

Thursday Evening, December 17, 2015, at 8:00
Isaac Stern Auditorium/Ronald O. Perelman Stage
Conductor's Notes Q&A with Leon Botstein at 7:00



presents

Russia's Jewish Composers

LEON BOTSTEIN, *Conductor*

ALEKSANDR KREIN *The Rose and the Cross* ("Symphonic
Fragments after Aleksandr Blok"), Op. 26
(NY Premiere)
 The Castle of Archimbault at Dawn
 The Rooms of Isaure
 On the Ocean Shore
 Gaetan's Song
 The Death of Bertrand: Epilog

ANTON RUBINSTEIN Cello Concerto No. 2 in D minor, Op. 96
 Allegro moderato
 Andante
 Allegro
 (no pause between movements)

ISTVÁN VÁRDAL, *Cello*

Intermission

PLEASE SWITCH OFF YOUR CELL PHONES AND OTHER ELECTRONIC DEVICES.

MIKHAIL GNESIN *From Shelley* (“Symphonic Fragment after Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*”), Op. 4 (U.S. Premiere)

MAXIMILIAN STEINBERG *Symphony No. 1 in D major, Op. 3* (U.S. Premiere)
Allegro non troppo—Poco più tranquillo—Tempo I
Scherzo: Allegro vivace—Un poco più tranquillo—Tempo I
Andante molto sostenuto
Finale: Allegro moderato

This evening’s concert will run approximately two hours and 15 minutes including one 20-minute intermission.

American Symphony Orchestra welcomes the many organizations who participate in our Community Access Program, which provides free and low-cost tickets to underserved groups in New York’s five boroughs. For information on how you can support this program, please call (212) 868-9276.

FROM THE **Music Director**

Jews and Russians: The Case of Music *by Leon Botstein*

The history of the Jews in Russia, before and during the first decades after the 1917 revolution, is a complex amalgam of segregation, poverty, exclusion, persecution, and extraordinary intellectual and cultural achievement both within the confines of Jewish society and culture and also outside in the larger non-Jewish Russian world. The significance of Russian Jewry to the development of modern Russian culture, and indeed to the central elements of the modern Russian national self-image, cannot be overestimated.

It is therefore not surprising that from the very start of communism and the Soviet Union, Jews were treated as a distinct nation rather than a religious group, comparable to the Georgians or the Armenians. Jews were given status

as such. Yiddish rather than Hebrew was considered the Jewish national language and under Soviet rule (until the devastating purges of the late 1940s during Stalin’s final years), the Yiddish language, and the theater and music associated with Yiddish culture, received extensive state patronage. The supposed elevation of Jews to a national status, however, was both ambivalent and disingenuous. It was designed to blunt the allure of Zionism and Hebrew, as well as to circumvent, with a fatal embrace, the hope that under communism, anti-Semitism would disappear. The official recognition of Jewish nationality actually ensured the persistence of anti-Semitism; after all, on all official documents, including passports, one’s nationality was identified. Every Jew was labeled as such.

All the composers on this program were Russian Jews by birth. The oldest is the

piano virtuoso, conductor, and composer Anton Rubinstein, whose fame—particularly in the United States—was legendary. Rubinstein, who taught Tchaikovsky, also was chosen to lead the celebrated Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna. His works won wide acclaim. Posterity, however, has been less kind. Despite its once enormous popularity, his “Ocean” symphony has lapsed into obscurity, together with the rest of his orchestral oeuvre. Rubinstein’s family (including his almost equally famous musician brother Nikolai) converted from Judaism when Anton was a young boy. Rubinstein was brought up as a Christian but like so many converts he realized that baptism was never a cure or antidote for anti-Semitism, since the prejudice was racial and political, not theological—once a Jew, always a Jew. Rubinstein is alleged to have observed, “Russians say I am German, Germans think me Russian, Jews call me a Christian, and Christians say I am a Jew.”

The fact is that more of Rubinstein’s music deserves to be played, as this concerto for cello and orchestra makes clear. Rubinstein’s musical output was enormous. Much of the best music was dramatic music written for the stage. A vast number of dramatic works with a “Jewish” connection appear in Rubinstein’s catalogue, including an opera on the Maccabees, works on the Tower of Babel and Moses, all alongside works explicitly on Christian subjects (most notably a setting of *Paradise Lost*). In the late 19th-century debate on what ought to be truly “Russian” music, Rubinstein was unfairly derided as a second-rate purveyor of German musical traditions.

Two of the Russian Jewish composers on this program are represented with works written when they were young. Both Krein and Gnesin became prominent

for their contributions as explicitly “Jewish” composers. Both men, influenced by Rimsky-Korsakov, celebrated the folk roots of their own specific national origin as Jews. They became leading members of the legendary and seminal St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music, founded in 1908.

Yet the works on this program remind us that their distinction and contribution as composers were not limited to the extent to which they utilized their Jewishness in their music. It is easy to overlook the extent of acculturation and symbiosis between the Jewish and the Russian in ways that bypassed the *Fiddler on the Roof* stereotype; we associate that process of cosmopolitan intermingling more readily with the historical dynamics between Jews and non-Jews in German-speaking Europe before 1933. Krein and Gnesin absorbed and extended—as did their contemporaries Joseph Achron, Lazare Saminsky, and Sergei Prokofiev—the influence of symbolism and of Scriabin and Rimsky. Gnesin and Krein, at the time they wrote the works on this program, were Russian cosmopolitan advocates of an avant-garde first and Jewish culture second.

The last work on the program is by a rival and contemporary of Stravinsky’s, Shostakovich’s teacher Maximilian Steinberg. One of the ironies of history is that Steinberg’s ballet *Metamorphosen* was scheduled for the same 1913 season as the *Rite of Spring*, and Stravinsky, who was jealous that Rimsky favored Steinberg and that Steinberg married Rimsky’s daughter, did everything he could to thwart Steinberg’s competing work.

Steinberg was the son of a major Hebrew scholar. Despite his extensive background in Jewish history and culture, unlike Krein and Gnesin, but rather more as a latter day Rubinstein,

Steinberg did not privilege his Jewish identity in his work and chose a quite eclectic array of inspirations for his music—from Uzbek folk material to the legend of *Till Eulenspiegel*. As Steinberg’s early symphonies—and the 1913 ballet score—suggest, the talent and facility of the young composer were extraordinary, as was his familiarity with the compositional traditions of Western Europe and Russia.

Steinberg is most often remembered not for his music but indirectly, first on account of his place in Stravinsky’s life, and second because of his connection to Shostakovich. He deserves more. Nonetheless, perhaps the most admirable indirect consequence of Steinberg’s career derives from the Shostakovich connection, not the link to Stravinsky. Shostakovich was rather the exception among Russian composers in his complete lack of anti-Semitism. Indeed Shostakovich identified with the plight of the Jews. He showed rare courage in his support of the family of Solomon Mikhoels, the great Yiddish actor who was killed by Stalin in 1948, and his protective advocacy of and friendship with the Polish Jewish composer Mieczysław Weinberg, who settled in Russia after 1945. Perhaps it was Shostakovich’s admiration and affection for his teacher that sustained his decency and courage on this issue.

Together these four Russian composers, whose lives and careers span the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th—arguably the heyday of classical musical culture—reveal the extent of acculturation, integration, and participation in Russian intellectual and artistic life by Jews. We have the unfortunate tendency to reduce the complexity of the past to stereotypes. The Jews of Russia evoke—legitimately—the image of mass poverty, the shtetl, sardonic humor, klezmer, and Yiddish eloquence: a distinctly Jewish culture born out of the unique experience of the Pale Settlement. It is to those roots that Krein and Gnesin—much like the young painter Marc Chagall—eventually turned in search of a unique source for a modern art and culture of their own. By so doing they were following a parallel pattern of discovery that would become audible in the music of Bartók and Stravinsky.

This concert reminds us that in literature, science, art, and above all, music, there was a Russian Jewish elite, fully conversant with Russian and European traditions that made seminal contributions to the mainstream of culture and art without foregrounding or even referencing their status as Jews. That remarkable achievement by an extraordinary elite is highlighted on today’s concert program.

THE Program

by Peter Laki

Aleksandr Krein

Born October 20, 1883, in Nizhniy-Novgorod, Russia
Died April 21, 1951, in Staraya Ruza, Russia

The Rose and the Cross (“Symphonic Fragments after Aleksandr Blok”), Op. 26
Composed in 1917–21

Performance Time: Approximately 20 minutes

Instruments for this performance: 2 flutes, 1 piccolo, 2 oboes, 1 English horn, 2 clarinets, 1 bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 1 contrabassoon, 5 French horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, timpani, percussion (cymbals, tam-tam), 2 harps, 22 violins, 8 violas, 8 cellos, and 6 double basses

Aleksandr Blok, perhaps the greatest Russian symbolist poet, died in 1921, four years after the October Revolution. Although he had welcomed the Revolution, he was hardly a Communist and by the time of his death at the age of 41, he had become disillusioned with the Bolsheviks. Blok had a great affinity for music; his mystical drama *The Rose and the Cross* was originally planned as a ballet whose score was to have been written by Aleksandr Glazunov. (In 1914 Mikhail Gnesin composed incidental music for the play.)

In the event, the play had more than 200 rehearsals at the Moscow Art Theater but was never performed in public. In his book *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, Simon Morrison offers the following summary of Blok’s play:

The plot brings together dissimilar characters, settings, images, and events: a grief-stricken lady and a dejected knight, a dilapidated castle and a windswept beach, the bells of a sunken city and a ghost in a dungeon, a peasant dance around a decorated tree

and a song contest in a flowering dale. The spring that sets the plot in motion is a song so provocative that it haunts the dramatis personae for years after they hear it performed by an itinerant troubadour. The troubadour reappears at the drama’s end for an encore performance...the song’s pastoral text identifies joy and suffering as equivalent emotional states. Its music was intended to mesmerize its listeners—both those on and off the stage.

Krein was deeply steeped in Eastern European klezmer musical traditions, and the majority of his works were inspired by Jewish folklore. But not all of his works are Jewish in inspiration, and he honored Blok’s memory, a few years after the poet’s death, with the present five-movement orchestral suite, providing that “mesmerizing music” the play called for.

The score includes the following epigraph from the play:

The world’s boundless ecstasy
belongs to the heart that sings,

the roaring ocean calls
to a fatal and aimless wandering.

Surrender to the impossible dream,
You will fulfill your fate,
It is the heart's immutable law:
Joy and suffering are the same!
(transl. P. L.)

Movement I (*The Castle of Archim-bault at Dawn*) opens with a dark motif for low strings and clarinets, accompanied by dramatic tremolos; a gloomy idea that gradually rises in dynamics to reach *fortissimo*, only to sink back, suddenly, into the mysterious atmosphere of the opening.

A brief fanfare for three muted trumpets leads into Movement II (*The Rooms of Isaura*), a passionately romantic sketch

with a colorfully orchestrated, explosive melody.

Movement III (*On the Ocean Shore*) reprises the main motif of the first movement in a more dramatic presentation; it is followed without pause by Movement IV (*Gaetan's Song*), in which we hear the song that is so important in the play (and from which Krein took the above-quoted epigraph). The expressive melody, first heard on English horn, viola, and cello, is later taken over by the entire orchestra. Movement V (*The Death of Bertrand: Epilog*) opens as a funeral march that, however, segues into a recapitulation of *Gaetan's Song* from the previous movement, fashioned into the work's triumphant conclusion, representing the "boundless ecstasy of the heart that sings."

Anton Rubinstein

Born November 28, 1829, in Vkhvatinetz, Ukraine

Died November 20, 1894, in Peterhof, Russia

Cello Concerto No. 2 in D minor, Op. 96

Composed in 1874

Performance Time: Approximately 29 minutes

Instruments for this performance: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 3 French horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, 22 violins, 8 violas, 8 cellos, 6 double basses, and cello soloist

Anton Rubinstein, one of the most celebrated pianist-composers of the 19th century and founder of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, composed two cello concertos for his colleague Karl Davydov, whom Tchaikovsky described as the "tsar of all cellists." The first major composer in Russia to write concertos for any instrument, Rubinstein had important European models to draw on, but he strove to "Russianize" those models—something his more radically nationalist contemporaries from the "Mighty Handful" gave him little credit for. Yet several of the themes in the present

work are undeniably Russian in their melodic style, and the concerto consistently eschews the methods of thematic development that German composers from Beethoven to Brahms were so fond of using.

The concerto is an eminently melodic work, in three movements played without pause. The first movement is serious and expressive; the second, which begins with a chorale-like introduction scored for woodwinds, is delicate and lyrical. Between the second and third movements the soloist plays a cadenza, punctuated by

orchestral interjections; this is followed by the finale, a rondo based on a melody clearly inspired by Russian folksong.

After a second cadenza the meter changes from duple and triple for a varied recapitulation of the main theme.

Mikhail Gnesin

Born February 2, 1883, in Rostov-on-Don, Russia

Died May 5, 1957, in Moscow

From Shelley (“Symphonic Fragment after Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*”), Op. 4

Composed in 1906–08

Performance Time: Approximately 8 minutes

Instruments for this performance: 2 flutes, 1 piccolo, 2 oboes, 1 English horn, 3 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 1 contrabassoon, 5 French Horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, timpani, 2 harps, 22 violins, 8 violas, 8 cellos, and 6 double basses

A generation before Samuel Barber wrote his *Music for a Scene from Shelley* after *Prometheus Unbound*, Mikhail Gnesin was inspired by the same play for his own “symphonic fragment.” Shelley was particularly admired by the poets of the Russian Silver Age; one of the leading Russian poets of the time, Konstantin Balmont, translated the complete works of the great English Romantic.

Gnesin studied with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov around the same time that Stravinsky did, and they were rather good friends for a while. (The famous Gnesin Institute of Moscow bears the name of this eminent composer and his three sisters, all pianists.) Gnesin was one of the founders of the Society for Jewish Folk Music and later became known as the “Jewish Glinka” for his Jewish operas. In his book *Music of the Repressed Russian Avant-garde*, Larry Sitsky compares Gnesin to Krein: “In contrast to Krein, Gnesin was a much more cerebral composer, concerned with the inward-looking and the contemplative rather than the external sensuality of his colleague.”

The present composition is Gnesin’s first orchestral score, written during his

years of study under Rimsky-Korsakov. On the front page we find the following excerpt from *Prometheus Unbound* in Balmont’s translation:

There was a change: the impalpable
thin air
And the all-circling sunlight were
transformed,
As if the sense of love dissolved in them
Had folded itself round the spherèd
world.

(Act III, scene 4)

A vision of light and sun then fills the pages of Gnesin’s short symphonic poem, which develops a single brief motif in rich orchestral colors, describing a gradual *crescendo* and *accelerando* followed by a *diminuendo* and *ritardando*. It was all intended to please Rimsky-Korsakov but, as we may learn from the latter’s memoirs, the master realized that the young man was only trying to placate him by the simplicity of his music, and that the young generation had begun to move in some new stylistic directions. Still, *From Shelley* was an auspicious start for a composer who went on to have a distinguished career in Russia and the Soviet Union.

Maximilian Steinberg

Born July 4, 1883, in Vilnius, Lithuania

Died December 6, 1946, in Leningrad

Symphony No. 1 in D major, Op. 3

Composed in 1905–06

Premiered March 18, 1908, in St. Petersburg

Performance Time: Approximately 40 minutes

Instruments for this performance: 2 flutes, 1 piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 1 contrabassoon, 5 French horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, cymbals, bass drum), 22 violins, 8 violas, 8 cellos, and 6 double basses

Rimsky-Korsakov's pupil and son-in-law, Stravinsky's rival, and Shostakovich's teacher, Maximilian Steinberg was a central figure in Russian musical life before, during, and after the October Revolution. Yet in spite of these illustrious associations, history has not been kind to Steinberg, whose music is hardly ever heard today. Granted, he was no innovator and never seemed to rock the boat in any way. Still, anyone who could compose a symphony like the one we're going to hear while still a student in his early 20s must be taken seriously: one cannot help but admire the young man's mastery of compositional technique—form, harmony, orchestration—as well as the confidence with which he deploys that technique. Concurrently to his musical studies, Steinberg was also an aspiring scientist at the university, and he graduated with a gold medal in biology in 1906.

The son of a distinguished Hebrew scholar from Vilna, the city that used to be called the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” Steinberg did not immediately adopt the Russian nationalist style of his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov. His models in the First Symphony seem to be entirely Germanic,

with influences ranging from Beethoven and Schumann to Mendelssohn and Wagner. The first movement opens with a pure D major that had become rare in the first years of the new century; the 6/8 time that the classics used so often to evoke the hunt comes to new life in this radiant *Allegro non troppo*. The scherzo that follows bristles with energy, with a gentle waltz for a trio section. In the slow movement a single melodic-rhythmic idea is exploited through a succession of attractive wind solos. The dynamic *Finale*, complete with the obligatory fugato, also contains a slower episode offering a different take on the fugato theme. Just before the end we hear two sustained, mysterious chords providing a last-minute moment of suspense, followed by the powerful final chords.

The Symphony was dedicated to Aleksandr Glazunov, another teacher of Steinberg's, who became the director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1905. It received its premiere in St. Petersburg on March 18, 1908.

Peter Laki is visiting associate professor of music at Bard College.

THE Artists

LEON BOTSTEIN, *Conductor*

Leon Botstein is now in his 24th year as music director and principal conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra. This season he also begins his tenure as the music director of The Orchestra Now, an innovative training orchestra composed of top musicians from around the world. Mr. Botstein has been hailed for his visionary zeal, often creating concert programs that give audiences a once-in-a-lifetime chance to hear live performances of works that are ignored in the standard repertory, and inviting music lovers to listen in their own way to create a personal experience. At the same time, he brings his distinctive style to core repertory works. He is also artistic director of Bard SummerScape and the Bard Music Festival, which take place at the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College, where he has been president since 1975. In addition, he is conductor laureate of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, where he served as music director from 2003–11.

Mr. Botstein leads an active schedule as a guest conductor all over the world, and can be heard on numerous recordings with the London Symphony (including their Grammy-nominated recording of Popov's First Symphony), the London Philharmonic, NDR-Hamburg, and the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra. Many of his live performances with the American Symphony Orchestra are available online, where they have cumulatively sold more than a quarter of a million downloads. Upcoming engagements include the Royal Philharmonic,



RIC KALLAHER

Wiesbaden, UNAM Mexico, and the Simon Bolivar Orchestra in Caracas. He recently conducted the Russian National Orchestra, the Taipei Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the Sinfónica Juvenil de Caracas in Venezuela and Japan, the first non-Venezuelan conductor invited by El Sistema to conduct on a tour.

Highly regarded as a music historian, Mr. Botstein's most recent book is *Von Beethoven zu Berg: Das Gedächtnis der Moderne* (2013). He is the editor of *The Musical Quarterly* and the author of numerous articles and books. He is currently working on a sequel to *Jefferson's Children*, about the American education system. Collections of his writings and other resources may be found online at LeonBotsteinMusicRoom.com. For his contributions to music he has received the award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and Harvard University's prestigious Centennial Award, as well as the Cross of Honor, First Class from the government of

Austria. Other recent awards include the Caroline P. and Charles W. Ireland Prize, the highest award given by the University of Alabama; the Bruckner Society's Julio Kilenyi Medal of Honor for his interpretations of that composer's music; the Leonard Bernstein Award for the Elevation of Music in Society; and

Carnegie Foundation's Academic Leadership Award. In 2011 he was inducted into the American Philosophical Society.

Mr. Botstein is represented worldwide by Susanna Stefani Caetani and in the United States by Columbia Artists Management Inc.

ISTVÁN VÁRDAI, *Cello*

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István Várdai is the only cellist in the world to have won both the International Cello Competition in Geneva (2008) and the ARD Competition in Munich (2014), the two most important contests for cellists. In 2000 he was elected best rising classical musician in the world by Prix Montblanc.

Since Mr. Várdai's debut concert in 1997 at the Hague, he has performed in New York, London, Paris, Prague, Vienna, Frankfurt, Munich, Geneva, Dublin, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Florence, Tokyo, and Beijing. He is a regular guest at such orchestras as the Russian National Orchestra, Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra, Suisse Romande, and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, and festivals such as the Santander, St. Petersburg, Radio France Montpellier, Verbier, West Cork Festival, Schwetzingen, and Casals Festival.

Mr. Várdai studied in the Class of Special Talents at the Liszt Academy in Budapest in 2004, and at the Music Academy of Vienna in 2005. Between 2010 and 2013 he continued his studies at Kronberg Academy in Germany, where he has been on the staff since 2013.

Mr. Várdai plays a Montagnana cello from 1720.

THE AMERICAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Now in its 54th season, the American Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1962 by Leopold Stokowski, with a mission of making orchestral music accessible and affordable for everyone. Music Director Leon Botstein expanded that mission when he joined the ASO in 1992, creating thematic concerts that explore music from the perspective of the visual arts, literature, religion, and history, and

reviving rarely-performed works that audiences would otherwise never have a chance to hear performed live.

The orchestra's Vanguard Series consists of multiple concerts annually at Carnegie Hall. ASO also performs at the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College in Bard's SummerScape Festival and the Bard

Music Festival. The orchestra has made several tours of Asia and Europe, and has performed in countless benefits for organizations including the Jerusalem Foundation and PBS.

Many of the world's most accomplished soloists have performed with the ASO, including Yo-Yo Ma, Deborah Voigt,

and Sarah Chang. The orchestra has released several recordings on the Telarc, New World, Bridge, Koch, and Vanguard labels, and many live performances are also available for digital download. In many cases these are the only existing recordings of some of the rare works that have been rediscovered in ASO performances.

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Thursday, March 17, 2016

Giant in the Shadows

with Peter Serkin, piano

The reputation of Max Reger today belies his dominant presence in music during his lifetime and the legacy he left. Here we celebrate two of his works, and one by his friend and contemporary, Adolf Busch.

Adolf Busch – Three Études for Orchestra

Max Reger – Piano Concerto

Max Reger – *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of J.A. Hiller*



Tuesday, April 5, 2016

A Mass of Life

with the Bard Festival Chorale

Delius was a fervid follower of Nietzsche, and here he set passages from the philosopher's book *Also sprach Zarathustra* to music, creating a grand and compelling work celebrating life at its highest.

Frederick Delius – *A Mass of Life*