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James Martin

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Oral History Interview with James Martin,
Conducted over Skype, February 2nd, 2016

Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: My name is Meg Miner. I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University and today is February 2nd and our alumnus James Martin has agreed to participate in an interview about Minor Myers. So James, please go ahead and introduce yourself and how you're affiliated with Minor and Wesleyan.

James Martin: Hi, my name is James Martin. I am a 1992 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan. I was in the department of music. I got have a Bachelor of Music and I went on to get my Masters at the Juilliard School. Minor Myers was a really interesting guy. When I started was his first year, I believe, as a- as a president at- at Wesleyan. And I just remember this man with this full head of hair who always- he was always walking around in quite a hurry, he- and he always had a smile on his face. He was always very positive and he loved music and the arts and he really, really worked hard for our- for our...schools. And one of the things that I remember him collecting was older instruments because of his love of music. And I think he had a particular love of early music and he had harpsichords, if I am correct. And I remember, he had invited us over for a donor party to do some singing- performing for it. And he would also- he had also...specifically for this concert had asked for Americana songs because he- he would get on these kicks where he would do- he would be very interested in one kind of music and do lots of- lots of research and listening, and he would go to another kind of music-

Miner: Hmm.

Martin: -if I'm correct. But he was a very interesting man, and I- I- he influenced so many of us in his- in his positivity, and creativity, and I think that- that's what made him so dynamic...as a president, and quite- he just had a fire. He- he had a passion for- for- for- very creative and- and wonderful things and I think that's why students and donors and the community responded so well to him.

Miner: Hmm. That's great. Do you want to talk a little bit about the- the in- instruments? You said that he brought them into your school or was it-

Martin: No, no. They were in his home-

Miner: Okay.

Martin: -actually. Yeah.

Miner: I heard he had one piano and one harpsichord in his home. So when you came there, was he performing with you or-

Martin: No, actually. He- he- he performed once that I recall. It's funny that you say that. I don't- I did remember that he did perform on the harpsichord I believe with- it was either with the Camerata or- I believe it was with the Camerata. No, but we went to his home and he did not play with us, no. We had our own accompanist.

Miner: Hmm. Well, what do you think- you mentioned his positive attitude and enthusiasm. What do you think maybe- or could you speculate on- on his interest in old music and old instruments as having an influence? Or was it really truly that his personality is what lingers with you?

Martin: His personality and his- I- his passion. I think it was- I think it was just very interested in history and the human story and the human condition. He was- that's why he really responded to the arts so well. I don't think he ever missed a- he very rarely missed a performance in the drama school or in the music school.

Miner: Hmm.

Martin: I just recall him almost at every event. He was that passionate. And so...his presence- his presence on campus was just- he was present.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Martin: And that- that was really excellent. It's funny. I work at a college now and I have not gotten that same kind of presence of a president. I know that he's out raising money and I know that Miner went out and raised money but I- I always recall him walking on the campus back and forth and he was always- he walked so quickly...[Miner laughs]...in these big strides. He had a big stride and he always had books in his hands. He was almost like a student going to class.

Miner: [laughs] That's great. I was going to ask you about that because you've seen a spectrum of the academic world now, and I was going to ask you what that- that sort of a character would have as an influence.

Martin: Oh, I think- I think he really influenced the culture on campus. Because of that...there's something about the presence of authority in a positive way. With him just being there, being positive, students were wanting to make the school better and I think faculty wanted to- to- to serve the school well and not just the students, really to- to- to- I mean, Wesleyan has become

quite...quite the school that- to be proud of. I think we as alumni are very proud of it and I think the institution itself has grown. The legacy of the school has grown because of him and we're- we're very proud of- of that-

Miner: Hmm.

Martin: -of the institution. And I think that his- his- during his tenure I know for me- and not just because I don't remember other presidents but I think the school went from one level to the next during his time.

Miner: Hmm. And do you think there's something...some relationship between the kind of personality he is and the kind of school that Illinois Wesleyan is? I mean, is it- is that kind of thing important?

Martin: Wow, that's like asking- yeah. Well, any president's tenure is- is limited. But I do think he shaped the character of the school into being a little bit more...world-minded, interdisciplinary, reaching out, to be a curious kind of...student. And- and as well...a strong institution that embraced some diversity, I believe.

Miner: That's great. Is there anything else you think we could- we should know about Minor from your perspective?

Martin: No, I think I got it. I think he- he really was a character in that way. [Miner laughs] He was not typical as a president. He was so active and- and very alive.

Miner: Yeah.

Martin: I mean, I never got to see him in that president mode. I just remember him at graduation and- and through the course of- of my...undergraduate years and him just being there.

Miner: Hmm. Mm-hmm. That's great.

Martin: I had a similar experience at Juilliard actually. The- the president was also very present. So I- I- I consider myself lucky. I do believe that that- that that- in- in church we call it the ministry of presence. I do think that's reflective. It reflects- the institution begins to reflect someone like that because of the decisions that they make and the persons that they act and support. I do believe that that makes a big difference.

Miner: And so that kind of curious and creative presence becomes a part of the character of the place.

Martin: I- I believe so. I mean, didn't he build the library?

Miner: Mm-hmm. Yep.

Martin: Yeah, and that is such a wonderful, wonderful facility. I remember when I got back to- to campus for an event. They had asked me to come back and I just remember going through that library. It was so beautiful. It was- it was- the- the architecture was lovely and it just seemed have a wonderful- again, creative elegance and just a little quirky. [Miner laughs] Yeah, it's kind of- yeah, I think that was just a wonderful addition to the campus and- and unobtrusive. It's- it's in the right spot. So-

Miner: Hmm. Mm-hmm. I have to ask you what's quirky about the library.

Martin: Doesn't it have those- like a hole in it? In the first floor?

Miner: Yeah.

Martin: And-

Miner: There are- there are- there's a hole between the first and the second floor, you're absolutely right. [laughs]

Martin: Yeah. I just remember that and- yeah, I kind of thought it was just a little bit interesting. [Miner laughs] It's not just your- it's just not glass and concrete.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Oh, absolutely. It's a beautiful place. Well, that's wonderful James. I really appreciate it.

Martin: Yeah. I'm happy to do it. I really liked him.

Miner: Oh, that's great. Well, thank you so much for participating and if I pull this together-

Martin: Oh.

Miner: Go ahead.

Martin: Yeah, 'cause I actually received the President's award and so I guess I would have been- I guess I was the first to receive that award from him.

Miner: Oh my!

Martin: I guess. And- and maybe that's just in the school of music, but yeah.

Miner: I didn't know that. So that was while you were a student?

Martin: Yes, when I graduated.

Miner: Oh wonderful! I will look that up. Alright.

Martin: Cool.

Miner: Alright, I just looked on the campus news site. I see your alumni recital, so this was-

Martin: Yes.

Miner: -after that. Yeah, wow. Well, thank you for your contributions and for returning to school too. That's wonderful.

Martin: Yes. [Miner laughs] Thank you and thank you for- for- for- asking. I think this is kind of neat.

Miner: Oh, certainly. I really appreciate your help and I'm getting a lot of good input from people and I'll follow up with you when I've got it into some sort of meaningful...[laughs]...presence, I guess would be a good word, for- for you to visit.

Martin: Great!

Miner: Take care James.

Martin: Take good care Meg. Buh-bye.

Miner: Thanks. Buh-bye.

Martin: Buh-bye.