

André Previn, versatile composer, conductor and pianist, dies at 89

Fred Mazelis
7 March 2019

André Previn, the conductor, pianist and composer known for his remarkable versatility and achievements in the fields of popular, jazz and classical music, from film to the concert hall, died last week in New York at the age of 89.

Previn, often compared to Leonard Bernstein, not only because of his wide-ranging interests but also his insistence on breaking down musical barriers and appealing to a broad musical public, was born Andréas Ludwig Priwin, into a musical family in Berlin in 1929. His father was a lawyer and also a music teacher.

The family left Germany in 1938, shortly before the Kristallnacht pogroms and the beginning of the war in Europe. The young Previn had already seen the face of Nazi anti-Semitism, of course. In 1938 he was kicked out of the Berlin Conservatory, where he had begun studies at the age of 6. The family settled briefly in Paris while awaiting visas for the United States.

Previn arrived in Los Angeles at the age of 10. His father's second cousin was Charles Previn, an American-born film composer who was the musical director at Universal Studios. After the war, while still a teenager, André was already working in Hollywood as an arranger.

Although more than a generation younger than other musicians who fled fascism, Previn was undoubtedly influenced even as a child by the Austro-German musical tradition. While his career took shape in the post-World War II period, he was in part the product of a musical culture that produced such figures as Kurt Weill, Erich Korngold, Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer.

Previn's long list of accomplishments, over a career that spanned more than seven decades, is nearly unprecedented in its range of musical genres and fields of endeavor. He took his cue from Bernstein, whose

work he warmly appreciated, and about whom he said, "Bernstein has made it possible not to specialize in one area of music. You no longer have to do just Broadway shows, or movies, or conduct—you can do any or all of them."

At various times Previn focused on work as an arranger, conductor and composer in film, a long and eminent career as a classical conductor and pianist, and a career as a composer, which continued up to his death. He was also active as a jazz pianist.

In Hollywood Previn won Academy Awards for his work as an arranger for the film scores of *Gigi* (1959), *Porgy and Bess* (1960), *Irma La Douce* (1964) and *My Fair Lady* (1965), while also composing 20 original film scores during the 1950s and 60s. He gradually became restless in his work for the movies, however, although he continued with it from time to time.

Previn's classical conducting career began in earnest with the Houston Symphony Orchestra, from 1967 to 1969. This was followed by more than a decade as the principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra (1968–79), overlapping in part with the Pittsburgh Symphony (1976–84), followed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1985–89), the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and many guest conducting appearances as well.

As a conductor, Previn was known especially for his accomplishments in the Russian repertoire, including the works of Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich. His recording of Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony in the 1970s was credited with bringing the work new attention and appreciation. He also highlighted Olivier Messiaen's unusual *Turangalila* Symphony, until then rarely performed, when he conducted it in Pittsburgh.

As a pianist, Previn worked with many esteemed

performers over the years, including a well-known performance of Beethoven's Triple Concerto with Mstislav Rostropovich and Yehudi Menuhin.

Previn also worked in jazz, although he characterized himself as a musician who played jazz, not as a jazz musician. He appeared with Doris Day and Ella Fitzgerald, and on television with jazz luminaries Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans. He was credited with a "feel" for the jazz idiom, and was praised by Dizzy Gillespie and others.

There were several forays into musical theater, including *Coco* (1969) in New York, *The Good Companions* (1974) in London, and *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977), a collaboration with playwright Tom Stoppard.

The list of Previn's classical compositions is a long one, comprising about two dozen orchestral works, more than twenty pieces of chamber music, some song cycles and other vocal works, and two operas that he completed in later years, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Brief Encounter*. Among his 14 concertos are three for violin, three for cello, three triple concertos and a piano concerto.

Among the composer's songs and song cycles are works set to texts of Toni Morrison, Emily Dickinson, Philip Larkin and William Carlos Williams. *Honey and Rue*, recorded by Kathleen Battle, became well-known in the early 1990s.

Previn was married five times, including to singer-songwriter Dory Previn and actress Mia Farrow. He is survived by nine children. His last wife was the famous German violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, to whom he was married from 2002–2006. His second violin concerto, published in 2001, was dedicated to her, and their close collaboration continued after their divorce in 2006. Between 2001 and 2015 Mutter premiered eight of Previn's compositions. The violinist issued a statement after Previn's death that included the following tribute:

"André Previn has for more than 70 years illuminated this often dark world with his extraordinary gifts, his superb intelligence and wit.

"We were companions in music for four decades and closest and dearest soulmates in the last 19 years. These years have brought me an abundance of deeply moving and challenging violin works. One of the first of them, the violin concerto, was an engagement present. I am forever grateful for all of his musical treasures.

"André will live on in the hearts of the millions of music lovers that his life and music has touched. His many scores will continue to enrich the life of musicians around the globe."

See also:

Previn, Concerto for violin and orchestra 'Anne-Sophie' (2001)

Previn, Honey and Rue, Kathleen Battle, Orchestra of St. Luke's (1995)

Shostakovich, Symphony No. 5, Previn conducting the London Symphony Orchestra (1966)



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact