

Interview with New Britain Symphony Conductor Maurice Peress

By Stephen Hard, GNBA Executive Director

Jesse Levine was a very close friend and colleague of yours. Most of us know that he wanted you to take his place after his death, but tell us why his proposal interested you, other than the obviously compelling nature of a request from a dying friend?

I very much enjoyed the band during our concerts together last season. I personally like and have confidence in our new President Barbara Kirejczyk and our Executive Director Christine Doty.

To watch you in action before an orchestra is to know how passionate you are about conducting, but what is your non-conducting musical background? What instruments do you or have you played?

I was a professional trumpeter. I freelanced with the NY Shakespeare Festival, on Broadway, for recordings and in films. For example, I played trumpet for Elia Kazan's "Splendour in the Grass." I did many orchestrations for Ellington and Bernstein. These days I play fair jazz piano—the American Songbook.

We all know that you're from the Big Apple. Tell us where else you have worked as a musician.

I have been Guest Conductor for the San Francisco, Washington and Vienna State Opera companies, and major orchestras including Chicago and Cleveland. I've conducted concerts in Rome, Prague, Beijing and Shanghai, London (with Jessye Norman), and Summer Festivals in Chatauqua, Ravinia, and Carvalho (Brazil). I was the conductor for the premier of Bernstein's Mass which he wrote for the opening of the Kennedy Center. I have had three Music Directorships over twenty years, two in Texas—Austin and Corpus Christi—and with the Kansas City Philharmonic. I was Principal Guest Conductor with the Shanghai Radio Orchestra.

Word of your association with Leonard Bernstein has gotten around. Other than Jesse and Mr. Bernstein, who inspires you and in what ways?

Brendel's Viennese classic style has influenced my personal musical style. Szeryng's noble phrasing and Malcolm Frager's clarity and passion are a constant inspiration. Duke Ellington has taught me the role of human interaction in music. I strive to emulate John Lewis of the MJQ's intellectual curiosity. My Father was my primary musical inspiration, while working with my Shrink was a finishing school in life and living.

What do you think are the most important qualities of a good conductor?

Inborn leadership ability has to be first, then a mature grasp of temporal elements. Attention to detail, coupled with the long view are also extremely important. Designing programs of excellence and inspiring the audience and the band are also high on the list.

Considering the difficult financial climate for symphony orchestras and the changed demographic realities of the 21st Century, how does it make sense for New Britain to have a symphony orchestra when Hartford, Waterbury, Farmington, and scores of other communities in Connecticut all also have orchestras?

Why not one mayor? One police force? One college, one football team, one central library? Communities have civic pride. Experience has shown us that people lose interest in a generic orchestra with an amorphous allegiance. People like to support their own brand name. Seriously, every orchestra reflects the taste and dedication of their community and they serve its particular needs with concert programming and outreach. This coming season the NBSO will host the

unique Polonia-Paderewski Choir. We have engaged the Music Director and most of the production staff of the former Connecticut Opera Company to bring La Boheme to New Britain. We are hosting a glorious musical tribute to Jesse Levine, our former Music Director, that will feature seven(!) soloists from the faculties of the Yale and the Aaron Copland Schools of Music. We work with the music students of CCSU. It makes a great deal of "sense."

Is there anything else you would like to say to the arts community of greater New Britain?

I have been asked to answer the question "Wherefore live music in a cyber world?" Why fresh food rather than canned? Why gather for prayer? Why travel hundreds of miles to hold your grandchild? Why pick grapes in the wild, stand before the wonders of a sunset? Only before a live audience are the musicians in the New Britain Orchestra, myself included, most inspired; only before a live audience can our music attain transcendent heights. We invite all music lovers to join us, to become a part of that human equation between a live audience, a grand orchestra, and a great work of art, "…that sort of paradise-on-earth feeling of total absorption when time just falls away … a complete evaporation of self awareness." [Ian McEwen, novelist in an interview with the NYT 3/31/05]