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SLSO's Leonard Slatkin partners with pianist Emanuel Ax for his first concert in renovated Powell Hall

By Rob Levy

There is nothing in the orchestral world that Leonard Slatkin hasn't done. The conductor laureate for the St. Louis symphony is also a composer and teacher and has spent nearly 60 years bringing classical music to St. Louis.

He was there when Powell Hall was renovated and opened to the public in 1968, and he is there now as the St. Louis Symphony [returns home after another renovation](#).

Serving as music director of the SLSO from 1979 to 1996, he introduced 30 commissioned pieces and conducted the American or world premieres of 32 additional works.

During this time, the maestro helped elevate the orchestra's international stature and developed a youth orchestra to launch the careers of young musicians.

On Oct. 11 and 12 he'll return to Powell Hall to conduct "Hope and Humanity," featuring pianist and multiple Grammy Award-winner Emanuel Ax. The concert celebrates their friendship and the reopening of Powell Hall.

"I'm very excited," Slatkin says about the refurbished hall, which swapped out its seats for larger ones, reducing capacity. "I think they have done the right thing by reducing the number of seats by about 400. It has a more intimate feel to it but is still spacious enough to accommodate the sonic palette that the St. Louis Symphony is well known for."

The renovation also improved the acoustics.

"If one is used to the hall, you're going to encounter the same kind of nice, full sound that the hall had. But it has a presence, that's the best way to describe it. It's still nice and resonant. The sound comes at you more directly than it did before. The hall is a little louder than it was. The sound is more in your face," Slatkin says.

The concert was designed with the rehabbed Powell in mind; the program begins with the U.S. premiere of Slatkin's own composition, "Schubertiade: An Orchestral Fantasy," a work written with three connected parts. Commissioned by the Hiroshima Symphony Orchestra, it is a contemporary reflection on the work of Franz Schubert.

"Schubert used to have events in his apartment. Composers and performers would come over, and they would play his music, they would sing, and they would share their own music sometimes. These became known as Schubertiades. So, I wondered what would happen if we had something similar now, and Schubert was walking amongst us and still had people over to his place," the maestro explains.

"The piece starts as Schubert is working on his great B-flat sonata. Suddenly, all the guests arrive for the Schubertiade. He forgot he was having them over. It's one of the loudest sounds you're ever going to hear in a concert hall, and it's shocking.

“It’s not a homage to Schubert, but there’s a fun aspect to it because the audience will recognize some of the music that I quote.”

Also on the program is Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 25, a richly textured piece featuring sublime playing from Ax, who performs alongside 50 musicians.

Slatkin and Ax have performed together before. In fact, they were at Juilliard together.

“We’ve known each other forever and worked together often,” Slatkin says. “He toured with the St. Louis Symphony when we played in Europe. He’s a good friend of the orchestra, a good friend of mine, and of course, one of the great pianists ever.”

The symbiotic relationship between the artists will be on full display for “Hope and Humanity.”

“There’s a spontaneity in the music making,” Slatkin says. “Often Manny will stop (in rehearsal), and he’ll say something to me, and I’ll just say, Manny, just tell the orchestra, let’s eliminate the middleman here. You do it because you know exactly what you want to happen. So, he’ll talk and interplay with the orchestra, and my job then is just to sit back and listen and enjoy it.”

Also on the program is a seminal work of British symphonic music, Edward Elgar’s Symphony No. 1, a passionate piece that the composer spent a decade writing.

Slatkin hopes audiences enjoy the program.

“I want them to have at least half as good a time as I will have. When it comes down to it, we’re entertainers. However, we are taking music that is sometimes centuries old, sometimes fresh off the page, and presenting it to them. I’d like to think that, for a couple of hours, we take them into our world,” he says.

“We show them what creativity is, although we are re-creators. The composers have already created the music. But we pull (the audience) into this special world, something that can’t accurately be put into words, but makes us forget the troubles that we’re going through on the planet, for a little while.”

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