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Facing the Music

ORINDA'S BOB GREENBERG BRINGS DEAD COMPOSERS TO LIFE

ON A WINTRY TUESDAY NIGHT in San Francisco, deep in the bowels of Davies Symphony Hall, Robert Greenberg is lecturing on Mozart. Briefcases, half-full containers of takeout food, and newspapers still bagged in plastic clutter the floor beneath 300-plus audience members, creating the impression that many attendees rushed here straight from work. By nine o'clock, Greenberg is just two-thirds of the way through the three-hour lecture. The room is warm and stuffy. The sound system occasionally crackles and fades. But the sold-out audience, despite the conditions, is riveted. A few are even perched, quite literally, on the edges of their seats.

What keeps these work-weary music lovers rapt is Orinda resident Bob Greenberg's hyperkinetic performance—a lecturing style that mixes impeccable scholarship with equal parts of theatricality, irreverence, humor, and unbridled enthusiasm—all delivered with the eye-opening clarity of a precision-cut diamond. There's a palpable sense that, at any moment, this 47-year-old dynamo of music composition will open another door to what was previously only a dimly imagined world.

A professor at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Greenberg recently changed his teaching emphasis so he could devote more time to lecturing for local music institutions and private companies. This night, the spectacled figure is dressed in black jeans and a black T-shirt, perfectly offset by a thick, black mustache. He prowls the front of the room expounding ebulliently on Mozart's staggering drive. "Typically," he marvels, "Mozart got about five or six hours of sleep a night. At times, he was so preoccupied with writing that he did not dress. Or ... " Greenberg suddenly gasps in mock horror—"have time to have his hair done!" As the audience titters appreciatively, Greenberg's voice grows quietly intense, as though he's channeling Mozart's own barely contained depth of feeling. "He wrote on one occasion, 'Every minute is precious! I have so much to do that often I do not know whether I'm on my head or on my heels. I have so much to compose and not a minute must be lost!'"

Having effectively set the scene, Greenberg launches into a precise, point-by-point exploration of Mozart's piano concertos by playing recordings of key pieces over the sound system. As the music fills the hall, Greenberg's

By Darcy Brown-Martin



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listeners nod, make notes on their handouts, and tilt their faces as though to catch a few more soaring notes.

Part of what makes Greenberg a great lecturer is his innate understanding of the underpinnings of music: in addition to being a lecturer, he is a composer with a Ph.D. in composition from UC Berkeley. Growing up in Willingboro, New Jersey in the early '60s, he says, "There was always music in our house. My grandmother [who had a degree in piano from what is now the Juilliard School] gave me informal lessons starting when I was about five. And she wrote down the little tunes I started making up for myself around age four." These days, such highly regarded groups as the Library of Congress's Koussevitsky Foundation and the Alexander String Quartet commission Greenberg's works. This month, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players will perform the world premiere of Greenberg's latest composition, *Funny Like a Monkey* (the title comes from Greenberg's 15-year-old daughter's "exuberant vocabulary, most of which is dripping with sarcasm," he says).

Every Greenberg lecture—whether it is concerned with the evolution of opera in the 17th century or the impact of Mahler's family life on his late symphonies—is a blend of detailed scholarly analysis wrapped in a highly digestible package of down-to-earth human detail. And each one- to three-hour lecture explores the social and political milieu in which a particular composer lived, or from which a type of music arose. "I try to humanize—not lower, but humanize—these [composers] so that we can identify with the time and place in which they existed and can then view their music in context," Greenberg says. "If you have the right context, you can view the music as contemporary." This makes it considerably easier for his students to understand and appreciate.

Tom Rollins will happily testify to the epiphanic powers of a Greenberg lecture. Rollins, the founder and president of the Teaching Company, a 12-year-old, Virginia-based institute that creates audio- and videotapes of lectures by some of this country's greatest university professors, is an unabashed Greenberg fan (which is hardly surprising, considering that Greenberg has taped more than 300 lectures for the company and is its star attraction). "I had listened to classical music all my life and understood it



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not at all," Rollins says. "There's a language in music; there are things being said. And I couldn't hear them all those years. Bob set me free. Through his skill in deconstructing music, he gives you a new sense. And that's not hyperbolic: I really mean that Bob allows you to hear in a new way."

Barry Gardiner, a surgeon at San Ramon Medical Center and a lifelong amateur pianist, heard about Greenberg 10 years ago from a colleague who told him about "this wonderfully entertaining and intelligent lecturer from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music who teaches music appreciation for adults." Gardiner subsequently attended a Saturday morning Greenberg lecture on Gershwin and got hooked. Since then he has taken every course Greenberg has to offer. In 1995, he commissioned Greenberg to write a major composition (a string quartet entitled *Among Friends*, which features a character portrait of Gardiner played by the cello).

But even more important to Greenberg's effectiveness as a lecturer is his singular ability to impart much of his own intrinsic understanding of music to novices and aficionados alike. Says Elisabeth Challenger, executive director of Montalvo, the Saratoga-based arts center, "I have a degree in music, and I love it, but I had never really liked string quartets. They just didn't speak to me. But after I heard 'The Fab Four,' Bob's lecture on the quartet, it became music that told a story and was full of emotion. My husband and I rushed out and bought so much new music ... it was like a new world." Hear, hear. ■

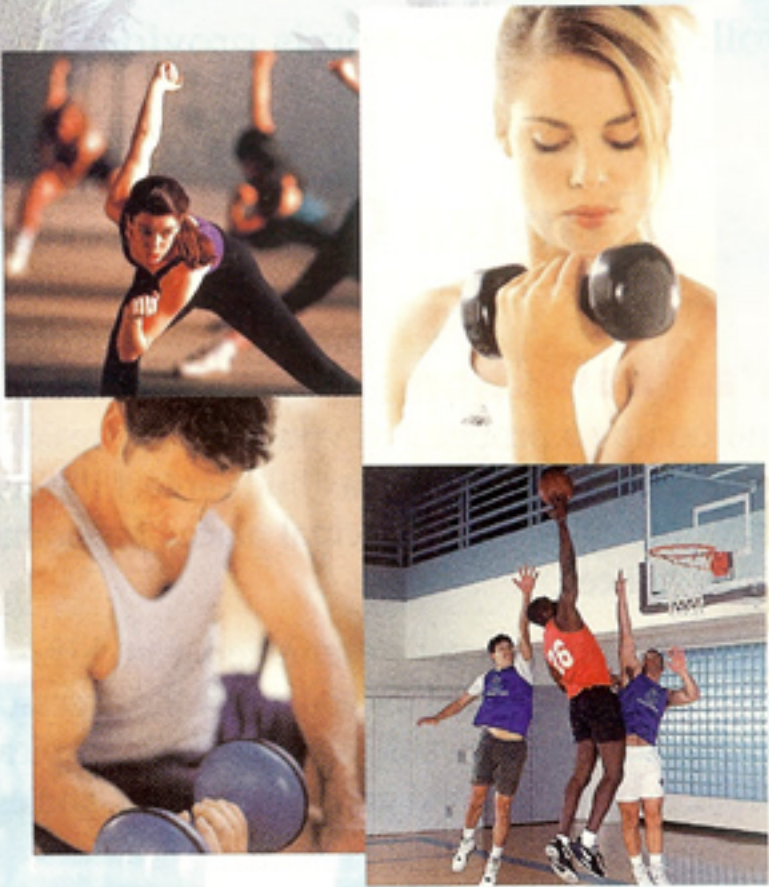
LISTEN AND LEARN

The San Francisco Contemporary Music Players will perform the world premiere of Greenberg's latest work, *Funny Like a Monkey*, on Monday, February 12 at 8 p.m. at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. \$18 general, \$14 seniors, \$7 students.

Greenberg's video- and audiotapes are available at most public libraries and through the Teaching Company. For information visit the company's Web site at www.teachco.com.

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