

HEAD OF THE CLASS

Professor Robert Winter's melodious music lectures are never flat and always sharp

By Rip Rense

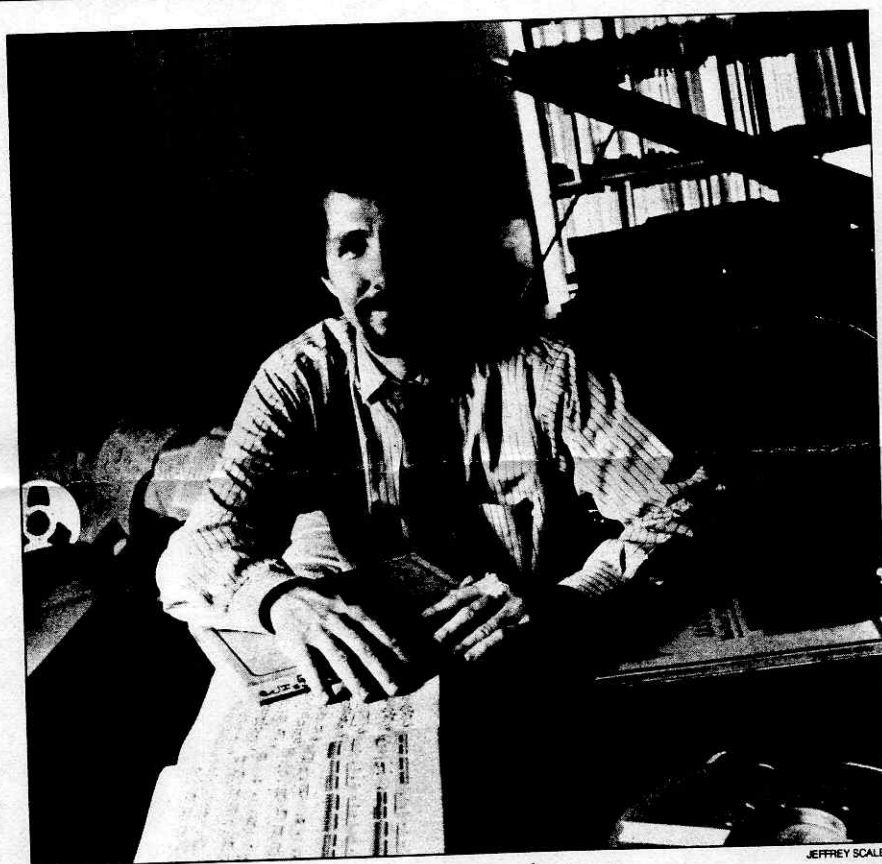
University professors don't make buckets of money. So Robert Winter, professor of musicology at UCLA and an internationally renowned Beethoven scholar, happily agreed one day back in 1976 to teach a small UCLA Extension class with the corny title "Masterpieces of Music from the Late Baroque to the 10th Century." It would never amount to much in terms of résumé, but Winter could use the extra \$600. Maybe, he thought, they'd ask him to do it again next session.

Winter remembers walking into that classroom 11 years ago and facing the 12 people who signed up. "I know what those people were expecting," says the lanky, goateed professor, his eyes mischievous at the memory. "They thought I would come in with an armful of records, then I would say a few words of appreciation about Bach or Beethoven, and we would all listen. Perhaps we would hold hands and look deeply into each other's eyes as we all listened, and when it was over, I would tell them that they had just had a *great aesthetic experience* and next week we would be doing Brahms!"

Instead, Winter sat down at the piano and played a couple of bars of something and asked his students what they thought. The class was taken aback. No one had ever done *that* before. And, after a few minutes of self-conscious giggling, what happened?

"They asked tons of dumb questions!" Winter booms. "It was wonderful!" Wonderful? Lesser men of scholarly bent would have fled the room.

"Look at it this way," he explains. "Here we are in L.A., the biggest hick town in the universe. You'll find more stupid, uncultured people with money here



Winter: "I like to take a work of greatness, change a few notes and make it mediocre."

than in any place else on earth. But why should they have asked any other questions than the ones they asked? *Should Beethoven be played fast?* Those questions may be silly, but they're ones these people believe are important."

Don't get the wrong idea. Winter is not a hipper-than-thou kind of guy on a messianic crusade to convert the world to high art. Yes, he's still teaching the extension class, only now he lectures in a UCLA concert hall to an average attendance of between 300 and 500 persons. Yes, he still plays piano and asks questions, but he also has some of the finest musicians in the world come to class to play—and then he asks questions. Winter is just the latest

and most intriguing chapter in that never-ending book *How to Make Classical Music Accessible*.

To that end, a National Public Radio show featuring Winter and his lectures, similar in spirit to Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion*, will hit the airwaves in July (locally on KUSC-FM). The radio series, *Pacific Coast Highway*, originally aired in 1981 with Winter's now legendary lectures on Beethoven (you can buy them at Tower Records), then left the airwaves in 1982. His return to radio after his five-year absence will spotlight his 1986-87 course on the history and development of melody, rhythm and harmony. Essentially, *Pacific Coast Highway* presents his three-hour UCLA

lectures, edited down to 90 minutes. Everyone from Chinese virtuoso gin (a zitherlike instrument) player Sen Yuen Lui to the Saint Paul Schola Cantorum (a Gregorian-chant group) to Jihad Racy, master of the Arabian flute and lute, to the World Percussion Ensemble has guested during the last six months of lectures (thanks to a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts).

"This radio series will explain how odd-ball what I do really is," says Winter. "There's nothing in union contracts with public radio that covers the kind of program I do. It's not a concert, not a class—it's both. What I've come to understand as the most valuable thing we do for the people who come is to give them a chance to attend an open rehearsal—but an open rehearsal that has *them* in mind.

"Of course, the L.A. Philharmonic has open rehearsals occasionally, but there it tends to be 'Look at the great men work!' and 'Isn't it amazing?' Maybe there's a little display of temper, and they say, 'Ooooh, doesn't he have *fire*!' What we try to do is create a comfortable, less awe-inspiring atmosphere that is like inviting the audience into the living room where the rehearsal is taking place."

The Keillor connection is not inappropriate (*Prairie Home's* production team, in fact, also produces *Pacific Coast Highway*). Although Winter is as kinetic in manner as Keillor is somnambulant, it's fair to say that Winter brings out the charms of music as Keillor brings out the charms of Middle America.

Winter is wont to discuss his own youth in middle-class American households in Massachusetts and Florida. Images of scuffed knees and apple pies in windowsills somehow creep into his discussions of symphonies and quartets. You see, Winter hasn't forgotten the days when he asked "tons of dumb questions," when he thought that *pizzicato* was something in an Italian sandwich, that *staff* was an infection, *treble clef* something in a chin and *downbeat* a magazine.

He is hardly a snob—which is a bit of a rarity in an area well populated by scholarly types. Although he is a bona fide scholar of the first order (the recipient of Fulbright and Rockefeller scholarships, he holds degrees in musicology and piano performance from the University of Chicago and is on the national board of directors of the American Musicological Society), Winter comes across as a man more at home fixing a pipe than puffing on one. He speaks English, as well as Intellectual. Or rather, he speaks Intellectual in plain English.

"Art music requires bridges," he says, using a term more correct than *classical music*. "It's that simple. You have to put it in a different context. Take it out of the auditory museums that concert halls often become and breathe life into it. You know, it's not beyond the ken of, say, a 60-year-old to understand what a modern band—World Party or the Pretenders—is up to. The average 60-year-old just doesn't want to make the effort; they have such prejudices to start with. But it certainly could be explained; I mean, your grandmother could understand it if you sat down and went over the lyrics and talked about the genesis of a rock band. But it would take a bridge, someone with a willingness to sit down and explain."

In effect, sitting down and explaining is what Winter is doing at UCLA Extension. And just how does he facilitate? Does Winter couch everything in contemporary slang? Does he, as Michael Tilson Thomas once did, liken Beethoven—or at least his Seventh Symphony—to Elton John and his music? No, nothing that contrived. Is he precious about it, like some of the oh-so-genteel new announcers at KFAC (one of whom recently remarked of a composer who never lived to hear one of his works, "Death will do that to you")? No, his style won't allow it. Winter almost suggests rather than lectures. He demonstrates rather than states.

In one class, for example, Winter attempted to allow the audience to feel, not just take his word for, the difference one simple chord made at the end of a Schubert song. He accompanied a vocalist in a performance of the work—first with a chord of ordinary harmonics and then with the more sophisticated chord chosen by Schubert. Not content to merely demonstrate this, he had the audience hum the sublime chord while he played the banal one. Everyone hummed like kids in grammar school; the whole thing seemed like a giant Mr. Wizard experiment. But the result was clear: a breakthrough! The crowd understood why that chord was the selection of an extraordinary mind; the music suddenly had more meaning. A sigh of understanding descended upon the classroom.

"He knows how to make everyone excited about what he's talking about," says Jeffrey Kallberg, a former pupil, now professor of musicology at the University of Pennsylvania and an internationally recognized authority on such esoteric pursuits as the discarded sketches of Chopin. "And that's absolutely extraordinary. It doesn't matter if it's the audience in his

class or a large crowd of his musicological peers. He gets them excited in a way I've never seen exceeded by anyone. If such a quality could be defined and understood, there would be more than one Winter."

Winter's own love of music is infectious. He discovered the stuff while he was a physics major attending a Brown University mixer. The girl he was "fixed up" with was a music major. She sat at a piano and played the first seven bars of a Mozart piano concerto (the one used in *Elvira Madigan*). Although young Robert had been subjected to the usual piano-lesson torment and understood how to read music, he had never paid much attention to feeling it. He certainly had never considered it as something to dedicate one's life to. That changed in a flash: "She was about eight bars into it when I realized that this is what I would do with my life," Winter exclaims. "It was literally like that."

He then spent three weeks preparing the Rachmaninoff Prelude in C-sharp Minor for an audition for the music department. He played the piece, he says, with "great fervor and no technical finesse." Half of the notes were wrong. It could have been over before it started, but for a kind and wise professor. "It was one of the most brilliant responses I've ever heard," says Winter. "He said, 'I see you take your playing seriously. Go to it.'"

As a lecturer-host, Winter is buoyant, fast-talking, enthusiastic, glib, incisive, subtle, respectful, disrespectful, planned and spontaneous. Sometimes all at once.

Now, there are some stuffy souls who will call Winter's antics just too irreverent. What some might perceive as lack of respect for great art might, in fact, be the very opposite. Winter is not unlike the film *Amadeus*, of which he commits the unscholarly sin of liking. (The movie, arguably, made Mozart out to be little more than a scatological idiot savant.)

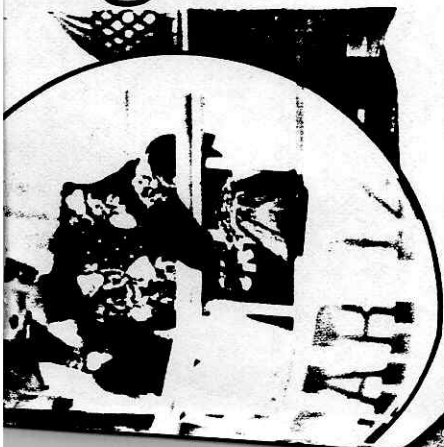
"But people bought the soundtrack!" he explodes. "I'll never forget this kid who came up to me and said, 'Doc Winter, this is incredible! Have you heard the soundtrack to *Amadeus* yet? It's great!' I had to chuckle. I said I hadn't heard it, but I was looking forward to it. Here were pieces like the *Lacrimosa* of the Requiem and the little G-minor symphony, pieces that this kid would have no more interest in than the man in the moon. But because he and so many others connected it to the great art form of our time—I mean, let's face it, cinema is to the 20th century what opera was to the 19th—they were able to listen to the music effortlessly."

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answer is just as rhetorical as the question. There is no real valid distinction between art music and pop music, between melodies that are appealing and those that are less appealing. We simply have great music and less-great music."

Applause. "Now I can listen to Frankie Laine sing 'Lucky Old Sun' without embarrassment," somebody laughed. What happened in between? Well, certainly Winter spoke a lot. But the key could be found in the guests Winter presented.

The first guest, David Raksin, is a masterful composer of great pop melodies ("Laura," among them) who was a student of Arnold Schönberg and Igor Stravinsky and a great friend and admirer of the remarkable blind jazz pianist Art Tatum. And also a fan of the legendary stride piano man Fats Waller. How could a man have such disparate but equal affections? Simple. It's all good music, said Raksin. To hear Raksin speak eloquently and wittily about the beauty of these very different kinds of music was a revelation to many.

The second guest was the young and highly gifted pianist Stephen Mayer, who proceeded to play with love and expertise a piece by Tatum and a work by Stravinsky based on his *Petrouchka* ballet. And he also threw in a little Fats Waller, performing with an authenticity that drew admiration from Raksin.

The effect? The skeptic, a 40-year-old attorney whose idea of good music is Khachaturian's "Saber Dance," said, "I came away with a new appreciation for the sophistication of pop music and the melodiousness of art music that I never thought of in terms of melody before. Parts of Tatum's stuff sounded as complex as parts of the Stravinsky piece, which is one of the most complex pieces I've ever heard. And Stravinsky? Well, I've never really felt what a balance of harmony, rhythm, mathematics and melody Stravinsky's music contains. I don't think I'd have been aware of it without the added context of Fats Waller and Art Tatum."

Winter was heard to explain after class to a few skeptical hangers-on the "logic" of 12-tone music being no less logical than the harmonics of Beethoven. Not all were convinced, Winter said later, but all were listening. In fact, about eight people crowded around the one-time physics major after class, all animatedly gesturing, airing opinions and asking tons of dumb questions.

It was all music to the ears of Robert Winter. ■

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Winter doesn't accomplish the injection of life into these works alone. Aside from the well-established guest artists who assist him—the Sequoia Quartet is a regular aural aide—Winter calls upon the frequent services of two rather obscure composers: Hieronymus Hufnagle and Giuseffo Biffi. (*Biffi*, in certain regions of Europe, roughly translates to "outdoor toilet.") "I have," says Winter, "developed a very special affection for these composers. They wrote pieces very much like Mozart's, but there was something a bit different." Biffi and Hufnagle, he says, are paragons of mediocrity, testaments to unoriginality, living tributes to the unexceptional. They are, of course, Winter's alter egos.

"They're pedestrian. We can all identify with mediocrity," explains Winter. "I am a brilliant Hufnagle or Biffi composer. I have unsurpassed technique when it comes to taking a great piece of music and making it mediocre with minimal changes. I have an uncanny ear for mediocrity. What I like to do is, by changing as few notes as possible, take a work of greatness and make it mediocre."

Purists might bristle, but Winter insists that it doesn't matter which door you enter through, as long as you get inside the building. And today, to Winter's concern, the actual buildings where concerts take place seem increasingly populated by an older crowd.

Winter's own audiences are hardly gray, perhaps a heartening sign. There are young marrieds and singles, with a smattering of the middle-aged. They are, he says, about 50 percent converts and 50 percent "hostile skeptics," persons dragged to the class by an art-lovin' friend or spouse. Winter loves to have a the people "who would rather be home with a can of Michelob watching the Lakers" stand up, generally to the chagrin of a companion or two. At least one not-so-hostile skeptic was converted at one session with Winter last November. Here's how it began:

"Welcome to our program," the professor intoned, "which I think is not too factually entitled, 'Is It Art, or Is It Pop?' There's a very good reason for that. We have three different kinds of music to share with you, and they all raise a question that has become something of a doctrine in 20th-century life. That is, the pretty hard-and-fast distinction between art music, the stuff that shows you've got class and culture; the serious stuff; and pop music, which is everything else."

And here's how the lecture ended: "I

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