

Slatkin returns to the National Symphony Orchestra, and it's personal

The erstwhile NSO music director celebrated his recent milestone birthday with an engaging program of Mozart, Cindy McTee and William Walton.

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By [Michael Andor Brodeur](#)

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A warm welcome greeted Leonard Slatkin on Thursday night at the Kennedy Center, where the maestro returned for the first of three concerts with his former National Symphony Orchestra.

Slatkin first came to the NSO in 1994 (following the tenure of Mstislav Rostropovich), served as music director designate for two years and continued on as music director from 1996 to 2008. This year he celebrated his 80th birthday, and the program felt a bit like a gift he wrapped for himself.

Cindy McTee's "Double Play" opened the evening. It was commissioned and premiered by Slatkin and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 2010. And one imagines it went well: Slatkin and McTee married the following year.

"Double Play" is composed in two joined movements: "The Unquestioned Answer" nods to composer Charles Ives in more ways than one. Atop tremulous strings, shimmering cymbals and chimes (plus the occasional rain stick) surround serpentine oboe and bassoon lines as a vibraphone takes careful steps forward. These tranquil passages are upended by sudden rushes of discordant blasts of white-knuckle horns. The movement is borne out on a calm swell of strings, decorated with a five-note motif from Ives.

"Tempus Fugit" opens with a pitter-patter of percussion that sounded like the leaky ceiling in my first apartment. Strings cautiously lean in like shadows, a coiling take on the motif returns via flute, and the drip-drop quickens into a frenetic rhythm that spreads across the orchestra. Where the first movement was about a collision of colors, the second is all about interlocking rhythm — including the buried fanfares and blockbuster horns that light up its climax.

Slatkin's close understanding of the music was evident in his meticulous management of its many little details, as well as the grand gestural sweep of its form.

Pianist Emanuel Ax — a longtime friend and former schoolmate of Slatkin — took the stage next for Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor, a piece that seemed to reside in the pianist’s hands. I’ve seldom heard the orchestra so warmly embrace a guest pianist — his playing in easy, even cooperation that characterized the entire performance.

Ax brought bright, jeweled tones to the first movement, wonderfully buttressed by Thomas Cupples and William Gerlach on trumpet and Scott Christian on timpani. His cadenza was a delight — fluid and sparkling. He brought a lyrical sweetness to the second movement “Romanze,” its charming back-and-forth with the woodwinds a reminder that 1785 was a particular sweet spot for Mozart’s operatic writing. The third movement — a rondo that works its way from minor to major — found both Slatkin and Ax digging in. The short, sharp stop of his parting cadenza inspired a few gasps in the audience, with the woodwinds supplying a sigh of relief.

For an encore, Ax played Liszt’s arrangement of Schubert’s “Ständchen,” but with some subtle dazzle — a little echo of the melody in the high register that trailed it around the keyboard.

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During a phone chat last week, Slatkin expressed special enthusiasm for the evening’s closer, William Walton’s Symphony No. 1 in B-flat minor, completed and premiered in 1935, calling it “a highly neglected masterpiece that should be played a lot.”

And certainly hearing it — especially Slatkin’s reading of the piece, which spares nary a decibel — you could swear you’ve heard it before. There’s an overwhelming nervous energy strung through all four moments — even the Andante third, with its long shadows of Sibelius. And this anxiety is most certainly an ingredient. The program offered a quote from Walton, whose writing process for this symphony was stalled by a creative block for three years.

“I think it almost hopeless for anyone to produce in any of the arts in these days,” Walton wrote in an apologetic letter to his commissioner, Sir Hamilton Harty. “It is practically impossible to get away from the general feeling of hopelessness and chaos which exists everywhere. However, one must try.”

And try the NSO did. This was an explosive introduction to the Walton. Slatkin brought a different kind of exactitude to the task — more aggressive and direct, a professor suddenly calling on unsuspecting students. This tight regulation produced a first movement that just seemed to keep climbing, its grand announcements of horn suggesting that John Williams is also a fan.

The second movement (Presto, con malizia) was animated by busy cellos and violins, little staggers and stalls forecasting the mechanistic movement’s trick ending. Walton’s craftsmanship (and penmanship) was more plainly legible in the slow third movement, with gorgeous flute solos (from Aaron Goldman) guiding us down a path of gradually darkening strings.

A surprise encore contributed to the family-affair vibe of the evening. As a tribute to his parents, Felix and Eleanor (respectively, the founding violinist and cellist of the Hollywood String Quartet), Slatkin led the orchestra in his and Ricky Marino's arrangement of Alfred Newman's theme from "The Song of Bernadette," orchestrated by McTee, and featuring solos from concertmaster Nurit Bar-Josef (whom Slatkin hired) and cellist David Hardy (whom Slatkin named principal cello in 1994). When you come home, best to do it with friends.

'The Song of Bernadette' - Alfred Newman, composer; arr. Cindy McTee; Leonar...



"Leonard Slatkin & Emanuel Ax" repeats Nov. 16 and 17 at the Kennedy Center, www.kennedy-center.org.