

Music that changed me

Leonard Slatkin

Conductor

US conductor Leonard Slatkin has been music director of orchestras including the Detroit, St Louis and National symphonies, Orchestre National de Lyon and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. At 81, he continues to conduct, record and write books about symphonic masterworks (published by Bloomsbury). In March his recording with the LA Film Orchestra of *Pictures at an Exhibition: The Paintings of Bob Peak*, ten original compositions inspired by the designer of iconic film posters, will be released on Warner Classics.

Because I came from this incredibly talented musical family, the first pieces that I heard became influential. Every night after my parents finished their work in the film studios – my father led the orchestra at 20th Century Fox and my mother was the first cellist at Warner Bros – the two other members of their quartet, the Hollywood String Quartet, would come over and rehearse. I used to sit on the stairwell listening to the rehearsals and I was totally fascinated with the sound. The first conscious memory of a piece that really impacted me (I was probably three-and-a-half) was the Sixth String Quartet by **HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS**, and part of it, the second movement, reminded me of teddy bears dancing. The piece introduced me to the world of the string quartet, which remains for me the highest form of writing that any composer of note could achieve.

In 1952 when I was eight years old, my parents took me to a concert in Pasadena by the NBC Symphony conducted by Arturo Toscanini, and I was totally bowled over by the sound they could make. They were selling recordings in the lobby and my parents said I could have just one, so I selected **MUSSORGSKY**'s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I played it over and over – to me that was what an orchestra should be. There was a vitality and energy coming right off the disc. That was probably what started me thinking about becoming a conductor. A lot of us are influenced by the recordings we first



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hear, but it makes a difference if you’ve heard those performers live because then you can translate what’s happening on the recordings to the live sound.

On Sunday afternoons, the New York Philharmonic used to broadcast concerts live and we listened regularly as a family. One concert in particular stood out to me – Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting **VAUGHAN WILLIAMS**'s Fourth Symphony. I didn't know a note of this composer's music, not even the *Tallis Fantasia*, and when the Fourth Symphony came on I heard aggressive, angry music that seemed relentless. When the performance ended 30 minutes later, I was out of breath. That's where my passion for English music developed, and since then I've taken on almost all the major English composers.

The one area that didn't inhabit the Slatkin household was the world of jazz, and I was crazy about it. One of

my big influences was **ANDRÉ PREVIN**. People don't realise what a remarkable jazz performer he was. I would hear him frequently in a club called Shelly's Manne-Hole. André's music had structure because of his background within classical music, but it had the freedom of jazz. I tried to emulate him when I played jazz piano, but I was no André! Listen to his rendition of 'Stormy Weather', the wonderful standard written for Lena Horne. He turns it into some sort of Debussy-Scriabin world, integrating these classic artists and composers into this great tune. This is what every brilliant jazz artist strives for: structure and style.

I was there in 1955/6 when **GLENN GOULD** made his recital debut in Los Angeles, and he played Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Back then it was the provenance of Wanda Landowska, on the harpsichord, but here comes this brash young Canadian playing a recital and that was a changing point for me. It was not about Gould, it was about the experience of hearing this masterwork for the first time, under the best of conditions. His method of playing was very different – less use of the pedal, finding the clarity of the counterpoint to bring out the virtuosity but also the lyricism. I had heard a lot of really good pianists, but this was something else.

It was similar when **VLADIMIR HOROWITZ** returned to Carnegie Hall in 1966. I stood in line four weeks prior to get a ticket – I wanted to know what it was about this man that my parents and my grandparents were always talking about. I'm up in the rafters in Carnegie Hall and everyone is worried he's not going to show up, but he comes out and starts with the Busoni transcriptions of Bach, and he messes up the first phrase; he misses one or two notes and we all hold our breath. And after that, the most incredible sounds come out of the piano – it was an orchestra played with ten fingers. I can now listen to Horowitz and Gould recordings knowing what that sound was really like, and transferring it to my listening at home. ☺

Interview by Amanda Holloway