

## LEONARD BERNSTEIN

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Leonard Bernstein was an incredible musician. I have seen him conduct all the symphonies of Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms and Tchaikovsky without the scores before him. I have seen him quietly weep after conducting Schumann's magnificent Symphony no 2 and the sheer joy he showed in the March-Scherzo in Tchaikovsky Symphony no 6. He knew inside out the music in all these fine works. Dmitri Shostakovich said the Bernstein gave the best performance of his Symphony no 5.

As to Schumann, his music and orchestration has been maligned particularly by Mahler who re-orchestrated the Schumann symphonies.

I saw Lenny conduct Beethoven's Choral Symphony, singing along and with infectious joy all over his face. He said that this work was the voice of God !

The BBC are highly prejudiced. In a documentary they made about Bernstein, they concentrated on his light music and his shows, and only included a brief excerpt from Elgar's Enigma Variations. The BBC consider Elgar to be the most worthy composer with over 200 broadcast of his works in 2014 and there were over 40 British composers who had no broadcasts at all that year.

Bernstein was savaged for his slow tempo in Elgar's Nimrod but he saw it as a Lament. It was a work that he did not like and he certainly did not want to conduct it since it is an awful work. The BBC Symphony Orchestra railed at Bernstein over this work and showed him no respect at all and you do not do this to a superb conductor.

He was an excellent pianist with admirable performances of such works as Ravel's G major concerto and the Piano Concerto no 2 by Shostakovich. He was an inspiring lecturer on classical music as shown in his television talks from 1954 onwards. His West Side Story is the most successful musical of all time.

As for his own work he wrote three symphonies, choral works including a fine Mass, ballet, piano works and music for the theatre.

He was the conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra for some time and transformed the two main Vienna orchestras from their thin sound to excellent ensembles. One of these orchestras supported the Nazis and the hatred of Jews.

(see my essay on [Hans Knappertsbusch](#))

Lenny was born Louis Bernstein of Ukrainian Jewish parents in Lawrence, Massachusetts on 25 August 1918. All his life he was often badly treated particularly by left wing politicians simply because he was a Jew and the BBC said he was on amphetamines and a homosexual. An anonymous BBC employer said that these punitive remarks were made because Bernstein did not adore Elgar.

His father, Sam, had a store for hair products in Lawrence and was a business man. Leonard, as he was now called, was given an unwanted piano. He attended Garrison Grammar School and Boston Latin School and had piano lessons with Helen Coates and in 1935 he went up to Harvard University where his fellow students included Edward Burlingame Hill and Walter Piston. He also became a friend of Marc Blitzstein for whom he put on a performance of Blitzstein's The Cradle will Rock.

Lenny graduated from Harvard in 1939 and went to the Curtis Institute of Music to study with the great Fritz Reiner. He could not have had a better teacher. Earlier, Bernstein had met the conductor

Dmitri Mitropoulos who was also a fine conductor. Incidentally, Leonard is not related to Elmer Bernstein.

Leonard Bernstein was a handsome young man and physically admired by many.

He furthered his studies concentrating on orchestration with Randall Thompson.

On leaving Curtis, he lived in New York sharing an apartment with his friend Adolphe Green having a full social life and forming intimate relationships with both men and women. He became a life long friend of the composer Lukas Foss and with fellow Jew and homosexual Aaron Copland. Lenny also attended Koussevitsky's master classes.

In 1943, Bernstein was appointed assistant conductor to Arthur Rodzinski at the New York Philharmonic. In 1943 he conducted the premiere of his Jeremiah Symphony and his ballet Fancy Free opened in New York in April 1944 which was later developed as the musical *On the Town* made into a brilliant film in 1949. From 1945 to 1947, Lenny was the Music Director of the New York City Symphony Orchestra which had been founded by Stokowski.

He went on to the international stage after World War II conducting the Czech Philharmonic in Prague. He conducted the American premiere of Britten's *Peter Grimes*. He conducted in Tel Aviv in 1947 beginning a life long relationship with Israel. And in 1949, he conducted the world premiere of Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony*.

After a real struggle with his sexuality, Bernstein married Felicia Cohn Montealegre, an American actress who was born in Costa Rica. This was on 10 September 1951. They had three children. It was said that Bernstein wanted men for sex and women for emotional support. It raises many questions about homosexuality which Bernstein had to contend with, and that it is not due to a faulty gene or that you are born this way. The valid argument is that a married couple have several children together and only one turns out to be gay... the others do not and this proves a point. Bernstein said late in life, I chose to be gay!

In 1951, Bernstein premiered Charles Ives *Symphony no 2* written some 50 years earlier. Lenny devoted himself to American music and particularly admired Irving Fine but not because he was Jewish but because he was an exceptional composer. He also championed Harold Shapero with whom he used to play piano duets.

From 1951 to 1956, he visited Brandeis University as a music professor. He premiered his opera *Trouble in Tahiti* and Weill's *Threepenny Opera* in the version by Blitzstein.

Bernstein was the first American conductor to appear at La Scala and this was in 1953 conducting Cherubini's *Medea* with Maria Callas. The following year, he gave his first lecture on television discussing Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. Towards the end of 1956 he was summoned to New York to conduct the Philharmonic which was to be conducted by Guido Cantelli who had just died in an air crash in Paris. Bernstein became their music director in 1957. He composed his operetta *Candide* and began work on *West Side Story*. In 1959 he toured Europe and Russia and delighted Shostakovich with his performance of the Russian master's intriguing *Symphony no 5*.

Bernstein became a well-known figure in the USA with his 53 TV shows for young people talking about music. He was celebrated around the world

In 1960, New York produced a Mahler Festival with Bernstein, Walter and Mitropoulos conducting. Bernstein recorded Mahler *Four*, a work that is like Marmite... you either love it or hate it. Bernstein

also took a great interest in Carl Nielsen. In 1964, he conducted Verdi's Falstaff at the Metropolitan Opera directed by Zeffirelli which he repeated at the Vienna State Opera.

He conducted Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde, Beethoven's Fidelio and Mussorgsky's Khovanshchina. As for his own work, he composed his Chichester Psalms a work that gives a lasting satisfaction.

His success in many areas continued unabated. His many further achievements are beyond the scope of this brief essay.

But, by 1976, his personal life was thrown into turmoil. He could not conceal his homosexuality any longer and his wife was diagnosed with lung cancer and he did care for her even more so in her illness although he was living with Tom Cothram. She died on 16 June 1978. The next year he conducted the Berlin Philharmonic for the first time. Karajan did not invite Bernstein but Karajan's arrogance and demeanour was always suspect and he was constantly downright rude.

In later life, Lenny was not ashamed of his homosexuality and said that he was not like Britten who had anal sex with young boys. One recalls Malcolm Arnold saying of Britten, He disgusts me both as a musician and as a man.

For the ten years from 1980 he continued to conduct, compose and teach. In 1982, he conducted Wagner's Tristan and Isolde an opera he highly regarded as every real musician and music lover does. He accompanied Glenn Gould in Brahms Piano Concerto no 1 and recorded Candide.

By the early 1990 his health began to decline. He had hidden this weakness for a few years. He had a coughing fit conducting Beethoven's Symphony no 7 on 19 August 1990 and in October declared his retirement and died five days later of a heart attack. But he had been a heavy smoker for years and suffered from emphysema.

Although it was said early in his career that he disliked left wing politics he developed strong political views and named in a book called Red Channels as a Communist. With a financial award from the Japan Arts Foundation he built a music school in Nashville In many ways he was a philanthropist.

Whatever the facts about Bernstein's private life there is no doubt that he was an excellent conductor... the best American born conductor. He was a fine musician and could compose in many styles. He was a good lecturer although loquacious. He had a photographic memory. He has been criticised for some aspects of his conducting but having read these things the contributors cannot be musicians because they show their ignorance. He was an honest man indicating without prejudice and music sources the weaknesses in some composers and the ignored greatness in others. He objected to Britten saying Only gay men can write great music ! he did say of the UK, At least they have Vaughan Williams !

We will not see the like of Lenny Bernstein again!

## **Works**

### **Ballet**

Fancy Free, 1944

Facsimile – Choreographic Essay for Orchestra, 1946

Dybbuk (ballet), 1974

### **Opera**

Trouble in Tahiti, 1952

Candide, 1956 (new libretto in 1973, operetta final revised version in 1989)  
A Quiet Place, 1983, revised in 1986

#### Musicals

On The Town, 1944  
Wonderful Town, 1953  
West Side Story, 1957  
The Race to Urga (incomplete), 1969  
"By Bernstein" (a Revue), 1975  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, 1976  
"A Party with Betty Comden and Adolph Green", 1977  
The Madwoman of Central Park West, (contributed to) 1979

#### Incidental music and other theatre

Peter Pan, 1950  
The Lark, 1955  
The Firstborn, 1958  
Mass (theatre piece for singers, players and dancers), 1971  
"Side by Side by Sondheim"\* 1976

#### Film scores

On the Town, 1949 (only part of his music was used)  
On the Waterfront, 1954  
West Side Story, 1961

#### Orchestral

Symphony No. 1, Jeremiah, 1942  
Fancy Free and Three Dance Variations from "Fancy Free", concert premiere 1946  
Three Dance Episodes from "On the Town", concert premiere 1947  
Symphony No. 2, The Age of Anxiety, (after W. H. Auden) for Piano and Orchestra, 1949 (revised in 1965)  
Serenade for Solo Violin, Strings, Harp and Percussion (after Plato's "Symposium"), 1954  
Prelude, Fugue, and Riffs for Solo Clarinet and Jazz Ensemble, 1949  
Symphonic Suite from "On the Waterfront", 1955  
Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story", 1961  
Symphony No. 3, Kaddish, for Orchestra, Mixed Chorus, Boys' Choir, Speaker and Soprano Solo, 1963 (revised in 1977)  
Dybbuk, Suites No. 1 and 2 for Orchestra, concert premieres 1975  
Songfest: A Cycle of American Poems for Six Singers and Orchestra, 1977  
Three Meditations from "Mass" for Violoncello and Orchestra, 1977  
Slava! A Political Overture for Orchestra, 1977  
Divertimento for Orchestra, 1980  
Halil, nocturne for Solo Flute, Piccolo, Alto Flute, Percussion, Harp and Strings, 1981  
Concerto for Orchestra, 1989 (Originally Jubilee Games from 1986, revised in 1989)

#### Choral

Hashkiveinu for Cantor (tenor), Mixed Chorus and Organ, 1945  
Missa Brevis for Mixed Chorus and Countertenor Solo, with Percussion, 1988  
Chichester Psalms for Boy Soprano (or Countertenor), Mixed Chorus, and Orchestra, 1965  
(Reduced version for Organ, Harp and Percussion)

#### Chamber music

Piano Trio, 1937, Boosey & Hawkes

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, 1942  
Brass Music, 1959  
Dance Suite, 1988  
Variations on an Octatonic Scale for recorder and cello, 1988

#### Vocal music

I Hate Music: A cycle of Five Kids Songs for Soprano and Piano, 1943  
Big Stuff, sung by Billie Holiday  
La Bonne Cuisine: Four Recipes for Voice and Piano, 1948  
Silhouette (Galilee), 1951  
Two Love Songs, 1960  
So Pretty, 1968  
Piccola Serenata, 1979  
Arias and Barcarolles for Mezzo-Soprano, Baritone and Piano four-hands, 1988

#### Piano music

Music for Two Pianos, 1937  
Piano Sonata, 1938  
7 Anniversaries, 1944  
4 Anniversaries, 1948  
5 Anniversaries, 1952  
Bridal Suite, 1960  
Moby Diptych, 1981 (republished as Anniversaries nos. 1 and 2 in Thirteen Anniversaries)  
Touches, 1981  
13 Anniversaries, 1988

#### Other music

Other occasional works, written as gifts and other forms of memorial and tribute  
"The Skin of Our Teeth": An aborted work from which Bernstein took material to use in his "Chichester Psalms"  
"Simhu Na" (arrangement of traditional song)  
"Waltz for Mippy III" for Tuba and Piano  
"Elegy for Mippy II" for Trombone alone  
"Elegy for Mippy I" for Horn and Piano  
"Rondo for Lify" for Trumpet and Piano  
"Fanfare for Bima" for Brass Quartet: composed in 1947 as a birthday tribute to Koussevitzky using the tune he whistled to call his cocker spaniel[65]  
"Shivaree: A Fanfare" for Double Brass Ensemble and Percussion. 1970. Commissioned by and dedicated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in honor of its Centenary.[66] Musical material later used in "Mass."

#### Awards

Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1951[67]  
Sonning Award (Denmark), 1965  
Ditson Conductor's Award, 1958  
George Peabody Medal – Johns Hopkins University, 1980  
Ernst von Siemens Music Prize 1987  
Royal Philharmonic Society Gold Medal (UK), 1987  
Knight Grand Cross Order of Merit (Italy), 1989  
Grammy Award for Best Album for Children  
Grammy Award for Best Orchestral Performance  
Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance

Grammy Award for Best Opera Recording  
Grammy Award for Best Classical Vocal Performance  
Grammy Award for Best Instrumental Soloist(s) Performance  
Grammy Award for Best Classical Contemporary Composition  
Grammy Award for Best Classical Album  
Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award  
Tony Award for Best Musical  
Special Tony Award  
Japan Arts Association Lifetime Achievement Award  
Gramophone Hall of Fame entrant[68]  
Commandeur de la Légion d'honneur, 1986

Leonard Bernstein is also a member of both the American Theater Hall of Fame, and the Television Hall of Fame.

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