

## “When #TimesUp for Musical Gods: The James Levine Scandal”

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For over two years, I have been writing [Not Another Music History Cliché](#), a blog devoted to debunking classical music myths. Such lore tends to focus on Great Composers, yet conductors and performers may also receive a mythic gloss for acting as living emissaries of the (often dead) composers. A passage by J.B. Priestley from 1965 reveals the perceived power that a conductor wields:

Oh! to be a conductor, to weld a hundred men into one singing giant, to build up the most gorgeous arabesques of sound, to know that with every [move of a finger] the orchestra would bound forward into a still more ecstatic surge and sweep, to fling oneself forward,... then to set them all singing and soaring in one final sweep, with the cymbals clashing at every flicker of one's eyelid, to sound the grand Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Two years later, Harold C. Schonberg would use this quote in the introduction to his book, *The Great Conductors*. In 1983 a profile in *Life* magazine quoted it again in reference to a conductor who “ha[d] become Priestley's ideal personified”: [pause] James Levine.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will trace the critical reception of Levine throughout his career, revealing the extent to which mythical rhetoric contributed to his image as a transcendent figure. Then, I examine reader comments on the internet in the wake of the Metropolitan Opera’s decision to suspend Levine due to accusations of decades of sexual abuse. I show how the persistent association of classical musicality with an elevated humanity makes some fans highly resistant to accept that their musical hero could conceal such reprehensible behavior.

Throughout his career, Levine accumulated prestigious positions: conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at their summer venue, Ravinia; a chief conductorship with the Munich Philharmonic; and a seven-year term conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra. But his forty

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Conductors* (Simon and Schuster, 1967), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Walsh, “Maestro of the Met: James Levine Is the Most Powerful Opera Conductor in America,” *Time*, January 17, 1983, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,951886,00.html>.

years as Principal Conductor for the Met in New York City is his highest accomplishment, made possible by the board's decision to invest in a 28-year-old rising star.

Nearly two decades into his term at the Met, *New York Times* critic Will Crutchfield proclaimed, "At the threshold of the 1990's [*sic*] Mr. Levine stands poised to take the orchestra he has built to a new and unprecedented level of prominence in the international music world."<sup>3</sup> Crutchfield explains it is due to Levine's congeniality and trustworthiness, often conflating the conductor's personality with his musicianship. Crutchfield cites Met violinist Seymore Wakschal as saying, "He's a very musical person, and you can hear it when he plays the piano himself. I'd sell my soul to play some sonatas with him."<sup>4</sup> Such sentiment reveals the extent to which musicians desired personal contact with Levine's musical genius.

Indeed, Levine inspired zealous devotion. In Donald Rosenberg's book *The Cleveland Orchestra Story*, published in 2000, he mentions that, "unquestionably destined for great things, Levine became so revered that a group of lovers formed a small society, known as the Levinites, to hail their hero."<sup>5</sup> Less than two decades later, an exposé on this group would describe the cult-like techniques that Levine used to maintain their unquestioning devotion to him, including sexual humiliation.<sup>6</sup>

At the time, however, any mention of Levine's purported sexual relationships with young men and underage boys were treated as ugly rumors. In 2001, cultural critic Alex Ross addressed the issue in *The New Yorker*, saying, "[The rumors] belong in the category of personalized urban legends that attach themselves to certain celebrities for no discernible reason....Levine has denied the rumors, but his most effective response has been his performances, which make all the gossip sound bitter and small."<sup>7</sup> This statement taps into the established practice of eliding

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<sup>3</sup> Will Crutchfield, "From the Pit at the Met, the Sound of Success," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1990, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/11/11/arts/classical-music-from-the-pit-at-the-met-the-sound-of-success.html>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Donald Rosenberg, *The Cleveland Orchestra Story: "Second to None"* (Cleveland: Gray & Company, 2000), 339.

<sup>6</sup> Malcom Gay and Kay Lazar, "In the Maestro's Thrall: Inside the 'Cult' That Catapulted Conductor James Levine's Career," *The Boston Globe*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/03/02/cleveland/cn2Sathz0EMJcdpYuoPjM/story.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Ross, "Metropolitan Lives," *The New Yorker*, October 29, 2001, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/11/05/metropolitan-lives>. Since the Met's suspension of Levine, Ross has expressed regret for this passage, Tweeting in 2017, "At the time, I thought that Levine was being victimized by false rumors. I was disastrously wrong, and am ashamed to have written this." Ross, Twitter post, December 4, 2017, 7:12 AM, <https://twitter.com/alexrossmusic/status/937701099976327173?lang=en>.

musicality and morality, placing them on the same scale by implying that Levine's performances are an appropriate means to dispel rumors, as though excellence in music corresponds to excellence of character.

The mythification of Levine escalated. In 2011, Levine took a hiatus from conducting, reportedly due to fractures in his spine after a fall that put him in a wheelchair. The *New York Times* reported this hiatus with the headline, "A 'God' With Baton vs. the Met's Mortal Needs."<sup>8</sup> Notice that it's the Metropolitan Opera, an institution well over a century old, that's identified as the "mortal" in this scenario. The "God" designation came from a comment by David Gockley, the general director of the San Francisco Opera: "He is no ordinary music director. He's a god. And gods get to make their own decisions on their own time."<sup>9</sup> The Met's General Manager, Peter Gelb, justified the institution's continued support of their disabled conductor, saying, "He is one of the greatest artists of all time. He has created one of the greatest orchestras in modern history. He may be one of the greatest opera conductors who ever lived. Those are very strong artistic reasons to support him."<sup>10</sup> Gelb's statement reaffirmed what had become fixtures of Levine's mythos: His artistry is extraordinary and will not be diminished by corporeal infirmity.

The Met's faith in Levine seemed justified two years later when he performed a resurrection, of sorts. In September 2013, Levine returned to the Met podium. *New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini raved,

If the performance had simply been a solid success, that would have been enough to gratify the opera fans who cherish his work and to reassure his concerned colleagues at the Met. But it was much more. Over many years I have heard Mr. Levine give some remarkable accounts of Mozart operas, and I don't think I have ever heard a more vibrant, masterly and natural performance than this "Cosi Fan Tutte"...<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel J. Wakin, "A 'God' With Baton vs. the Met's Mortal Needs," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2011, sec. Music, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/24/arts/music/the-dilemma-of-james-levine-and-the-metropolitan-opera.html>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "Levine Is Impressive in Return to Met With 'Cosi Fan Tutte,'" *The New York Times*, September 25, 2013, sec. Music, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/26/arts/music/james-levine-met-opera-cosi-fan-tutte-review.html>.

James Levine was back, apparently better than ever. His triumph over physical constraints seemed to prove that nothing—no worldly concern, no bodily impairment, no base accusations, *nothing*—could stop this hero of music.

Yet beyond the walls of the Met, American culture was changing. In the wake of the 2016 election, in which admitted sexual harasser Donald Trump managed to secure the Presidency, protests against misogyny and sexual abuse became unavoidable. On Twitter, the hashtag #MeToo—which civil rights activist Tarana Burke created in 2006—was revived in 2017 when it became attached to posts about sexual abuse.<sup>12</sup> #MeToo inherited some momentum from a previous hashtag, #YesAllWomen, which was a response to yet another hashtag, #NotAllMen. These hashtags emerged as women shared the trauma of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault, mostly by men. Some took offense to perceived slights against the male gender, claiming that “not all men” are sexually violent. The tag #YesAllWomen responded that, although not all men are violent, enough of them are that “yes, *all* women” have reason to be guarded, with further implications that “all women” have experienced at least some violation due to their gender.

#MeToo created a way for people of all genders, not just women, to share their personal stories of sexual violence, many of which described events that occurred years earlier and had been ignored or suppressed. By explaining that sexual assault happened to “me, too,” victims hoped to show that sexual abuse *can* happen to anyone (even men) and *has* happened more often than has been reported. As the hashtag became more prominent, so too did reports of sexual abusers being arrested for their crimes. On the first day of 2018, several celebrities endorsed an announcement of a newly formed organization called “Times Up” (with the hashtag #TimesUp) to indicate that sexual abuse should no longer be tacitly tolerated—that is, the abusers’ time is up; let the prosecutions (and healing) begin.<sup>13</sup>

Yet even as tales of abuse in classical music establishments accumulated, some cultural luminaries insisted on music’s ability to lead listeners to moral enlightenment. Andris Nelsons,

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<sup>12</sup> Sandra E. Garcia, “The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Cara Buckley, “Powerful Hollywood Women Unveil Anti-Harassment Action Plan,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2018, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/01/movies/times-up-hollywood-women-sexual-harassment.html>.

music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, gave an interview with Boston Public Radio in November 2017 that addressed the trending #MeToo hashtag. When asked outright whether sexual harassment is or has ever been an issue among classical musicians, he responded unequivocally, “No,” explaining, “If [people] could realize how important [music and art] are...I believe they would become better human beings.”<sup>14</sup> Nelsons’s comments were at best uninformed and at worst willfully naïve, considering that several classical musicians had already used the #MeToo tag to describe abuses of conductors, private teachers, and fellow performers. Nelsons’s remark was also spectacularly ill-timed, as the Met suspended James Levine over accusations of sexual abuse less than two weeks later.<sup>15</sup>

As many (many!) people would attest, Levine’s sexual practices had long been an “open secret,” though it obviously hadn’t hindered his career until 2017. In 1997, music critic Norman Lebrecht published *Who Killed Classical Music*, a book which included a story of sexual abuse by an unnamed conductor many recognized as Levine.<sup>16</sup> Also that year, the City Council of Munich investigated such rumors while considering Levine for chief conductor of the Munich Philharmonic. As an article in *VAN Magazine* revealed in 2018, some council members had been reluctant to address the rumors, finding the subject too vulgar for a discussion of a cultural institution. One complained, “The City Council of Munich isn’t talking about the Philharmonic, about the music, about conductors and programs. Instead it’s talking about disgusting crimes, and no one has even pretended these accusations belong here.”<sup>17</sup> Those who were willing to address the issue pointed out that Levine had never been arrested or charged, so he should be presumed innocent. Rumors of impropriety could be explained away as professional jealousy or rampant homophobia. The *VAN* writer notes that, overall, the Munich City Council seemed more concerned with preserving their image than compassion for potential victims.

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Shanahan, “BSO’s Andris Nelsons Says Sexual Harassment Isn’t a Problem in Classical Music - The Boston Globe,” *The Boston Globe*, November 20, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/names/2017/11/20/bso-andris-nelsons-says-sexual-harassment-isn-problem-classical-music/RS4BiGKOCt4nLUWP9szsGP/story.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Malcolm Gay, “Metropolitan Opera Suspends James Levine, While BSO Says It Had No Complaints of Sexual Impropriety by Him as Music Director,” *The Boston Globe*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/music/2017/12/03/metropolitan-opera-suspends-james-levine-while-bso-says-had-complaints-sexual-impropriety-him-music-director/RHCwkbNdxLhWA8ylBlmD3H/story.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Norman Lebrecht, *Who Killed Classical Music?: Maestros, Managers, and Corporate Politics* (Birch Lane Pr, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Arlo Brown, “Munich 1997,” *VAN Magazine*, March 8, 2018, <https://van-us.atavist.com/munich-1997>.

But twenty years later, the discourse surrounding sexual abuse had shifted, and victims were going public. The Met suspension was prompted by the accusation that Levine had sexually abused a teenager at Ravinia on several occasions in 1986 and '87.<sup>18</sup> By the time the Met sued Levine for breach of contract and defamation in March 2018, the suit could cite nine men who claimed that Levine abused them, with incidents going back as early as the 1970s.<sup>19</sup> In March 2018, *The Boston Globe* published an exposé of the “Levinites,” that group of Levine devotees.<sup>20</sup> Former members said that Levine demanded that they cut off ties with their relatives and discouraged them from reading newspapers or watching television.<sup>21</sup> This isolation and limiting of information are common techniques among religious cults, justified by Levine as eliminating distractions from the music.

Levine also used promises of enhanced musicality to justify sexual acts with his followers. One victim explained, “Basically, the theory was if you were less inhibited sexually, you’d be a better musician.”<sup>22</sup> Another said, “It was your job, basically, to service him under the guise of improving your music playing.”<sup>23</sup> Levine played on young musicians’ hopes for an outstanding career under the mentorship of a musical deity; his growing reputation in classical music meant that resisting him or even disappointing him would risk destroying their prospects. As for the purported goal of Levine’s cult? According to the *Globe*, “They would follow Levine...to form ‘The God Philharmonic,’ an orchestra whose players were so musically integrated...their performances would be nothing short of celestial.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite recent articles describing Levine’s and other musicians’ sexual predations, the association of classical music with heightened humanity is so entrenched that some find it difficult to reconcile the reports of sexual abuse with their musical heroes. Each announcement, exposé, and think piece prompted a variety of reactions recorded on the internet. While *most* of these responses express compassion for the victims and accept that classical music has been rife with sexual abuse, I was most intrigued by the commenters who resisted the news. I examined

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<sup>18</sup> Gay, “Metropolitan Opera Suspends James Levine.”

<sup>19</sup> Michael Cooper, “James Levine’s Final Act at the Met Ends in Disgrace,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2018, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/arts/music/james-levine-metropolitan-opera.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Gay and Lazar, “In the Maestro’s Thrall.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

reader comments on the major news articles, letters to the editor, comments on classical music blogs, and posts on social media to track the comments that most forcefully defended Levine against the accusations. I found distinct patterns of argument, some of which are typical responses to *any* report of sexual abuse, particularly when the accused is a highly regarded celebrity. Yet many of these comments also reflect the unique cultural status of classical music. I'll point out a few recurring themes.

Many people found the suspension disrespectful considering Levine's service and accomplishments. One *New York Times* reader wrote to the editor, "[S]hould Mr. Levine now, at this late stage in his career, be dismissed after what he has given the world through his musical artistry?"<sup>25</sup> A commenter on Norman Lebrecht's blog *Slipped Disc* asserted, "[T]o treat our Jimmy this way is unforgivable after his decades of World [*sic*] class service, for which the Metropolitan Opera is a far, far greater company than it ever could have been without him."<sup>26</sup> These comments bear traces of the promotional pieces I quoted earlier, with Levine singlehandedly transforming the Met into a world-class company. These arguments suggest that his exceptional *genius* should warrant the benefit of the doubt, as well as some discretion and dignity.

Calling upon that same logic, a Twitter user posted, "[R]ight on the heels of that magnificent Verdi Requiem, could you not hold off on this cruel public statement until after a fair hearing?"<sup>27</sup> Not only does this question posit Levine's talent as justification for discretion, it exemplifies another common defense: that Levine is innocent until proven guilty, therefore he should be treated as innocent, even in situations outside a court of law. This is an attempt to shut down discussion—or at the very least delay it—while claiming the moral high ground. One *Slipped Disc* reader decried, "'We are not only living in a 'post truth' age but a 'post proof' age. It's all down to trial by media."<sup>28</sup> Yet "innocent until proven guilty" is a *legal* mandate and does

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Pearlstein, "Opinion | Artistic Genius and Sexual Misconduct," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2017, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/opinion/james-levine.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Comment on Lebrecht, "The Met Kicks Back against James Levine's Lawsuit," *Slipped Disc*, March 16, 2018, <http://slippedisc.com/2018/03/the-met-kicks-back-against-james-levines-lawsuit/>.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Pennington, "And Right on the Heels of That Magnificent Verdi Requiem, Could You Not Hold off on This Cruel Public Statement until after a Fair Hearing?," Tweet, @elizapen (blog), December 3, 2017, <https://twitter.com/elizapen/status/937532315374366720>.

<sup>28</sup> Comment on Lebrecht, "NY Post: James Levine Molested Teenaged Boy," *Slipped Disc*, December 2, 2017, <http://slippedisc.com/2017/12/ny-post-james-levine-molested-teenaged-boy/>.

not preclude discussion or action in response to accusations. Indeed, if the Met had *not* suspended Levine, they would have been prioritizing the reputation of a Genius over the continued trauma of potential victims.

Some comments express negative views of the #MeToo movement as a whole. One *Slipped Disc* commenter referred to “the bullies of metoo.”<sup>29</sup> Another said, “I think this METOO thing is a fad – another way to get back at people who now annoy you.”<sup>30</sup> While these opinions have been expressed outside the classical music fandom, in this particular context, the idea that #MeToo could be a weapon for envy and pettiness. A comment on *The New York Times* claims, “[I]n stoning selected malefactors, the me-tooers are diminishing culture at all levels, depriving us of fine gifts like Jimmy's extraordinary musicianship.”<sup>31</sup> Yet again, the suffering of potential victims is a lower priority than the protection of elite culture.

Such suspicion toward #MeToo is a form of “victim blaming,” another common way to deflect criticism of the accused. Some commenters implied that the alleged victims brought it upon themselves for seeking a connection to Levine. For example, on a Change.org petition to get Levine reinstated at the Met, one of the comments argued, “The guys actually BENEFITED professionally from the alleged abuse - and the sentence is professional death without trial ?”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a comment on *Slipped Disc* asked, “Who was manipulating whom? Who was getting what out of whom?”<sup>33</sup>

Then the comment slips into another tactic used to undermine the credibility of assault victims: “[W]hen at 40 or 60 years old, they are still crying victim, and still claiming to be traumatised by a wank when they were 17, they strain all credibility.”<sup>34</sup> This and similar comments present the accusers as opportunists, waiting to strike at the moment when it would

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<sup>29</sup> Comment on Lebrecht, “Just in: James Levine Sues the Met for Unfair Dismissal,” *Slipped Disc*, accessed August 24, 2018, <http://slippedisc.com/2018/03/just-in-james-levine-sues-the-met-for-unfair-dismissal/>.

<sup>30</sup> Comment on Lebrecht, “Opera Boss Departed over #MeToo Issues,” *Slipped Disc*, accessed August 24, 2018, <http://slippedisc.com/2018/05/opera-boss-departed-over-metoo-issues/>. Although this is a response to a sex scandal other than Levine’s, the sentiment expressed toward #MeToo as a movement is relevant to the present discussion.

<sup>31</sup> Comment on Cooper.

<sup>32</sup> Comment on Serena Leland, “Reinstate James Levine at the Metropolitan Opera,” Change.org, December 2017, <https://www.change.org/p/metropolitan-opera-reinstate-james-levine-at-the-metropolitan-opera>.

<sup>33</sup> Comment on Lebrecht, “Only One Loser in the Met vs Levine,” *Slipped Disc*, May 22, 2018, <http://slippedisc.com/2018/05/only-one-loser-in-the-met-vs-levine/>.

<sup>34</sup> Comment on *Ibid.*

garner the most attention. However, there are several well-researched reasons why victims of sexual assault don't report incidents sooner—most relevantly, fear of recrimination, that someone so highly regarded in the industry could easily destroy their career.<sup>35</sup>

Another common reaction is a “slippery slope” fallacy that mentions other figures in music history: “Should we poke around in the closets of all artists and approve only the works of those who are squeaky clean?”<sup>36</sup> This comment implies that, if Levine's career can be sunk over sexual abuse, then any moral impropriety can be used to destroy the legacy of any musician. This fallacy shifts attention from the actual sexual abuse of children to hypothetically “lesser” offenses, as though punishing one entails punishing all to the same degree. In a music-specific rendition of this argument, one figure in classical radio listed on Facebook names of historical composers who had broken the laws of their own time, asking whether we should be boycotting Beethoven for public vagrancy or Britten, Copland, Barber, and Menotti for being gay when homosexuality was illegal. This case of “What about”-ism is fraught with problems. Among them, the argument conflates morality with legality.

The final trend I'll address here is what I consider to be reactionary hyperbole. When the Met Opera Radio on Sirius removed all recordings conducted by Levine, Norman Lebrecht posted on *Slipped Disc*, “[T]his vindictive editing of institutional history is reminiscent of Stalin at his worst, when Trotsky and other undesirables were whited out of party pictures.”<sup>37</sup> His readers amplified his rhetoric in the comments section: “To suppress the existence of a politician or an Artist is pure undiluted Stalishism [sic],”<sup>38</sup> and, “This is pure Bolshevism – the Russians routinely banned the broadcast of (and frequently also destroyed) the recordings of the artists who were suspected of being disloyal to the Commie-land.”<sup>39</sup> Keep in mind, this is their reaction to *one* radio station deciding not to air recordings featuring Levine. They have not “destroyed” these recordings, nor has the Met made any attempt to deny that Levine was their music director.

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<sup>35</sup> Beverly Engel, “Why Don't Victims of Sexual Harassment Come Forward Sooner?,” *Psychology Today*, November 16, 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-compassion-chronicles/201711/why-dont-victims-sexual-harassment-come-forward-sooner>.

<sup>36</sup> Drew Snider, “Opinion | Artistic Genius and Sexual Misconduct,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2017, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/opinion/james-levine.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Lebrecht, “James Levine Is Wiped off Met Opera Radio,” *Slipped Disc*, April 28, 2018, <http://slippedisc.com/2018/04/james-levine-is-wiped-off-24x7-met-opera-radio/>.

<sup>38</sup> Comment on *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Comment on *Ibid.*

These reactionary comments reveal anger toward a cultural shift that they don't like. To them, the situation is not about victims of abuse; it's about progressive "PC" culture and its threats to the status quo.

In conclusion: The way in which we discuss music and musicians matters. Classical music myths exacerbate power imbalances, creating the conditions that allow and enable abuse, all justified under the claim of protecting a cultural legacy. The doctrine that high art, particularly classical music, is a mark and measure of character ultimately leads to reactionary defensiveness when reality demonstrates otherwise. The further we separate classical music from the humans who make it, the more oblivious we become to the potential trauma involved in its production.

Thank you.