Leon Botstein: Intellectual With a Baton

by Daniel Nemerov

For a man who knows as much about Vienna as Leon Botstein, it was surprising to discover there was anything significant about the city he hadn’t read. For instance, Edmund de Waal’s captivating family history—cum-aesthetic journey into fin-de-siècle Viennese culture, The Hare with Amber Eyes – one among a number of remarkable recent memoirs, each a window on the era through the lives of remarkable people. But there were so many, a whole library of new scholarship on the city he clearly loves.

“I am skeptical about these memoirs,” he said. He must have noted my surprise. “I’m sure it’s a terrific book. But I think there’s a big divide between the family memoirs of people that are survivors and the children of survivors. They really don’t count as eye-witnesses. There’s a tremendous amount of sentimentalization.”

It also bothered him that the memoirs were also on a five-volume dissertation at Harvard in 1985. Entitled Music and Its Public: Habits of Listening 1870-1914, the study explored how the various threads of culture, technology and social change had resulted in a rift between modernist composers and audiences that remains to this day.

It was a Wednesday afternoon when we met at the Café Weimar on Währinger Straße in the 9th District, a short stroll from the Instituto, where he would be lecturing that evening. There should have been plenty of time, except that Botstein had just arrived from New York that morning and got mixed up about the time zone. Had he been able to sleep on the plane? “I never sleep on planes,” he confessed. Those hours in the air are too precious, as uninterrupted time to read, write and think. In fact, he seems to rarely get what other people would call a good night’s sleep. Yet, there he was, bright-eyed and alert, full of ideas.

We settled into a booth at the far end of the café, while a waiter took his order: a tall, frosty, Eiskaffee, with a couple of scoops of creamy vanilla ice cream, topped with Schlagobers and a crisp wafer. He lifted the long spoon and took a bite. He seemed very pleased.

“So why Vienna?” I asked him. It is clearly not what he called “the clichés of Viennese Gesamtkunstwerk,” that had attracted him – that “melange of Fleisch, Klume, Schindler, that is now the intellectual tourism of the city.” He also has no “autobiographical connection” to Vienna; he was born in Zurich to Polish refugee parents, both doctors.

All the components of a musical life “I was interested in the questions as a musicologist,” he said. “Of why this genre of music seemed to have taken a different path than the history of painting, architecture and literature – that what we consider to be modernism in music did not, after its initial appearance, gain an audience. It actually lost its audience of patrons, and its audience of participation and following.”

It was this question that first absorbed him all those years at Harvard, and from a variety of angles, continues to do today. He began by looking at people’s habits, and how they spent time with the arts, with literature or ideas.

What he noticed was that, as modernist ideas took hold, “people became accustomed to reading modern poetry, modern fiction, they decorated their houses with modern designs, they commissioned buildings and houses, the more wealthy of them, made by modern architects. And modern painting became an object of value.”

But the same had not occurred in music, “so that to this day, we consider the cutting edge of modernization – lower Mahler and Schönberg, the Wunder Klange, the 2nd Viennese school – remains difficult; these composers have never found an audience comparable to the other art forms.”

Even though music was at the center of life in German-speaking Europe. This seems particularly surprising in multi-cultural Vienna where at the turn of the 20th century, less than half the population were native born and the rest spoke any of the Empire’s 11 languages. (“The whole cult of ‘Al-Wien’ was a reaction against immigration; in fact, there were very few Al-Wieners.”) Through music, they found a shared culture.

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The technology of democracy “So there was a level of musical literacy, that penetrated the culture.” Technology had transformed the piano into a push button machine, now with an iron frame – the harp of the piano – and the laminator, creating a stable system that wouldn’t go out of tune. (“So any idiot could learn anything.”) It was the first instrument of mechanical reproduction. The well-tempered Klavier, along with the advent of music printing, democratized music, had brought amateur ensembles into the home.

But democracy is a messy thing. And as audiences began increasingly to make their own music, they made a more active choice in what they wanted to hear. And with the advent of modernism, they weren’t so sure they liked it. The composers took offense, even became hostile and decided the audiences were philistines. And the audiences dug in their heels, interested only in what they knew and could handle. “So there was a level of musical literacy, that the musicologists refer to as ‘democratic music.’”

But we were already out of time. My mobile phone rang; it was the IWM calling asking if we had left yet, and we rushed to pay the bill and headed out to a cab.

We had only touched on the next chapter of Leon Botstein’s intellectual life, the events related to the Richard Wagner bi-centennial, that includes an exhibit at the Jewish Museum Vienna opening 24 September, entitled Euphoria and Unrest: Jewish Vienna and Richard Wagner.

“The real innovator was Richard Wagner,” Botstein had told me. “Wagner did was make music accessible by repetition, by music on colour and of course with a story line in an opera. But really it was the whole of programme music, the idea that music was a narrative art, which was illustrative, told stories, before there were movies.”

Then again, “the violence in Wagner’s music is extremely alarming, especially along racial lines.”

And the confusion of sex and violence… (“The misogyny is enough to tear my hair out… I don’t understand how he got away reading this stuff in Zurich.”) Yet Botstein admires him, not just as a composer, but also as a man.

Today we listen to Wagner, often, and with pleasure. Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, rarely.

“And the reason that there’s a difference between art music and that music that is art is an object of fashion, and object of purchase, an object of gaz- ing.” Botstein had told me. “Music was a habit- ing singing in choruses, singing at home. It was a common activity of entertainment. It was viewed as a shared language.”

Leon Botstein as Café Weimar: On a piano, all you had to do was push a button. Photos: M. Warz

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