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**To:** President <[REDACTED]>

**Subject:** asked my guys to follow the suggestion of lynne and ask peter davis, hence

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To anyone weary of standard concert fare, the **American Symphony Orchestra** programs always look enticing. Ever since he became the orchestra's conductor and music director in 1992, Leon Botstein has been uncovering a buried repertory that our more timid musical organizations avoid, and he is not above stretching a point to put his discoveries into provocative thematic contexts.

The latest concert in Avery Fisher Hall was typical: Robert Fuchs's Symphony No. 3, Alexander Zemlinsky's *Symphonische Gesänge*, Mahler's *Rückert Lieder*, and Franz Schreker's "Nachtstück" interlude from his opera *Der Ferne Klang* -- rare works, the Mahler songs excepted, that few audiences can have ever heard performed live. All four composers were colleagues in turn-of-the-century Vienna (a noted pedagogue, Fuchs in fact taught the other three), and Botstein brought them together in hopes that by showing us how they dealt with 1900 *fin de siècle* angst, we might connect with their music and "so define our own place in history."

That's a lot to ask from any concert, and I can't say that I came away from this one much the wiser. Botstein, who leads a second life as president of Bard College, sometimes seems to be substituting classroom ideals for musical reality -- especially when he puts forth extravagant claims for neglected minor scores that may make fascinating discussion topics but contain precious little musical interest. The Fuchs symphony is a case in point, a pallid imitation of Brahms, already ten years in his grave when this dreary exercise was written in 1907; if such works are still worth hearing at all, they should surely be sampled on reference recordings rather than in a concert. Zemlinsky and Schreker had more individual voices, and both deserve careful reassessment, although I wonder if they are well served by being exposed in an academic context that scarcely shows them at their best.

The performances were not very persuasive, either. Botstein shares a missionary's zeal for second-rate music with Leopold Stokowski and Sir Thomas Beecham, but he lacks their technical and communicative skills to make these scores sound better than they are.

ven at that, both the ASO and its conductor do seem to be more comfortable with each other than when they first met seven years ago, and there is a real need for the sort of repertory freshening they so passionately believe in. Next season's unusual fare looks typically tantalizing, on paper at least; let's hope that it translates more successfully into sound.

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