

Interview of Leon Theremin (Lev Sergeyevich Termen)

by Olivia Mattis

Bourges, France, 16 June 1989

Also present: Natalia Theremin

Interview in French/Russian with Patrick Lemoine, interpreter

Translated by Nina Boguslawsky and Alejandro Tkaczewski

Mattis: Please tell me about yourself: where you were born, about your family, and about your scientific and musical training.

Theremin: I was born in Leningrad, that was then called St. Petersburg, in 1896. My father was a lawyer, and my mother was interested in the arts, especially music and drawing. Even before high school I was interested in physics, in electricity and in oscillatory motions like those of a pendulum. In high school I was interested in physics, and after playing the piano I started studying cello. While in high school I entered the conservatory on the cello, and I graduated with the title of "free artist on the violoncello." Then I entered the university, after graduating from high school, and majored in physics and astronomy.

Mattis: When did you first conceive of your instrument?

Theremin: The idea first came to me right after our Revolution, at the beginning of the Bolshevik state. I wanted to invent some kind of an instrument that would not operate mechanically, as does the piano, or the cello and the violin, whose bow movements can be compared to those of a saw. I conceived of an instrument that would create sound without using any mechanical energy, like the conductor of an orchestra. The orchestra plays mechanically, using mechanical energy; the conductor just moves his hands, and his movements have an effect on the musical artistry [of the orchestra].

Mattis: Why did you make this instrument?

Theremin: I became interested in effectuating progress in music, so that there would be more [musical] resources. I was not satisfied with the mechanical instruments in existence, of which there were many. They were all built using elementary principles and were not physically well done. I was interested in making a different kind of instrument. And I wanted, of course, to make an apparatus that would be controlled in space, exploiting electrical fields, and that would use little energy. Therefore I transformed electronic [equipment] into a musical instrument that would provide greater resources.

Mattis: What did Lenin think of it, and why did you show it to him?

Theremin: In the Soviet Union at that time everyone was interested in new things, in particular all the new uses of electricity: for agriculture, for mechanical uses, for transport, for communication. And so then, at that time, when everyone was interested in these fields, I decided to create a musical use for electricity. I made a few first

apparatuses that were made [based on principles of] the human interference of radio waves in space, at first used in [electronic] security systems, then applied to musical purposes. I made it, and I showed it at that time to the leaders. There was a big electronics conference in Moscow, and I showed my instruments there. It [the conference] was a great success; it was written up in the literature and the newspapers, of which we had many at that time, and many doors were opened [for me then] in the Soviet Union.

And so Vladimir Il'yich Lenin, the leader of our state, learned that I had shown an interesting thing at this conference, and he wanted to get acquainted with it himself. So they asked me to come with my apparatus, with my musical instrument, to his office, to show him. And I did so.

Mattis: What did Lenin think of it?

Theremin: I brought my apparatus and set it up in his large office in the Kremlin. He was not yet there because he was in a meeting. I waited with Fotiva, his secretary, who was a good pianist, a graduate of the conservatory. She said that a little piano would be brought into the office, and that she would accompany me on the music that I would play. So we prepared, and about an hour and a half later Vladimir Il'yich Lenin came with those people with whom he had been in conference in the Kremlin.

He was very gracious; I was very pleased to meet him, and then I showed him the signaling system of my instrument, which I played by moving my hands in the air, and which was called at that time the thereminvox. I played a piece [of music]. After I played the piece they applauded, including Vladimir Il'yich [Lenin], who had been watching very attentively during my playing. I played Glinka's *The Lark*, which he loved very much, and Vladimir Il'yich said, after all this applause, that I should show him, and he would try himself to play it.

He stood up, moved to the instrument, stretched his hands out, left and right: right to the pitch and left to the volume. I took his hands from behind and helped him. He started to play *The Lark*. He had a very good ear, and he felt where to move his hands to get the sound: to lower them or to raise them. In the middle of this piece I thought that he could himself, independently, move his hands. So I took my hands off of his, and he completed the whole thing independently, by himself, with great success and with great applause following. He was very happy that he could play on this instrument all by himself.

Mattis: Incredible! You spoke to me yesterday about a polyphonic instrument; did it exist?

Theremin: Yes, I did make such an instrument: a person could regulate one voice or at the same time could add two or three more voices which would be in some sort of correct intervallic, I mean chordal, relationship in some natural pitch system. Well, I tried to make such an instrument, and indeed it was convincing, because it plays a melody very precisely with great accuracy, as opposed to when a choir executes [a melody], in which each voice deviates up and down in pitch. Here this instrument plays in an exact and natural way. I made such an instrument, and it was successful. It

so happened that I showed it in my studio while I was working at the university. This instrument was made for a demonstration at the university.

Mattis: Does this instrument still exist?

Theremin: I had the instrument in the university in a special place where I demonstrated it for my lectures. But then the university was reorganized and rooms reassigned. The instrument was left in a room for four years, where people could come and gradually dismantle it. So now it is in a completely dismantled and ruined condition at the university somewhere.

After that I started working on a new instrument. The old instrument was made using "radio lamps," but the new instrument I started making was based on semiconductors. The project was going well; it was partially completed when I had to clear out the place where the instrument was located because there were other projects going that were unrelated to music. The chairman of the physics department considered music not to be a science, that this should not be taking place at the university, and I had to vacate the room that I was occupying at the university.

Mattis: In what year was this?

Theremin: Approximately--I am afraid to say--'78. It was about '78.

Mattis: What was the first musical destination of your machine? Was the purpose of the instrument to play the classical repertory, or did you share the preoccupations of the modern composers for new sounds and new usages?

Theremin: When I made the first instrument, with the first method of regulation, the character of the sound it could create surpassed all the abilities of all the instruments then in existence. So that's why I considered that composers should write new music for this new timbre, and that in addition to knowing traditional musical techniques, that they had to know new ones. So, in this respect, I thought that there would be progress in the world of instruments, as well as the world of composition.

Mattis: Then why at the first concert, on Clara Rockmore's recording, and on last night's concert program was classical music played almost exclusively?

Theremin: That is because there are so far no well-written compositions for the thereminvox. That's why in the concert there were mostly compositions written by good composers, or folksongs. There are some things written by the [modern] composers, but they were not popular. I can't say that they fully exploit the instrument. They were written to imitate old instruments, such as the violin, the voice, etc. So the repertoire that is used is mostly the repertoire written for other musical instruments.

Mattis: Now I would like to ask you a few questions about the composer Edgard Varèse.

Theremin: Some pieces by Edgard Varèse could have been played, but I don't now remember our acquaintance. Sometimes we met, but I don't precisely remember. There were a lot of composers. Sometimes we met, in different places, let's say in the streets or at concerts. There were many performances. Either the composers would come to my concerts, or I would go to hear the new compositions by the new composers. There we would meet. There were many, many composers; I'm afraid to mention the names of the composers.

Mattis: That's too bad, because I have very precise questions about them!

Theremin: I'm afraid to say anything about that.

Mattis: According to the memoirs of Louise Varèse¹ you met Varèse in New York. What year might that have been?

Theremin: I was in New York for nine years.² I might have met him towards the beginning of my stay. I had concerts in New York many times, and people came to the concerts. We had gatherings of people who were interested in my work. Social get-togethers were organized; about 30-40 people would attend. All sorts of interesting composers and scientists, like [Albert] Einstein, etc. would talk to me, and I talked to many of them. I can't enumerate them. There were some composers, but also some instrumentalists, violinists or cellists, who would meet with me and who were interested in new music.

Mattis: In what year did you arrive in New York?

Theremin: At the end of 1929, beginning of the '30's: 31, 33.³

Mattis: I thought that you came to New York in 1927 or 1928.

Theremin: Yes, approximately at the end of that time, at the end of 1929.

Mattis: Can you remember Edgard Varèse? How did he look physically? Can you remember?

Theremin: No, I couldn't tell you. I met so many people. I did not see Varèse much. I cannot remember it. It was so long ago, decades ago. More than sixty years have passed since that time; I don't remember. I remember many people, according to photographs and letters. I met a lot of people. I remember well a lot of my good students. I had a

¹ *Varèse: A Looking-Glass Diary*, vol.2, unpublished.

² Sic: should be eleven (1927-1938).

³ Sic: should be December 22, 1927.

wonderful student Clara Rockmore, and also Lucie Rosen. These were the better ones whom I remember who worked in my studio.

There was one who was interested in the color of music, the connection between light and music, and that was Einstein. He asked-- He showed me that his wife played piano very well; he could play violin, and he tried to play the thereminvox. He asked me if he could use my studio; I had a big, big house that I rented in New York, at 37 W 54th Street.

Mattis: What repertory did you play with Einstein?

Theremin: Einstein, no Einstein was more interested in the connection between music and geometrical figures: not only color, but mostly triangles, hexagons, heptagons, different kinds of geometrical figures. He wanted to combine these into drawings. He asked whether he could have a laboratory in a small room in my large house, where he could draw. So I gave him a study, not very big. I found him a [woman] assistant, one of my co-workers who was a painter, to help him draft these sketches, and he would come and do his work. I saw him many times, very often. It was not the field that I was interested in, these geometrical figures. I can't say that from my point of view they [the figures] had a psychological effect on the colors of the music.

He was there for a long time. All the walls were covered with these paintings, with these drawings. There was not enough room, and he wanted more room. So I found another big place. I got a room in my good friend's house, an American. He had a very large house, and I referred him to that house. He continued to work on these things there with my assistant, the painter. I saw him often, and we talked.

As for him personally, Einstein was a physicist and theorist, but I was not a theorist--I was an inventor--so we did not have that much in common. I had much more kinship with someone like Vladimir Il'yich [Lenin], who was interested in how the whole world is created. Einstein was a theorist, so he knew all the formulas, etc. I cannot say that I was very much interested in him as a physicist.

Mattis: Varèse came to you to ask you to build him an instrument for his piece *Ecuatorial*. Do you remember anything about that?

Theremin: I don't remember whether I had made an instrument for him. There was one man who was very much interested in my instruments: it was the chief conductor of the New York orchestra,⁴ [Leopold] Stokowski, who had ordered instruments especially for the orchestra. I made ten instruments especially for Stokowski. It was a musical [instrument]; they used it in concerts, and it created a great impression. This was very interesting. As for Varèse I don't remember anything. I don't remember his musical activities at all.

Mattis: What works, which composers, did Stokowski play with your instrument?

⁴ Sic: should be ThePhiladelphia Orchestra.

Theremin: I have programs of the orchestra where he played different things. There were many of them. Sometimes there were compositions written by new composers and old composers for regular orchestra, and often the basses and cellos would be replaced in the orchestra by thereminvoxes. The bassists were interested in this, and in general there were many musical experiments conducted on timbre. I'm not going to get into this because it's very technical. With Stokowski I had a really good opportunity to work and think about new music.

Lemoine: Do you remember what composers they played?

Theremin: I don't remember. I cannot remember now; I cannot tell you who the new composers were. There were many fashionable composers at that time in America. Some of them were alone-- Some of them made arrangements for orchestra. [. . .] Great interest was shown for my instrument and for the new sound that could be used for the orchestra, and this [interest] was [shown especially] by Stokowski: he was the main conductor of a big symphony orchestra in New York. According to his order, five, I mean ten, instruments, thereminvoxes were specially made that could produce stronger bass sounds. These instruments were made, and some composers arranged existing symphonies in order to incorporate this instrument; some parts of symphonies were arranged by American composers at that time. I cannot tell you their last names, but there were many young composers who were interested in this, and who were interested in that their composition utilizing the new instruments be played by the New York orchestra.

Mattis: Did Varèse ask you to build him an electronic cello?

Theremin: I made my electronic cello, not only for Varèse, but for [all] those who were interested. It was not just the instrument played with hands in the air; it was a different instrument, like a cello, that had a fingerboard. But instead of pressing down on strings, it was necessary just to place [one's] fingers in different places, thereby creating different pitches. I have photographs of this instrument; it was also called the thereminvox. We sometimes tried to play it in the orchestra, especially for bass instruments. It was not played by pressing the strings, but had a layout similar to that of a cello. This would create the electric intervals.

Mattis: When Varèse returned from New Mexico he tried in vain to contact you. He wrote you two letters, of which I have one here, dated 1941. [Presents letter.] Do you remember this letter; did you ever receive it?

Theremin: In '41 I was already in a government institution where I could not write letters abroad, so I didn't receive this letter in '41.

Mattis: So you have never seen this letter?

Theremin: I am afraid to say I don't know, because I don't have it now, and it might be that I have never seen it. [Reads letter.] At that time I was in a special place, so I had no opportunity to receive letters. I could receive them only after '46.

Mattis: Can you tell us who is this man Mr. Fediushine?

Theremin: I don't know. I can't remember. I don't have any literature on that.

Mattis: The American composer Wallingford Riegger is reputed to have played your electronic cello; do you remember this?

Theremin: There were many composers, and I showed it to many composers, but I don't remember the names. I don't remember. Maybe he was my student; I don't remember this. There were many people in my studio; they were all studying. I had a 99-year lease: I rented a big house in New York at 37 W 54th Street, a six-storey house. My studio was there. Many students came there, and composers came to the place. I don't remember the names, but they were interested in the instruments. I showed them the instruments and gave them opportunities to play it, and so on, and so on. Everything took place during a nine-year [sic] period. I didn't write down the names: only the most world-famous ones. I have notes about them, Einstein among them, and composers-- [Joseph] Szigeti visited me; Szigeti, the famous violinist, was also there.

Mattis: I would like to mention some other names, and elicit any thoughts you have about these people you knew.

Theremin: I can prepare for next time, but I cannot answer you off the cuff. I can't remember them now [the composers' names]. There were too many people, too many different composers. Sometimes I remember the composer's name, but I don't remember if he was at my place or not. I want to say that at that time I was mostly interested in questions of electronic music and timbre. There were many new questions at that time, so I was not so much interested in people and composers. They only impressed me after having learned the old science.

Mattis: Do you remember Nicolas Slonimsky?

Theremin: Maybe. I don't remember. It's a familiar name to me--I might even know him--but I don't remember.

Mattis: How about Henry Cowell?

Theremin: I recognize all these names. No, I am afraid I don't remember very much about him. Stokowski I remember very well, because I made instruments for him. As for the rest, maybe we talked casually. The composers knew very little about acoustics, so I did not talk to them much.

Mattis: Please tell me about Stokowski.

Theremin: About Stokowski I can say, yes, I remember him. He was of course a great conductor. He was very interested in technical resources, of course: not in the electronics specifically, but in what new sounds, what new timbres, what new characters of sound could be obtained. So of course I can tell you all the theory I know, but this may not be relevant now. I have some notes about this theory of new timbres and about musical acoustics. I delivered lectures at the university. There are many things that composers know very little about. I was not very interested in them, because they were going in a different direction [. . .] in relation to the new musical resources. This was as much [in the realm of] melodic construction as of timbre and the use of chords [harmonies]. This was all worked out by me based on the new musical resources.

Mattis: [. . .] In Paris did you ever meet George Antheil?

Theremin: I don't remember.

Lemoine: What other composers did you meet in New York?

Theremin: I'm afraid to say. It's very hard for me to say.

Mattis: Now I would like to ask you about the artistic world; did you know the Futurists?

Theremin: No.

Mattis: Neither the Italians nor the Russians?

Theremin: No. No. There were a lot of different people with whom I had to talk. There were a lot of societies that would invite me, where I would answer questions, but I don't remember. You can imagine. For example, now we are having a meeting, and we are talking now. You are asking me questions, and I am answering. And I don't know your names. I don't know to whom I am speaking. There were many such interviews, and then you ask, "Who was there?" I'm meeting a lot of people in these three or four days I'm here, and I'm not writing down all the names. I don't remember who they are or what their names are: "He's a director, or he is an assistant, what's his name?" Even now, I don't know [either of your names]. And, of course, in America I was not as accurate in recording people's names. If it was a very famous person I may have remembered him, and might remember him now.

There were a lot of good people who were praised, but they also had enemies who would say derogatory things about them, who did not agree with them, who would say, "He's an awful composer." Some said one [fellow] was a good composer, and some said he was an awful composer. So there were all different kinds of people. I was very interested, and I talked to them. There were many things I talked about with them, and from those conversations I thought I should find new ways of thinking, so that composers would not [have to] use the old viewpoints that had been used in art.

Mattis: Do you remember Joseph Schillinger?

Theremin: Schillinger, yes, I knew him. I had many conversations with him, but I cannot say anything about his work. I recognize his name; he was famous, after all.

Mattis: You worked together, and you wrote a composition together.⁵

Theremin: Yeah, he was a composer, but from my point of view he was one of many interesting, good people who were interested in old-fashioned ideas and viewpoints that were not suitable for the development of musical art.

Mattis: I would like to ask you about your life in New York. Could you speak first in general terms about your life in New York?

Theremin: Yes, of course. Do you want it now? Do you want my story now?

Lemoine: Yes: when you were in New York, how did you live, where did you live, and what were you doing in New York in general?

Theremin: [You have to tell me what you want to know] because I can tell you about my musical and theoretical side or my personal life. My personal life has to do with my personal pleasures: with my friends, some little things with family affairs. So if you want to talk about family affairs, we can talk about the people that were close to me, and so on, or I can tell you about my work and the people who shared it with me.

Mattis: I'm interested in both aspects of your life, absolutely.

Theremin: First my personal life: it was known, as everything else was known. In my personal life I was interested very much in different physicists. At the same time, I was very interested in the people who were very close to me. I was quite close to my parents, to my sister, and so on. Also, I could love people whom I liked. I fell in love for the first time (of course, not in New York) with a girl that I liked very much when I was three years old. That was my first love.

Lemoine: We want to know about your life in New York.

Theremin: I can tell you many things that occurred that may have significance, etc. I can tell you all the things that strongly influenced my musical life. I can tell you all kinds of things, but they may sound random. I can tell them quickly. I won't tell you about the love that happened when I was three years old, but I can tell you about my first wedding.

Lemoine: Where was this, in New York?

⁵ *First Airphonic Suite for RCA Theremin and Orchestra, 1929.*

Theremin: I'll tell you all about it, in New York and everything.

Mattis: Please tell me about it.

Theremin: I was born in 1896, so it was in '21 for the first time. I had a colleague, Constantinov, who had a very attractive sister. And so she made herself [became] my wife, and we got married when I was working in Leningrad in the Ioffe Institute for Physics and Technology. She was very attractive. We were in Russia. She had general interests, not music. She was much younger than me. It was in '21. I was already 26 [sic] years old at that time, and she was probably 20 or a little more than 19: Katia Constantinova.

After that I had a lot of work, very interesting work. I had a lab. I was the inventor of this instrument, the first instrument. She was not interested in music much. I was the first in the world to invent a television device; this was in 1926.

Then I was sent abroad. I was sent to the international conference in Frankfurt-am-Main. I went alone, and she was left behind. She joined me in Paris, where I went next, and we stayed with my relatives. After that I went to America, and she joined me there. So I was with Katia.

It was a difficult time. We had a lot of work to do. We did not have children, on principle. It's not that we didn't want them, but we decided that because of the circumstances we did not want to have children while traveling. So we came to New York; she was in New York with me.

She was interested in medicine. She wanted to enter the institute, the medical institute, which was about 60 km from New York, or maybe less: 35 km. So she entered this medical school, and she slept there [in the dormitory], but she visited me once or twice a week in New York. We had a very good relationship, but she was interested, not in music, but in medicine. I was also interested in medicine, but not in the same way as her.

After a while--

Mattis: Did you have any children with this woman?

Theremin: No. We didn't want children on principle. Then I'll tell you what happened afterwards. After that it happened that she was visiting me once a week, and one fine day a young man came to me and he said, "You know" (he gave me his calling card), "I have a request to make of you and of your wife too. We love each other, and let us marry each other." It was not quite pleasant for me, but I said, "Of course I cannot forbid-- Well, in the Soviet Union we have freedom [divorce is legal]." But I told him that things could not happen in this way. So he left, and I felt terrible.

I tried to reach my wife, but the phones weren't working well. After a while, maybe three days later, I received from my embassy--because at the time I was working under the leadership of our consulate--they sent me a magazine that was published by German representatives of a fascist organization in America. This fascist organization wrote that Theremin-- In this article it was written that "the wife of Theremin is sympathetic to our work, and we accepted her into our society, but Theremin doesn't

want to pay money, because he's probably a Jew, and he is afraid to give money. That's why he won't become a member of our society." Well, there was such a magazine.

At the embassy, the people said, "We cannot allow this." Then in a few days, they said something more definite. The embassy called me, and demanded that I get a divorce from her. They called me and gave me my first divorce without her [presence or consent]. I talked to her on the telephone about it. She said, "It's my friends, but I was never a member of any such society," and that's it. This was my first divorce. She continued to live there; she continued to study at this institute. I would talk to her sometimes, but did not believe her. So this was my first divorce.

Of course, at the same time I continued constructing musical instruments, and this too preoccupied my mind. Composers came by and would ask about my wife. So I told you a little bit [about my life]. Then there's more to tell--

Mattis: Are you Jewish?

Theremin: No.

Mattis: Do you have anything more to add about your personal life in New York?

Theremin: There are many interesting things connected with my work, with the composers I had to see. But anyway, I felt lonely. I sometimes called my wife on the telephone, but I couldn't-- I couldn't get her attention--well, we didn't really argue--but, I felt lonely that I had no wife.

So I had my studio, where I was conducting many studies on a new instrument which I invented, an instrument for dancing. The instrument for dancing was called the "Terpsitone." It was in my studio, this instrument. It's important to talk about this instrument, because it required a great deal of work. It's a dancing musical instrument: much like a thereminvox, but for dancing.

There I had a very beautiful student, a black woman. She danced well. And it happened that we liked each other very much, and when I said in my consulate that I liked a black woman, they said, "O.K., marry her." Then we went to the consulate where we were married, and that was my marriage #1 [sic: should be #2] to the black woman. Her name was Lavinia Williams.

She lived with me, etc. She participated in some dancing works, about which I should talk because I had done much work on the dancing musical instrument. So, when I left America (we did not have children either)--I had to leave America--she was to be sent in a few weeks. I went on a special-- Well, so she stayed in America.

Mattis: [. . .] Do you know what happened to her afterwards?

Theremin: She stayed there. We wrote to each other for a while, but now I don't know.

Natalia Theremin: She married and has two daughters who were ballerinas and performed in a major New York theater; I don't know its name.

Theremin: She married another man. Not immediately: six years after I left.

Mattis: Is she alive?

Theremin: Yes, she is.

Natalia Theremin: She has been dancing, lately even. Five years ago she was still dancing. The wife-- She has her own studio in the Hawaiian Islands.

Theremin: There were many magazines she used to send. We had a good relationship.

Mattis: You divorced her?

Natalia Theremin: No. There is still no divorce. She was planning to come to the Soviet Union, but it happened that she didn't come. They have no divorce still.

Theremin: Then I came here on special assignment--

Mattis: Where is here?

Theremin: --to the Soviet Union. After some time I had the opportunity to marry again. So I married again in '47, '46. [. . .] Then I had two children with her, born together. One was older than the other by 40 minutes. One is older, Lena [Helena], and the second one is Natasha [Natalia]. Here she is, [Natasha].

Mattis: Where is Lena?

Theremin: She is in Moscow. I have two grandchildren there. And I have two children, two daughters. This is my daughter.

Mattis: So you were married three times.

Theremin: Yes. My wife passed away in '70.

Mattis: Why did you leave New York?

Theremin: I left New York because-- Of course, I was there on assignment all the time, but the assignments dealt with seemingly unimportant issues for military purposes. But at that time the war was coming. The military troops of the fascists were approaching Leningrad, etc., and I asked to be sent to the Soviet Union so as to make myself useful. I asked many times. For a whole year I asked to be sent back. The war had already started. And they didn't send me, they didn't send me. Then at last they permitted me. They assigned me to be an assistant to the captain of a large motor ship. So I went home, but they did not take my wife.

Mattis: So what happened then?

Theremin: They took me on this ship, yeah, and after I arrived, my wife: they would not send her. We exchanged thirty letters. Then I was arrested, and I was taken prisoner: not quite a prisoner, but they put me in a special lab in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There I worked in this lab just as others worked. Topolev [the airplane designer] was imprisoned in such a way too, if you know about that. He was considered to be a prisoner, and I was considered a prisoner too.

Mattis: So what did you do in that lab?

Theremin: Electronics and other different things that were mostly associated with military matters: television and other types of communication.⁶

Mattis: Weren't you in a camp?

Theremin: No, I was in a special lab. At one time, on the way to there [the laboratory], I was sent to a camp, where they did road construction. I was assigned to be the supervisor over the prisoners. From there, after eight months on the road construction, I was sent with Topolev to the Aviation Institute. Many important people worked there; Korolev worked there for me.

Mattis: Why were you arrested?

Theremin: I was arrested, first, for them to find out-- We were all under suspicion, all the people, and I as a suspicious person was assigned to be under investigation. The investigator was occupied with my case for about a month or more. He and the magistrate asked me all kinds of questions. This was all very formal, and they congratulated me [and said] that everything was O.K., but they said that unfortunately there would be a second investigation. There was a second investigator, who also asked [questions]. And they wrote down that everything would be fine. But after that, together with the other prisoners, I went with Topolev. Officially I was considered a prisoner, but as soon as I arrived they made me the supervisor of a group of prisoners.

Mattis: What did you do after you became free?

Theremin: I stayed in my lab. First I was under some supervision, and then I became the director of the lab. I remained in the same place. I had some new things that I invented. I received a big bonus; I received an apartment. It was at that time that I got married. Eight years elapsed while I was there [in prison].

Mattis: Why was your name not mentioned in the West? I have one book that says that you died c.1945.⁷

⁶ He is rumored to have perfected the Soviet "bug."

⁷ Andy Mackay, *Electronic Music: the Instruments, the Music & the Musicians*, 1981.

Theremin: Somebody invented that.

Lemoine: How do you explain the fact that everyone thought you died in '45?

Theremin: Because at that time my arrival was kind of secret. At the end of the long situation, a long time passed, about half a year, and then there was a procedure [that was] standard with many people who were under suspicion. At that time it was quite accepted for people to be detained in such a way. I was allowed to be detained then, and I was appointed to be in charge of the laboratory (that was fine), but it was written that they could detain me as a prisoner. They used a word not as terrible as "prison," but I was imprisoned there for eight years.

Lemoine: And then?

Theremin: After the eight years I remained in the same place.

Lemoine: Why, when all this was over, why after '47 did still nobody know that you were alive in Moscow and about your work?⁸

Theremin: Before '47 I lived in complete secret. After '47 I was free, not in secret. I've been allowed to write and have conversations since '47.

Natalia Theremin: No, no. Only after '60 did you start receiving letters. Before that you didn't have any correspondence. In the '50's, until the '60's, you had no correspondence.

Theremin: Well, maybe there were no letters.

Mattis: Why were you considered such a criminal so as to be in this situation?

Theremin: Which situation?

Lemoine: You were in a special lab.

Theremin: I was in the lab.

Lemoine: We don't understand why you were arrested.

Theremin: I was arrested just like Topolev.

Natalia Theremin: At that time it was common ~~that~~ normal, good people ~~were~~ arrested.

⁸ For example, in 1959 Slonimsky asked Shostakovich about Theremin, and Shostakovich replied, "About Theremin I can say nothing." Quoted in Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 1988, p.153.

Theremin: Even when I was interned I was treated very well. I was not considered to be in prison, but I worked as a normal person. I was the head of the lab, and when they liberated me I was still working in the same lab. Then I got married. It turned out that when I was free it was much more difficult to work in the lab. When I was considered to be imprisoned I had a supervisor, and they would say to me that I had to do this and that. Then, when I was freed, I had to do it myself. Then I had to fuss, do much more paperwork, keep an office in order; the work became much worse.

Mattis: Did you work with any Soviet composers?

Theremin: I cannot say that I worked with composers. I had many acquaintances [whom] I remember. I worked in an organization, and then sometimes I worked on secret projects, until '66 or '67—I'm afraid to say exactly when. After that, I retired from that important organization. I went on a pension in 1966 or '67. Then I started to look for an organization where I could work. The first place I came to work was at the conservatory, Moscow Conservatory. They gave me a space, and I started to work on the electronic musical instruments and the dancing instruments at the conservatory. By that time the children had grown up (from '47 to '67); so by then they were 20 years old.

Mattis: With which composers did you work?

Theremin: I collaborated with some at the conservatory. There were meetings. Should I tell you what difficulties there were?

Lemoine: No, it's not necessary.

Mattis: With which composers did you work there?

Theremin: I did not work with composers.

Lemoine: You just said that you had meetings with composers.

Theremin: With those composers who were there—I am afraid to say right now with whom. I was there in a special lab. We could do different things. At that time I started working with my apparatus; I made a kind of thereminvox. I was working again on my instrument the Terpsitone. I had a special studio for studying these instruments. There was one young composer, [Vladimir] Smirnov.

Mattis: Did you make a new instrument?

Theremin: Yes, I had a new instrument. There was a very unpleasant situation that I'm going to tell you about. I was working there. Svishnikov, the director there—When they learned in America that I was working at the conservatory, a man who was one of the journalists from the newspaper *The New York Times* came to Svishnikov. He said, "We thought Theremin was dead, but it turns out that he's working here; I

would like to meet him, to see him, to find out what he's been doing." So Svishnikov called me to his place [his office], and I talked to him [the journalist].

So I showed the man the musical instrument, a good thereminvox which I had made, and the dancing instrument. He liked them very much. In the newspaper-- I had a space there [at the conservatory]. Svishnikov had an assistant who was in charge of administration, who did not know what I was doing there.

And then it happened that in a month the newspaper arrived, containing an article that Theremin is doing this and that, electrical musical instruments in the conservatory, dancing instruments for dancing. This very newspaper got into the hands of the assistant of Svishnikov who was there; his name was Muzin. So he learned that in the conservatory electrical musical instruments were being made. He announced that "Electricity is not good for music; electricity is to be used for electrocution." So he ordered that all these instruments be removed from the conservatory, and Theremin too, and to throw all these things out, and that there be no more such projects at the conservatory.

Mattis: What year did it happen?

Theremin: It happened in the early '70's. I don't quite remember now. We should look it up. '72, '73: something like that.⁹

Mattis: Now your arrival at this festival is the first time you've left the Soviet Union since you left America?

Theremin: [. . .] The first time.

Mattis: Do you have a message now, in 1989, that you would like to convey to the Western world?

Theremin: What words! I knew the Western world pretty well. I haven't been ever-- Only here I see some of my friends, so I don't know to whom to say anything. The only thing I wanted to ask, maybe of some people, (if it were allowed by the Soviet government), is that I be allowed to promote my instruments. You must make the impression that I came here, that I was allowed to come here-- It seems that there will be no punishment for me if you write in the newspaper about all I have told you. I hope [nothing will happen]. We'll see what happens. The same with my invention. I want to stress to you that all this needs to be done in a disciplined way, and that when people will be asking about me and writing about me, that all this be done in a responsible way. But if you write that I have said something against the Soviet government and [that I have] said that it is better to work elsewhere, then I shall have difficulties back home. [ironic laughter]

⁹ Sic: should be April 25, 1967. The article, by Harold Schonberg, appeared the following day, on page 40.