

The New York Times

Arts & LEISURE

Sunday, March 12, 2006

Professor Botstein in the Promised Land

By THOR ECKERT

Leon Botstein is a familiar presence on New York podiums. As music director of the American Symphony Orchestra, he conducts often at Avery Fisher Hall, and last year he made his debut at the New York City Opera, leading Dukas's "Ariane et Barbe-Bleue." But tonight at Carnegie Hall, Mr. Botstein will appear in New York in yet another guise, as music director of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, a position he has held for three years.

The Jerusalem Symphony is, after the Israel Philharmonic (once the Palestine Orchestra), the oldest and most important symphony orchestra in Israel. Since it is the nation's radio orchestra as well as the orchestra of the city of Jerusalem, programs need to balance the requirements of radio with those of subscription audiences. So to a greater extent than with the American Symphony, where Mr. Botstein performs mostly unfamiliar repertory for New York audiences, the Jerusalem needs a generous serving of the standard peppered with the unusual.

There are also repertory demands specific to the setting.

"Because we are in Jerusalem," Mr. Botstein said recently in an interview in New York, "there is a multioctave, multireligious obligation, which is one of the exciting parts about it. A good example of that is the liturgical festival which we offer during holidays. I'm doing the 'St. John Passion' during Easter time. We've done a lot of choral liturgical music during Christmas for the pilgrims that come to Jerusalem."

In short, Mr. Botstein added, "the context of music-making, the political context of music, the makeup of the audience, what they bring to the table as audience members, there are some radical differences."

The programming of the current East Coast tour reflects what Mr. Botstein has been striving for in Jerusalem (and has largely achieved in New York): a sort of thematic coherence.

"The program we're doing here," Mr. Botstein said of tonight's concert, the last of the tour, "is the 'Memorial to Lidice' of Martinu, which is in memory of the town which was burnt to the ground by the Nazis in 1942, after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich; then the Strauss Oboe Concerto, which was commissioned by the American oboist John de Lancie at the end of the war; and finally the Prokofiev Fifth Symphony, which was written in anticipation of the Soviet victory."

Mr. Botstein suggests that the Prokofiev war horse is discreetly contextualized, first by a work that memorializes a nation, a people, innocent civilians; then by a work from a Nazi collaborator, seeking to make amends in some way.

"It's also the whole question of coming to terms with, shaking hands with, one's enemies and forgiving the perpetrators, and the role music has in that," Mr. Botstein said, "and about nostalgia, loss and regret in the late Strauss. And then the Prokofiev, this strange, ambivalent relationship to the triumphalism of this dictatorship that was crucial to winning the war. You know, who were the bad guys?"

Mr. Botstein is a rarity among today's conductors, possessed of a voracious scholarly mind. Although he always planned to be a musician, he made his first career as a college pres-



Jonathan Taylor for The New York Times

For the Jerusalem Symphony, every note has an added resonance.

ident.

Born in Switzerland, Mr. Botstein came to the United States with his parents as an infant. He started out as a violinist and studied with Roman Totenberg in New York. "By playing in an orchestra in my adolescence," he said, "somehow I conceived the ambition of conducting one."

In 1970, at 23, he found himself president of the bankrupt Franconia College in New Hampshire. Among other things, he founded the White Mountain Music and Arts Festival, which has since given way to a series of summer concerts by the North Country Chamber Players.

At 28, with small children and other responsibilities, he was approached by the trustees of Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, a school with a rich tradition in music and the arts, and he accepted their offer of the presidency.

"I wouldn't have done it had it not had a real

investment in the arts," he said. "And I didn't think at 28 that it was in my scheme of things to remain the rest of my life at Bard. Then I had a daughter who was killed in 1981, hit by a motorist. "That's the simple truth of it. She was a very gifted violinist and gifted girl. And when I was trying to figure out what to do while I was trying to recover, get my bearings, the idea came up of doing a benefit concert to raise some money for a fund at the public school where she was a student. One of my friends said, 'Why don't you consider this concert?' And I did, and I realized that this was really my ambition."

In 1990, Mr. Botstein, who continues as Bard's president, founded the Bard Music Festival, and he remains its co-director. It concentrates on a single composer each year — this summer, Franz Liszt — and has become a destination for music lovers far and wide.

On the basis of his experience with the American Symphony in the early years of the festival, he became its music director in 1992 — the same year, it happens, that he became editor of The Musical Quarterly, the pre-eminent American music journal.

A stable public took to Mr. Botstein's chal-

lenging ideas of programming from the start, and Lynne Meloccaro, the executive director of the American Symphony, says that subscriptions have never been stranger.

"I was persuaded that there was some kind of ridiculous conservatism that descended on the major performing institutions in terms of their representation of the history of music," Mr. Botstein said. "If it is a living museum, an overwhelmingly high percentage of the rooms are closed, and closed unfairly. In music we are really hounded, paralyzed, by this masterpiece syndrome. And it's a falsification of history. There is great, great music — rooms of it — out there that deserves to be heard: wonderful works, and they are not user-unfriendly."

This season, he has done a Lutoslawski program and a rare concert performance of Schumann's "Paradies und die Peri." In years past, American Symphony audiences have heard two late Strauss operas, "Die Ägyptische Helena" and "Die Liebe der Danae" (both performances were recorded live and are available on Telarc), and Zemlin's "Zwerg."

While generally praising his programming, Continued on Page 32

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New York critics tend to chide Mr. Botstein for what they perceive to be less than perfectly honed conducting skills. He is candid about his journey to perfect his craft, a process taken on in front of a highly visible orchestra at Avery Fisher Hall.

He tells a story related to him by Gary Bertini, who was the Jerusalem Symphony's laureate conductor

before his death last year. On a whim, during a tour of Israel with the orchestra, the aged pianist Arthur Schnabel tried his hand at conducting Brahms's Third Symphony one afternoon instead of a sound check, with disastrous results. "After all these years, now I get it," Rubinstein is supposed to have said. "This is not an 18th's game."

Mr. Botstein added: "The art of controlling one's physical equipment, so to speak, one's eyes, one's

hands, the space, is something that it took me a long time to learn: years of very intense private study with Harold Farberman, to whom I really credit the technical — hard won, I would say — understanding of the art of conducting."

The cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who has had vast experience with conductors and has long known Mr. Botstein personally as well as professionally, said:

"More and more I think that you are the musician that you are from the

totality of what you are. What is the value of someone standing in front of a group? Is it conducting technique? Is it the presence? No, it's all the knowledge that someone has that can contribute to it, and it's the relationship between the knowledge and how it's shared with the people."

For his part, Mr. Botstein said, "Music is a form of life." He recalled standing backstage with the Czech pianist Rudolf Firkušný for a performance of Brahms's D minor Concerto.

"He was very nervous," Mr. Botstein said. "It was my first time with

the piece, [redacted] had done it with George Szell and Arturo Toscanini and everybody. And he said, 'As you get older, it doesn't get easier.' This dismayed me no end. And then he said — which I will never forget — as we were about to go out, 'If it were only about music, I wouldn't worry as much.'

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"Music was for him a voice of national self-assertion against oppression, first against the Nazis, then against the Communists. This was not a trivial matter, it was a matter of life and death." Musicians, like other figures from the arts or of world of ideas, Mr. Botstein said, "need to take a stand in public leadership." He cited the pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim, who is outspoken with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"Whether one agrees with him or not is not the issue," Mr. Botstein said. "The engagement is serious."