

San Jose Mercury News

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today

Music



Robert Greenberg

Encore

Lecturer brings
classical
composers to life

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Monday is the final day to
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Book Club title "Who's Irish," by
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SUNDAY

Arts & Entertainment

A most noteworthy lecturer

PROFESSOR'S PRE-CONCERT TALKS ENLIVEN DEAD EUROPEANS

By Anita Amirrezvani
Mercury News

There is never enough time for Robert Greenberg to tell you everything. The clock is already eating away at the three hours budgeted for all the juicy stories, quotes and jokes he has prepared during the past three weeks. But Greenberg really wants, no, he really *needs*, six hours. He has come armed with 126 pages of notes — reluctantly cut to 84 and chopped once again to 74 — “and still I realized that I have way too much material for tonight!” he exults.

The source of Greenberg's passion is classical music, and his subject on this particular night at San Francisco's Davies Symphony Hall is the 19th-century Austrian composer Gustav Mahler. But this isn't going to be another dry lecture about a long-dead composer. Mahler is a “young punk” with relatives like “the Addams Family” who managed to compose music “with a concentration factor like used-up uranium,” Greenberg says. “He suffered mightily, as he never tired of telling us” — but that suffering resulted in some of the most stirring music around. In fact, “if you can't let it go for Mahler...” Greenberg insists, in a mini-crescendo of excitement, “you've died — give your ticket to someone who can!”

Greenberg, a professor at the



NHAT V. MEYER — MERCURY NEWS

Patrons pay \$25 to hear Robert Greenberg talk for three hours about classical music, and then they pay to hear more on his many tapes for sale.

San Francisco Conservatory of Music, is one of the hottest names on the classical music lecture circuit. In the next few months, he will be giving three-hour talks at Villa Montalvo in Saratoga, at Davies Symphony Hall and at the War Memorial Veterans Building in San Francisco, as well as providing lectures for business clients like Strategos in Menlo Park.

Not only does he regularly draw a capacity crowd of 220 to the San Francisco Symphony's “Discovery” series, but also his San Francisco Performances Saturday morning lectures with the Alexander String Quartet this year sold out eight months in advance.

Greenberg's success comes at a time when arts organizations concerned over the “graying” of their audiences are striving to make classical music more accessible. Although virtually all orchestras offer free pre-concert lectures, patrons seem to view Greenberg's lectures as rewarding performances in their own right, shelling out \$25 and blocking off three hours of extra time to hear him.

The reason, according to fans, is his ability to mix encyclopedic knowledge with enthusiasm.

“What really sets him apart is that his passion for the art form is communicated in every word and gesture, and it's infectious,” says Ronald Gallman, director of education for the San Francisco Symphony.

At Greenberg's Orinda home, which is perched like a bird's nest in the trees, there are a piano, five wild-man busts of Beethoven and dozens of vintage cocktail shakers. When asked to explain his gift of gab, he refers to his childhood. “Where I grew up in southern New Jersey, you had three choices in order to survive. You could run really fast, you could punch really hard or you could talk. I was always one of them *tawkers*.”

Greenberg, 46, begins to ad-lib in a high-pitched, nasal New Jersey accent, and it's easy to imagine him as a smart, short, bespectacled kid who had to use his mouth to avoid getting beaten to a pulp. “Hey, you don't wanna hit me! If you hit me, you're going to hurt your hand, and my friend Eddie, who is 6-foot-2, is gonna wanna hit you, and did you hear the one about the rabbi?”

Like most of us, Greenberg started his career wishing he could do something else. He was

GREENBERG ON TAPE

“The Symphonies of Beethoven”: 32 lectures. On tape, \$249.95; on video, \$399.95.

“How to Listen to and Understand Great Music”: 48 lectures. On tape, \$149.95. On video, \$199.95.

“How to Listen to and Understand Opera”: 32 lectures. On tape, \$249.95. On video, \$399.95.

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More information: The Teaching Company at (800) 832-2412 or www.teachco.com.

Classical music



still getting his Ph.D. in music composition at the University of California-Berkeley when he realized that he could compose music forever without being able to eat. That's why, at the precocious age of 26, Greenberg began his Living Room lectures on classical music. These classes, which met for eight to 12 weeks in a host's living room, attracted a wide range of people and began to sell out by word of mouth.

After a 1992 Wall Street Journal article took notice of the Living Room talks, Greenberg's career took off. He was invited to create a series of "Superstar" lectures for the Teaching Company, a Springfield, Va., firm that produces courses on audio and videotape. Greenberg is probably known to most of his fans for his lengthy taped classes on the history of classical music, opera and Beethoven's symphonies.

Although he won't reveal how many tapes he's sold, it's clear they have done extremely well. Full-page ads in the New York Times Book Review plug them as if they were commodities like stereo systems or vacuum cleaners. Libraries have been one of his biggest customers, and if Greenberg's tapes at the Berkeley Public Library are any indication, they rarely sit on the shelves for very long.

The tapes tend to get people hooked when they least expect it. Last year, Villa Montalvo executive director Elisabeth Challener was searching for a lecturer for the Villa's expanding classical music lineup when she thought she'd try just one of Greenberg's tapes. She ended up listening to all 48 tapes in "How to Listen to and Understand Great Music," which clinched her decision to hire him. "I really defy anyone, no matter what their background in classical music, not to be entertained and educated in a lecture by Robert Greenberg," Challener says.

Greenberg defies the image of classical music as elitist. He doesn't hesitate to throw in refer-

ences to popular culture, such as comparing Beethoven's quartets to baseball or string quartets to the Beatles. Acknowledging that movies, sports and the Internet are competing for people's time, Greenberg asks rhetorically: "Why should I go to a concert and listen to music played by four stuffy people in tuxedos — dead Germanic Euro-males — who worked and lived in a phallocentric imperialistic culture? Well, it's not a bad question!"

It's Greenberg's special gift to be able to bring the past to life. "People are people, music is music and it's all relevant to all people, provided we have a doorway to walk into it," he says. "And that's what I can do — I can open the door so that we're hearing and thinking in the head of someone at that particular period and we get access to the relevance of the music."

Some patrons have taken Greenberg to task for poking fun at musical geniuses, arguing that he's being irreverent. "People think it's all so serious — it's not!" he insists. "Any product of a creative human mind is going to run the gamut of emotions, and what I simply do a lot of times is point that out."

Challener says it's just a matter of audience expectations. "It shouldn't be, but it is still kind of unusual to mix entertainment with classical music," she points out.

Greenberg is also a composer, though he admits to being too busy with lecturing to write more than

GREENBERG IN PERSON

Here's a calendar of Robert Greenberg's upcoming lectures. Each lecture last three hours.

San Francisco

Performances: "20th Century Music: You Need No Longer Be Afraid," 7 p.m. Oct. 23; "The Romantic Piano" 7 p.m. Jan. 31. Green Room, War Memorial Veterans Building, 401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. \$25 for one, \$40 for both. (415) 398-6449.

Villa Montalvo, Saratoga:

"The Romantic Piano," 2 p.m. Feb. 4; "Bach Transcendent," 2 p.m. March 25; "Will the Real Mozart Please Stand Up?" 7 p.m. July 31; "Oldies But Goodies" on medieval and Renaissance music, 2 p.m. Oct. 14, 2001. Carriage House Theater, Villa Montalvo, 15400 Montalvo Road, Saratoga. \$30 per lecture. (408) 961-5858.

San Francisco Symphony:

"The Life and Music of Beethoven," Nov. 14; "The Life and Music of Schumann," March 20; "The Life and Music of Shostakovich," May 1. All lectures take place 7 p.m. at Zellerbach C Rehearsal Hall, Davies Symphony Hall. Admission is \$25. (415) 864-6000.

one piece per year. One of his piano pieces, "Dude Tudes" drew inspiration from his toddler's movements (his children are now 10 and 14). The New York Times music critic Bernard Holland described his "Iron Balconies and Lilies," which set turn-of-the-century Yiddish poems to music, as "vivid, passionate and energetic, almost to a fault ... Mr. Greenberg's emotional responses seem irrepressible."

But it may be just that sense of unrestrained excitement that makes Greenberg such a winning lecturer. "If something turns me on, I want it to turn on my listener," he says. "I want them to say, 'Damn, let's go to Tower Records right now!'"

Some are doing more than that. Not long ago, Greenberg was scheduled to give a talk related to a concert by the world-renowned violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter. A patron called San Francisco Performances president Ruth Felt and asked

her to describe Mutter's work.

"I told her she was one of the greatest violinists of our times," says Felt. "The person said, 'I've never heard of her, but if Bob Greenberg is involved, I'm coming.'"

There's nothing like a great entertainer to get the audiences in the door.

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