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Peace celebration with music

## **What Leon Botstein, conductor of the concert on May 8, thinks about the Congress Hall as the perpetrator**

**Nuremberg - The Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra is organizing a symbolic memorial concert to mark the end of the war on May 8: Leon Botstein will conduct Mendelssohn in the Congress Hall with his New York Orchestra. We spoke to him about his motivations.**

From [Thomas Heinold](#)

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On May 8, on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra invites you to the memorial concert "Give us peace!" It takes place in the concert hall of the Symphony Orchestra in the Congress Hall - a place of perpetrators. New York's "The Orchestra Now" (TON) will perform there. Highly talented young musicians are trained in it. The TON will be conducted by Leon Botstein, TON founder and Principal Guest Conductor of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra. Works by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, a central figure in German musical life in the 19th century, will be performed. Because of his Jewish roots, his music was under the influence of

Rule of the National Socialists was banned. In the run-up to the concert, we spoke to Leon Botstein.

**Mr. Botstein, the Congress Hall, in whose concert hall you will perform with your "The Orchestra Now" (TON) on May 8, is a place of perpetrators, a place that the National Socialists built to represent their criminal system. What does it mean to you to make music in this place?**

The Congress Hall is a reminder of a past that can be overcome without erasing it. It is important to know that the Nazi regime - morally and ethically a criminal regime - was the legal government of Germany when the hall was built. The laws associated with the name Nuremberg defined criminality in a way that we do not accept today. We must remember how easy it is to make radical evil acceptable and legal. When we present music in this hall, we remind us that it is not the architecture or the origin of the building that is important, but its use.



Leon Botstein's TON Orchestra has an outstanding reputation as a training orchestra for young musicians. Here Botstein conducts the orchestra at New York's The Metropolitan Museum of Art. © David DeNee

**You are described as the "advocate of forgotten composers". Do you also see Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy in this series, whose works are on the programme on 8 May? Is that the reason why you chose his works for this concert?**

Mendelssohn is certainly not a forgotten or neglected composer. However, it is underrepresented and underrated in today's repertoire. It cannot be said that he had discovered the works of Bach, but it was he who brought the St. Matthew Passion back into the repertoire. The Nazis banned his works because he was of Jewish descent. They applied Richard Wagner's anti-Semitic theory that Jews were rootless and incapable of genuine creativity. Our choice to perform Mendelssohn's work in this concert was motivated by a desire to mark the end of state censorship and the return of freedom for artists, and to discredit racist thinking.

**Which musicians will play in the TON Orchestra, who and what can the Nuremberg audience look forward to at this concert?**

The musicians of TON participate in a three-year training program for young, professional musicians who have completed their conservatory education. They come from all over the world. The Nuremberg audience can look forward to the committed playing of these young musicians.

**Leon Botstein: The current U.S. administration violates the Bill of Rights and the founding document of the United States**

**Would you like to comment on the current political situation in the USA? Do you see the danger that totalitarian tendencies will get out of hand in US society, that people will be categorized and marginalized, and that even the freedom of art will be suppressed?**

The current administration of the United States, in my opinion, is acting increasingly autocratically and is jeopardizing the division of powers enshrined in the Constitution. It violates the basic principles of the Bill of Rights and the founding document of the United States, the Declaration of Independence. The abuse of power leads to fear, and fear in turn leads to self-censorship. The fear is quite justified, and people restrict their freedom themselves. As citizens, it is our task to resist this tendency and to stand up for the freedom and dignity of all the inhabitants of our country.

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**About Leon Botstein**

The American conductor and musicologist Leon Botstein was born in Zurich in 1946. His parents come from Poland. Before the Second World War, they had gone to Switzerland to study medicine because of the racist numerus clausus in Poland, and members of their families became victims of the Holocaust. After the Second World War, they moved to the United States, where Botstein attended the New York High School of Science until 1962.

Music and Art. He then studied at the University of Chicago and Harvard University, and became president of Franconia College in 1970.

Since 1975 he has been president of Bard College, where he founded the Bard Music Festival in 1990 . There he also founded "The Orchestra Now" (TON). Since 1992 he has been Music Director and Principal Conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra. From 2003 to 2011 he was also musical director of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra.

As a guest conductor, he has worked with many renowned orchestras and can look back on many music recordings. His album of Gavriil Popov's First Symphony and Dmitri Shostakovich's Theme and Variations was nominated for the 2004 Grammy for Best Orchestral Recording.

Botstein is also the editor of The Musical Quarterly and has published articles and books on music and Judaism. In 2011 he received the Leonard Bernstein Award for the Elevation of Music in Society. He has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences since 1993 and a member of the American Philosophical Society since 2011. He is also a non-resident permanent fellow at the Vienna Institute for Human Sciences.