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MUSIC REVIEW

## Jeffrey Kahane's Curtain Call

Appraising the legacy of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra's music director as his tenure draws to a close.



Conductor Jeffrey Kahane leading the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra in 2014 PHOTO: BRIAN VAN DER BRUG/LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

By David Mermelstein

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*Jeffrey Kahane's performances with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the Alex Theatre in Glendale and at UCLA's Royce Hall on April 22 and 23 may well be regarded as capstones to his 20-year tenure as the group's music director. After all, this mighty work is both a test of musical prowess and a grand humanitarian statement, two things widely associated with Mr. Kahane's vibrant term, which ends in June. But a series of concerts in January under the banner "Lift Every Voice" was in many ways closer to this conductor's heart and even more emblematic of his achievements here in the city of his birth.*

**"Lift Every Voice" attempted to link the musical legacy of Kurt Weill, a victim of Nazi tyranny and a welcome and fecund immigrant to the U.S., with the moral authority of Rabbi Joachim Prinz, another German-Jewish transplant, though one far less famous than the composer of "The Threepenny Opera" and "Lady in the Dark." The experiment achieved only mixed success melding concept and content. But in its varied aspects—an orchestral concert featuring the violinist Daniel Hope performing a suite of Weill hits and a recent concerto by Bruce Adolphe ; a chamber program as engaging for Mr. Kahane's learned remarks as for the compellingly played and sung snippets from Weill's scores; and a rare fully staged**

**production of the 1949 anti-apartheid musical “Lost in the Stars”—it offered a microcosm of Mr. Kahane’s achievements with LACO (the acronym preferred by the chamber orchestra) over two decades.**

Mr. Kahane, age 60, was an unconventional choice for the orchestra when he assumed the job. He was then, and arguably remains, far better known as a pianist, equally comfortable performing chamber music (he has long been a favorite partner of the cellist Yo-Yo Ma) or serving as an orchestral soloist (he gave the premiere of Andrew Norman’s piano concerto “Split,” with the New York Philharmonic in 2015, and his performances of Mozart’s concertos, conducted from keyboard, have been huge draws for LACO). Yet LACO, which since its inception in 1968 has afforded the area’s many gifted studio musicians an opportunity to play the classics, was in a mood to take chances. Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say that the orchestra had nothing to lose. Its previous music director inspired neither the players nor audiences, and the organization had come close to bankruptcy.

Ruth Eliel, LACO’s executive director from 1997 through 2006 and currently a board member, is widely credited with reviving the organization’s fortunes. She and Mr. Kahane, who assumed their LACO jobs at roughly the same time, formed an unusually close partnership, and the consensus is that together they brought the orchestra, currently 40 tenured players, to its present place of security and esteem.

Many things contributed to that success, but one factor with wide impact has been Mr. Kahane’s approach to music making. By all accounts, he is a collaborative musician in the broadest sense. That’s not to say that he is uncertain of his views or lax in seeing them fulfilled in performance. Quite the opposite, in fact; Mr. Kahane is a man and a musician of firm opinions, his intellect frequently cited among his sterling attributes. But perhaps because he began his career off the podium, he is more open to the ideas of fellow musicians. When discussing Mr. Kahane’s tenure and impact, several LACO players mentioned a democratic spirit pervading rehearsals.

**In addition to LACO’s eight subscription programs each season, members of the orchestra participate in two smaller ventures that began about 10 years ago: Westside Connections, an interdisciplinary chamber-music series spearheaded by LACO’s concertmaster, Margaret Batjer (Mr. Kahane’s first hire, 19 years ago), and Baroque Conversations, which focuses on pre-Classical repertory and gives LACO a foothold downtown with performances at the Colburn School, cater-cornered from Walt Disney Concert Hall, home to the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the region’s orchestral behemoth.**

But of all Mr. Kahane’s advances, improvements and innovations at LACO, the one with the most far-reaching consequences for the organization—and the one he occasionally betrays he is most proud of—is the orchestra’s connection to new music, a hard-fought alteration to the group’s mission that continues to disgruntle at least some older subscribers. To help generate enthusiasm for this course, Mr. Kahane again employed collaboration, in 2001 creating the Sound Investment program, in which donors get glimpses into the process of creating the works they fund.

“I made the case to the board that the survival of the great canonical repertoire is contingent on the health of new music,” Mr. Kahane told me recently, “because music is either a living art form or a dead one, and I don’t want to be part of a dead art form.”

He also enhanced the position of composer-in-residence. Five have held the job since he started, most recently the precocious Mr. Norman, winner of this year’s Grawemeyer Award, who will remain with LACO until Mr. Kahane’s replacement is selected. Which brings us to a delicate subject, the orchestra’s future.

Both players and administrators feel conflicted about Mr. Kahane’s entirely amicable departure, which was announced three years ago. Everyone seems to lament his going even as they welcome the prospect of new blood, though no successor is expected to be announced before next season at the earliest. Ask those most concerned if they fear for the organization’s future, and the majority offer a variation on the theme of “no man is indispensable.” Yet in unguarded moments, the scope of the challenge emerges.

“It makes a huge difference who’s at the artistic helm,” one player acknowledged privately. “At the end of the day, that’s who we are. It’s the music director’s vision that most shapes the cumulative artistic vision of the orchestra, and a bad fit would set us back.”

There’s no reason to assume a bad choice will be made, though at least one high-profile candidate has deflected LACO’s overtures. Certainly the position is all the more attractive thanks to Mr. Kahane’s efforts. So he deserves that highest of compliments: He has left the place far better than he found it.

—*Mr. Mermelstein writes for the Journal on classical music and film.*