

Michael Tilson Thomas, acclaimed American conductor, has died at the age of 81

Fred Mazelis
24 April 2026

The well-known American conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, long associated with the San Francisco Symphony, died on Wednesday at his home in that city.

MTT, as he was known almost universally to musicians and also to music lovers in the US and elsewhere, had led the San Francisco Symphony from 1995 to 2020, when he became music director laureate. It was the longest tenure of any conductor since the symphony's founding in 1911. Under Tilson Thomas, the SF Symphony had become one of the most prominent and critically praised orchestras in the US.

MTT announced in 2021 that he had been diagnosed with brain cancer, later identified as glioblastoma, a particularly aggressive form of the disease. He was nevertheless able to continue his work for a number of years, not only with his own San Francisco Symphony, but also with the London Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic and many other ensembles. In April 2025, almost exactly a year ago, he announced that a scheduled performance with the San Francisco Symphony would be his final one. He survived for almost five years before his death at the age of 81.

Tilson Thomas was known above all for his role in San Francisco, but his career had started almost 30 years earlier. Born in Los Angeles, he soon showed signs of musical precocity, and went on to study piano, composition and conducting at the University of Southern California. His conducting career in the 1970s and '80s took him to Boston, Buffalo, New York and Los Angeles. It was with the Boston Symphony that he first attracted international attention, when he took over for an ailing conductor in the middle of a concert that the orchestra was performing in New York.

That experience, when Tilson Thomas was only 24 years old, is reminiscent of the even more famous moment when Leonard Bernstein, then 25, took over

for Bruno Walter at the New York Philharmonic in 1943. Bernstein, one of the most famous musical personalities of the 20th century and a generation older than MTT, later became the most important mentor of his young colleague. Their collaboration lasted from the time they met in 1968, at Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony, until Bernstein's death 22 years later.

Tilson Thomas and Bernstein shared much more than the similar circumstances under which they first achieved prominence. MTT was often compared to Bernstein because of his ability to communicate with and attract a broad audience without oversimplifying the content and form of the music itself. This talent was manifested in Tilson Thomas's work on the Young People's Concerts with the New York Philharmonic. These had been pioneered by Bernstein in 1958, and helped to shape the musical taste and musical knowledge of a significant number of the young generation. Tilson Thomas continued these concerts in New York from 1971 to 1977. Like Bernstein's, they were broadcast on the CBS television network. It has been decades since any similar programs on the major broadcast networks—a sharp illustration of the decline of musical culture over the last 50 years.

In his later career, in San Francisco and elsewhere, MTT continued to focus attention on young people and younger listeners. In 1987, he founded the New World Symphony, a classical music academy that is also a performing ensemble for gifted musicians at the beginning of their careers. The New World Symphony moved into a new hall in Miami Beach, designed by architect Frank Gehry, in 2011.

Throughout his life, Tilson Thomas sought to use the medium of television to reach a broader audience. He inaugurated the "Keeping Score" series of programs on

public television in the US about 20 years ago, introducing the music of such figures as Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Gustav Mahler, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Copland and Charles Ives. These programs, nine in all, highlighted some of Tilson Thomas's interests: his devotion to the great classics like the work of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky; his enthusiasm for work of the late 19th and the 20th century, including Mahler, Stravinsky and Shostakovich; and his advocacy for American composers like Aaron Copland and Charles Ives. These treasures of education and of musical performance can be viewed today on YouTube.

Another American composer with whom Tilson Thomas was closely identified was George Gershwin, the composer of such classics as *Rhapsody in Blue*, *An American in Paris*, the *Piano Concerto in F*, the *Cuban Overture* and *Porgy and Bess*. MTT's recordings of *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris* were among his best. "Gershwin Live!," an award-winning performance with Sarah Vaughan and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, included some of Gershwin's most famous songs.

Tilson Thomas also shared with Leonard Bernstein a particular enthusiasm for the work of Gustav Mahler. It was Bernstein who, in the middle of the 20th century, did much to popularize the work of the Viennese master who had died at the young age of 50 in 1911, and whose work was not yet widely programmed. Mahler composed nine symphonies, plus an uncompleted 10th, between 1888 and his death. Every single one of his symphonies is performed frequently today. Both Bernstein and Tilson Thomas recorded the complete Mahler cycle, Bernstein more than once.

It should be noted as well that Tilson Thomas was also an active composer. The titles of some of his compositions—*From the Diary of Anne Frank* (1990); *Shôwa/Shoáh* (1995), composed to mark the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima; and *Whitman Songs* (1999)—indicate an interest in social issues and history that he shared with Bernstein.

In Tilson Thomas's programming, both in San Francisco and elsewhere, he was able to combine the standard repertory with new music in a fresh and lively way. He worked closely with contemporary composers, including John Adams, Steve Reich, Meredith Monk and others.

Tilson Thomas was the grandson of Boris and Bessie Thomashevsky, famous for their pioneering work on the Yiddish theater, centered in New York City during the decades of the peak immigration of East European Jews to the United States. Boris Thomashevsky was among those who inaugurated the Yiddish theater in 1882, when he was still a teenager. He was later involved in Yiddish-language adaptations of an amazingly wide variety of classics, including Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Wagner's *Parsifal*.

Tilson Thomas probably inherited a predisposition for music and performance from his grandparents, and his family upbringing (his father was a Broadway stage manager) undoubtedly played a part in his later career. He created the Thomashevsky Project as a way of preserving materials from the Yiddish theater. In 2005 he conducted a program at Carnegie Hall entitled *The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater*, intended both as a tribute to his own grandparents and also to the Yiddish theater as a whole. In 2011, Tilson Thomas presented this concert stage show on public television.

Tilson Thomas's partner of some 50 years, Joshua Robison, to whom he was married in 2014, died in February of this year.



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