

The 'Pope's Maestro'

Sir Gilbert Levine is honoring Sts. John Paul II and John XXIII, and Pope Francis with a televised concert.

BY JAMES BREIG



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HE CLOSE FRIENDSHIP between a pope from Poland and a Jewish conductor from America evolved into an international concert tour in 2014 and a PBS music special that was broadcast throughout the United States earlier this year. Titled "A Celebration of Peace through Music," the concert was created and led by Sir Gilbert Levine to honor Sts. John XXIII and John Paul II, and Pope Francis.

The story of how the three Roman Catholic leaders became the focus of Levine's attention and talent begins with a papal encounter he never expected to have—and a pope's healing remarks to his mother-in-law. Levine and John Paul II first met in 1987, when Levine, a Brooklyn native, was appointed conductor of the Krakow Philharmonic in Poland. A year later, the pope, who had been archbishop of Krakow, asked Levine to lead his orchestra in a musical

commemoration of the 10th anniversary of John Paul II's election. It was the beginning of a long friendship.

"I had the incredible honor to work closely with Pope John Paul II from 1988 until his passing in 2005," Levine says. Years later, their relationship would inspire in him the notion of "creating and conducting concerts on the theme of tolerance and mutual respect among people of all the world's faiths."

While their friendship began with music—Levine has been called "the pope's maestro"—the conductor explains that over time it became something deeper, due to John Paul II's focus on interfaith understanding. His commitment to that cause, Levine says, "came out of his own history, seeing the horrors of the Shoah firsthand in his native Poland, and from his dedication to fulfilling the promise of better interfaith relations as expressed in the landmark Vatican II document 'Nostra Aetate' ('In Our Time')."

That statement, which resulted from dis-



PHOTO FROM GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

cussions during the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, is subtitled “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.” It declares: “The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion.” It would eventually lead to Levine’s commemorating a second pontiff in his musical performance. That’s because the document “was initiated at the strong inspiration of Pope John XXIII,” who summoned the council, says Levine.

Finally, a third pope, Francis, was added to the concert because “he announced that he would be canonizing John XXIII and John Paul II together,” Levine says. Reflecting on his friendship with one pope and his admiration for the interfaith achievements of two others, he came up with the theme of his tribute. “I knew that I had to create a concert to celebrate [the dual canonization] in the language—music—that I knew John Paul would

have wished,” Levine says. The resulting concert has been performed several times in cities around the globe, including Venice, Krakow, and Vienna.

One of the challenges Levine faced in assembling the concert program was coming up with classical music that reflected, in theme, style, and mood, the three popes’ efforts to strengthen ecumenical and interfaith relationships. As he puts it, “Each work was specially selected to ‘illustrate’ the popes.”

Pope Francis A Developing Legacy

Although Pope Francis’ full legacy remains to be seen, Levine added him to the concert because he has already “captivated billions around the world with his simplicity, wisdom, and caring for the universal poor. He has reached out, even in the early days of his pontificate, to people of all faiths—in Rome, in Jerusalem, and Istanbul, just as he did in his native Argentina—bringing his message of

Sir Gilbert Levine conducts “A Celebration of Peace through Music” at DAR Constitution Hall in Washington, DC. The concert, which has been broadcast on PBS, is a celebration of music and spirit among faiths.

Hearing 'A Language of God'



PHOTO BY TONY GALE

Sir Gilbert Levine's biography could be one sentence long: He has conducted symphony orchestras in North America and Europe. But then comes a second sentence, guaranteed to raise eyebrows: Pope John Paul II selected this Jewish man to become a Knight-Commander of the Equestrian Order of Saint Gregory the Great. That honor is the highest one given to a non-Church musician and was last bestowed on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Levine's journey from his Brooklyn birthplace to the Vatican was a musical one. Born in 1948, he grew up watching Leonard Bernstein's "Young People's Concerts," aired on television in 53 installments over 14 years to introduce children to classical music. Levine has called the shows "mesmerizing," and the spark that lit a flame in him to become just like Bernstein.

The future "pope's maestro" consumed music the way some children soak in sports. He rapidly took up the piano, clarinet, and bassoon. His mother, dumbfounded about what to do with young Gilbert, sent him at age 12 to a professional musician for assessment. The tutor had been recommended by Bernstein.

The pro told Levine's mother that her son had "great talents. . . . He has an extraordinary future ahead of him as a really wonderful professional artist."

That future would include the unimaginable: being knighted by a pope. At the ceremony, Levine said, "Ever since I can remember, it has not been words but music that has had the mystical power to encompass depths of feeling and, yes, even thought. . . . It is, I believe, a language of God."

peace to all who will open their hearts to hear it. I, for one, have had a smile on my face since the moment he was elected."

To reflect all of that, Levine chose "Fanfare for the Common Man" by American composer Aaron Copland. Levine says the score "exem-



PHOTO BY DANIELE CATALDI/DEMOTIX/CORBIS

plifies the commitment of Pope Francis to the 'least of these,' whether in the slums of his native Argentina, at the Vatican, or on his travels throughout the world. Who can forget the image of His Holiness comforting a homeless girl in the Philippines, who beseeched the pope on behalf of all the poor children of her country? His powerful outreach to her could be felt around the world."

St. John XXIII A Man of Huge Heart

After the brief fanfare for Pope Francis opens the concert, the program reaches back in time to honor Pope John XXIII with another musical salute. Because Levine was a teenager when John XXIII died, his knowledge of the pontiff came as he worked on the structure of the concert. "He was a man from a simple village, where there were no people of other faiths," Levine outlines, "and yet he grew into a priest, a bishop, and a pope who changed the world forever with his calling of the Second Vatican Council and its landmark declaration of religious tolerance."

To honor John XXIII, the conductor turned to a work by Giuseppe Verdi, an Italian composer who lived in northern Italy, where the pope was born. The future head of the Church was 20 when the composer died in 1901. Choosing "Sanctus" by Verdi, Levine said he was accenting the interfaith message of that pontiff. Verdi's piece "sets a text, 'Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,' which comes directly from the 'Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh' found in the Book

of Isaiah," he explains. As "an Old Testament text brought intact into the Latin Mass to accentuate the brotherly relationship between Judaism and Christianity, it illustrates John XXIII's ceaseless efforts toward better interfaith understanding."

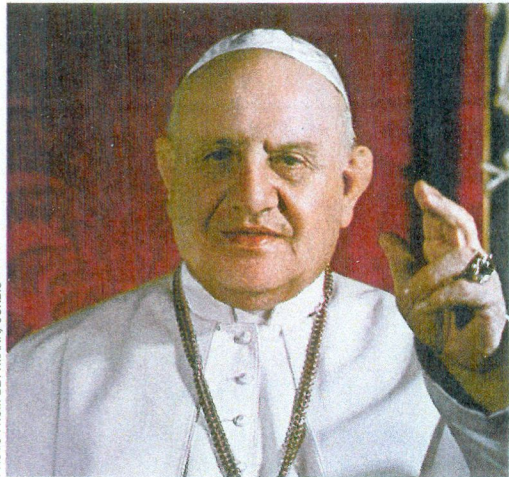


PHOTO FROM BETTMANN/CORBIS

among people of all faiths worldwide."

The finale of the concert is a performance of Johannes Brahms' First Symphony. Levine calls it "a demonstration of John Paul II's belief that music without words can have the greatest power to unite us." Levine adds that the

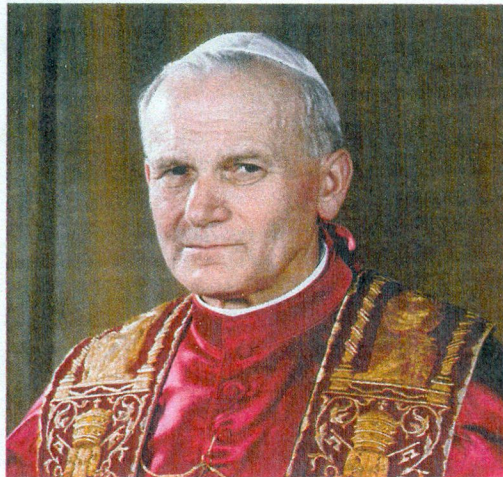


PHOTO FROM BETTMANN/CORBIS

Levine says that each piece in the concert was chosen to represent the efforts of Sts. John XXIII and John Paul II, and Pope Francis, to strengthen ecumenical and interfaith relationships.

The maestro points out that John XXIII "performed many courageous works of brotherly compassion while he was the papal nuncio in Istanbul, saving thousands of Jews from extermination by issuing false baptismal certificates, so that they might survive the Nazi Holocaust. He was a man of huge heart and common touch, but he was also a pope of immense vision, who changed the Church and the world in the short five years of his papacy."

St. John Paul II

An Inspiration

When it came to matching musical settings to the life of his longtime friend John Paul II, Levine opted for several works, beginning with two Marian hymns. "We performed one ancient, *'Bogurodzica,'* and one modern, *'Totus Tuus,'* John Paul's own motto [which was set to music] by his favorite modern Polish composer, Henryk Gorecki," Levine explains. The latter composition was "dedicated to John Paul, and had its premiere on the pope's third visit back to his native Poland in 1987." The papal motto, taken from the opening words of a prayer, translates to "I am all yours," and refers to the pope's devotion to Our Lady.

Next on the concert program is "Chichester Psalms," a piece by Leonard Bernstein, whom Levine salutes as "one of America's great music geniuses." His score "sets psalm texts in their original Hebrew," Levine says. "It exemplifies the commitment of each of these three popes to finding a way of peace in the relations

"music's transcendence comes with its ability to reflect our human spirit, in all our diversity. Music, John Paul believed, uplifts us with its universal message of the unity of all mankind, whatever way we worship God."

Levine hopes "that our music-making and the stories of these three great popes will bring all who see and hear it together in music and spirit." He also wishes that audiences "will be inspired by these exemplary men of God to be united in the pursuit of peace among all people, no matter our faith."

Sharing the Message

The concert, videotaped in Washington, DC, was first televised last Easter, but it is still being shown on stations around the United States. Pope Francis' visit to the United States this September might inspire more broadcasts. The video is a joint effort of WETA (public TV in Washington, DC), Georgetown University, the Archdiocese of Washington, the Holy See, and the embassies of Poland, Italy, and Argentina.

The president of Georgetown's board, Paul Tagliabue, observes that those partners "agreed that celebrating the legacies of these popes was a way for us to collectively use our institutions to bring their message of peace and acceptance to audiences across the country and around the world."

Saying that this message "needs to be heard today," he explains that music conveys it

For more on the concert and Sir Gilbert Levine, log in to your digital edition at StAnthonyMessenger.org.

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Extras

Following a performance of his concert, Sir Gilbert Levine takes a bow. Levine created and conducted concerts for St. John Paul II, including the 1994 “Papal Concert to Commemorate the Holocaust” and the “Papal Concert of Reconciliation” in 2004.



PHOTOS: ADJACENT COURTESY OF GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY; BELOW COURTESY OF SIR GILBERT LEVINE

The friendship between Levine and St. John Paul II began in 1987, when Levine was conductor of the Krakow Philharmonic in Poland.



because “music has a history of bringing people of all faiths, all backgrounds, from all over the world together. It is indeed universal.” The power of music to unite “is needed now more than ever,” he continues, because “the virus of intolerance is epidemic. Recent tragic events have underscored, more than ever, the critical importance of the commitments to religious liberty and tolerance, religious diversity, and mutual respect.”


Tagliabue credits Levine for detecting “how Pope John Paul used music powerfully to unite faiths and bring people together. That power is reflected in this celebration. The themes of this celebration—religious tolerance, interreligious respect and dialogue, peace among people of all faiths—mirror the work that we engage in at Georgetown University.”

Sharon Percy Rockefeller, president and chief executive officer of WETA, was also involved in the creation of the program. She describes the performance as “a special concert celebrating religious diversity and interfaith under-

standing.” That celebration, she continues, honors “three towering spiritual leaders and their dedication to improving dialogue between people of all faiths.”

One of those three popes had a special influence on Levine—and on someone very close to him. “Pope John Paul transformed my life with the power of his heart,” the conductor explains. But the pope’s impact on Levine was greater than even that, the musician reveals, because John Paul reached out to one of his relatives.

“His belief in my art to help him fulfill his mission, his compassion, his wisdom, his caring for me and my family were inspirational,” Levine says. “I saw him literally lift the weight of grief and torment from my mother-in-law’s heart.

“She was a survivor of Auschwitz. John Paul made her see the power of life after the horrors she had seen during the Second World War. He touched our family’s lives in the way he touched the lives of men and women all over the world during his pontificate.” 

For information about a DVD, CD, book, and other ways to experience “A Celebration of Peace through Music,” visit www.concertforpeace.org.

James Breig is a freelance author from East Greenbush, New York. He has written articles for many Catholic publications, including this one, and is the author of *Searching for Sgt. Bailey: Saluting an Ordinary Soldier of World War II* (Park Chase Press, Baltimore).