



## KAFFEEHAUS

*The scholar, musician (and college president) on memoirs, modernism and the role of music in a polyglot world*

## Leon Botstein: Intellectual With a Baton



Leon Botstein at Café Weimar: On a piano, all you had to do was push a button Photos: M. Würz

by Dardis McNamee

For a man who knows as much about Vienna as Leon Botstein, it was surprising to discover there was anything significant about the city he hadn't read. For instance, Edmund de Waal's captivating family history-cum-aesthetic journey into fin de siècle Viennese culture, *The Hare With Amber Eyes* – one among a number of remarkable recent memoirs, each a window on the era through the lives of remarkable people. But there were so many, a whole library of new scholarship on the city he clearly loves.

"I am sceptical about these memoirs," he said. He must have noted my surprise. "I'm sure it's a terrific book. But I think there's a big divide between the family memoirs of people that are survivors and the children of survivors. They really don't count as eye-witnesses. There's a tremendous amount of sentimentalisation."

It also bothered him that the memoirs were almost always about distinguished families of the *haute bourgeoisie*: "This has little to do with the history of the city and its population, with its cultural life in the 19th and 20th century, particularly the period before 1938."

And the more scholarly ones? What about *The*

*Age of Insight*, Nobel laureate Eric Kandel's brilliant intellectual portrait of the era, that in a fuller way than ever before, revealed the role of science and medicine in modernist Vienna? Also not.

But the questions were unfair. Leon Botstein is a very busy man. A scholar/musician, concert pianist and conductor of the American Symphony, he is also a distinguished educator, President of Bard College in Annandale on Hudson, New York (his day job) and sometime Fellow at the Institute for the Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, as well as chairman of the board of the Central European University in Budapest. And that's just the big things. When would he find time?

### Composers and audiences

Botstein had stopped in Vienna on his way east, at the request of his friend Ivan Krastev, to lecture at the IWM on one of his favourite topics, "Music and Politics", which has been a continuing interest at least since he handed in a five-volume dissertation at Harvard in 1985. Entitled *Music and Its Public: Habits of Listening and the Crisis of Musical Modernism in Vienna, 1870-1914*, the study explored how the various threads of culture, technology and social change

had resulted in a rift between modernist composers and audiences that remains to this day.

It was a Wednesday afternoon when we met at the Café Weimar on Währinger Straße in the 9th District, a short ride from the Institute, where he would be lecturing that evening. There should have been plenty of time, except that Botstein had just arrived from New York that morning and got mixed up about the time zone. Had he been able to sleep on the plane?

"I never sleep on planes," he confessed. Those hours in the air are too precious, as uninterrupted time to read, write and think. In fact, he seems to rarely get what other people would call a good night's sleep. Yet, there he was, bright eyed and alert, and full of ideas.

We settled into a booth at the far end of the café, while a waiter took his order: a tall, frosty, *Eiskaffee*, with a couple of scoops of creamy vanilla ice cream, topped with *Schlagobers* and a crisp wafer. He lifted the long spoon and took a bite. He seemed very pleased.

So why Vienna? It was clearly not what he called "the clichés of Viennese *Gemütlichkeit*," that had attracted him – that "mélange of Freud, Klimt, Schnitzler, that is now the intellectual tourism of the city." He also has no "autobiographical connection" to Vienna; he was born in Zurich to Polish refugee parents, both doctors.

### All the components of a musical life

"I was interested in the questions as a musician," he said, "of why the history of music seemed to have taken a different path than the history of painting, architecture and literature – that what we consider to be modernism in music, did not, after its initial appearance, gain an audience. It actually lost its audience of patronage, and its audience of participation and following."

It was this question that first absorbed him all those years ago at Harvard, and from a variety of angles, continues to do so today. He began by looking at people's habits, and how they spent time with the arts, with literature or ideas.

What he noticed was that, as modernist ideas took hold, "people became accustomed to reading modern poetry, modern fiction, they decorated their houses with modern designs, they commissioned buildings and houses, the more wealthy of them, made by modern architects. And modern painting became an object of value."

But the same had not occurred in music, "so that to this day, what we consider the cutting edge of modernism – later Mahler and Schönberg, the *Wiener Klang*, the 2nd Viennese school – remains difficult; these composers have never found an audience comparable to the other art forms."

Even though music was at the centre of life in German speaking Europe. This seems particularly surprising in multi-cultural Vienna where at the turn of the 20th century, less than half the population were native born and the rest might speak any of the Empire's 11 languages. ("The whole cult of 'Alt-Wien' was a reaction against immigration; in fact, there were very few Alt-Wiener.") Through music, they found a shared culture.

So Botstein chose to study Vienna, because it had then, as to a large extent it has today, "all the components of musical life", the many roles music plays in the lives of individuals, and in the community. And he ticked them off: instrument manufacturing and distribution, music publishing, public concerts, schools of music, music teaching, music journalism. And, of course, *Hausmusik*. Arthur Schnitzler was an amateur composer, he told me. Ludwig Bösendorfer, the piano manufacturer, was as well.

### The technology of democracy

"So there was a level of musical literacy, that permeated the culture." Technology had transformed the piano into a push button machine, now with an iron frame – the harp of the piano – and the lamination, creating a stable system that wouldn't go out of tune. ("So any idiot could learn anything.") It was the first instrument of mechanical reproduction. Thus the well-tempered *Klavier*, along with the advent of music printing, democratised music, had brought amateur ensembles into the home.

But democracy is a messy thing. And as audiences began increasingly to make their own music, they made a more active choice in what they wanted to hear. And with the advent of modernism, they weren't so sure they liked it. The composers took offence, even became hostile and decided the audiences were philistines. And the audiences dug in their heels, interested only in what they knew and could understand.

But we were already out of time. My mobile phone rang: It was the IWM calling asking if we had left yet, and we rushed to pay the bill and headed out to hail a cab.

We had only touched on the next chapter of Leon Botstein's intellectual life in Vienna: events related to the Richard Wagner bi-centennial, that includes an exhibit at the Jewish Museum Vienna opening 24 September, entitled *Euphoria and Unease. Jewish Vienna and Richard Wagner*.

"The real innovator was Richard Wagner," Botstein had told me. "What Wagner did was make music followable by repetition, by emphasis on colour and of course with a story line in an opera. But really it was the whole of programme music, the idea that music was a narrative art, which was illustrative, told stories, before there were movies." Then again, "the violence in Wagner's music is extremely alarming, especially along racial lines." And the confusion of sex and violence... ("The misogyny is enough to tear my hair out... I don't understand how he got away reading this stuff in Zurich.") Yet Botstein admires him, not just as a pioneer. Wagner had reinvented music.

Today we listen to Wagner, often, and with pleasure. Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, rarely.

"And the reason that there's a difference between art and music is that art was an object of fashion, and object of purchase, an object of gazing," Botstein had told me. "Music was a habit: singing in choral societies, singing at home. It was a domestic as well as public form of entertainment. It was viewed as a shared language." ♦

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