

CLASSICAL MUSIC

He's a multi-task force

Call Leon Botstein, whose experience as a college president informs his conducting, an activist musician.

MARK SWED
MUSIC CRITIC
REPORTING FROM
ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y.

Leon Botstein has been president of Bard College here, 100 miles up the Hudson from New York City, since 1975. He is an outspoken advocate for education. For instance, he believes that college should begin after 10th grade, and at Bard he has created the largest prison education program of any college in the country.

He is one of our few remaining public intellectuals. Last year, Stephen Colbert joked that Botstein — who has a bulbous shaved head — was the quintessential pointy-headed intellectual when the bemused academic appeared briefly on Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report."

But Botstein is also a musicologist, teacher, author and founder of the uniquely stimulating Bard Music Festival, which is devoted to exploring in depth a different composer each summer. He is a brilliant public speaker, inveterate panelist and first-rate fundraiser.

And he is a conductor. In New York, he heads the American Symphony Orchestra. In the Israeli capital, he is music director of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, with which he will appear at Royce Hall on Tuesday night. He has made 30 recordings in recent years. His rediscovery of a gripping symphony by Shostakovich's forgotten contemporary Gavriel Nikolayevich Popov won him a Grammy nomination in 2006.

He has just released the first recording of an extraordinary British rarity from 1923, John Herbert Foulds' "A World Requiem" — a 90-minute, mystically tinged tribute to the World War I dead that in some of its techniques is half a century ahead of its time.

Still, Botstein has always struggled to get respect. He is colorful, charming, friendly, funny, wry. (Full disclosure: I served under him as an editor at the scholarly journal *Music Quarterly* in the '90s.) Yet he has an uncanny ability to generate suspicion and make enemies, particularly in the musical establishment. Until recently, he couldn't buy a good review in New York. Although he is an active guest conductor in Europe, he has never been invited to conduct a prominent American orchestra.

The principal charge against him is dilettantism. In an age of professionalism and specialization, no one should be able to do so many different things well. Similarly, Leonard Bernstein used to be trotted out as a prime specimen of genius spreading itself too thin.

Why a musician?

Sitting on a terrace off his generously book-lined study at Bard one morning last summer, Botstein grew a bit prickly in defense of his conducting, pointing out that he is a professional whose schedule is equivalent to many full-time conductors'. He also noted his training.

He was born in 1946 in Zurich to Russian parents, physicians who had immigrated first to Poland and eventually found their way to New York when Botstein was 2. He studied violin as a child.

"Why am I musician?" he asked, as so often using a rhetorical question to begin a thought. "The story is a very simple one: I stuttered as a child. I never commanded any ordinary language well. My English is limited. I have shortcomings in my German and Russian. And I speak Polish the way Tonto speaks English in 'The Lone Ranger.'"

"My mother, who was an amateur pianist, lost her hearing when I was a very young boy. I have no memory of my mother hearing. For me, music was the only language of any intimacy because I couldn't speak any other language. I couldn't get 10 words out without stuttering."

"I'm not a violinist because I have handedness difficulties. To me, to play well required 10 times as much time as the next kid. I did some composition, and it was pretty terrible. I ended up determined to be a conductor by the time I was 16."

After earning degrees from Harvard and the University of Chicago, however, Botstein be-

came the youngest college president in U.S. history. He was hired by the small, financially troubled Franconia College in rural New Hampshire at age 23. He moved on to the better-known Bard five years later.

"I was also an emigrant," he explained when asked how his passion for music had morphed into one for education, "and I had an emigrant attitude of European Jews fleeing Europe. I remember when I was naturalized as a 10-year-old, and there was always this sense of civic obligation."

Back to music

After a decade at Bard, where he impressively increased the liberal arts college's national profile, he seemed primed for a bigger school. Instead, he went back to the baton, studying privately with a crusty, no-nonsense pedagogue, Harold Faberman, and remained at Bard.

He was again a musician but, he said, a different kind of musician. Because of all his intellectual and fundraising activities, he became an activist musician, an organizer.

"I hate to be pretentious and quote Ludwig Wittgenstein" — he is writing a book on the philosopher and music — "but he has this wonderful line that music is a form of life," he said. "And as a form of life, it informs the nature of life."

"Music is connected. Brahms had a huge library. Beethoven had a huge library. Strauss was one of the most educated composers ever to live. I don't think you can be a great musician — I don't think you can do Mahler, Beethoven, Strauss — as an idiot savant."

"These people died and lived for an art form that was part of a larger fabric that included literature and painting. The idea that this is a thing on its own is idiotic. I determined to bring music back into life, so I started thematic programming."

In 1989, Botstein created the first Bard Music Festival, which he devoted to Mendelssohn and during which he conducted all the orchestral concerts in a large tent. Then, in 1992, the American Symphony Orchestra, founded by Leopold Stokowski in 1962 but a victim of bad times under the uninspired music directors who followed, called on him. It needed to go in a new direction, and he proposed creating thematic programming for it.

Few thought he would succeed. He was accused of using the strategy to mask his lack of stick technique. Moreover, the programming of unfamiliar works was dismissed as an easy out, since no one would know what they were supposed to sound like anyway.

His interpretations were blunt. Once, when he was conducting a difficult symphony by Roger Sessions, the orchestra got lost and had to start over. He received devastating reviews.

But Botstein proved a persuasive personality, and he found an engaged audience looking for something other than the same old standard repertory. He saved the American Symphony and, with experience, his conducting technique significantly improved.

Then the Jerusalem Symphony sent an SOS. Started 70 years ago by the British as the orchestra of the Palestine Broadcasting Authority (which became, after statehood, the Israel Broadcasting Authority), it was publicly funded but bankrupt and embroiled in political scandals. Botstein was

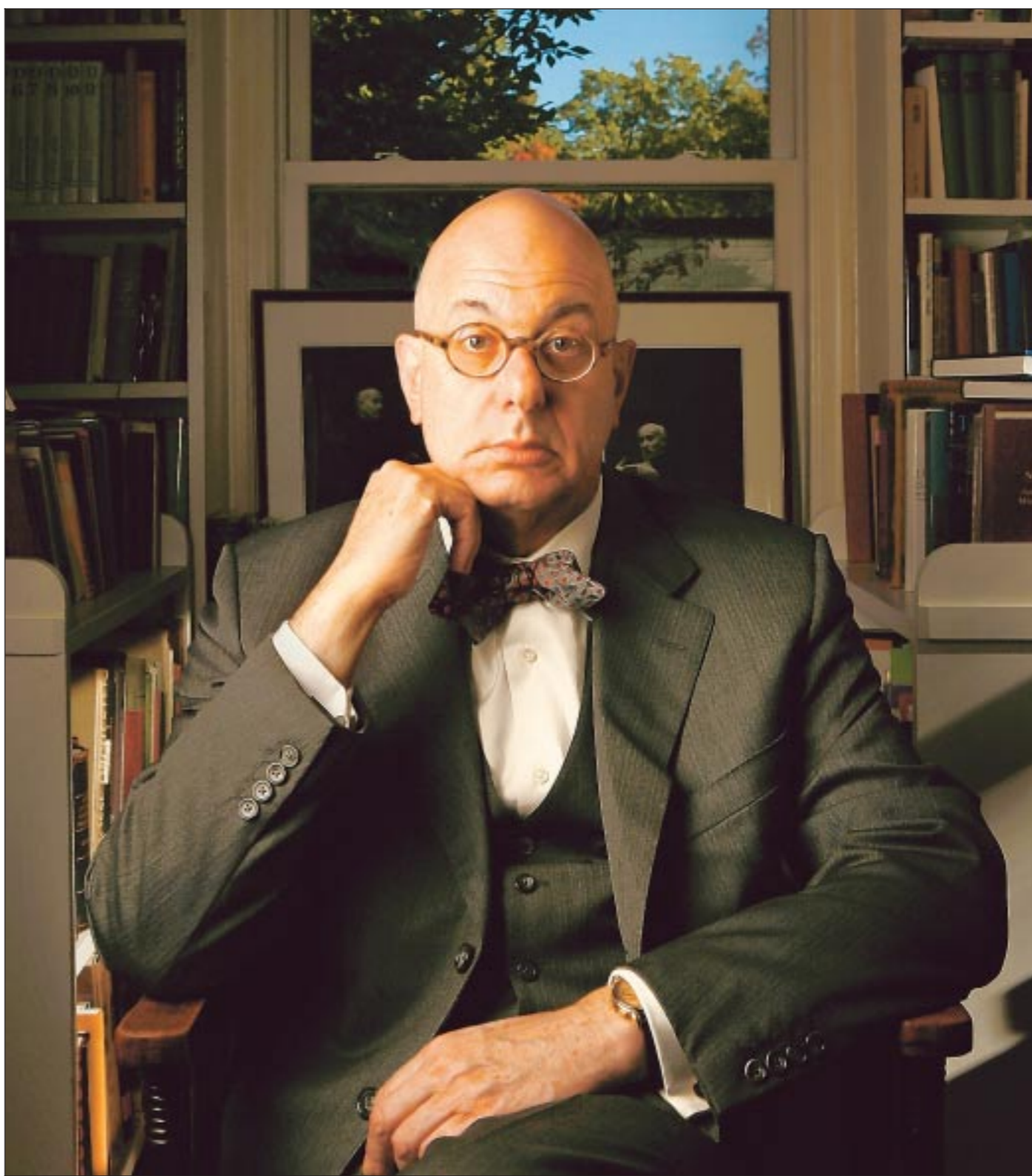
Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra

Where: Royce Hall, UCLA
When: 8 p.m. Tuesday
Price: \$24 to \$90
Contact: (310) 825-2101 or
www.uclalive.org

selected by the musicians (half of them Russian) and seen as someone who could give the orchestra a profile distinct from that of its competition, the far more famous Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

Israel is a musically conservative country, and Botstein's programming — which has included Israel's first all-Mexican orchestral concert — is a stretch for audiences. But the Israelis are also avid listeners, and he has guided the ensemble back into the black by eagerly building concerts for a conflicted society.

"My hope is that the Jerusalem Symphony will ultimately be an orchestra that reaches



CAROLYN COLE Los Angeles Times

UCLA BOUND: In an age of specialization, Botstein — who is bringing the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra to Westwood on Tuesday night — is a musicologist, teacher, author and founder of the stimulating Bard Music Festival.

out to the multiethnic population of the city through programming," he said. "We would like to play all over Jerusalem. We do Bach's 'St. Matthew Passion' at Easter and the 'Messiah' on Christmas for the Christian community. We do much new music by Jewish composers. But we need to reach out to the Muslim and Arab community as well. We already have members of the orchestra teaching in Ramallah" — in the West Bank — "which is great."

Forthright manner

Botstein still has detractors who think he lacks interpretive nuance, that by constantly taking on new scores he never delves into the depths of a Brahms or Beethoven symphony. But, he said, "if you go to the 19th century, when all this was born, this discussion is meaningless. There was no such thing as playing the Brahms Violin Concerto 400 times. The repertory doesn't bear that kind of constant repetition. This is a totally affected, distorted view of the power of music."

"And don't forget that these pieces benefit from a fresh perspective. The notion that people are specialists and therefore own certain repertoire because they live as performers all the time is a falsehood. Gustav Mahler didn't do that. If you look at Gustav Mahler's conducting career, he did new music all the time."

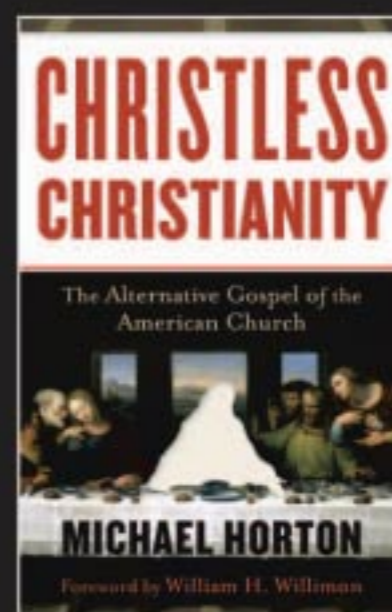
Botstein is still not a fancy conductor. He approaches scores in a forthright fashion, and he punches things out with the excitement of discovery. But he has finally begun winning over the press. By now, almost everyone is grateful to him for this discovery or that. I would count the Foulds Requiem as the find of the year.

Even the idea of mixing scholarship and concerts is no longer looked at askance, thanks to the Bard Music Festival's success and the college's increasing prominence in the musical and academic worlds. Concerts are held in a shiny, sexy hall designed by Frank Gehry. The college has started a music conservatory that institutionalizes the idea of well-rounded musicians by requiring young performers and composers to have double majors.

Surveying the international scene — and seemingly summing up his philosophy and his mission — Botstein said, "Most of our musicians are not educated sufficiently to understand music as a form of life."

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