

North America focus

Spotlight on the classical scene in the US and Canada



Rob Kapilow:
evangelist for good music

Give this music life

His own son once believed classical composers had to be dead, but Rob Kapilow takes to the air, page and web to disprove that notion. He tells Vivien Schweitzer how

“**N**o one else could be Bernstein but it’s inspiring to have someone like him,” says Rob Kapilow, the gregarious host of Lincoln Center’s popular *What Makes It Great* series. Just as Leonard Bernstein reached out to new audiences with his Young People’s Concerts, Kapilow energetically woos listeners of all ages, continuing his idol’s legacy with deeply enthusiastic, witty and eminently knowledgeable musical explorations. *What Makes It Great* grew out of segments first broadcast on NPR’s *Performance Today* 15 years ago. Kapilow also takes the show on the road, with dates in Washington, Boston and Cerritos, California, in February alone. And he has a new book out.

The book, *All You Have to Do is Listen: Music from the Inside Out*, was partly inspired by the *What Makes It Great* series, but covers broader ground than his live shows, which usually focus on a single work. “The idea was to take the basic

principles from those programmes and put them into a general perspective,” explains Kapilow. He was inspired by the populist mission of Aaron Copland’s *What to Listen for in Music*, a book published in 1939 aimed at the general public, but he was also motivated by what the publication couldn’t do.

“A big challenge of writing books in the days before you could have music in web format is that you were stuck with one of two bad options,” he says. “If you put it in musical notation you essentially eliminated the public who can’t read music. But if you eliminated music notation then it’s hard to really talk in any real specific way about the music itself. So while I was inspired by what Copland tried to do, I was equally inspired by what he couldn’t even begin to do.”

Kapilow was initially hesitant about writing his own book until he understood how the web could complement it. In his primer, Copland was forced to talk on a more general level instead of

focusing on the specifics of one verse or measure, which Kapilow believes is essential. With modern technology, he wonders, “who knows what kind of a book Copland would have written?” The companion website to Kapilow’s book features excerpts of scores accompanied by a visual scrollbar that moves across the screen in real time as the music is playing.

It’s a vital component of the book, says Kapilow, adding that the main reason he created the *What Makes It Great* series is because he wanted to be able to demonstrate his ideas. He hopes that this format – serving both those who can and can’t read music – will help his listeners enjoy that all-important “ah ha” moment. Bernstein once said that the most exciting moment for him was watching someone else get it, relates Kapilow. “To me that sentence has made a huge difference. That sentence could be my sentence! There’s always a moment in the *What Makes It Great* series when

you hear an 'Oh' – and that's the best moment in life!"

"Bernstein didn't do just one kids' concert, he did around 60," he enthuses, "which was an unbelievable commitment. I found it very inspiring that he cared so much. It's unthinkable that a conductor today would do 60 television programmes!"

Kapilow chooses repertory for his concerts depending on circumstance and prior experience. Sometimes programmers request a certain work. For a recent presentation on NPR's *Weekend Edition*, for example, he was asked to discuss the song "Brother can you spare a dime?" in light of the current economic problems and anniversary of the Great Depression.

Some What Makes it Great programmes this season were chosen to coincide with a series at Lincoln Center called *New Visions: The Literary Muse*. On February 9 Kapilow will explore Janáček's String Quartet No 1, which was inspired by Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*. On March 16 he continues that literary theme with Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*.

A few popular works have proven less successful for demonstrations. One of the least rewarding works he has presented, says Kapilow, was Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which he has explored in both piano and orchestral versions. "I feel it already really gets its message across and there's not a huge amount I brought to it," he explains. "Whereas, ironically, with something simple like *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* everyone thinks they know it but it's a very sophisticated piece." Other works, such as string quartets by Ravel and Debussy, might be too complex or subtle and the explanation becomes tedious, he says, adding that he can sense when the audience's eyes are glazing over.

Bach, Beethoven and Chopin work well, however. In a programme in December 2008 Kapilow explored Chopin's Third and Fourth Ballades with the pianist Jeremy Denk. "People have an image of these beautiful swooning melodies, but it's some of the most intellectually crafted music of the 19th century,"



Rob Kapilow: demonstrating what makes music great

says Kapilow, "I have an immense amount to say about those Ballades. I never realised how truly spectacular they are until I took them apart."

between soloist and ensemble – so how can you convey this *tutti* contrast without an orchestra? How can a keyboard fulfil both roles?" Kapilow then demonstrated how

"Palestrina's music is not only exquisitely beautiful but intensely expressive," he adds, "and I want to get inside this seemingly formal language and seemingly objective surface to its heart." That meant exploring the connection between Gregorian chant and Palestrina's style, illuminated by the *a cappella* vocal ensemble Lionheart.

Kapilow often composes music specifically for his family concerts. His setting of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* premieres in Vancouver on January 18 and will also be performed at Lincoln Center on April 25. One of his most successful compositions to date is his ingenious setting of the Dr Seuss classic *Green Eggs and Ham*, a vibrant mélange of piquant

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At one recent concert at Lincoln Center, Kapilow explored Bach's *Italian Concerto* with the harpsichordist Bradley Brookshire. "A Baroque concerto is fundamentally about the contrast

the opening bars of the Concerto imitate multiple instruments.

During another programme he discussed the music of Palestrina, whose "cool formal style can make the music almost impersonal". Yet



Stravinsky-esque woodwinds, pop and folksong references and sultry jazz and blues interludes. Kapilow recorded his colourful score as *Green Eggs and Hamadeus*, an Artemis Classics release.

Kapilow certainly has impeccable composer credentials, with degrees from Eastman and Yale. Aged 19, he spent his sophomore year in France studying with Nadia Boulanger, to whom he has dedicated his new book. He recalls that she was “beyond intimidating; terrifying. She never said anything nice when I was there, but when I left she wrote me the nicest-ever letters. But she had a twinkle in her eye and we really got along well. She was brutal – but she was absolutely spectacular, the real deal.

It was the kind of training you don’t get any more.”

After finishing his studies Kapilow was an assistant professor for six years at Yale, where he was conductor of the Yale Symphony Orchestra. During that period he also conducted Broadway shows such as the Tony Award-winning *Nine*. Early accolades include winning first place in the Fontainebleau Casadesus Piano Competition and second place in the Antal Dorati Conducting Competition with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

The *Green Eggs and Hamadeus* disc also includes a discussion and complete performance of *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* by I Solisti de Zagreb. Kapilow delves into the

piece by highlighting, one note at a time, how Mozart created such an unforgettable melody. “What makes a good story is a surprise,” he says, demonstrating how the tune could have turned out in less capable hands. “Let’s pretend that Mozart wasn’t a great composer: let’s pretend that I wrote the viola part instead of Mozart,” he says self-deprecatingly, before demonstrating what certain measures would sound like with the rhythms played at faster speeds.

Kapilow hopes that alongside enlightening neophytes, he can simultaneously offer new insights to seasoned performers (who may have played a certain piece innumerable times) or clarify particularly challenging works. He

frequently collaborates with the St Lawrence Quartet, who asked him to do a session on the *Grosse Fuge*. They are “excellent demonstrators,” says Kapilow. Participant musicians “have to get excited when the audience gets something,” he says, adding that the ensembles he has worked with “have been very honest that it’s a learning experience for them, too.”

In most orchestral rehearsals conductors rarely have time to dissect a symphony in much detail, so Kapilow enjoys illuminating the intricacies of standard repertory such as Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony or Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony* for professional musicians, who can learn alongside the audience. The Schubert, he points out, begins with an eerie cello melody, which is transposed in the development. “Sometimes, if you’ve played it a hundred times and the first bar was a hundred measures ago, the orchestral musician doesn’t hear it any more,” he says.

Kapilow lives in River Vale, New Jersey, with his wife and three children, whom he cites as a major inspiration for his concerts. Indeed, he was inspired to begin his series after an orchestral family concert at Carnegie Hall when his young son, referring to the musicians, said, “Daddy, why are they all so mad?”

His children have provided a “fantastic try-out” over the years, he laughs, offering “unbelievably, brutally honest” comments like, “That’s boring! I don’t get it!” His eldest son studies privately at Juilliard and wants to be a composer. When he was seven, according to his father, he came home from school one day and said, “Daddy, you can’t be a composer, you aren’t dead!” That comment had a profound impact on Kapilow, who says he loves doing kids’ concerts for which he has written the music. “I want them to understand that it’s a living thing as opposed to just dead European composers,” he remarks. “I want them to understand that composers are alive!”

All You Have to Do is Listen: Music from the Inside Out is published by Wiley and Lincoln Center