

Chapter 3. The Remarkable Career of Leonard Slatkin

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I first encountered Leonard Slatkin in 1984 during a trip to Saint Louis, where I aimed to ensure that Joseph Schwantner—a highly esteemed Eastman faculty member—would return to Rochester upon completing his three-year tenure as composer-in-residence for the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. I later met Leonard backstage in May 1992 at Chicago's Lyric Opera after he conducted an exhilarating performance of Strauss's *Elektra*. In New York City, while Leonard conducted at the Metropolitan Opera, we shared lunch, and I persuaded him to write an introduction to my book, *The Crisis of Classical Music in America: Lessons from a Life in the Education of Musicians*. For years, I have enthusiastically collected Leonard's 200-plus recordings with orchestras worldwide and thoroughly enjoyed his books, *Conducting Business* (2012) and *Leading Tones* (2017). In June 2019, I spent a week with Leonard in St. Louis. Our daily rendezvous entailed discussions about orchestral music and its future, but we also made time for a Cardinals-Angels game, visits to Ted Drewes's renowned frozen-custard emporium, and tours of St. Louis landmarks. Alongside Michael Tilson Thomas, Leonard Slatkin leads the generation of American conductors that follows Bernstein's era.

Early Life and Influences

Leonard's father, Felix Slatkin, was the first musician in his family. Born in St. Louis in 1915 to Ukrainian-Jewish immigrants, he became a violinist, conductor, composer, arranger, and producer. Felix joined the Curtis Institute as a young teen, studying violin with Efrem Zimbalist and conducting with Fritz Reiner. At seventeen, he became a member of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. Following a competition win in Los Angeles, Felix performed as a soloist at the Hollywood Bowl in 1935, where he met Eleanor Aller, a talented young cellist. He later conducted the Force Tactical Command Orchestra, which raised over \$100 million for US war bonds. Eleanor, at the age of sixteen, began studying with Felix Salmond at Juilliard and later became the first woman to hold a principal chair in

a major Hollywood studio orchestra as the principal cellist of the Warner Brothers Studio Orchestra in 1939. The same year, she married Felix Slatkin. Eleanor performed as a soloist in Erich Wolfgang Korngold's Cello Concerto, featured in the 1946 film *Deception*, and with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In 1977, John Williams composed a significant cello solo for Eleanor, which appeared in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Felix Slatkin and Eleanor Aller founded the Hollywood String Quartet in 1939. In addition to his role as first violinist, Felix was also concertmaster of the 20th Century-Fox orchestra, participating in movie-music production with hundreds of other leading musicians. The Hollywood Quartet released over twenty-one albums on Capitol Records, won a Grammy for their late Beethoven quartets, and toured internationally. Tragically, Felix passed away at 47 from a heart attack in 1963. In 1994, the Hollywood Quartet won the London Gramophone Award for their recording of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* and Schubert's Two-Cello Quintet. Felix also received a Grammy for his conducting of Offenbach's *Gaîté Parisienne* with the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra.

Leonard's home life was rich in musical experiences. Born in Los Angeles on September 1, 1944, Leonard Slatkin's childhood was inevitably immersed in music of all kinds. While my upbringing was deeply influenced by the classical music of Germans and Austrians, Leonard was exposed to a more holistic musical environment that included solo, chamber, and orchestral repertoires, as well as film scores and popular genres. He often quotes Duke Ellington, who spoke of "good music and the other stuff," as a reminder that there is a wide variety of wonderful music, each with its own admirers, and that not all "classical" music is of equal merit. Leonard received instruction from his parents and enjoyed mealtime visits from luminaries such as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Art Tatum, George Shearing, Danny Kaye, and Doris Day, among others. Renowned musicians like Heifetz and Piatigorsky also visited, as well as notable film composers, including Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Miklós Rózsa, Max Steiner, Dimitri Tiomkin, John Williams, and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. As a teenager, Leonard studied composition and arranging with Castelnuovo-Tedesco.

Growing up in Los Angeles, Leonard Slatkin enjoyed spending afternoons with friends at the movies and participating in the Bugs Bunny Club. When he wasn't at the movies, he practiced the violin or piano and played baseball. Leonard started violin lessons at the age of 3 but switched to studying with Joachim Chassman, the associate concertmaster of the orchestra at 20th Century -Fox, where his father was the concertmaster. In 1956, he began piano studies with his uncle, Victor Aller, and eventually switched from violin to viola.

Education and Early Career

Leonard enrolled at the Music School (now the Jacobs School) of Indiana University in the fall of 1962 but left after a semester due to the university's mandatory ROTC enrollment for male students. After a year of English study at Los Angeles City College, he spent the summer of 1964 at Aspen, studying with Walter Susskind, an important mentor, before enrolling at Juilliard in the fall. There, he studied with Jean Morel, whose other pupils included James Conlon, John Nelson, and Dennis Russell Davies.

Leonard was excused from Juilliard's solfège classes by Renée Longy Miquelle due to his absolute pitch and his objection to the fixed-do system. He noticed that as he aged, his sense of absolute pitch became less acute, a phenomenon that he believes should be investigated by the growing field of music and neuroscience. Leonard laments the decline of fugue instruction as part of undergraduate music education. During his time at Juilliard, Leonard was appointed artistic director and conductor of the New York Youth Symphony Orchestra.

Following graduation from Juilliard, Leonard was concerned about the possibility of the Vietnam draft and considered remaining at Juilliard for a master's degree and further study with Morel. While he holds Jean Morel in high regard as a teacher, he remembers Walter Susskind as a dedicated mentor to whom he feels he owes a great deal, both professionally and personally. Susskind was able to take a strong interest in the career development of younger people he worked with, while Morel's perceived lack of career fulfillment sometimes impeded his teaching ability—a phenomenon that occurs not only in the world of music but in other fields as well.

Achievements and Legacy

Leonard Slatkin's illustrious career as the music director of three major American orchestras is detailed in his own book, *Conducting Business* (Amadeus, 2012). In it, he recounts his decision to turn down the opportunity to enter the Dimitri Mitropoulos Competition, established to determine a new assistant conductor for Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. He chose not to participate when he learned that the competition had been rigged in favor of an American-born conductor. Instead, he accepted Walter Susskind's invitation to return to the city of his father's birth as assistant conductor of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra and assistant to Susskind.

Called up for a pre-induction physical for military service shortly after his arrival in St. Louis, Leonard, like the author, did not pass, and thus gained two years of productive life. His first season as Susskind's assistant led him to conduct eighty-three children's concerts, some touring concerts, and a subscription concert. His first children's concert in Canton, Missouri, included Dukas's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* and convinced him of the importance of learning to speak to a general audience briefly and succinctly—a skill he has since honed to a higher level than any other musician I have met. This is evident in Leonard's brief oral introductions to Copland's *Appalachian Spring* and Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony with the Detroit Symphony.

His first scheduled subscription concert was canceled due to labor unrest, leading him to teach and speak to civic groups. After an interview on Radio Free St. Louis, he was offered his own show, "The Slatkin Project," on KDNA, 102.5 FM, where he showcased his broad knowledge of repertory. When the orchestra returned to work, there was increasing interest in Leonard's unusual programming ideas, combining symphony musicians with rock and folk artists and the first live performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. As a result, he collaborated with Janis Joplin, the rock group Yes, Jim Croce, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Joni Mitchell, and others.

Leonard founded the St. Louis Youth Symphony Orchestra in 1970, which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2020. As his mother joined the music faculty of Indiana University, he frequently met her in Chicago, developing professional relationships with George Solti, Carlo Maria Giulini, and Erich Leinsdorf. As assistant conductor in St. Louis, he worked with soloists Michael Rabin, Géza Anda, John Browning, and Jean-Pierre Rampal. Walter Susskind was always a generous boss.

In 1974, Leonard had the good fortune to receive three last-minute opportunities to substitute for three indisposed maestros. The first was when he was asked to step in for Riccardo Muti, who was unlocatable for an engagement with the New York Philharmonic. The program comprised Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony, for which Leonard later received a Grammy for his recording with the St. Louis Symphony, the third Beethoven piano concerto with Byron Janis as soloist, and Berlioz's early "Waverley" Overture. Some of the New York Philharmonic players challenged the young conductor, but Leonard did not react defensively. He led four memorable performances, received positive press coverage, and was immediately invited back for return engagements. As a result, Leonard Slatkin has appeared

as a guest conductor of the New York Philharmonic more often than any other conductor in its history. Two months later, he was invited by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to substitute for Daniel Barenboim, who needed to be absent to be with his wife, the famous cellist Jacqueline du Pré, who was dying tragically young from multiple sclerosis. The program consisted of Leonard's arrangement of the Purcell Chaconne, Vaughan Williams's Symphony no. 6, Walter Piston's Symphony no. 2, and Ravel's *La Valse*. By good luck, Walter Susskind had asked Leonard to conduct the Vaughan Williams work a year earlier during a rehearsal in St. Louis. The Chicago rehearsals and performances went well, all four Chicago newspapers were unanimously enthusiastic, and Leonard was immediately invited to return, becoming a regular visitor ever since.

Then, Adrian Boult fell ill in the spring of 1974 for a concert in London with the Royal Philharmonic. Though some members of the European Union, then at its beginning, said they would prefer a European substitute for Boult, recommendation letters from Georg Solti and British composer Michael Tippett secured Leonard's position. His program with the RPO comprised Walton's overture *Portsmouth Point*, the Delius Violin Concerto with Wanda Wilkomirska as soloist, the Vaughan Williams Symphony no. 6, and Lennox Berkeley conducting his own Symphony no. 3. The Royal Festival Hall was full, and the audience was silent for half a minute in awe after the end of Leonard's concluding the Vaughan Williams Sixth. The press was enthusiastic, perhaps because they were unaccustomed to foreign-born conductors so enthusiastic about British music. During his long career, Leonard has substituted for Giulini, Bernstein, Steinberg, Tennstedt, Eschenbach, Leinsdorf, and Levine, leading him to believe in the musical importance of the Boy Scout motto, "Be prepared."

In 1976, Leonard was offered the music directorship of the New Orleans Philharmonic. Hesitant at first, he was persuaded to accept by his mentor John Edwards, then executive director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Though initially not understanding Edwards's advice, Leonard later realized its importance. Reflecting on his New Orleans years, he remembers the orchestra as an ensemble of fine players performing well together but burdened by fiscal problems. The orchestra went through four executive directors during the two seasons Leonard served as music director, an experience from which he learned a great deal.

Two years into his tenure as New Orleans music director, Leonard Slatkin received three offers for advancement, to the music directorships of the orchestras in Minneapolis, Cincinnati, and St. Louis. Once more relying on John Edwards's advice, Leonard accepted the offer from St. Louis, largely due to Edwards's knowledge of the leadership team he would work with there, including new executive director David Hyslop and his newly appointed artistic administrator, Joan Briccetti. Despite occasional disagreements, the three worked together effectively, organizing the orchestra's first overseas tours and ensuring annual performances at Carnegie Hall. In 1983, *Time's* music critic Michael Walsh declared that St. Louis was the second-best orchestra in the nation, boosting morale and fostering pride throughout the city. Leonard Slatkin strongly believes in the importance of a symphony orchestra serving its community at a high level.

A key aspect of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra's growing national reputation was the appointment of leading American composers, whose works were performed not only in St. Louis but also by Slatkin as a guest conductor nationwide. This allowed St. Louis audiences to hear new works by these composers, deepening the musical literacy of the Orchestra's home audiences and diversifying the previously heavy reliance on standard works of the nineteenth century and twentieth centuries. The four composers whom Slatkin introduced to St. Louis were Joseph Schwantner, Donald Erb, Joan Tower, and Claude Baker.

Leonard has long emphasized the importance of programming in connecting with today's audiences, given the decline in attendance, increasing audience age, and often stale repertoire. The conductor must develop a broad repertoire, be sensitive to the needs of the community the orchestra serves, and focus on the parts of the orchestral repertoire in which the orchestra can excel. This also involves hiring guest conductors who have strengths where resident conductors perceive themselves as weak.

Slatkin and David Hyslop developed a system in St. Louis where each program was rated on a continuum from zero to two. Two represented a guaranteed sell-out and zero an event for which one could anticipate efforts to return tickets already purchased. Their goal was to develop a twenty-four-week season that resulted in a total of twenty-four points. This complex thinking required them to develop a repertoire that would score points for St. Louis on the national musical map while simultaneously serving the musical needs of

St. Louis itself. As a result, St. Louis did hear its share of exotic works, but many of these were in preparation for tour appearances.

Leonard Slatkin's six Grammy awards and numerous nominations showcase his commitment to and excellence in performing and promoting American music of the twentieth century. His awards with various orchestras, such as the St. Louis Symphony, the University of Michigan University Symphony Orchestra, and the Nashville Symphony, highlight his ability to bring out the best in each ensemble he works with. His extensive work with American composers and a diverse repertoire has made a significant impact on the landscape of classical music.

The legacy of Leonard's commitment to innovative programming and the promotion of American music continues today through the work of other music directors, such as David Robertson. By developing new audience bases and embracing unique programming concepts, these conductors carry on the tradition of exploring new musical horizons and ensuring the continued growth and evolution of classical music in the twenty-first century.

Leonard Slatkin's tenure as music director of the National Symphony from 1996 to 2008 was marked by significant efforts to elevate the orchestra's status and to make it a truly national ensemble. Despite challenges, such as the acoustics of the Kennedy Center auditorium and internal disagreements, Slatkin pursued ambitious projects and programs. One such project involved performing in all fifty states, a testament to Slatkin's commitment to making the orchestra truly national in scope. During his time in Washington, Slatkin also worked closely with then-President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton to raise national arts awareness, demonstrating his belief in the importance of public service and advocacy for the arts.

Slatkin's dedication to promoting American music was evident in his programming, as he made a point to open each concert with a work by an American composer. He was particularly proud of founding the National Conducting Institute, which provided valuable training and experience for aspiring American conductors, covering not only conducting skills but also the practical aspects of running a major orchestra. Despite facing personal challenges during his time in Washington, Slatkin remained devoted to his mission of elevating the National Symphony and promoting American music. His candor about these difficulties in the "Running the Ship" chapter from *Conducting Business* reveals his humility and openness, as well as his willingness to learn and grow from his experiences. Despite the

challenges, he believed the orchestra improved during his time there and began to reclaim national attention.

In 2008, Slatkin became music director of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), taking the helm of an orchestra that had been without artistic leadership for five seasons. Despite the challenges posed by the collapse of the automobile industry and the national economy, as well as a six-month strike by the orchestra, Slatkin worked tirelessly to improve the orchestra's fortunes. He focused on fundraising, community involvement, and various outreach programs to strengthen the ensemble's connection to its audience and the city of Detroit.

Slatkin's tenure in Detroit, which lasted until 2018, was marked by personal health issues, including a heart attack and bypass surgery. Nevertheless, he led the DSO through a period of growth and innovation, introducing initiatives such as free webcasts of classical subscription programs, an annual winter festival, an Asian tour, and a neighborhood concert series. Through his dedication and hard work, Slatkin continued to make a lasting impact on the orchestras he led and the communities they served.

Throughout his illustrious career, Leonard Slatkin has not only held music directorships at four American orchestras but also led the BBC Symphony and the Symphony Orchestra of Lyon, France. He has been involved in numerous summer festivals, including the Minnesota Orchestra's Viennese Sommerfest, the Pittsburgh Symphony's summer festival at Great Woods, and the Blossom Festival of the Cleveland Orchestra.

Slatkin has dedicated his summers to conducting and teaching at prestigious institutions such as Aspen and Breckenridge, Colorado, Santa Barbara's Music Academy of the West, and Indiana University. He has authored well-received books on music and the music industry, and remains an active presence in the musical community.

In October 2019, Slatkin spent two weeks at the Manhattan School, where he conducted, taught, and lectured on the future of music in America. He also curated a CD featuring music related to the Slatkin family, showcasing the impressive musical lineage within his family.

Slatkin has visited several renowned conservatories and hopes to visit more in the future. In November 2019, Leonard spent a week in residence at the Eastman School in Rochester, conducting the Eastman Philharmonia in a concert featuring music by Eastman alumnus Jeff Beal. Half of the performance included Beal's symphonic music, while the other half

featured a live music-to-screen performance of “Battleground” from the television series *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*, for which Beal composed the score. This event harkened back to the early days of the Eastman Theatre, now called Kodak Hall, where silent films were accompanied by live orchestral music. Although he considers his time as a music director to be complete, he remains active in writing, hosting a radio program, and guest conducting for orchestras worldwide. His accomplishments and dedication to music continue to inspire and influence the international music community.

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