

Notables

Episode 9: Leonard Slatkin

TRANSCRIPT

Noah: You are listening to Notables, an education through music podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined today by maestro, Leonard Slatkin, who is a six-time Grammy award-winning conductor who has conducted virtually all the leading orchestras of the world. Leonard, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Leonard: Very happy to be here with you.

Noah: So I'm very interested in all of the facets of your early childhood musical experiences and your education in music. I wondered if we could speak about your profoundly musical family and the fact that not always does growing up in a profoundly musical family mean you end up sort of centering music in your lived experience. So I wonder what aspects were most instrumental in creating a groundwork for a sustainable life in music.

Leonard: As you mentioned, I have this profoundly musical family that goes back at least two generations before me we don't know much before that but they were in Russia on both sides of the family, but the immediate impact was that my parents were part of a three-tiered system of music-making in Los Angeles. My father was the concertmaster of the orchestra at 20th Century Fox, his wife, Eleanor, was the first cellist at Mourners. They had an active career as one half of the Hollywood String Quartet and the third part of their lives was as part of the stable of artists at Capitol Records, working with artists like Nat King Cole, George Shearing and, in particular, Frank Sinatra. So the first thing that's important to understand is my upbringing is not just about classical music. It's about film music, it's about the popular scene, it's about every kind of music, thereby exemplifying what Duke Ellington and others have said that there are only two kinds of music: good music and the other stuff. So that's how I grew up and I heard all these musics going on. I was drawn, actually when I was very little, to what was then called country and western I for some reason found myself fascinated with it as a young, young person went to sleep listening to that music on the radio, and the classical part probably really hit me when I was about six years old, because the quartet was rehearsing in the house every night, and I believe it was with the sixth quartet of the Brazilian composer Heitor Villalobos where I went...Wow, this is really great. And I then started to move into studies. To get back to the family issue, though often the parents of a young person are not the best teachers of their children. They're too close to it, and music is highly disciplined, or should be, and to be difficult with your child because they're not producing what you wish on an instrument or as a vocalist can hinder the personal relationship that you need to achieve as a family.

Noah: Right.

Leonard: Some people react to it well, some don't, because the family heritage in my case was Russian. There was this assumption that nothing was ever good. It didn't matter if you played and you thought it was great, nothing was said, but if it wasn't right, you really heard about it. So

it was a kind of negative feeling that you always had to overcome and that stayed with me through most of my life. So it can be a double-edged sword. You have, on one hand, encouraging parents who stay in the background when their children are studying music or any of the other artistic disciplines, or you have parents who are overbearing, and that's what happened for me and my brother, who was a cellist. So eventually my parents figured it out and had us working with other teachers rather than themselves.

Noah: When did that handoff occur?

Leonard: About a year after we were working with our respective parents.

Noah: So they figured it out quickly.

Leonard: But my brother actually wound up studying with my grandfather who was an eminent cello pedagogue in Los Angeles and I wound up studying with my uncle, so it kind of stayed in the family anyway. We don't know what kind of reports ever went back to our parents about how we were doing.

Noah: So you are a product of California public schools.

Leonard: Correct.

Noah: Which is very interesting to us at Education Through Music. We love our public school music programs, and so I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your music teachers, your school music teachers?

Leonard: Public school education back in the 1950s and early 60s was very different around the country than it is now. California, in particular, had an aggressively strong approach not just to music but to the arts in its schools. Every school had programs whether they were in music, painting, pottery, it didn't matter, everyone did. And of particular interest is that those programs were always part of the regular curriculum of study. Aside from the marching band, everything else occurred during the regular school sessions, not before school and not after. That all changed in the 1960s and it had a trickle-down effect to many places in the country, of course, and today we have a broken system, to be honest about it. I remember when I arrived as music director in Detroit, I met with the head of the Detroit public school system who boasted that 30% of Detroit public schools had music programs. And I just looked at him and I said you mean 70%, don't.

Noah: Right.

Leonard: This is the kind of story that is sad, because it shows you that our so-called leadership in political areas, in various stages of government, whether it's city, state, federal, have little interest in the arts right now. They don't see it as something that money needs to be spent to build character, to build strength in our young people and, of course, your organization,

as well as so many people who are actively involved in the arts, understand. No, this is part of the soul of a young person that carries over into their lives, even though the majority will not enter an artistic field. And that's critical. Everybody wants an instant result. You can catch a football, you're going to be a pro player, you're going to make a lot of money. You can come up with a cure for some disease we maybe haven't heard of yet. Boom, you have a job, you're going to do fine. But should you play the violin or be able to sing, unless you're going to hit it big on Broadway? You're really not going to be seeing the end result of that, because most people who have arts education do not go into an artistic endeavor, but they have it as part of their life. They understand what it means to create, to make something where nothing existed before.

Noah: That's as ringing an endorsement of the need for public school music education as I've ever heard. I'm thinking about your early studies in violin and piano and the fact that you ended up playing viola in junior high and then went on to play...

Leonard: I was composing after that, I did different things.

Noah: So you've yeah, you've sort of done a number of... You've really run the gamut in the sort of plethora of variety and music experience.

Leonard: But the reason for that is actually very little to do with the instruments themselves, but more the fact that we were a very competitive family. I knew I wouldn't be as good a violinist as my father, so I quit. I knew I wouldn't be as good a pianist as my uncle, so I quit. Cello was out of the question because there were already four generations of cellists in the family and my brother was fighting that struggle with his grandfather and his mother. Viola was there because nobody else in the family played it. That worked really well. And composition was also something that at the time when I began to take it up, nobody else was doing it all my father would go into arranging. But when I was 19, my father passed away suddenly at the age of 47. At this point he'd become fairly well known as a conductor, not just of light music but serious as well. He wanted very much to be the conductor of a symphony orchestra someplace, but that was not to be. But I had harbored interest in conducting as well, having done musicals in high school, some conducting with the youth orchestra when I was the first violist of that orchestra. Now that my father wasn't there anymore, sadly, that path opened and that's how I actually entered the field. I don't know if I would be conducting today if he had lived much longer. I'm not happy that he passed away so suddenly and so early, but, as I say, a door opened that possibly would not have been there before.

Noah: That's such an interesting perspective. My initial thought was the viola was.. nobody was playing it, so that was a niche and that was an opportunity to sort of fill out the team both in your family and in school.

Leonard: Well, I hadn't thought about it quite that way. It was just that the schools that I went to...not very many people were playing viola, so it was a way to be a little different within the fabric of the junior-high and high school orchestras. In band I played various percussion instruments when we were a marching band and sometimes double bass when it was a concert

band, sometimes also other percussion instruments. I think by studying and learning about so many different instruments that was also laying the groundwork for conducting. I knew a little bit about a lot of instruments by playing them.

Noah: Right. You ended up at Aspen to study...

Leonard: Right.

Noah: And one of your first conducting opportunities was of the Samuel Barber Adagio for Strings...

Leonard: Correct.

Noah: Another notable instance in which you conducted that piece was after 9/11 and with the BBC Orchestra. I refreshed my memory and watched the YouTube video of it on the train here this morning and that is just, I think, one of the notable instances of that piece being performed.

Leonard: Well, it was certainly the most emotional event, musically, that I ever experienced. Here it was, three days after 9/11. Originally as the last night of the proms I was going to be the first non-Brit ever to conduct it in, I think, 100 and something years, this worldwide celebration of England and all its glory and somewhat jingoistic methods.. Land of hope and glory.. rule Britannia, all that stuff. And then when the towers fell, we all knew we had to make changes. It was emotional, it was difficult.. and the Barbera Daggio is, in a way, our classical music way of remembrance from tragedies. It wasn't intended as that, it was just the slow mode of a string quartet, very much like in England when there is passage of some kind and they play the Nimrod Variation from Elgar's Enigma Variations, which is intended as just a piece of music of friendship between Elgar and his good friend, his publisher Jaeger. So sometimes the music itself overtakes what the meaning of the piece may or may not be. We don't know. It was something that certainly I'll never forget. In fact, a week later there was another memorial concert in Washington where I was the music director and we again played The Barber, but I think I had already expressed my own grief from the London performance and even though I assume it was meaningful for everyone in attendance, especially the military families, who were there it didn't resonate in exactly the same way for me, because I'd already experienced the most profound emotional musical event that could be experienced.

Noah: Yeah, it really comes across in the...

Leonard: I'm crying, doing it.

Noah: Yeah.

Leonard: And the images they had of people standing in the park draped in flags. It was just truly one of those moments. You want to say that you were honored to be there to do it, but maybe on that occasion you shouldn't have been honored for anything.

Noah: And now for a short break. This podcast is made possible by Education Through Music. ETM's mission is to positively impact student motivation, achievement and self-confidence by partnering with under-resourced schools to integrate music education into the core curriculum. To find out more or to support ETM in its mission, go to etmonline.org.

Noah: Los Angeles High School. You mentioned that, the arts...It was a different time. In the 50s and in the 60s in the US. There was a composer in residence at Los Angeles High School and in doing a little bit of research I thought this was a very interesting find. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.

Leonard: LA High, which was a fascinating school. We didn't realize it at the time, we were all so naive, but it was one of these schools that bordered on several districts. LA is divided in, like New York, different ethnicities living in different places not ghettoizing really, but just how it was and so there were not necessarily an equal proportion of black students, white students, asian students, latino students, and we were just there and we didn't know on the West Coast quite so much, as students, about what was going on in the rest of the country. We were isolated from it and we just all got along so well. We didn't know about bitterness and hatred and racism, at least in school, and part of the reason that we didn't know that is because the arts brought us together. You, you put an orchestra or a chorus together and you're going to have this incredible mixture of people all working to accomplish one purpose. So LA High had three choruses, two bands, an orchestra and, as you mentioned, a composer in residence. Under a Ford Foundation grant, the, sadly now late, Peter Schickley was with us, baby-faced, as he always was, even with that beard, was ours for a semester, I think. I don't think he did the whole year and he wrote a couple pieces. One was particularly interesting because it was a choral setting with staging of a nativity scene for the holiday program and it was really interesting for young musicians to have this different take. Usually you played traditional high school arrangements, although our orchestra wasn't bad and the choruses were very good. So it was a little more adventurous than you would have found in many high schools. But there it was and there was Peter, and Peter and I went on to have a wonderful relationship over so many years. I helped participate in that very first town hall concert. We did many shows together. I commissioned several pieces from him, including a couple of educational ones, including a work called A Zoo Called Earth, which was one of the very first pieces to address the environmental crisis which was already unfolding in the late 70s.

Noah: So here we are recording through microphones. You have done a lot of live performances, that's an understatement, of course you have, but you've also recorded a great deal of music and you have six Grammys, 35 nominations, if my tally is correct. I don't want to...

Leonard: I have no idea. I lost count at one.

Noah: Yeah well, it's certainly more than one at this point, and so I'm wondering this is kind of a maybe this makes the final cut, maybe not. This might be sort of a nerd question on my behalf,

but what is the difference, in your, if there is a difference, in your approach to conducting an orchestra for a live performance versus conducting something that is strictly for recording that will be played in perpetuity?

Leonard: There's actually a third variant of that, which almost occurs every time when you do what's called a live recording. You're going to go back after the performance and fix up all that stuff that didn't work. You're going to get rid of the coughs. You're going to have that one note that might have been out of tune or somebody missed, or that you, as a conductor, didn't feel comfortable about. So no, live recording is usually truly live. It might be in jazz, it might be in pop, but not really much in the classical world. So the difference, though, if you're making a studio recording or taking it from a live performance, is that live performance you can't stop, you keep going, and maybe that means you get a better sense of the architecture of a piece of music from beginning to end, because you have to do it that way. When you're doing a studio recording, you may possibly play through a whole movement of a symphony or ballet, whatever you're recording, but without the audience there you take away just a little bit of the edge, a little bit of that disappears, and you're looking for maybe too pristine a performance sometimes. Now, that being said, there are some recordings I made that were studio recordings that I'm very proud of and happy, and there are some live recordings I did that are not as good as I would have liked it to have been recordings that I'm very proud of and happy and there are some live recordings I did around and not as good as I would have liked it to have been. So I think we have to remember that all recordings are simply a snapshot. They're a photograph of a particular day at a particular time and we can remember that. But the next day, if we were to take a photograph of the same scene, we'd see something different, just like performances. Hopefully, if you hear an orchestra or a quartet or a singer do the same exact music the second day in a row, there'll be things that are different about it. It should be. That's what music is all about. Or if you look at a painting, you go back and see it a second, third, fourth time, you begin to discover other things in it. So, to some degree, that's really why the live performance to me remains something unique and even with our technological advances the ability to have more material available in so many different ways. There's nothing like sitting down and maybe on your left is somebody you know really well and maybe on your right somebody you've never met, but you're all experiencing the same thing together and yet having different responses to it. That's what's amazing: 1,500 people at a concert, 1,500 different ways of perceiving what happened on that stage.

Noah: So we have, over the course of this conversation, discussed sort of your unique circumstances in growing up in your family and having access to public school music in the way that you did, and we've talked about your career and I wonder what your thoughts are on how music teachers who are working with students 6 years old, 12 years old, 18 years old.. What advice would you have for them as they prepare the next generation of musicians, conductors, composers?

Leonard: The first response I have to.. the way you frame that question is interesting. I don't think music teachers should be thinking that their students are going to go into the arts, but I do think they have to tap into today's culture, more so than when I was young. I saw the beginnings

of rock and roll, I saw jazz elements come in, various folk music movements were happening in the early 60s, and yet none of that made its way into our educational arts process. I think that's different now, because the arts are more broad than they ever have been. So I would suggest to music educators open your ears and your minds. Really understand what the young people from about age six, we'll assume through eight are starting to listen to with their friends every day, and see if you can find ways to parallel that to existing art. And I have an example, which might help. Art doesn't live in a vacuum. It exists in history. History is not a vacuum. Beethoven writes a symphony. It's an E-flat. It's inspired by Napoleon, who Beethoven just thinks is the greatest leader in the world. Napoleon declares himself Emperor of France. Beethoven is furious, scratches the dedication out of the manuscript and when we listen to the opening of the Eroica Symphony, what do we hear? Two very sharp chords followed by two beats of silence. The next time you listen to the opening of the Eroica, you will think about that and all of a sudden, the vehemence of Beethoven in anger, doing that, reflecting the social and political feeling of his time through his music. That's what we have today in rap, we have it in some of our singer-songwriters that are going on, we have it in classical composition. There's been a really interesting melding of music that goes from one genre to the other very comfortably. So I think we need to open up the music education field just a bit to incorporate more of the new things that young people can relate to. It's hard for them to understand the ethic of Mozart or Schubert or Brahms or Tchaikovsky, but they can if you parallel it, saying this was what's happening in Beethoven's time. Do we have anything now? Can anybody think of any song you heard where it really expresses you're being upset with something that happened in your personal life, in your parents. Whatever...what is there you can find today, draw parallels to today's time and I think you have a better chance of reaching young people.

Noah: It starts to make a little more sense, that way, yeah, taking it out of the vacuum, wonderful. Well, that's all my questions.

Leonard: That's all my answers.

Noah: Leonard, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Leonard: My pleasure, really. Just keep it up. Keep fighting the good fight. The arts are always worth it, and it's frustrating at times. It can get to be to the point where you go. I give up, but you can't. The arts have always had to fight to survive and we still need to do that. I leave it now for the younger generation to fix all this and to make it right again.