

LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER
May 25, 2006 8:00 p.m. on PBS
30 years of Life From Lincoln Center

January 30, 1976! Early in the celebratory year of the United States' Bicentennial, a new performing arts series was launched on PBS. "Live From Lincoln Center" it was called, and its opening event was a harbinger of things to come: a concert by the New York Philharmonic conducted by Andre Previn, with Van Cliburn as soloist in the Grieg Piano Concerto. The next Live from Lincoln Center, on Thursday evening, May 25, will be a retrospective celebration of the program's 30th anniversary.

What were the circumstances of our lives those thirty years ago? We had recently extricated ourselves from the disaster of the war in Vietnam. Gerald Ford was President and Nelson Rockefeller Vice President, in what was to prove their final year in office. The leading films of the year were "Taxi Driver", "All the President's Men", "Network," and "Rocky". Still to come were the Olympic Games in Montreal where, memorably, the Roumanian gymnast, Nadia Comaneci, was to stun the world with three perfect scores. And the All Star Baseball Game in July that year was played in Philadelphia, with the National League continuing its dominance at the time over the American League with a final score of 7 to 1.

The performing arts on television were reasonably well served. PBS had an ongoing relationship with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and concerts by the B.S.O. and the Boston Pops were seen regularly on "Evening at Symphony" and "Evening at Pops" respectively. They even picked up several Emmy Awards. And the commercial networks also had a proud history and involvement. At the virtual dawn of television, in 1948, NBC began to televise selected concerts by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra; and CBS, following upon its discovery of the telegenic personality of Leonard Bernstein, quickly aligned itself with Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic in two continuing series: The New York Philharmonic Young People's Concerts, and Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic.

Even the highly-rated variety shows of the time felt it necessary to incorporate "high culture" in their offerings. NBC's Saturday evening block buster starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca also had as regulars Robert Merrill and Marguerite Piazza singing opera arias and duets. And I remember a spell-binding performance of the final scene from Act II of Puccini's "Tosca" with Maria Callas and George London on the CBS Sunday evening Ed Sullivan Show.

What did Live From Lincoln Center have to offer in this heady environment? Its stated purpose, from which it has not deviated from Day 1, was to provide viewers with a steady diet of LIVE coverage of highlight events taking place at

that very time in the nation's leading performing arts center. I have highlighted the word LIVE for good reason. Since nearly every program on television except news and sports is transmitted by means of pre-recording, I have on occasion been asked when a particular Live From Lincoln Center program was taped. The answer was and remains, Never. Live in the program's title means exactly that. It is true that some stations on the PBS network do delay their transmission, some by hours, some by days. But the origination is always live.

Can you imagine the problem faced by John Goberman, our Executive Producer from the very beginning, in selecting highlights from these 30 years of Live From Lincoln Center? From performances by the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, the New York City Opera, the New York City Ballet, the Juilliard School, Jazz at Lincoln Center and the Lincoln Center Theater! The roster of artists is a Who's Who in music, dance and theater of the recent past and present.

What you will see on the 30th anniversary celebration is a kaleidoscope of events, most of them fairly brief, featuring among others Itzhak Perlman, Renee Fleming, Joshua Bell, Beverly Sills, Wynton Marsalis, Placido Domingo, Emanuel Ax, Marilyn Horne, Yo-Yo Ma, Peter Martins, Isaac Stern, Andre Watts and Luciano Pavarotti. Pavarotti, as a matter of fact, acts as a sort of book-end. The musical evening will begin with his performance of the aria "E lucevan le stelle" from the last act of Puccini's Tosca, and it will end with what has become his signature piece, "Nessun dorma" from Puccini's Turandot. Both come from a Live From Lincoln Center program of January 14, 1980 with Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic.

A closing personal note: it has been my honor and one of the most gratifying assignments of my professional career to serve as Commentator for Live From Lincoln Center beginning with the very first program. 30 years is a virtual generation, and I have decided that this 30-year celebration is the perfect time for me to turn the reins over to the next generation. I do so with thanks to all of you who have taken the time to express your pleasure in my contributions to the series. I do intend still to be with you, however, by continuing to write these pre-performance notes on the web site.

Enjoy Live From Lincoln Center's 30th!

With all my best wishes,

MARTIN BOOKSPAN