
From: President [REDACTED] >
Sent: Thursday, August 29, 2013 8:02 PM
To: jeevacation@gmail.com
Subject: Message from Leon Botstein's office

Dear Mr. Epstein,

President Botstein asked that I send you his article from the L.A. Times.

Best regards,

Catherine

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<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-botstein-hollywood-bowl-review-20130829=0,4204208.story>

Music review: Botstein has last laugh with L.A. Phil at the Bowl

· The conductor's hands-off interpretive approach Tuesday made for a sensational Prokofiev with violinist Jennifer Koh as soloist.

Leon Botstein conducts the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl. (Michael Robinson Chavez, Los Angeles Times / January 14, 2009)

By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Music Critic

August 8, 2013, 2:20 a.m.

They laughed when Leon Botstein became president of Bard College in 1975, at the very idea that a 28-year-old could enliven a venerable New York liberal arts college. They laughed in 1990 when Botstein started the Bard Music Festival, which had the appearance of a vanity operation for his own seemingly dubious ambitions as a conductor. They laughed once more when he became music director of the American Symphony Orchestra 20 years ago, especially after some rocky early performances and scathing reviews.

From what I gather some American orchestras were laughing this summer at the very notion of Botstein making his Hollywood Bowl debut. The Los Angeles Philharmonic was the first major American orchestra to invite Botstein to conduct. That debut was Tuesday night in a program of Prokofiev and Shostakovich. It was a success.

Then again, so is Bard College, which Botstein has made a progressive leader in many areas of education. So is the Bard Music Festival, which continues to be, year after year under Botstein, the summer's most stimulating music festival. And so is the American Symphony, which Botstein has used to spearhead the kind of adventurous thematic programming that many other orchestras are now looking at as a way to remain relevant.

Why, therefore, all the worry, especially given that Botstein has had an active career guest conducting in Western and Eastern Europe and served as music director of the Jerusalem Symphony for eight years? He's even begun getting rave reviews in New York.

Part of the problem is that, perhaps out of its own insecurity, America's music establishment has a history of mistrusting intellectuals. And Botstein happens to be someone "The Colbert Report" can turn to when looking for an egghead.

The populist, picnic-friendly Bowl, with its large video screens, may seem like the last place for an academic. And yet Botstein's basically hands-off interpretive approach served him exceedingly well in a sensational performance of Prokofiev's Second Violin Concerto with Jennifer Koh as soloist. Botstein may keep an objective, emotional distance as a conductor, but he also had no intention of getting in the way of an intensely passionate violinist.

This was, believe it or not, the all-around most compelling performance of anything I've heard all summer at the Bowl. For once, the amphitheater's many moving parts were placed at the service of an extraordinary soloist, who dug into the concerto with an unrelenting intensity.

Botstein provided Koh with a secure framework in which to operate. The L.A. Phil, which had sounded like it had entered into late summer doldrums last week, came roaring back to life on a sultry evening. The new sound system was more vibrant than ever, capturing the bodily substance of Koh's sound.

At last, even the controversial high definition video was just fine. Finally, the colors on screen matched the stage, and so did the luminosity, no longer fighting the music or forcing your attention to go where you may not want it. Koh was so worth watching that I almost wish the Los Angeles Opera would consider installing video when Koh returns to town in October as Einstein in the Philip Glass and Robert Wilson opera "Einstein on the Beach" at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion (just kidding.)

The big piece Tuesday was Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony. Botstein introduced the night by placing the program in the context of Soviet music. Prokofiev's concerto was written in 1935 just before he returned from the West to Russia. The composer then had to spend the rest of his life contending with Stalin, and both died, coincidentally, in 1953 on the same day.

Shostakovich's Tenth, written just after Stalin's death, is often interpreted as a bitter reproach to the dictator. The first movement is long and moody. The second movement is a macabre march; the third, a weird waltz. Derisive anger bubbles up everywhere. The last movement is ominous and ferocious. Climaxes hit you over the head.

The composer makes himself the protagonist, using musical codes for his name and that of a mistress. The symphony finally ends with a coda of glee.

The usual way to treat this symphony is as if it were an epic Russian novel, squeezing character out of every extravagant Shostakovichian utterance. Botstein didn't. His performance was adamant. He does love loud.

But he otherwise displayed an element of emotional caution. Without too many interpretive cues or really any kind of cues, the orchestra needed to be very alert. The wind solos were impressive. The brass proved solid. The strings held things together. The L.A. Phil made it work.

In the end, Botstein made neither too little nor too much of Shostakovich's best but still indulgent symphony. It was what it was, which is saying a lot. And Botstein was what he is, which is also saying a lot.

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