

# ROB KAPILOW

## THE ART OF LISTENING

BY EVA CIABATTONI

Delightfully entertaining and profoundly insightful, conductor, composer, and NPR personality Rob Kapilow explores the world's best-loved compositions through a blend of musical demonstrations, commentary, and audience participation. His unique combination of entertainment and insights has both the uninitiated and the most seasoned of listeners hearing music in fresh and revealing ways.

As Rob Kapilow knows, listening to classical music can be daunting, not unlike going to a planetarium and staring at the confusing mass of stars dotting the ceiling. But once a guide has explained the myth of Orion and pointed out the stars that outline the giant hunter, his belt, and his sword, one never again fails to see Diana's ill-fated lover striding across the firmament on starry nights. Witnessing Rob Kapilow interpret a composition in one of his acclaimed *What Makes It Great?* programs can have the same transformative impact on the way an audience experiences a piece of music.

"What Rob does isn't art education, it's art," explains Robin Fribance, interim executive director of Lively Arts. "He has the amazing ability to pull out the nuances of music that make it special, thus heightening listeners' enjoyment and understanding of some of the world's most famous compositions."

Whether for music connoisseurs at Lincoln Center exploring Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* or for a group of children nodding as he sings the phrase "droopy-droop feather" in a descending minor scale from his composition *Dr. Seuss's Gertrude McFuzz*, Kapilow is famous for eliciting sighs of comprehension from his listeners. As he delves into the music, bodies lean forward in their seats and ears perk up. Kapilow engages the audience and encourages them to sing, listen to, and focus on the nuances of each piece. There is no chilling out at a Kapilow event. This is listening as a sport.

"There was no single moment when I realized that, oh, this is what I'm called to do," Kapilow says of his vocation. He toyed with the idea of following a concert pianist track—building on his background of performing classical, jazz, and cocktail



piano—but realized after a few years that the requirement of practicing five to six hours a day only to be confined to the rarefied performing world held little appeal for him.

Nadia Boulanger was also a key influence. The summer after his junior year at Yale University, he traveled to Fontainebleau Castle 40 miles south of Paris to study with the renowned composer, conductor, and grande dame of music instruction. His demo piece was Mozart's Sonata in A Minor. When he finished playing, Boulanger dealt him a sharp whack on the arm with her fist. "Kah-pi-loff," she said, "that was grotesque."

Boulanger, who was born when Brahms was at his peak, went on to explain that Mozart would never have insulted his listeners with a pair of redundant notes; she demonstrated how to play the



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phrase the way Mozart intended. Kapilow played both versions at full speed at the 2004 Stanford Summer Chamber Institute; to many in the audience, they sounded identical. Then, speaking while his hands played the variations in slow motion, he highlighted the change. The next time through, at tempo, the audience breathed out an audible “ahhh”—they heard the difference.

As a newly minted professor at Yale, Kapilow conducted the Tony Award-winning musical *Nine* on Broadway. “The audience got it,” he says. “They knew what was funny, what was witty, what was moving. It was their language.” When he conducted the Yale Symphony Orchestra in a performance of Beethoven, he was struck by the contrast. “I wished I could stop and explain the music. And when I was teaching, I wished for an orchestra to illustrate the concepts we were discussing. I decided to take responsibility for how other people hear.”

Kansas City became the laboratory as Kapilow partnered with the Kansas City Friends of Chamber Music in an ambitious effort to engage the community. Barry Shiffman, second violinist for the St. Lawrence String Quartet, received a *What Makes It Great?* recording with an invitation to Kansas City. “I was in a car driving down West 70th Street in New York and the last thing I wanted to hear was an analysis of the most overplayed piece of music in the world,” recalls Shiffman. “What was this guy going to add to Mozart’s *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*? I was really not excited. But once the program began, I pulled over to the side of the road and listened to the entire hour-long presentation.” Shiffman remembers thinking that Kapilow was the “real deal” for his ability to discuss art in a simple way without dumbing it down. Their first meeting in Kansas City confirmed Shiffman’s initial impression. “I was literally dumbfounded by Rob’s energy and vision. He’s a very serious musician, he’s incredibly well rehearsed, and he brings an artist’s sense of timing to arts education.”

The St. Lawrence String Quartet and the Ying Quartet agreed to take turns exploring repertoire with Kapilow. They presented to diverse groups, students from metal detector schools to private schools, donors and subscribers to Friends of Chamber Music, medical students, and the creative staff at Hallmark among them. “Presenting a Bartók string quartet to an assembly of 300 kids in an inner-city school was like walking through Fallujah

without a flak jacket,” says Shiffman. “Somehow Rob was able to win the trust of these students. He transformed the idea of what it means to be a musician in the community.”

“In mystery writing, you have to be familiar with the convention of ‘the butler did it’ to know that the butler is probably a red herring. And it’s knowing that convention that makes you gasp to find out the butler really did do it,” explains Kapilow. Once central to social life, classical music expressed and drew forth emotions. People understood its conventions. It was not relegated to the background like a kind of fancy wallpaper. Wanting to restore classical music to its rightful place in the public arena, Kapilow is passionate about winning converts.

One of Kapilow’s trademarks is that he shows not only what is, but what *isn’t* in a piece of music. Music appreciation lies in the delta between the two. For Handel’s *Hallelujah Chorus*, Kapilow plays the same note four times. Boring. He varies one note. Interesting. He plays Handel’s famous four notes. Great. “Handel had the gift of the sticky idea,” he says, citing a concept from the book *The Tipping Point* by *The New Yorker* writer Malcolm Gladwell. “In a seemingly simple piece of music, it’s the simple that makes it popular or sticky. It’s the seemingly, the piece you don’t hear, that makes it great.” Advertising jingles and pop music may be simple and sticky, he explains, but the seemingly in the sense of underlying complexity is missing from the simple. “It’s the simple that makes you like a catchy song at first, then want to scream by the 12th time through.”

Kapilow uses common language rather than jargon: flashing runs in the violins; the whole thing higher; melody back in the violins; flashing runs down low in the basses. “Shudder-2-3-4,” he says to accompany one of Mozart’s *Jupiter* Symphony’s dark, brooding, throbbing passages, “shudder-2-3-4.” To wrap up, Kapilow deconstructs its coda into five ideas. It’s difficult to keep track of the five ideas as they become layered and transformed in the grand finale like fireworks exploding one on top of the other in the “most dazzling display of counterpoint in the history of the symphony.” Kapilow agrees. “It’s exhausting to truly pay attention.”

It is so exhausting that Kapilow calls listening a hero’s journey, after Joseph Campbell’s work on legends. A hero’s journey

consists of three parts: separation, initiation, and transformation. The listening experience, according to Kapilow, is similar. We separate from what is familiar in order to see the world from someone else's point of view and then return home transformed, bringing back what we have learned. This journey requires commitment. If we filter what we've learned, nothing happens. "How we listen to music is how we listen in life," says Kapilow, who is writing an as yet untitled book on the subject.

Recognizing the limitations of the short modern attention span, Kapilow turns it to his advantage, paradoxically catering to it in order to extend it. Trying to get across an idea in the fastest way possible before an audience becomes restive, Kapilow talks rapidly in pithy sound bites that feed a high-concept sentence, as in the idea, "With Mozart, things are never as simple as they seem." He moves around, sings, conducts the audience, and engages the musicians. But Phillip Ying of the Ying Quartet clarifies that Kapilow never resorts to any kind of gimmickry or superficial entertainment: "His presentations are rooted in the most rigorous compositional analysis and judged within a broad musical and philosophical context. He himself is a musician with uncompromising standards and integrity."

Hands waving or playing the piano, voice brimming with excitement, Kapilow appraises a swath of musical wallpaper, unveils the pattern detail bit by bit, and wraps it in a bit of history for context. He raps and taps against it like a detective, probing. At his touch, secret compartments spring open and the entire wall moves to reveal rooms hidden behind what once seemed impenetrable.

While examining Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony, Kapilow contrasts the opening loud, military flourish with the intimacy of the strings. He counts measures and shows the extra measure that makes one of the phrases subtly irregular instead of boringly predictable. "Revelation," he says, as Mozart creates unity by putting the military flourish into the string section and layers a flute part on top. Occasionally, Mozart, like a man in dire need of a smoke, ducks away from the politesse of the drawing room and takes his listeners into the shadows to peer into the abyss. This transition, marked by a taut, unexpected moment of silence, will never again go unnoticed by a Kapilow audience.

Highbrow critics have faulted Kapilow, perhaps for throwing open the doors of what was once an exclusive club. *New York Times* music reviewer Anne Midgette snippily writes about "his didactic tone" and "the manic exuberance that helped make Mr. Kapilow likable in spite of himself" before conceding that "Mr. Kapilow helped sharpen the ear and bring out details even to someone who has heard the [*Jupiter* Symphony] dozens of times."

Phillip Ying, violist for the Ying Quartet, lauds Kapilow for his ability to take any musical concept, no matter how complicated, and figure out a way to explain it to a listener clearly, directly, concisely, and completely. "He has an uncanny ability to see right through to a core idea or thought or musical motive, or even an individual musical note or moment. And that process leads to a key that unlocks a deeper understanding of the entire work. Musicians who learn to think the way Rob does not only become better communicators but also more persuasive, intelligent performers," says Ying.



"My favorite composer is whomever I'm presenting at the moment," says Kapilow, who is equally at home dissecting modern musicals and classical compositions, and even poetry. "Great artists hear possibilities in the most ordinary ideas." Kapilow, too, hears possibilities in the most ordinary things. For example, in a preview of his January 8 performance at Stanford, he says, "Take this chord." As the chord resonates through the phone line from the piano in his New Jersey home, he continues, "That chord sat there for 200 years before Aaron Copland [another student of Boulanger's] came along and changed it into this for *Appalachian Spring*." He plays the Copland variation. "Lovely."

The art of listening, "that's what *What Makes It Great?* is really all about," says Kapilow. "It's about noticing all of the fantastic things in great music that might otherwise escape attention. When you begin to hear the things that make great music great, a work can spring to life as if you had never heard it before." ■

*Rob Kapilow makes his Lively Arts debut this season with two performances of his critically acclaimed What Makes It Great? program—an exploration of Leonard Bernstein's music, including West Side Story, on December 7 (see page 35) and a revealing look at Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring on January 8.*

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