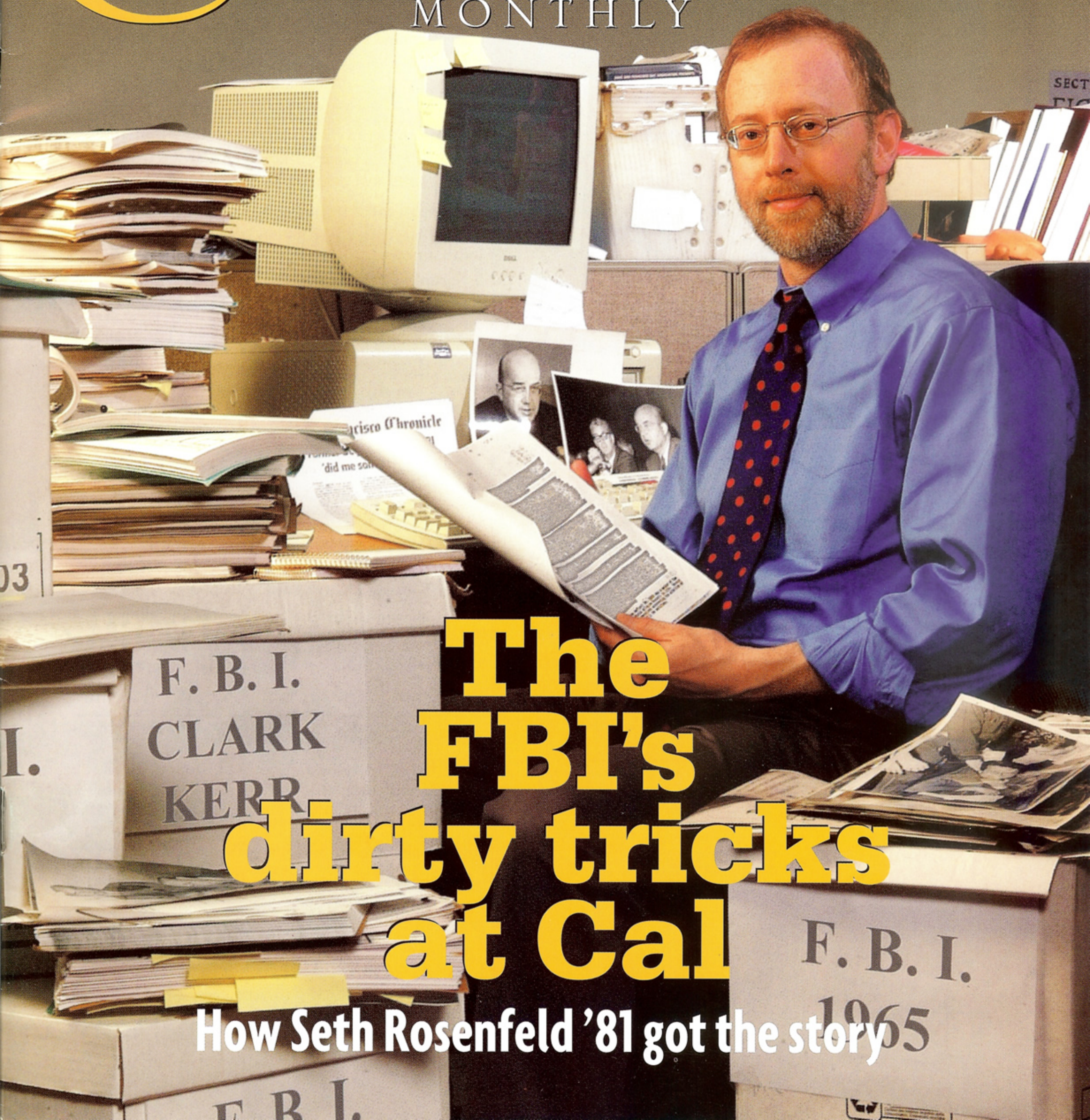


A Stoic's guide to life | Fighting sweatshops | The music man

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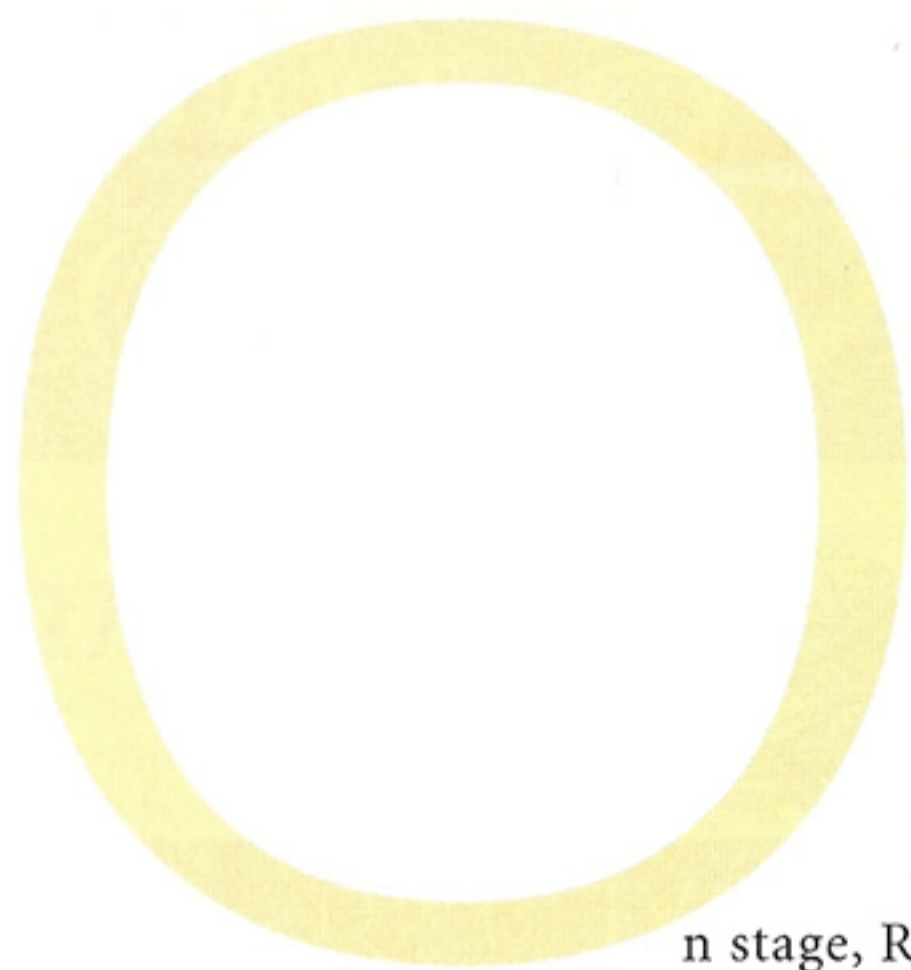
CALIFORNIA

MONTHLY



The FBI's dirty tricks at Cal

How Seth Rosenfeld '81 got the story



Getting honey from the B's

By Fred Setterberg

On stage, Robert Greenberg rocks the violin out of his arms' cradle, pinches the neck, and dangles it face-forward toward the audience. He spends a few fast-paced minutes reviewing the form and function of the soundboard, ribs, pegbox, fingerboard, bridge, and the odd squiggle of f-holes. He explains how—by drawing a bow of stretched horse-hair along strings of gut wound with steel or aluminum (or silver or perlon)—the wooden components will respond in concert to produce sound.

With theatrical flair, he shakes his head and sniffs the air with faint disgust. "My friends," he says, his basic black shirt rolled up to reveal a pair of meaty forearms more suggestive of a collegiate wrestler than college professor, "there we have reductionism at its most nauseating: The violin as a piece of extraordinary technology."

Instantly, a cassette player comes on. San Francisco's Herbst Theatre is flooded with the strains of Tchaikovsky's "Violin Concerto in D Major," one of the most rapturous pieces ever written for the violin. We listen with patience, recognition, curiosity; and certainly, as intended, with pleasure approaching revelation.

But not reverence. Reverence is never the point of a Greenberg lecture. "So much," he says, prowling across the stage to surrender the violin to its safe haven, "for reductionism."

Greenberg's presentation, "The Virtuoso Violin," is the latest in the expanding repertoire of lectures that he has been delivering in concert halls, living rooms, universities, and board rooms over the past 22 years, all with the avowed intention of drawing new audiences to the visceral thrill of classical music.

"I hate that term," Greenberg fumes later. "Classical music, with all its associations of exclusion, Euro-arrogance, and intellectual conceit. Who do you think Brahms was? He grew up playing in the whorehouses of Hamburg. His mother was 17 years old, his father was barely literate and had no teeth. Dvorak was apprenticed to a butcher. The great composers were all middle-class artisans who lifted themselves up by their bootstraps. They *gigged*. And I think that's *great!*"

I first encountered Robert Greenberg on tape, courtesy of the Teaching Company, which enlists professors to commit their lectures to audio and video recordings. Slowly working my way through the Berkeley Public Library's copy of Greenberg's first



series—a 48-lecture, 36-hour explication of "How to Listen to and Understand Great Music" (which he has followed with lectures on the history of opera, Bach and the high baroque, and the lives and masterworks of more than a half-dozen other composers)—I unexpectedly found myself drawn to an art form whose attractions previously had been lost on my uninformed ears.

Indeed, for most of my life, I have scarcely cared a note for—well, what shall we call it?

Concert music rooted in the European tradition.... A marginalized form of musical entertainment that accounts for a scant 3 percent of all recordings purchased annually.... The official route to high culture too often mapped out in eye-glazing courses of "music appreciation"—a term, says Greenberg, "that carries with it nasty visions of pedantic matrons force-feeding opera to 12-year-olds."

Why now did I suddenly find myself searching out every opportunity to listen and learn? "What can I say?" asks Greenberg, as we spend an evening talking in his Orinda home about the miseries of what often passes for music education and the undiminished glories of music. "It's simply the work of the best dead white European males that ever lived, starting with the Killer B's—Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Now I'm not a terribly spiritual person," he goes on, "but I do believe in *Homo sapiens*'s ability to translate our experience into a crystalline

The music man



mode, whether painting or literature or music. Learning about an art form is our opportunity to transcend the boundaries of time and converse with other ages—an amazing thing, quite holy and quite magnificent.”

Robert Greenberg's background suggests that he is ideally suited to lead avid, if untutored, listeners like myself into the realm of music's deeper pleasures. He earned his B.A. at Princeton, then his M.A. in 1981 and his Ph.D. in music composition at Cal in 1984; and he spent two decades as a professor of music history at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Greenberg is also a distinguished composer, with over 40 works for instrumental and vocal ensembles to his credit. His “gift,” noted *San Francisco Chronicle* music critic Joshua Kosman, M.A. '85, in a review of a Greenberg string quartet, “is to write music that appeals to an audience without condescension; his themes are at once unusual enough to be interesting and accessible enough to be recognized when they return.”

Yet all that's mere résumé. What strikes me most forcefully, in person or on tape, is Greenberg's passion. It's present in the way his voice throttles the raspy tail of key pronouncements, in the small explosives of startled enthusiasm as he pounces upon some illuminating point. Indeed, at each of his four public lectures I attended during the past year, he launched into an insistent apology that three hours on a weekday evening, after work,

is absurdly insufficient to broach the marvels of Schumann, or Shostakovich, or the long career of the violin.

Robert Greenberg began his lecturing career in 1980 at the Magnes Museum in Berkeley as a last-minute stand-in for Cal composer and composition professor Olly Wilson. The evening's subject: the life and works of George Gershwin. It proved to be an ideal fit.

“I grew up with the pop songs of the twenties and thirties,” recalls Greenberg, who also learned the classical repertoire at the hand of his pianist father. “It was perhaps the first great flowering of American culture. At the center was Gershwin, this wonderful mix of Jewish ethnic and cantorial music, and one of the very few white composers to understand the rhythmic essence of African-American music.”

The lecture proved a huge, if somewhat startling, success. “People were falling all over themselves, and I thought: ‘What did I do?’ I didn't even have a piano at my disposal. I had to play all the music on cassette. But audience members came up and asked, ‘Where are you teaching?’ I was 26 years old, a graduate student at Berkeley. I wasn't teaching anywhere.”

Over time, Greenberg could be found lecturing everywhere. He led evening courses for UC Extension on Beethoven and Mahler, and when one of his students suggested he undertake a private course in her San Francisco home, he leapt at the opportunity. For 15 years, Greenberg complemented his public lectures with private classes, accumulating a following throughout the Bay Area. Introductions by Earl Cheit, dean emeritus of the Haas School of Business and an enthusiastic student of Greenberg's, also led to an unexpected corporate clientele. Greenberg has alternated lectures for San Francisco Performances on romanticism, Russian music, and Bach's “Goldberg Variations” with presentations to the Haas School of Business executive program on “Music as a Mirror” of cultural, social, and economic change.

This past November, Greenberg presented a lecture on “Blues, Jazz, and Rock & Roll” for a batch of students visiting Cal from Switzerland. The evening proved classic Greenberg: the cyclonic energy at the podium; the lecturer whipping together the rhythms of West African drumming and the plaintive voicings of African-American spirituals (with the Swiss students pounding on their desktops and calling out a highly inflected approximation of the blues); and, as a denouement, the conflation of Robert Johnson, John Philip Sousa, Charlie Parker, and Carole King as an example of cultures reshaping themselves through mutual influence, a kind of musical globalism.

Most of all, the presentation emphasized Greenberg's perennial faith that the fluent, frequent, and joyous exploration of great music of all varieties can add immensely to the lives of every one of us. A little learning complemented by lots of listening, says Greenberg, is all we need.

Fred Setterberg '75 is the author of The Roads Taken: Travels Through America's Literary Landscapes (1995).