

André Previn, Whose Music Knew No Boundaries, Dies at 89

André Previn in 1965. He conducted, composed, played jazz piano and scored movies in a musical life that spurned categories. Erich Auerbach/Getty Images

By **James Barron**

Feb. 28, 2019



André Previn, who blurred the boundaries between jazz, pop and classical music — and between composing, conducting and performing — in an extraordinarily eclectic, award-filled career, died on Thursday at his home in Manhattan. He was 89.

His death was confirmed by his manager, Linda Petrikova.

Mr. Previn wrote or arranged the music for dozens of movies and received four Academy Awards, and was nominated for three Oscars in one year alone — 1961, for the scores for “Elmer Gantry” and “Bells Are Ringing” and the song “Faraway Part of Town” from the comedy “Pepe.”

Audiences knew him as well as a jazz pianist who appeared with Ella Fitzgerald, among others, and as a composer who turned out musicals, orchestral works, chamber music, operas and [concertos](#), including several for his fifth wife, the [violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter](#). He was also the music director or principal conductor of a half-dozen orchestras.

Critics described Mr. Previn as a “wunderkind in a turtleneck” and the “Mickey Mouse maestro” when he was in his 20s and 30s. He was often compared to Leonard Bernstein, a similarly versatile conductor, composer and pianist. Time magazine’s headline when Mr. Previn became the principal conductor of the London Symphony in 1968 was “Almost Like Bernstein.” Newsweek summarized his appointment as music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1985 as “Bernstein West.”

And like Bernstein, Mr. Previn was no stranger to a life of glamour and media attention, particularly when the actress Mia Farrow left Frank Sinatra, her husband, and married Mr. Previn after an affair that had become grist for the gossip columns.

Mr. Previn conducting the London Symphony Orchestra in London. He was its musical director from 1968 to 1979. John Minihan/Getty Images

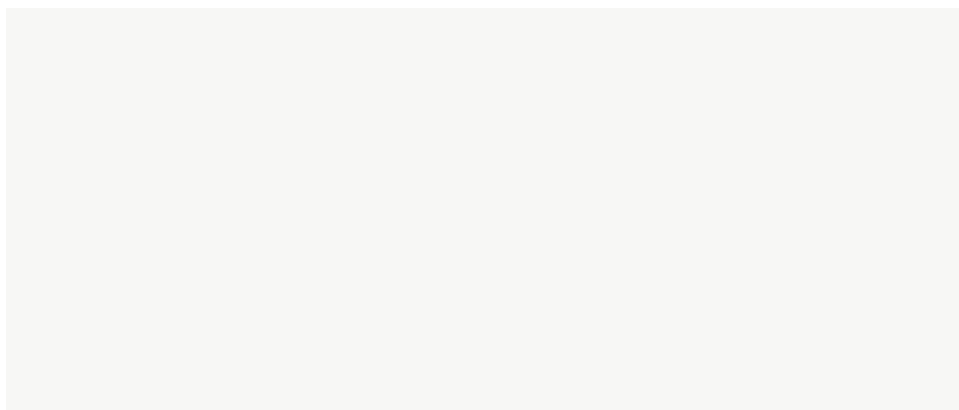
“See you in the Morning beloved Friend,” Ms. Farrow, who was divorced from Mr. Previn in 1979, tweeted on Thursday. “May you rest in glorious symphonies.”

Mr. Previn himself considered Bernstein an idol. “Bernstein has made it possible not to specialize in one area of music,” he said. “You no longer have to do just Broadway shows, or movies, or conduct — you can do any or all of them.”

And [Mr. Previn did](#). In the 1960s, he appeared in sold-out classical and jazz concerts. Sometimes he combined genres, playing a concerto before intermission and jazz with a trio after. Dizzy Gillespie marveled at his performances. “He has the flow, you know, which a lot of guys don’t have and won’t ever get,” he said.

Mr. Previn made recordings with Benny Carter and Mahalia Jackson and an album of jazz arrangements of songs from “My Fair Lady” with the drummer Shelly Manne and the bass player Leroy Vinnegar. (Mr. Previn was later the conductor and music supervisor for the film version of “My Fair Lady.”) He also made two albums with [Dinah Shore](#) and recorded a collection of Christmas carols with Julie Andrews and George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” with Andre Kostelanetz.

But the classical world was never comfortable with his work in jazz, and the jazz historian Ted Gioia said Mr. Previn had been “something of a popularizer of jazz rather than a serious practitioner.”



Mr. Previn with Audrey Hepburn in 1963. He was the conductor and music supervisor for the film version of “My Fair Lady,” which starred Ms. Hepburn. Associated Press

Mr. Previn disdained all the labels. “I never considered myself a jazz musician,” he said in 1986, “but a musician who occasionally played jazz.”

A Start in Movies

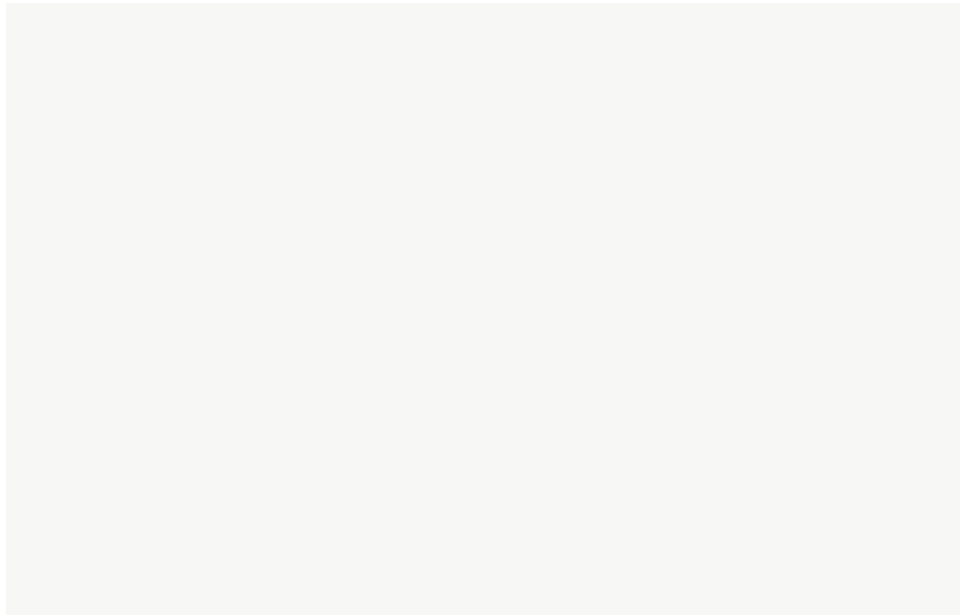
He was born Andreas Ludwig Priwin on April 6, 1929, in Berlin. After his parents realized he had perfect pitch — his father had been an amateur pianist in Berlin — André entered the Berlin Conservatory when he was 6. His father, Jacob, a Polish-born lawyer who was Jewish, moved the family to Paris in 1938 to escape the Nazis.

André studied with Marcel Dupré at the Paris Conservatory for about a year before the family left for Los Angeles. There, he studied with the composer and conductor [Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco](#), the violinist and composer [Joseph](#)

[Achron](#) and the composer [Ernst Toch](#). He soon recorded all the four-hand piano music of Mozart with the composer [Lukas Foss](#), who was not quite seven years older than Mr. Previn.

Mr. Previn became an American citizen in 1943, and in 1950 he was drafted into the Army and served with the Sixth Army Band. He also studied conducting in San Francisco with [Pierre Monteux](#), whom he later followed at the London Symphony.

A relative worked in the music department at Universal Studios, and Mr. Previn wrote music for movies even before he went into the Army. As a senior in high school, he was called in to help with “[Holiday in Mexico](#),” a 1946 MGM musical starring Walter Pidgeon. (A young Fidel Castro was an extra.) The script called for the concert pianist [Jose Iturbi](#) to play some jazz, but he was uncomfortable improvising and wanted a score to read. Mr. Previn went to a jam session, listened and wrote out a piano part for Mr. Iturbi to play when the cameras rolled.



Mr. Previn with the actress Mia Farrow, his wife at the time, and their twin sons, Matthew and Sascha, in London in 1971. George Stroud/Daily Express, via Getty Images

MGM took notice and hired Mr. Previn to compose and conduct the music for “The Sun Comes Up,” starring Lassie and the once-illustrious actress [Jeanette MacDonald](#), who was allergic to dogs. “Go figure that billing,” he once said.

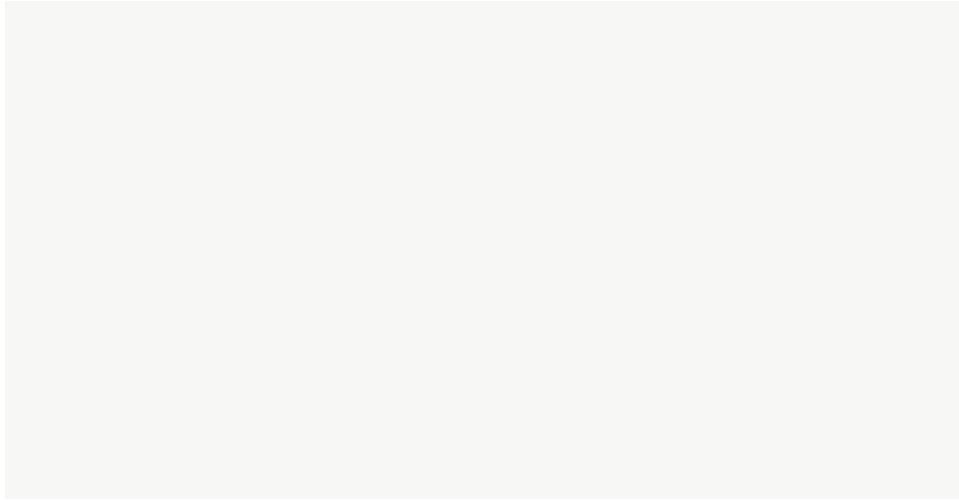
Years after its premiere in 1949, he gave the movie a thumbs-down. “Like all Lassie pictures,” he said, “there was hardly any dialogue, but a lot of barking. I thought it was easy, but I have since put myself through the wringer of watching it on a television rerun, and it’s the most inept score you ever heard.”

But front-office executives realized that Mr. Previn could handle the deadlines that went with studio work, and they put him on what he called “an endless stream of cheap, fast movies.”

Not all his assignments fit that description. He collected Oscars for scoring “Gigi” (1959), “Porgy and Bess” (1960), “Irma La Douce” (1964) and “My Fair

Lady” (1965). He did not write classic songs like “Summertime” and “I Could Have Danced All Night”; rather, he arranged and orchestrated them, creating the soundtrack versions.

Like Bernstein, Mr. Previn also tried Broadway. With Allan Jay Lerner, he wrote “Coco,” a musical about the designer Coco Chanel that starred Katharine Hepburn and ran for 329 performances in 1969 and 1970. He also wrote the music for “The Good Companions,” a musical with lyrics by Johnny Mercer that ran for 252 performances in London in 1974.



Mr. Previn at a book-signing event in London in 1979. He had recently published “Orchestra,” written with Michael Foss, about the lives of musicians in both Britain and the United States. Keystone/Getty Images

Presence on the Podium

Also like Bernstein, Mr. Previn was a crowd-pleaser as a conductor. Five years after his surprise appointment in London, the British magazine *New Statesman* complained that he had given the orchestra “a strong American accent: the big-screen sound, rich, loud and brilliant.” But it said his programs on the BBC — which prefigured by a few years the American public-television series “Previn and the Pittsburgh,” broadcast when he was [the music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony](#) — had “clearly widened his box-office appeal.”

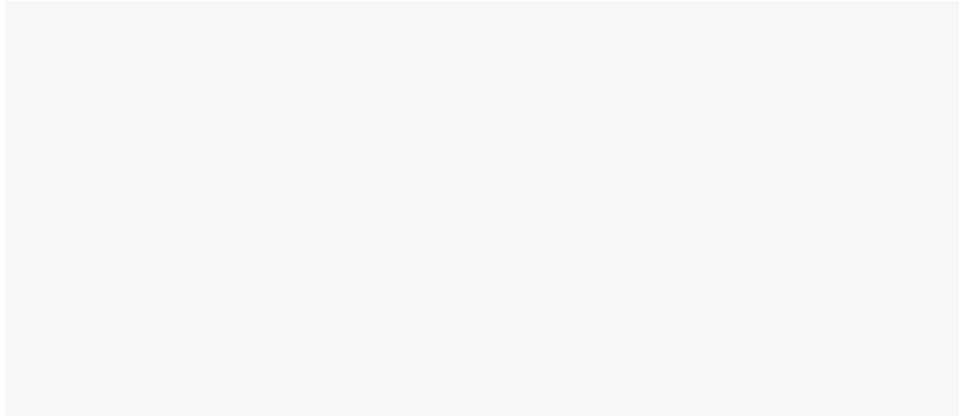
“Whereas Boulez looks boring and Boult looks bored,” the magazine said, referring to the prominent conductors Pierre Boulez and Adrian Boult, “Previn always seems to be enjoying himself.”

He remained principal conductor of the London Symphony until 1979; he was also the principal conductor of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra from 1985 to 1988. In the United States, he held the Pittsburgh job from 1976 to 1984 right before taking over in Los Angeles.

Mr. Previn resigned the Los Angeles post in 1989, complaining that the orchestra’s managing director, Ernest Fleischmann, had maneuvered to bring in Esa-Pekka Salonen as his successor. “It has become obvious to me that there is no room for a music director,” Mr. Previn said when he quit. Mr. Salonen was named music director-designate a few months later.

An Operatic Turn

As he approached 70, Mr. Previn turned to opera, writing “A Streetcar Named Desire” to a libretto by Philip Littell based on the Tennessee Williams play. Renée Fleming sang the role of Blanche DuBois in the premiere with the San Francisco Opera in 1998, with Mr. Previn on the podium. Bernard Holland, [reviewing the performance](#) for The New York Times, wrote that “it sings very well.”



Mr. Previn conducting the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra in a performance at Carnegie Hall in 2005. Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times

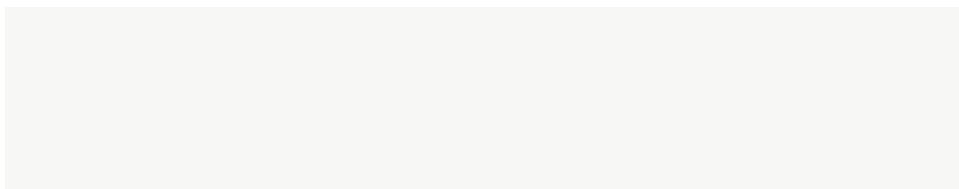
“There are angry clashes of harmony and key,” he added, “many Straussian gestures, sweet-as-honey popular melody and the kinds of corporate noodling and mumbling among the strings native to a Ligeti or a Penderecki.”

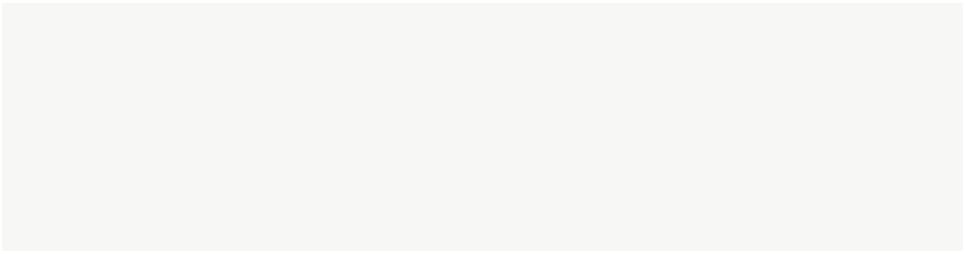
A recording with the San Francisco cast won the Grand Prix du Disque. Mr. Previn also won 10 competitive Grammys from 1958 to 2004, divided evenly between classical and nonclassical categories, and a lifetime achievement Grammy in 2010.

The second of his two operas was “Brief Encounter” (2007), with a libretto by John Caird based on Noël Coward’s screenplay for the 1945 David Lean film by that name.

Toward the end of his life, Mr. Previn seemed surprised at the interest in his compositions. “I wrote a string quartet that I very diffidently mentioned to the Emerson Quartet,” he told the critic David Patrick Stearns in 2017. “And they said, ‘Where is it?’ I’m not used to that.”

In 2017, Ms. Fleming gave several performances of a song cycle he wrote, “Lyrical Yeats.” “These brief songs display Mr. Previn’s keen ear for the telling detail, for musical gestures that set a mood or conjure an image,” [Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim wrote](#) in The Times when Ms. Fleming sang them in a solo recital at Carnegie Hall.





Mr Previn in 1998. Leonard Bernstein, he said, “made it possible not to specialize in one area of music. You no longer have to do just Broadway shows, or movies, or conduct — you can do any or all of them.” Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

In 2018, Ms. Mutter played “The Fifth Season,” for violin and piano, which she and Carnegie Hall had commissioned. She described it as “rather lighthearted.”

This year, Tanglewood had planned events to celebrate Mr. Previn’s 90th birthday, including a performance of the violin concerto “Anne-Sophie” with Ms. Mutter and, with Ms. Fleming and the Emerson quartet, the premiere of “Penelope,” by Mr. Previn and the playwright Tom Stoppard. Tanglewood said the events would now be framed as a celebration of his life and work, although it was not immediately clear if Mr. Previn had finished “Penelope.”

Mr. Previn wrote several books, including “Orchestra” (1979), a depiction of the lives of orchestral musicians, and a memoir of his movie experiences, “No Minor Chords: My Days in Hollywood” (1991).

Mr. Previn’s first wife, Betty Bennett, was a singer he had seen in San Francisco jazz clubs. They had two daughters, Claudia and Alicia, also known as Lovely (who became a violinist in the Irish band In Tua Nua), and divorced in 1958.

His second marriage was to Dory Langan, an MGM lyricist, who, after they separated, recorded several albums as a singer-songwriter under the name Dory Previn, many of them reflections on their breakup and its aftermath. [Dory Previn](#) died in 2012.

Their divorce in 1970 was prompted by the well-publicized affair between Mr. Previn and Ms. Farrow, who had been a friend of Ms. Previn’s. Ms. Farrow divorced Sinatra in 1968 and married Mr. Previn in 1970. They had three children, Matthew and Sascha, who were twins, and Fletcher. They also adopted Summer Song, known as Daisy, and Soon-Yi, who married Woody Allen in 1997.

Mr. Previn’s fourth wife was Heather Haines Sneddon. They had a son, Lukas, in 1984, and divorced in 1999, the year he wrote the violin concerto for Ms. Mutter. He and Ms. Mutter married in 2002 and divorced in 2006 but continued to perform together.

“You know how people say that their marriage didn’t work?” he said in 2017. “With us, the divorce didn’t work. We call each other every day regardless of where we are. Maybe she’s in China and I’m in Cincinnati, but we find each other. It’s like being very best friends who have a romantic history.”

Complete information on his survivors was not immediately available.

Mr. Previn seemed puzzled that critics continued to mention his Hollywood past long after he had been focusing on classical music. “I haven’t done anything else since the mid-’60s,” he told The Times in 1991. “I think there’s a statute of

limitations here.

“When I go to Tanglewood to teach, the kids don’t know I ever did anything else,” he continued. “Sometimes they see a movie on the late, late show, and they say, ‘Who is that?’ And then I have to confess that the man who manufactured harp glissandos for Esther Williams to dive to was actually me.”

Correction: Feb. 28, 2019

An earlier version of this obituary referred incorrectly to Mr. Previn’s daughter Alicia, also known as Lovely. Her mother is Mr. Previn’s first wife, Betty Bennett — not his second wife, Dory Langan. The earlier version also misstated the year Mr. Previn became principal conductor of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. It was 1985, not 1965.

Correction: Feb. 28, 2019

An earlier version of this obituary misstated Mr. Previn’s original surname. He was born Andreas Ludwig Priwin, not Prewin.

Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on, on PageB14 of the New York edition with the headline: André Previn, Composer, Conductor and Explorer of Genres, Dies at 89. Order Reprints | Today’s Paper | Subscribe



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