

Conductor James Levine is dead at the age of 77

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James Levine, whose death at the age of 77 was announced on Wednesday, was one of the most influential figures in the classical music and opera world of the last half century. This towering figure leaves a legacy that will withstand the disgraceful #MeToo-style witch-hunt to which he was subjected, toward the end of his career, by the media and New York City's Metropolitan Opera management.

Levine was associated with the Met Opera for 47 years, and for 40 of those years he was its music director. He led the Met in a record-breaking 2,552 performances of 83 operas. Under his leadership, the company achieved a nearly unrivalled global reputation, and the Met Orchestra was transformed into one of the world's greatest orchestral ensembles.

Levine also led the Munich Philharmonic from 1999-2004 and the Boston Symphony from 2004-2011, and he was well known at some of the most famous European opera and concert stages, including in Berlin, Vienna, Bayreuth and Salzburg. None of this, however, interrupted his tenure at the Met. It was only increasing health problems, beginning about 15 years ago, that led to canceled dates and then to a two-year hiatus in work behind the podium, from 2011-2013.

The young conductor first arrived at the Met in 1971, just a few weeks before his 28th birthday, when he led a performance of Puccini's *Tosca*, with a cast including the noted African American soprano Grace Bumbry and legendary Italian tenor Franco Corelli. By 1973 he had already been appointed principal conductor at the Met. In 1976 he became music director, a position he held until accepting the post of music director emeritus in 2016. Between 1986 and 2004 he was also the opera company's artistic director.

James Levine was born in Cincinnati on June 23, 1943. His Jewish forebears came to America from Germany and Eastern Europe in the 19th century. The young boy showed precocious musical ability from an early age. He studied at the Marlboro School in Vermont under Rudolf Serkin, and also under the famous Rosina Lhévinne in New York. Graduating from New York's Juilliard School in 1964, he then served for a number of years under George Szell at the Cleveland Orchestra.

Levine's long tenure at the Met was without precedent in the field of major opera companies in recent decades. The Met under Levine became known for its extremely high musical and production standards, and for simultaneously passionate, fresh and natural performances that rarely disappointed audiences and critics alike.

Perhaps Levine himself put it best. While modestly not claiming sole credit for the opera company's accomplishments, he wrote in *Opera News* in 1990, "Those singers, conductors, directors who work in opera houses around the world concur about one thing—the work that is done at the Met is more consistently serious, thoughtful, comprehensive, imaginative, professional, stylish and exciting, with greater combined musical, dramatic and technical resources, than in any other international theater in the world."

At the same time, Levine's many appearances on public television brought him to a wider audience, even before the company began, more

than a decade ago, showing video performances of live opera from the Met to millions of viewers in movie houses around the world.

The repertoire under Levine began with the great operas of Mozart in the 1780s, then spanned the golden age of Italian, German and French opera in the 19th century, and encompassed work of the first half of the 20th century, including Janacek, Schoenberg, Berg and Stravinsky. Levine was a particular champion of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, the atonal work based on the unfinished play by Georg Büchner from almost a century earlier. He also led vital performances of other 20th century works, including George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and Bertolt Brecht-Kurt Weill's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.

There were also some productions of contemporary operas, from John Harbison, John Adams and others, but these were relatively few in number. While Levine himself was an advocate of contemporary composers, his tenure at the Met was marked above all by devotion to tradition. He eschewed the kind of "updating" of productions that characterized European "Regietheater." There was nothing fusty or old-fashioned about most productions at the Met, however, and Levine's work with singers and orchestra had much to do with this fact.

Of course, Levine did not conduct every performance, but he did take the lead on most new productions and major revivals. The Met's online archives show that he concentrated on Mozart, Verdi, Wagner and Richard Strauss, perhaps the four most prolific and towering figures in the history of opera. This writer recalls a performance of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* almost 20 years ago, which came as a revelation and quickly led to a belated appreciation of the German musical revolutionary.

It should be added that Levine did not ignore French opera. His many French opera performances included Gounod's *Faust*, *The Tales of Hoffmann* by Offenbach, and Berlioz's five-hour epic, *Les Troyens*, which made an enormous impression on this listener, with a cast that included Ben Heppner, Deborah Voigt and the incandescent work of the late Lorraine Hunt Lieberson.

The support Levine gave to singers at the Met, and the affection they showed him in return, was well known. As Tim Page put it in the *Washington Post* this week, "He guided revered performers such as Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, Jessye Norman, Cecilia Bartoli and Kiri Te Kanawa and earned a reputation as one of the most supportive conductors and accompanists in the field. 'I could go where they pay four or five times what I get at the Met,' Domingo once said. 'But the other places do not offer the opportunity to work with Jim.'"

Levine was known above all as a conductor who would never raise his voice and rarely criticize singers directly. Mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe, appearing on a "60 Minutes" segment devoted to Levine more than 20 years ago, stressed how he would find a way to encourage a singer without ignoring the need for improvement and new insight into the role.

Nor did Levine confine himself to working with stars. He established the Lindemann Young Artists Development Program at the Met in 1986, which has trained scores of young singers who have gone on to careers at

the Met and elsewhere.

A remarkable testament to the bond between Levine and the voices that graced the Met stage over decades was displayed at the 25th anniversary gala presented by the company in 1996 in Levine's honor. About 60 artists performed under his baton, in a marathon lasting eight hours, with intermissions. A partial list of the performers includes Roberto Alagna, Carlo Bergonzi, Bumbry, Domingo, Rosalind Elias, Renee Fleming, Angela Gheorghiu, Thomas Hampson, Alfredo Kraus, Karita Mattila, Aprile Mollo, Sherill Milnes, James Morris, Frederica von Stade, Anne Sofie von Otter, Bryn Terfel and Dawn Upshaw. This extraordinary concert is available on DVD as well as CD.

As already indicated, Levine's accomplishments were not confined to the opera stage. Under him the Met Orchestra was shaped into a world-class ensemble, one that scheduled three sold-out concerts annually at New York's Carnegie Hall beginning in the late 1980s. At the same time, he established the Met Chamber Ensemble, for regular chamber music programs, and he also accompanied soloists like Kathleen Battle, Upshaw, Christa Ludwig and Norman in song recitals that included Franz Schubert, Francis Poulenc and much else.

The Met Orchestra also appeared under Levine in the famous screen adaptation of Verdi's *La Traviata*, in 1983, and in 1998, as part of the series of popular concerts billed as The Three Tenors, he led the Orchestre de Paris, with Pavarotti, Domingo and José Carreras.

Levine's career accomplishments include eight Grammy Awards in the classical music category. In 2002 he was also a recipient of the Kennedy Center Honors, the annual awards given to five leading figures in the performing arts.

As noted above, Levine began experiencing serious health problems in his early 60s. A serious fall in 2006 led to surgery for a torn rotator cuff, hindering his conducting ability for a period of time. In 2008 he was treated successfully for kidney cancer, and this was followed by major back surgery. It was the back pain that led him to interrupt his career in 2011. He had also begun experiencing symptoms of Parkinson's Disease as early as the mid-1990s, although this was not acknowledged until more than two decades later.

Despite these health challenges, Levine refused to end his career. He returned to the Met in 2013 in a triumphant series of performances of Mozart's *Così fan Tutte*.

The conductor's decades-long career was abruptly halted in December 2017, when the Met, under general manager Peter Gelb, announced that he had been suspended pending an investigation of "sexual abuse" allegations that stemmed from decades earlier, which had just been plastered over the pages of the *New York Times*, as part of the #MeToo sexual misconduct witch-hunt being hysterically promoted by that "newspaper of record" of the US ruling class.

Levine defended himself with a statement that said, in part, that as "anyone who truly knows me will attest, I have not lived my life as an oppressor or an aggressor. I have devoted my energies to the development, growth, and nurturing of music and musicians all over the world particularly with the Metropolitan Opera where my work has been the lifeblood and passion of my artistic imagination." He attacked the Met for "neo-McCarthyite tactics."

As the WSWS pointed out at the time, the consensual sexual activities, from between 30 and 50 years earlier, involved no one below the age of consent, and Levine was not then or at any time charged with a crime. He was charged with "immoral" and not criminal behavior. Sexual "improprieties" were invoked as the reason for humiliating a man who had made historic and world-changing contributions to musical life at the Met and around the world.

As the WSWS explained, Levine came of age when homosexual activities were stigmatized if not illegal. The present-day attacks on Levine were in the tradition of the persecution of Oscar Wilde. One could

add that Leonard Bernstein, if he were still alive, would also undoubtedly attract the attention of the latter-day sexual witch-hunters.

In March 2018, the Met announced that it was firing the man who had made it what it is today. Levine answered this action immediately, with a lawsuit seeking \$5.8 million in damages for defamation of character. The Met countersued for roughly the same amount. The suit was settled nearly 18 months later, with the Met forced to pay Levine the significant sum of \$3.5 million in order to end its contractual obligations with him.

The settlement clearly reflected the fear on the part of management that it could not win its case in court. Levine had courageously refused to surrender, forthrightly denying the charges of alleged abuse, and indicating moreover that he would expose the hypocrisy of the Met's sudden discovery of "sexual misconduct" in its ranks.

Nevertheless, the #MeToo-style campaign had effectively ended the US career of the ailing conductor, just as similar attacks led a bit later to Domingo's blacklisting. Levine again refused to surrender, announcing that he had accepted offers to conduct in both Florence and Rome. These, however, were canceled by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to most of the obituaries in the mainstream press, James Levine died with a "tarnished" legacy. They all managed to call attention to the phony "morals charges" in the first paragraph of their reports. This only demonstrates the narrow, bigoted and backward character of the prevalent identity politics and the #MeToo witch-hunt that flows from it.

The Met's Gelb was forced to acknowledge Levine's enduring musical and intellectual significance in a statement he issued after the announcement of the conductor's passing. "No artist in the 137-year history of the Met had as profound an impact as James Levine," said Gelb. "He raised the Met's musical standards to new and greater heights during a tenure that spanned five decades."

Indeed, Levine's legacy is secure and profound. Long after #MeToo is recognized as a reactionary diversion, James Levine and his contributions will be remembered with respect.



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