

**An Interview with Professor Leon Botstein, Newly
Appointed Conductor of the Jerusalem Symphony
Orchestra**

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Min-Ad wishes to congratulate Leon Botstein, the noted musicologist, President of Bard College (1975-) and musical director of the American Symphony Orchestra (1992-), on his recent appointment as conductor of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra. We also would like to thank him for sharing with us some of the concepts that have shaped his career, both as a scholar and as a practicing performer.

Q: Please tell us about the teachers and musicians who had a special impact on your career.

A: On the musical side, I would say that I was particularly influenced by Roman Totenberg (1911-), with whom I studied violin for seven or eight years, Harold Farberman, now aged 75, who was my conductor-teacher, Richard Wernick (1934-), the American composer whose assistant I was during my college years, and also the late American pianist of Czech origin, Rudolph Firkušný (1912-94), who was extremely supportive of my career in the early days. And then, in the area of musicology, I would say that I was very impressed, as a 16-, 17-year-old, by the performer-scholars of the early music movement. The most prominent of these, in my experience, was the late Howard Meyer Brown (1930-93), the Renaissance scholar. I played in his collegium in Chicago, in his early music group. I was also very

impressed by Leo Treitler (1931-), who played continuo in an orchestra that I conducted, and I played a recital with him and Colin Slim (1929-). These people were in the musicology business, if you will, but they also performed. When I was in Tanglewood as a student in 1967, I was stunned by the artificial gap between being a practical musician and the anti-intellectualism that was cultivated in the conservatory environment. In point of fact, most of the great conductors, like Bruno Walter (1876-1962) and Otto Klemperer (1885-1973), were people of enormous literary, visual, and intellectual capacity. And of course we were taught by a generation of teachers in the composer and analysis world who were extremely hostile to performers. This generation was trained in its attitude to players by Schoenberg and Stravinsky, who were extremely negative about performers. So I grew up in a climate with many contradictory elements and I was determined, somehow, not to fall prey to the conventional attitude. I thought that making music was a cerebral business and not simply a matter of inarticulate intuition. And so I never had a problem in combining the practical with the theoretical, the intellectual.

Q: Much of your work today deals with composers of Jewish ancestry, like Felix Mendelssohn, and explores issues of anti-Semitism within cultural history. When and how did you develop this personal interest?

A: While it may appear that I have a particular interest in this subject, I do work in other fields as well. For example, I edited a book on Brahms.¹ So I don't consider myself to be primarily a Jewish scholar. I got into it, really, when attempting to understand why

¹ . *The Complete Brahms* (New York: Norton, 1998).

Mendelssohn has suffered so terribly in the repertoire. I started to defend Mendelssohn's repertoire, and inevitably got involved in Mendelssohn's reception history and its relationship to anti-Semitism.

Q: Would you say that one thing led to another, and that you couldn't really have anticipated the way things would evolve?

A: No, I didn't anticipate it. In 1988, for example, just after Waldheim had been elected president of Austria, I was invited by the Austrians to replace Manfred Wagner, the prominent sociologist of music in Vienna. So, instead of doing a general lecture, I did a graduate seminar on the Second Viennese school. But when they wanted me to do a German language course, I figured that at this time such a course would be ridiculous. So I decided to do a general course on Jewish and German culture in the nineteenth century, with a special emphasis on music. That again was an accident, as it had never occurred to me to do a course like that. And so I became interested in the question of the part played by the Jews in the nineteenth century and anti-Semitism, which was a central part of European history, and the Jewish involvement in Vienna, which is a subject that I know most about, the city of Vienna. Of course, it is impossible to do this without confronting the Jewish question.

Q: How was the course received in Vienna?

A: Well, a book came out of it, called *Judentum und Modernität*.² Oddly enough, it has been translated into Russian, and it appeared in Russia last year.

² . *Judentum und Modernität: Essays zur Rolle der Juden in Der deutschen und osterreichischen Kultur 1848-1938* (Vienna: Bahlau Verlag, 1991).

Q: Please tell us about how you came to Israel and why you accepted the invitation to serve as conductor of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra.

A: What happened was pretty simple. I conducted the orchestra several years ago. When the orchestra ran into political and financial difficulties in the spring of 2003, the courts stepped in to reevaluate what could be done. In that context, an advisory committee made up of members of the Hebrew University music department, including Ruth Hachohen, invited me to give a guest performance. During my trip, I met with many people and talked to various members in the Ministry and in the Knesset, in the Broadcasting Authority and so on. Everything seemed to work right. I wouldn't have accepted the position had it not been in Israel. My father is no longer alive, but he was a graduate of a Zionist gymnasium in Lodz. This was something I felt I wanted to do. I had no prior academic or artistic relationship with Israel. It all came about suddenly.

Q: In New York, you introduced the concept of thematic concerts. What was your intent when you began organizing concerts in this way?

A: First of all, I think that thematic concerts are not initially a marketing ploy because, in fact, these kinds of thematic concerts have to create their own audience. It's a controversial, difficult thing. When you try something new, it takes time. My motivation for doing it has to do with reviving real interest in the classical music business. I'm extremely allergic to what I consider to be "the masterpiece syndrome"

in our business, that is to say, people who are fixated on a group of 50 – 70 pieces of music. In fact, the history of music has as many treasures as are exhibited in the major art museums. Not everything is da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. I was astonished by how little of the repertoire musicians perform. I'm a violinist and my daughter is also a violinist. We studied the same six concertos, when in fact there are dozens of fantastic twentieth- and nineteenth-century concertos that have never reached the public. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. So that's the motivation. The thematic concept has to do with the fact that music is not some kind of detached separate realm, some kind of absolute aesthetic of the nineteenth century. Our attitude to literature or to painting is not like this. We don't read *War and Peace* every year, and we don't see the same film over and over again. And music also has its own logic; it is connected in many ways to the world. For example, I am doing a concert here in Jerusalem that is about music written in the aftermath of World War II. The compositions chosen for performance — Marcel Rubin's (1905-55) *Symphony No. 4*, Erich Wolfgang Korngold's (1897-1957) *Concerto in C Major for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 37*, Arthur Honegger's (1892-1995) *Symphony No. 3*, and Richard Strauss's (1864-1949) *Metamorphosen* — were all written in a 12-month period. Similarly, I will be giving a concert entitled "Music Under Stalin," featuring works composed during the 1930s by Prokofiev, Nikolai Miaskovsky (1881-1950) and Shostakovich. When was the last time you heard these pieces on the stage? So a thematic program is not about a gimmick, it's about history.

Q: In Israel will you be performing works by Israeli composers?

A: One of the requirements of the Orchestra is to support Israeli music and contemporary music, so I certainly think we will. We're looking forward to appointing a composer in residence.

Q: Do you have any preferences regarding the Israeli composers you will perform?

A: I don't know. My general feeling is to support younger people. I think young people should be given a chance. This is true of soloists as well as composers.

Q: How do you think music should be taught within the educational system?

A: I believe that the only way to teach music is to have students make music. Following Paul Hindemith, Carl Orff, or Zoltán Kodaly, I believe that we must get them to sing and to play. Music education based on conventional music appreciation is like teaching baseball by getting the child to read the rulebook. Kids want to know the rules of the sport because they enjoy hitting the ball. The desire to learn how to read music is because it helps you play an instrument. The most natural of all instruments is the voice. So a choral tradition is the backbone of music education, together with training the ear, and improvisation.

Q: Why do you think that this doesn't happen in many music programs?

A: Because musicology is a relatively young field, musicologists have a chip on their shoulders. They want to be sophisticated, and often forget that part of their mission is to introduce young people to the wonders of the repertoire. Art historians are more successful because they impress young people by showing them things that they've never seen before. Similarly, in literature, before a student can engage in serious theoretical analysis, s/he must first love to read. This does not mean that I advocate simplification. But it seems to me that historians and philosophers have discovered ways to talk intelligibly and in a sophisticated manner about complex matters, and still to reach a wide public. This is what we should be doing in music.

Q: As editor of the *Musical Quarterly*, what types of articles do you value most?

A: So much today is driven by career considerations. We have come to a phase where people want to publish books, so a number of articles get printed together in collections that are published as books. That's the new style. Or, alternatively, what should be an article is inflated into a book, because what should have been a footnote becomes an article. Journals should be publishing new material, written by younger scholars or senior people. We are constantly on the lookout for good work. Our journal subdivides into very specific areas that we think need "advocacy." We have a section on American music, and an area that we call "institutions and technology." This includes the history of acoustics, the economics of music, instrument manufacture, and the history of reproduction. We are interested also in the relationship between music and other fields, and other activities, and we seek items that connect music and politics and

culture. We are going to publish a first annotated publication of the Koussevitzky-Stravinsky correspondence, for example.

Q: Would you say that you are promoting an interdisciplinary approach?

A: The problem with this is that the notion of interdisciplinary sounds like a fad. It is no fad. In scholarship, what is important is what type of question you ask. In science, for example, real scholarship comes from asking very important, simple, straightforward questions. These questions rarely fit into the bureaucratic boxes that we have created in the university to solve them. The questions confronting modern biologists today, for example, require them to know physics and chemistry and mathematics. In the humanities, studying Mahler forces one to confront questions that involve philosophy, politics, history, and literature. Similarly, Mendelssohn was a friend of Goethe; he also painted, and was fluent in Latin. This requires musicologists to know about the politics and the literature of the period. Someone who has never read the philosophical works of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) cannot possibly understand Felix Mendelssohn. I don't care how many exams they passed in Schenkerian analysis. Similarly, people who never read Nietzsche write books about Mahler. It's simply not possible. But it is very difficult to convince people that this kind of serious education is necessary for the training of scholars. The fact is that there should be a distinction between discipline and specialization. Specialization is a necessary attribute in which I know very little about very little — but the little that I know about the little, I really know. Specialization, however, evolves from many different disciplines. When I conduct a piece of

music, for example, I am interested in what its composer read. If you look at the libraries that Brahms, Beethoven and Aaron Copland left behind, you're looking at a serious question — what did they read? Many of the composers I'm interested in gave their attention to the visual arts — painting, design and architecture. I want to know about the spaces they lived in, the visual environment in which they functioned.

Q: This kind of scholarship makes learning so much more relevant; it brings the subject to life.

A: The history of music did not operate in a vacuum. And yet, our graduate programs have been shortchanged by self-imposed, bureaucratic professionalism. And that's a problem. That someone who has written a dissertation analysing Stravinsky is unable to say that they have read any nineteenth- or twentieth-century Russian literature and can't name three Russian painters of any significance is not a plausible situation. Luckily, there are exceptions. Cases like Larry Todd, for example, who wrote a wonderful biography of Mendelssohn. It took him years. Unfortunately, however, when one looks at the critical apparatus, the footnotes of many of our colleagues in music, one discovers that they don't read outside their field. Mistake! Curiosity about the important questions should lead musicologists wherever the problem leads them, irrespective of where the institutionalized career structure forces them to be.