

## Leonard Slatkin to lead CIM Orchestra at Severance

by Jarrett Hoffman



Over the past month, Leonard Slatkin has gone back to school.

The recent college visits, so to speak, for the renowned conductor — who is currently Music Director Laureate of the Detroit Symphony, Directeur Musical Honoraire of the Orchestre National de Lyon, Conductor Laureate of the St. Louis Symphony, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Orquesta

Filarmónica de Gran Canaria — have included concerts at Manhattan School of Music and Carnegie Mellon University.

Slatkin will cap off that run when he guest conducts the Cleveland Institute of Music Orchestra on Tuesday, February 27 at 7:30 pm at Severance Music Center for a night of music “From the New World.” The program includes that famous symphony by Antonín Dvořák as well as Cindy McTee’s *Double Play* and Aaron Copland’s *Clarinet Concerto*, which will feature CIM student Jazmin Pascual as soloist. Tickets are available [here](#).

I reached Slatkin on Zoom to discuss working with students, how he became interested in conducting, his multi-generational musical family, and his writing — ranging from his early interest in science fiction all the way up to his fourth book. *Eight Symphonic Masterworks of the Twentieth Century: A Study Guide for Conductors* will be published by Rowman & Littlefield on March 5.

We began our conversation with the *Clarinet Concerto*. Slatkin noted its influence from jazz, its elements of Copland’s training as a student in Paris, and how the piece moves

from its lyrical opening to “a kind of quilt of different styles and sounds” — a progression that opened us up to a broader discussion of the program.

*Jarrett Hoffman: The pairing of the concerto and Cindy McTee’s Double Play is so interesting with their similar arcs, moving from lyricism to something very frenetic and buzzing and jazzy.*

Leonard Slatkin: The idea of two pieces that are essentially in two sections makes sense to me — it’s like doing two mini two-movement symphonies. Cindy (*pictured*), of course, is my wife, but that’s not the reason I do the piece. I like it as an opener. And it’s good to introduce students to slightly more contemporary techniques, things that are a little bit different from what they usually see — not that much, but enough.



*JH: With the “New World” Symphony, a piece that’s so famous and that you’ve known for so long, how do you approach bringing it to a student orchestra that is probably familiar with it, but that doesn’t have that deep well of experience to draw on?*

LS: Right, most of the musicians will not have played it before. They’ll know it from having heard it either live or on a recording, or through one of the various transcriptions.

I’ve been doing a little more of this teaching recently — I do a couple weeks a year at the Manhattan School, and I’ll be at Carnegie Mellon just prior to coming to Cleveland. And these programs are designed to have some music that’s not familiar as well as something that is.

We never know what’s going to happen to the young musicians when they complete their studies — although in music you never complete it, of course. But let’s say that 20 percent or so, maybe a little more, wind up becoming a member of an orchestra. Part of my job is to give them enough background in a work like the “New World” so that when they come to their orchestra job and the piece surfaces on a program, they have as much information as they need, to in some ways be ahead of others in the orchestra.

It’s not just about learning the music, but discussing with them various options of interpretation, and what else is going on while one group of instruments is playing. Say

you're sitting there in the clarinet section and you have fifteen bars of rest before you come in. It helps to know — here's what you listen for before you enter, and here's what's happening while you're playing. Little things like that can be very helpful for young people. It's what my teachers did when they were working with student orchestras, so I'm kind of carrying on what I learned from my own mentors.

*JH: In terms of your early studies, you started on violin, then took up piano and viola. How did you become interested in conducting?*

LS: I think conducting was always in the back of my mind, but I put it on hold as a kid. I'd dream about it, and certainly I would pretend — my father was a conductor as well as a violinist. But it kind of took hold when I was about 16 and I would arrange the music for the high school musicals. Obviously we didn't have the money or resources to put on a show as it would have been done on Broadway. So I would take the piano-vocal score and maybe construct it for a string quintet with piano, a few winds, and percussion — just boil it down. Then I had the chance to actually conduct it.

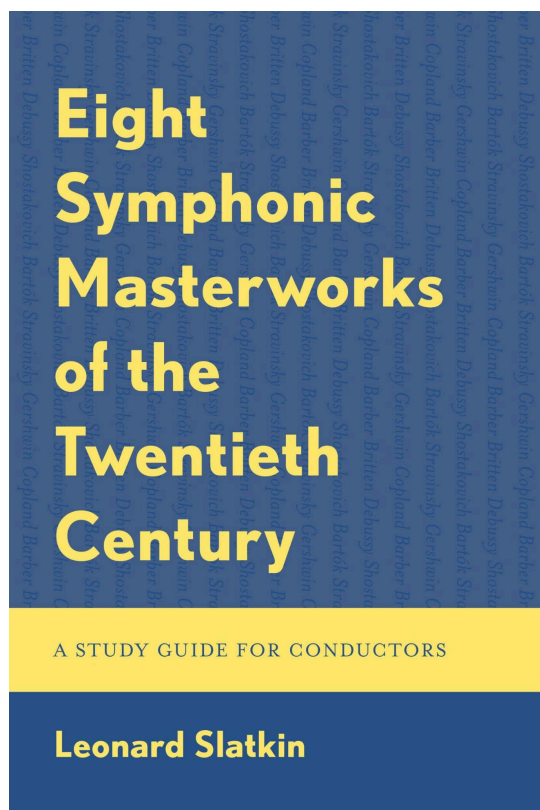
And then I was playing in a youth orchestra — I played viola — and the conductor was called away to the phone at a rehearsal, and just literally threw a score down at me and said, "Here, you, get up, conduct." That's where that part started. And from that point, once I started doing it, I felt that of all the things that had been part of my musical life, that conducting was the area where I was the best suited. I was not a good violinist. I was a terrible violist. And I wasn't a bad pianist, but not good enough to really embark on a career in any way that I could think of.

*JH: Something else from early on is that you had a pretty diverse musical background to draw on.*

LS: With my family being in the music end of the motion picture industry, as well as being one half of a very famous string quartet and working in the pop music industry, I had this background that was inclusive of all kinds of music. I spent a lot of my time hanging out in jazz clubs, and I became a decent lounge pianist. But these various forms of music were always of interest, and it stays that way to this day.

I have a radio show that you can find online, [Slatkin Shuffle](#), where I'll go from — it might be a movement of a Bruckner symphony, and all of a sudden we're doing *The Man I Love*, and then we're doing a bluegrass version of a Bach suite. Especially today with the availability of so much music to so many people, even though you might be studying in one direction, it's important to try to learn about what else is out there. It can inform decisions you'll make later on if you choose to become a professional musician.

JH: Another project of yours — you've been doing a lot of writing.



LS: Oh yeah. Three books are out, and a new one [*Eight Symphonic Masterworks of the Twentieth Century*] comes out in a couple of weeks. In this one, basically I take eight pieces of music and try to explain what anybody conducting them needs to know before they ever step on the podium. It's part history, part understanding the editions, and it goes into the question of whether the piece is suitable for the orchestra you're going to conduct. Then it goes into the specifics, almost measure by measure.

It will be the start of a series, with the idea that one volume will come out every six or seven months. [*The next volume, focusing on the 19th century, comes out later this year.*] And it does take up a lot of time, more so than the other books I've written, which were more stream-of-consciousness writing. This actually has to be accurate (laughs). But I'm very happy about it.

And the person reading doesn't have to be a conductor, as long as they can navigate their way through reading any kind of music, even a single line. You need to have a copy of the score, and that — or the book — can be gotten online. Then going back and forth between the book and the score, you get an idea of what it is that the conductor really has to know.

JH: In terms of writing, something else I found really interesting is the [journal](#) that you keep very regularly.

LS: Once a month.

JH: I'd be curious to hear how these different ways of writing attract you.

LS: Well, I've been writing ever since I was in junior high school. And one of the paths that I considered at one time was writing science fiction, or as my friend Ray Bradbury used to call it, speculative fiction — and of course all fiction is that. But the idea was, what could be out there?

And I loved that genre. I really did, between Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke and all the other writers from the '50s and '60s. Remarkable. So I would write short stories, and I submitted a few for publication. Nothing ever happened — they weren't very good — and then I stopped.

I never kept a diary. But when it was decided that I would have a website, I thought, you know, this is an opportunity to explore that part of my life from before, and maybe with all I've learned, perhaps I could be good at it, we'll see. The journal goes back quite a ways. If you scroll through it, you can see how my writing has improved, because it was pretty horrible when I started.

But that's what paved the way for the books, between that and talking with other musicians — there's nothing more fun than just getting together with musicians and telling stories. People said, you know, you've got to put these things down.

The journal is a kind of diary, but sometimes it goes in other directions. When a film comes out that's of particular interest, like *Maestro* or *Tár*, I will review it from the musical standpoint. Or when something happens — well, last month we lost Peter Schickele, so I wrote a [tribute](#) to him.

*JH: I saw that — that was really nice.*

LS: So, things like that. Anytime I can write, it improves my skills in this area. It also gives me a chance to swear at spellcheck — 'is that how you spell Wednesday?' But I love doing it.

*JH: And you write music too.*

LS: Just about to be published is a set of transcriptions for winds of Scarlatti sonatas. And I'm almost finished with a piece that is actually my first commission.

The pandemic was kind of fun in terms of composition for me. I wrote a couple of original pieces. I wrote more transcriptions — some Brahms pieces. I think as a conductor, you have a unique perspective when you're creating a work for orchestra, because you know what an orchestra can and can't do — more so sometimes than a composer. So what I write tends to be pretty practical in terms of performance.

I think every musician should try to write something. What we do as performers is re-create. And in order to really understand a piece of music, part of what you should have in your arsenal is the understanding of the creative process, not just the re-creative one.

*JH: I imagine that you and Cindy must have some interesting discussions, both of you being composers.*

LS: A lot of our discussions are often not about the actual composition process or even the styles, but about more practical things — copyrights and elements like that.

It's also important to know that my son is a composer — he's writing for film and television. And he didn't plan to become a musician in any way. He wanted to work in the front office of a baseball team, but all of a sudden he got this bug to write music, and he's really good at it. And my wife has been one of his mentors. She was a teacher for 30 years at the University of North Texas. So to be able to advise my son is really a lot of fun for her, and he gets so much out of it as well.

A few of the places where I'm conducting next season, I have a first half that consists of a piece by Cindy — either *Double Play*, *Timepiece*, or *Circuits*, which are all good openers — then this set of five Scarlatti sonatas that I transcribed, and finally a new piece by my son. So it's kind of a familial first half that I think will be interesting for audiences.

*JH: An amazing musical family you have, going back a long time.*

LS: There's a whole album now on Naxos called [Slatkin Conducts Slatkin](#), and it has pretty much every generation of Slatkins that created music. It's nice to have a tribute album like that — it was fun.

*JH: A beautiful thing to have for your family. Well, thank you so much for your time — is there anything you'd like to add?*

LS: I'm really looking forward to getting back to Cleveland. It's been a little while, and I still have some good friends there. And it's always interesting to go to a couple of different music schools each year just to see the state of music education in these places that are preparing people for entrance into the professional field.

Are the schools being realistic? Some of them are not. Some of them are trying to train everybody to be the next Yo-Yo or Josh. I think we need to be a little more practical — what's it going to be like when the students get out of school, and what alternatives



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should they be looking at in case it doesn't work out? We want everybody to pursue their dream, but they have some options out there, because ultimately you've got to put some food on the table too.

*JH: Do you mean alternatives within or outside of performing?*

LS: Could be outside — everybody has different interests. Music is very specialized and it's hard, no matter what form of music you go into. It could be that some people are more suited towards, say, management, or public relations, or library work — who knows? And boy, if you're a composer now, you've got the whole world open. You can do video games, you can do a limited television series, you can do advertising.

There's more out there than people think, but you have to open up your parameters to understand that.

*Photo of Slatkin by Cindy McTee*

*Photo of McTee by Laurie Tennent*

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