood in the past, and had them in fits of laughter. And he just knew and always experienced this is what happens in film studios. Some of the other people were moaning and groaning. Not him, he kept everybody happy. He was wonderful.

And the other person who was marvellous in the face of delays in the studio was Eartha Kit. She wasn't in Gilbert and Sullivan, she was in one of the later ones. And I met her at the side of the studio sitting in a semi darkness and there was a big hold up for some disaster. And she was sitting there doing embroidery. I said is that petit point. She said well it is gros point actually. I said what is it a cushion cover. She said no it's a seat cover, I'm doing 10 of them for my daughter's wedding present. And she was doing the background, it was a square piece with a flower pattern in the middle and miles of, tremendous amount of plain background and she was sitting completely patience in her costume just filling in this background with her gros point. And then when the problem was solved and she went to go on, she went on with her I'm Just An Old Fashioned Girl… Old Fashioned Millionaire. But complete patience inbetween. So her daughter has got 10 beautiful chair seats.

SIDE 4, TAPE 2

Alexander Faris: We were talking about famous artists, we had Vincent Price and Eartha Kit. When I was a boy, famous people used to come to Belfast. They had a very good series of celebrity concerts there, and as a schoolboy I used to be taken to these concerts, sometimes to these rehearsals and I used to collect their autographs. I remember getting Albert Coates' autograph and that was rather a memorable occasion for me, it was the first time I'd ever heard Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony, the Pathetique, and I was so moved by it, it was the end of the first half of the concert, I was so moved by it I asked my mother and my sister if we could go home because I didn't want to lose the impression of that piece. It was a total epiphany to me. But before we went home, we went up into the interval to get Albert Coates' autograph, and he was there in just his pants and things, he was changing into clean shirts and what not. He was the fattest man I'd ever seen in my life. He could have been a suomo wrestler, and anyway I still have his autograph. I still have the autograph of Henry Wood, who was very pleasant to me. And I have half the autograph of Arthur Bliss who had been to conduct the music for *The Shape Of Things To Come*. I think it was just called *Things To Come*. And he had done that, and he was rushing away and I came up with my autograph book and he started signing it and his pen ran out of ink and he said I'm terribly sorry but he was rushing to catch a plane. So I've half of Arthur Bliss' autograph and the whole of Albert Coates and Henry Wood and a few other people like Sigetti and Bachaus. Those are my first memories as a schoolboy of hearing great music played.

Td: Of the musicians you've conducted who do you remember most for their professionalism, or for their difficulties.

Alexander Faris: For professionalism and moving singing I remember Patricia Kern as, when I conducted her she was doing *Iolanthe*, also I conducted her doing Rossina in the *Barber*, the mezzo version of that, and I remember seeing her in Gluck's Orfeo when she came in as the messenger and it was just one of those musical moments I'll never forget. But I remember in *Iolanthe* she sings the very moving little appeal to the Lord Chancellor for the sake of her son. And she used to do that and it was the most magical thing, she was really wonderful. Also Elizabeth Harwood was wonderful,

and June Bronhill was just amazing. June Bronhill was a singer whose voice never didn't work, she seemed to be able to sing top Cs and bottom anything you like, you never had the feeling. I never had the feeling she's not going to make a top note, she's going to crack on it, it's not going to be good. She just soared away. And she lived a very full live, and she did a lot of sitting up at night gambling and so on and she seemed to be able to come on the next day and there she was, an incredible vitality. And a lovely personality and really great fun, memorable. And while we were on the Saddlers Wells people there was Eric Shilling who was a great standby. Dennis Darling and John Fryat,

Td: Whose idea was it in *Orpheus in the Underworld* when she is in the bath, the sash thing.

Alexander Faris: That was Wendy Toye's idea. It was hard to know how to do that scene effectively but it worked terribly well.

Al: What are your memorable moments

Alexander Faris: I remember the first day I conducted at Saddlers Wells, the first rehearsal, and nobody knew me, and nobody in the orchestra knew me, the cast knew me by that time because we'd been having piano rehearsals but it was my first orchestral rehearsal in the pit at Saddler's Wells, and we started off and all was going well. And we came to a bit of recitative where there is a chord, and a guy sings, and then the orchestra goes bump bump…. It was like that. Well the orchestra were playing these chords very well, but they were making them rather long, instead of going bump, they were going baaaaaa, all very nicely played. So I said ladies and gentlemen, can you just make these chords short, it's a light comedy, a satirical comedy, just make them short comedy wise. And everybody knew exactly what I meant and did so until we were stopped by one guy at the back desk of the second fiddles. And he said excuse me Mr Faris, exactly how long would you like me to play these chords. I said just a little bit shorter than you played them last time. Crisper, shorter, comedy. I went to start again, and this guy put up his hand again. He said Mr Faris, how long, I said as I said, shorter than before. Short chords. And we went to start again, and then he said, by this time the orchestra were beginning to shuffle their feet, they didn't like this guy. He then said Mr Faris if you would tell us exactly how long you wish these

chords to be we will play them exactly that way. I said right, I will tell you exactly how long I wish them to be. Play each written crotchet as if it was a quaver tied to a double dotted semi quaver with a pause over the second dot. And that got practically a cheer from the orchestra and we went on. And he never spoke to me again in his life. But at the end of the rehearsal I went to the pub with the orchestra, I was being stood rounds of drinks from all the rest of the orchestra. Somebody had finally nailed this guy. He was a real barrack room lawyer and he thought he would get me down, just a tiresome waste of time and petty pedantry to its greatest degree.

Td: How do you manage a rehearsal, when you have one session for a concert and you have so many things to do. You've no time to go through the entire programme, what do you do exactly.

Alexander Faris: You top and tail is what we call it, and you set the tempo at the beginning and you go on till there is any difference, if there is any change of tempo, or you go to the end and say on the penultimate chord the singer is going to make a long pause so we'll just play the last four bars. And then you go onto the next number and give them the tempo of that and any hazards that may occur on the way. And if you haven't time to do the whole thing. They love it actually because you trust them to do the rest alright.

Al: Picking up by bar numbers

Alexander Faris: Yes, you may say look at bar 23, there is a change of tempo and if we play from bar 19 and I'll show you how the change of tempo goes this way, and then there is no pause here and there is a cut from here to here.

Td: Do you have to say how you bring in a beat, how you yourself do it.

Alexander Faris: No, but there is a slight problem there. An orchestra may be used to one conductor and they may be used to coming in rather late on the beat. If the beat, suppose you have a piece of wire stretched in front of you and the beat is each time you hit the wire, and that is where the beat is to be. And that is where they should play. Some conductors like them to play late on that. They get in the habit of doing that, you get that very much in,

for instance the Vienna Philharmonic will play very late on a beat. And if you come to them as a new conductor, I like them to play very close to the beat, partly because I've usually been doing comedy on the whole and it wants to be rather quick and precise and sharp. And I just say to them would you play, I like it if you would play a little bit closer to the beat and they get the message.

Occasionally the scenery will get held up, there will be a pile up or something will get stuck against something else, or some dozy stage hand will be too late or whatever, and the scenery will get stuck. And then the orchestra in the meantime is playing the music for a scene change and you have to go on till ready, and you round and round and round the same repeat and after a while it does get a bit embarrassing. And I think there was one time when I had to stop because we played the same 16 bars 24 times or something and it was beginning to sound silly, so it was better to stop and wait for a cue. And at Saddlers Wells there is an internal telephone system, well there is in every theatre now, and one at the stage door, one at the prompt corner to the stage manager, one by the conductors side in case the stage manager needs to give him a message. And if there was a big disaster the stage manager could ring down and he'd say we're got a big hold up and if you can just stop we'll bring the curtain in and we'll tell you when to start again. I think that did happen once, I don't have a clear memory of it. But one great advantage of this internal telephone system, near Saddlers Wells there are 3 pubs, the Shakespeare Head, the Harlequin and the Empress of Russia and they all have extensions of the internal telephone system so anybody can be got hold of. Well this means in the last bit of dialogue before the end of *Orpheus In The Underworld*, I was in a position to raise the telephone and say I'll be there in 10 minutes, I want a large scotch with ice. I would get my order in while the audience was still in their seats.

I'll tell you another funny *Iolanthe* story, switching to Germany now, but it was a Wells production. We took it to Munich and the local man there who was in charge of editing the programme had to right a synopsis of the story of *Iolanthe* in German. And he got totally confused, he didn't know what to write about Stefan who was the son of the Lord Chancellor and *Iolanthe* and so was half and half mortal. So one of our directors who was a German speaker, Edward Renton, a conductor, explained this to him, he said the

Germans will not understand this. So it appears in the programme, there is a little asterisk by Stefan's name, it says in German die Englische Marchen… the English mythology also recognises male fairies, which didn't mean anything to the Germans but caused great hilarity among the cast. I've got that programme

Td: It was John Reed who was playing the **Grossmith** parts.

Alexander Faris: Yes and a marvellous performer and a nice man. He used to race ahead of the beat a little bit when he was doing the Lord Chancellors song he used to get so fast, it was impossible to catch up. However he did it so well nobody minded, my generation of D'Oyly Carte people were John Reed and Kenneth Sandford who was excellent and Meston Reed who sadly died just a few weeks before we are making this recording and had a memorial service the other day. The whole of D'Oyly Carte and half of Saddlers Wells turned up, it was a very moving occasion. That is a personal reminiscence

Td: Who sang the Katisha parts.

Alexander Faris: Patricia Leonard and Jill Pert, both excellent, queen of the fairies.

Talking of the *Mikado* I did it, as I said before, I did it in Turkey in Turkish and that provided a problem, because Turkey, they don't have rhyming verse, so the translations were very awkward, so all the cast told us. I think they were just bad because we got some of them altered by a local professor who knew English and he made them considerably better. But when I came back, I came back by train, well I flew to Milan and came the rest of the way by train. And I landed at Harwich at 7 in the morning. And 2 ferries landed, an English one and a Dutch one at Harwich at the same time, so about 2000 people all coming to go through customs. And 999 of them went through the green channel and I went through the red channel, I had stuff to declare anyway. Because it's much quicker to go through the red channel, I was the only one, and 2000 at the other. So the guy there dealt with me very reasonably. I had presents, I had been there for two months and I had presents and I bought a camera, and I'm very bad at lying to the customs, I get too nervous. So I just told them the truth as I saw it. They packed everything up and I gave them a reasonable small cheque and then I was walking away.

He said excuse me sir, my heart went pitter pat and I thought here comes the body search, they get you complacent and then they call you back. He said just out of interest what were you doing in Turkey for 2 months. I said I was conducting a production of the *Mikado* for the Turkish National Opera in Turkish. And he said that's the first thing you've said to me this morning that I don't believe.

Td: You said you conducted in Canada, Turkey, Germany, but you haven't really told us about all the different countries you've conducted in.

Alexander Faris: We've got Canada, Turkey, Germany, Belgium, Austria and Czechoslovakia, where the show, *Iolanthe* was equally well received to my astonishment, but I loved Prague because I think it is one of the most beautiful cities, if not the most beautiful city in the world of anywhere I've ever seen. Also I've conducted in Sidney and Melbourne, and Auckland and Wellington and Christchurch, doing a combination there of *Orpheus In The Underworld* and then alternating with the *Merry Widow*. And one night I went in and by this time I never used the music. And we'd do say 10 days of *Orpheus* and then 10 days of the *Merry Widow*. And I went in one night convinced it was one and it was actually the other. And I gave an upbeat and I was expecting one piece of music and the other piece of music started. And fortunately it was basically the same tempo. I'd forgotten they'd changed the opera that night. And nobody put up. I don't even think the music was even there. It was probably sitting closed underneath the desk, possibly the wrong music may have been on top, a nasty shock.

Td: What do you find the difference between orchestras of different nationalities. We know that British orchestras are marvellous sight readers. When you went to different countries did you find great difficulties from people not being able to sight read that well or play solos

Alexander Faris: Noticeably less good, quite noticeably less good than the English at sight reading. I don't know why we're so good at sight reading because nobody teaches sight reading particularly as far as I can see it at college. I think the English boys and girls just know that if they don't become good sight readers they will never get any sessions, because half their life is going to depend on recording sessions. And if you go on a recording session,

you just have to play it right on the first take. And they arrive at the session not knowing what music they're going to play and it's just put there in front of them.

Td: When you're conducting a concert or opera with a foreign orchestra, when you have to rehearse the orchestra for the first time, do you have to go in to greater detail with a foreign orchestra than an English orchestra. Do you have to rehearse the sections much more and things like that.

Alexander Faris: I've found that you did. Particularly in Germany, when we did that Ustinov show in Munich, the orchestra there was quite a good orchestra but it was not the Berlin Philharmonic by any manner of means and I found they made the same, we corrected mistakes if there were any, and there were some because it was a totally new score and there were some copying mistakes, there inevitably are. Or in some cases the musicians just played them wrong and you had to stop and they would play it right and it wasn't the copying mistake, it was the musician's mistake. And you'd sort this out and then the next day the same musician would make the same mistake. Or there would be a different musician on because it was a different shift, it was Tuesday's shift for the orchestra and then that musician would make the same mistake and it was very tiresome. And a lot of delay happened which would not have happened with any English orchestra that I know.

Al: When you corrected a mistake, did the musicians mark it.

Alexander Faris: Of course they do, but if it was a musician, just not a very good sight reader and it came to the same place the next day and forgot it should be a G sharp and even if the music was right, I don't know what it was, there was a lot. It was much slower than it would have been with and English orchestra in my experience. But you see we were at the sort of good but not top rate German orchestras in that case. And the Turkish orchestra was very uneven, they were a bit of a mixed bag, some very good players and some who. There was one trumpet player who just couldn't count, the other musicians were singing it for him, how it should go. And that was rather, that was just because there was a shortage of decent musicians in Turkey. But in the end when they got to know it, then they came out with a nice performance and they enjoyed it I think.

Td: How about the Canadian orchestras

Alexander Faris: They were pretty good. Yes. They were pretty good. They were more up to British standards as a matter of fact.

Td: Looking back on your life what would you do differently and have you any great regrets.

Alexander Faris: I have one regret dating from schooldays that I didn't learn German. I was put onto the Latin and Greek side of the school and I would have loved to have been a good German speaker by now. I've learned quite a bit since, and I'm alright and I can work with a German orchestra because I know the music jargon and the theatre jargon and I know enough grammar to be reasonably ok and my French, I was good at French at school, and although it's lovely to have a bit of knowledge of Latin and Greek, in practical terms, nobody could have known this, and my mother who was wonderful, a wonderfully supportive person and a brilliant woman, she couldn't foresee Germany might be a place where I might work, she couldn't have known that. That is just a personal regret from early days. As far as what happened later, I think I would have liked to have gone on a bit longer in opera before getting into the West End, to have more of an operatic record. But it didn't really matter because it was very useful to do the West End stuff and I learned a lot and I learned a bit about orchestration doing that. And then I did go for many years in Saddlers Wells. That was the happiest, the highlight really of my life was the 6 years, of my professional life anyway, was the 6 years that I spent at Saddlers Wells doing both opera and operetta. And it was a lovely community in those days. And also you could park. I had a lovely Riley. And there was a wonderful family feeling about the company then. Also it was on the up and up and Norman Tucker was building it up and increasing the repertoire. We began to do Janacek and things which they hadn't done before and really during the process of upgrading the company until it was leading it towards it being the English National Opera, that process was starting then. I was very happy doing a bit of serious opera and doing my operettas of which I was a big operetta wheel. Colin Davis arrived in the middle of that time. I knew him well but our paths didn't cross very much. I was strictly speaking a guest conductor all that time, I was a freelance

conductor, I wasn't on the staff but I was just always there. And I had, the operetta world was my world then and it was our own little family and it was a very happy place. Not that things had been unhappy since then. But if there was a highlight that was the time.

Covent Garden, I found the ballet at Covent Garden, the atmosphere when I was there was very tetchy, you could feel the knives being sharpened behind your back. It was quite different from the Well, I didn't feel so much at home there. But I've no regrets. For instance working with Markova was very interesting, she completely changed my view of one ballet, and that was Les Sylphides. And she came to rehearsal and they were doing a pas de deux, and she stopped them and said it's not like that. And she demonstrated the movements they were doing which were wide movements of the arms. She said no, I did this with Fokine at Leningrad or wherever she was, and the whole point of Sylphides was that it was a very revolutionary ballet. Well I'd never thought of it as Les Sylphides, I thought it rather pretty, pretty tutus and things. And she said he broke down the classical movements of Petipas. And you just did half a movement and it was soft, and soft edged. And it was quite different. And I've told that, I've even dared to tell it to dancers. And it was Diaghliev's favourite ballet because it was a revolution in ballet. And unless you know these facts, so I've cherished the fact that having got it straight from Markova just listening to her rehearsing two dancers. And I've told choreographers this story. And unless you know them and pass them on, one of my great pleasures in music is to meet the older people like that. In this case it's dancing but it's music all the same and to be able to pass them on to the next generation, so that they know certain things. And maybe somebody will quote me about something one day. Who knows. Those sort of things are highlights.

Td: What is your opinion of productions such as *Rigoletto* done as the Mafia, and changing the periods of classical opera or ballet. Do you approve. Or artificial trying to be clever.

Alexander Faris: I think a lot is artificial trying to be clever but I must say I didn't see that Rigoletto and I've heard so many people whom I respect praise it, I would reserve judgement on that. But it is almost you can never see an opera done in the period for which the composer

wrote it. And the same with Shakespeare productions, there is a terrible tendency to shift them and then it works, it works a little, it works in one respect, because they're bringing out a revolutionary element in some play or something. And then it stops working suddenly because some terrible anachronism, it couldn't possibly have happened, and things like that. And you get a feeling that the director is just showing off, he has thought up something different for the sake of something different. I think it possible sometimes works but it's got to be very good.

Td: I saw the Black *Mikado* which I thought was brilliant. I saw the latest *Mikado* at EMO which was done in an Edwardian drawing room which I didn't think worked at all. Did you see those

Alexander Faris: I didn't see either of those

Td: Tell us about the theme for *Upstairs Downstairs* and now with the Irish guards.

Alexander Faris: I've always hoped that having been in the Irish guards, I've always hoped that some music of mine would be played by the Irish guards band. I never met the band during the war, we were in a different theatre of war and I wasn't involved with the band. So I eventually plucked up courage and got onto the present musical director, who is a very nice man, albeit a Scotsman, a good drinker, and I said would he be interested in that. And I had a very good recording of an arrangement I'd made for a big orchestra, do you remember a show called Filmharmonic which used to go on at the Albert Hall, which Sydney Samuelson used to do. And I did a huge arrangement of *Upstairs Downstairs* both themes. And then I redid it and it was recorded by ATV I think, it was a session orchestra, not so big but big enough, like 45 to 50. And conducted by Jack Parnell who was a very nice guy. And he let me make a few comments, which in point of fact he welcomed because he had such a pile of music which he'd never seen before; and I passed this on to the Irish guards musical director who based a military band arrangement on my symphonic arrangement. And they not only played as an item in concerts but they used it as a quick and slow march, the two themes, one quick and one slow. So I'm rather proud of that. I rather hope we might here it on trooping the colour one day. It is the Irish guards trooping the colour this

year, but I don't know whether they're allowed to play any outside tunes

Td: They do

Alexander Faris: During the interval yes. If that's the case he might well do it. I've got to talk to him anyway and he's very well disposed.

The question of royalties on records, it's a very good thing. If you get a piece on a record, on an album, even if your piece is not the one the public buy the album for, if there is a terrific hit somewhere on the album and they buy it for that, you still get the same royalties as the guy with the big hit. You see what I mean. So you really want everybody to be successful and there is no jealousy of the guy who has the bigger hit. Well in one sense there is, he is selling more records in another place. But it's great to have a great success on the same thing.

Al: Be on the B side

Alexander Faris: To be on the B side and get the same royalties as the guy on the A side.

Td: You did have all these things of hits from movies and tv series.

Alexander Faris: Yes, your favourite tv themes, or gems from tv, or tv melodies, and all this kind of thing.

Al: Thanks very much