

Benjamin Hochman

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Scratch a Conductor, Find a Composer



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

The soloist Benjamin Hochman and members of the American Symphony Orchestra at Avery Fisher.

The composer-conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen once said that he is a musician above all, and that “musicians do all kinds of things.”

That was certainly the case before the emergence of star conductors in the late 19th century, although many podium giants of the 20th century also composed, to varying degrees.

MUSIC REVIEW

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The works of George Szell, who was music director of the Cleveland Orchestra from 1946 until his death in 1970, are barely known. But Szell’s music was among the works by conductors that were highlighted on Friday in an American Symphony Orchestra concert at Avery Fisher Hall led by Leon Botstein, a tireless champion of musical rarities.

Mahler and Richard Strauss both struggled with the composer-conductor balancing act. Szell, who made his debut at 11 as a pianist playing his own compositions and was awarded a major publishing contract at 14, apparently stopped composing shortly after he was chosen by Strauss to join the staff of the Berlin State Opera at 18.



KIRSHBAUM DEMLER & ASSOCIATES, INC.
711 WEST END AVENUE SUITE 5KN NEW YORK NY 10025
212 222 4843 TEL 212 222 7321 FAX WWW.KIRSHDEM.COM

The program opened with Szell's deftly orchestrated, cheery and melodic Variations on an Original Theme, (Op. 4, 1913), which show the harmonic influence of Strauss. It's not a particularly memorable work but certainly impressive for a teenager.

The American Symphony Orchestra also performed the New York premiere of the percussionist and conductor Harold Farberman's lively Double Concerto for Violin and Percussion (2006), dedicated to Guillermo Figueroa, a violinist and conductor. Its three movements represent Mr. Figueroa as a young man, his children, and Mr. Figueroa and his wife.

A musical marriage of percussion and violin is potentially rocky. But it's all about communication, and there was a witty dialogue between the vibraphone and violin. During the work, at times dissonant, contemplative and stirringly tonal, the energetic percussionist Simon Boyar leapt about the stage from wind chimes to drums, playing with panache. Mr. Figueroa performed the violin part with the sensitivity of a man exploring his own psyche.

The cynical, evocative and theatrical Symphony No. 2, "The Age of Anxiety" (1949/'65), by Leonard Bernstein concluded the program. It too is a deeply personal work, inspired by W. H. Auden's poem of the same name about four lonely people bonding in a New York bar.

Bernstein, who was the pianist at the premiere in 1949, called it a "symphony with piano solo." Its episodic structure follows the narrative of Auden's poem, with fragments of Bernstein's published and unpub-

American Symphony Orchestra

Avery Fisher Hall

lished works, including a jazzy piano riff originally written for but dropped from "On the Town." The sensitive soloist was Benjamin Hochman, a fine young Israeli pianist.

Bernstein also classified himself as a musician above all. In a 1980 speech to the American Symphony Orchestra League, he spoke of the "drastic change of persona" that occurs when a public figure like a conductor becomes a private one like a composer.

Paul Kletzki (1900-1973), a Polish Jew chosen by Furtwängler to become a principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic in 1932, was robbed of the chance to compose or conduct by the Nazis, who came to power the following year. According to the program notes, he ceased composing after the war.

But his Violin Concerto (Op. 19, 1928) received its United States premiere on Friday with Robert Davidovici as the excellent soloist. The American Symphony Orchestra, which played well throughout the evening, gave a convincing performance of the three-movement piece, which wavers between tonality and dissonance, with lyrical violin lines, spiky harmonies and lighthearted allusions to cabaret music.