



William Gottlieb/Leonard Bernstein Office

Composer: Bernstein at work in his New York City apartment, circa 1946-1948

The Legacy of

Leonard Bernstein

by Leon Botstein

Leonard Bernstein was the first internationally acclaimed American-born maestro, a man of prodigious talents as a pianist, conductor, and composer, with an extraordinary gift for communicating the allure of classical music. As Bernstein's 100th birthday in 2018 approaches, and orchestras everywhere perform his scores, one conductor shares his personal view of the legacy of man who was—and still is—America's best-known classical musician.

Leonard Bernstein would have been astonished to discover that at the centenary of his birth, 2018, he would be remembered as America's most beloved and famous composer of classical and concert music. Bernstein's name is recognized all over the world, and his music appears on concert programs everywhere. His enormous posthumous reputation rests neither on his legacy as a conductor nor on the memory of him as a television personality. It is Bernstein's work as the composer of *West Side Story*, *On the Town*, *Candide*, the *Chichester Psalms*, the *Serenade*, three symphonies, and a *Mass* that has insured his immortality. That places him firmly in a pantheon of composers from Paul Dukas to Edward Elgar whose popularity rests on only a few works. Bernstein's contemporaries, whom he himself might have suspected were stronger competitors for such fame—even fellow conservatives such as Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber, not to speak of modernists such as Roger Sessions and Elliott Carter—possess less of a presence than Bernstein in the public imagination and on concert stages, certainly abroad and

even in in the United States. The achievement that eluded Bernstein during his lifetime—to be taken seriously as a composer, not merely of songs and for Broadway but of music in the grand tradition on a large scale—has been granted finally by posterity.

At the same time, the aura that continues to surround Bernstein stems as well from how famous he was during his lifetime as perhaps the greatest American conductor and certainly the first internationally acclaimed American-born maestro. A cult of personality developed around him that was unprecedented in the history of American classical music; his popularity transcended race and class. By the mid-1960s he was a public personality, media superstar, and ambassador of the nation.

The range of Bernstein's talent was itself astonishing. Although Bernstein took pains to debunk any thought that he had been some sort of “wunderkind” child prodigy, there was nothing in music that Bernstein could not do. He was a truly fine and original pianist, as an early recording of the Beethoven First Piano Concerto



Alan Warren

Conductor: Bernstein in 1973

and his later performance of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* reveal. He could improvise and mimic any style. He composed in every genre. His rapid facility also may have helped betray him. Much of his “serious” music—the *Serenade* and the symphonies, for example—reveals the enduring impression left on him by the music



Bert Blair, courtesy of New York Philharmonic Digital Archives

Communicator: Bernstein brought classical music to millions when he explored the relatively new technology of television on the Young People's Concerts with the New York Philharmonic, shown here in 1958.

of Copland, Stravinsky, and Bartók. Bernstein was at his least derivative when writing for the stage, for dancing and singing.

As a conductor, Bernstein was an original. He transformed the theater of conducting. His charisma, his athleticism, and his unabashed confessional display of emotion on the podium altered the public's expectations of conductors. Owing to Bernstein we no longer describe how we "heard" a concert; rather, we recount how we "saw" a concert. Bernstein turned Richard Strauss's advice to conductors upside down. Strauss cautioned that at a concert only the audience should sweat. The image of Bernstein, drenched in sweat, exhausted and drained after a heart-wrenching traversal of a score in public, set a new standard. What infuriated his critics, however, was that when conducting, Bernstein brought his instincts as a composer to the podium. That may have led to off-putting and idiosyncratic solutions. But he never failed to take thoughtful risks. A Bernstein performance was never dull or routine; moments of insight and originality occurred regularly in his readings of major works, both at the start of his career—an unforgettable Schumann Second—and at the end, with the symphonies of Brahms.

Arts Advocate

What most distinguished Bernstein from other composer-conductors, both contemporaries and predecessors (with the possible ironic exceptions of Richard Wagner and Pierre Boulez), was Bernstein's unique command of language. Bernstein was as much a man of words and ideas as he was of sounds. He had a lifelong fas-

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ination with words and word games, and even invented, as a child, with his siblings, his own language. And he read literature, history, and philosophy avidly and closely, as his six 1973 Harvard Norton Lectures, *The Unanswered Question*, make plain. He wrote fluidly and easily, everything from the poetic declamation in his 1963 "Kaddish" Symphony to his first bestselling popular book, *The Joy of Music*, published in 1959. And he always wrote his own concert lectures for television.

It was Bernstein the orator that really set him apart. No one before or since has

come close to matching the magnetism, charm, and eloquence of Bernstein the speaker and teacher. No one could talk about music so clearly, enthusiastically, and alluringly. It was through his television shows and the broadcasts of his Young People's Concerts that Bernstein became a national figure. He talked about so-called "long hair" music with a disarming absence of pretense, but always with a commanding authority. He made viewers believe that he really wanted them to learn and enjoy music. And by using television he made classical music in America seem an art form fit for a democracy, and much more than a snobbish elite entertainment imported from Europe.

With these gifts Bernstein captured and shaped the spirit of post-World War II America. The Broadway theater music from the mid-1940s on—*On the Town*, *Fancy Free*, and *West Side Story*—gave voice to an America that was moving on a progressive trajectory towards desegregation, social equality, the end to prejudice (particularly anti-Semitism), universal access to education, and perhaps world peace, the Cold War notwithstanding. Bernstein, in all his television appearances, lectures, and performances, articulated an affectionate liberal populism and commitment to accessibility. Music, like language, needed to communicate to the masses, and do so with immediacy.

During the 1950s Bernstein came to symbolize a new, vibrant, young, and triumphant post-War America, just as John F. Kennedy would at the end of the decade. Indeed, the twenty years between the end of World War II and the escalation of the Vietnam War under Lyndon Johnson were the apogee of Bernstein's career in America. Bernstein became gradually less visible and less of a force in the America of Nixon, Carter, and Reagan. The fact that his last moment on the world stage was his now legendary 1989 performance of Beethoven Nine, with an altered text, celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall, was fitting. Although an event entirely consistent with Bernstein's lifelong dedication to freedom and justice, it was a triumph that occurred in Europe, not in his native country.

Above all things Bernstein sought love, first from his family, then his friends, and last the public. And they all gave it

to him, particularly the public. The range and depth of his public still sets Bernstein apart from podium and composer predecessors and successors. Having succeeded in becoming the first American superstar of classical music, in the 1970s Bernstein sought to extend his fame abroad. After stepping down in 1969 as music director of the New York Philharmonic, Bernstein focused on his international career as a conductor, cultivating a special relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic. That relationship benefitted both parties. The orchestra's embrace of Bernstein—who showered Karl Böhm, Vienna's beloved maestro and once an ardent Nazi, with affection—helped diminish the public impact of a growing recognition of the Vienna Philharmonic's dubious history under Nazism. And as an unabashedly proud Jew and supporter of Israel, Bernstein took pains to sustain his unique connection to the Israel Philharmonic—solidified during the country's 1948 war of independence. Until the Nixon years, Bernstein, despite earlier triumphs in London, Prague, and Milan, was world-famous because he was somewhat exotic: a young American conductor. By the end of his life he was Kara-

No one could talk about classical music so clearly, enthusiastically, and alluringly.

jan's only rival. He became an international master, a legendary conductor who incidentally happened to be a composer and an American. Bernstein put his efforts into readings of the standard repertoire, from Tchaikovsky and Mahler to Shostakovich and Stravinsky. He deepened his personal identification with Mahler, whose music (following Bruno Walter and Dimitri Mitropoulos) he helped become part of the standard repertoire. Even a few years after his death in 1990, his career as educator and public figure in America had already receded into memory, a consequence of the marked decline in interest in classical music in America that began in the mid-1970s.

New Beginnings

At the peak of his career—particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the decades immediately following Bernstein's sensational 1943 New York debut, when he stepped



Steve J. Sherman

Well-wishers, among them composer Morton Gould at far right, greet Leonard Bernstein at a gala dinner honoring him during the League of American Orchestras' 1988 Conference in Chicago.

in for Bruno Walter on a nationally broadcast concert that made the front page of the *New York Times*—Bernstein's name remained synonymous with the new. His meteoric rise suggested a watershed. Owing to its deft appropriation of sophisticated compositional practices taken from Copland, Stravinsky, and jazz, and Bernstein's acute sensitivity to the link between text and music, his theater music represented a major advance in the aesthetic of Broadway. Equally novel was the fact that he was an American Jewish celebrity who celebrated his religion and heritage without apology. He found new a way to communicate and reveal the possibilities of television. He brought classical music into America's homes. And he chose not to hide behind his status as an artist. He participated in public life and politics. Bernstein became crucial to the post-Stalin thaw between the United States and the Soviet Union, as his 1959 tour to the Soviet Union with Shostakovich Five demonstrated. At one and the same time Bernstein managed to communicate pride as an American and also tap into the special emotional and tacitly political relationship Russians audiences, under Soviet rule, maintained with listening to music in public. Bernstein did not shy away from

showing his solidarity with liberal causes, particularly the struggle for civil rights in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s.

In his programming as music director of the New York Philharmonic, Bernstein was also the apostle of the new. He advanced the cause of new music. Some may have been dismayed at the relative conservatism of his taste, but Bernstein honored the example set by his patron and mentor, Serge Koussevitzky, and his closest musical friend, Aaron Copland. From Charles Ives to Marc Blitzstein and David Diamond, Bernstein used his unprecedented influence to bring American music to audiences. At the same time, Bernstein embraced his predecessors and the European musical heritage in new ways; he promoted the music of Carl Nielsen and invited Nadia Boulanger to conduct.

But by the end of his career, Bernstein no longer was a symbol of a new beginning. The momentum towards an age of prosperity and innovation for classical music in America, which Bernstein had come to represent, stalled. When Bernstein died, the hope that he would guide the classical music establishment and orchestras to find a central place in American culture had vanished. At the start of his career, Bernstein signaled the possibility that the

worlds of popular music, jazz, and concert music would become connected, and that a gulf between the popular and the so-called “serious” practices of composition would be closed.

Learning from Bernstein

Following the example of Bernstein, it might have been right to expect orchestras in the United States would abandon the habit of expressing a nineteenth-century cultural insecurity by hiring non-American music directors with little connection to the culture and politics of the communities surrounding the civic institution of the orchestra that hired them. Symphony orchestras might forge bonds with their communities, the way Bernstein did, so classical music would become central in America to major political and educational aspirations, and attract larger and younger audiences. But, for the most part, this did not happen.

The leaders within the establishment of institutions of classical music in America failed to learn from Bernstein’s example. As a result, the optimism he inspired faded, particularly in the 1980s. This paralleled a shift in the nation’s politics from liberal to conservative. America ended up treating Bernstein as a unique phenomenon, not a harbinger of the new. Consider who the music directors of America’s 24 largest orchestras (in terms of budget) are. Only six are Americans. Not surprisingly, two of them, Marin Alsop and Michael Tilson Thomas, are Bernstein protégés. The rest are from Europe, Latin America, and Asia and, in my opinion, many of them show little interest in making a difference in the public life of the nation.

In his own manner, James Levine can be said to have followed in Bernstein’s path. He revived the Metropolitan Opera. He promoted American singers and a few new American operas. During his tenure as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (a post that Bernstein coveted and should have been offered), Levine maintained a staunch and unpopular advocacy of American modernist composers, from Milton Babbitt and George Perle to Carter and Charles Wuorinen. For all his gifts—including being a fabulous pianist—Levine has remained, however, a profoundly private person. He never

sought to become the eloquent, entertaining, and ebullient public personality Bernstein was. And he does not compose.

It turns out that Bernstein was not the beginning of a new era. Looking back, his work and career turn out actually to mark the end of an era. He represented an unexpected last hurrah of an old cultural pattern, in which classical music was taken for granted as an essential and significant component of culture and politics. Leonard Bernstein deserves to be remembered with honor, and his work and contributions should be covered with glory and praise because he tried to do something different. He brought learning and dis-

The proper way to honor Bernstein’s memory is to do more than perform his music. We must pick up where he left off and make orchestras and concert life crucial to our communities.

cernment to the public. He sought to elevate taste. He was a teacher. And he showed singular courage and commitment as a musician and a citizen. His achievements should serve as the conscience of every conductor, composer, orchestra manager, and civic leader in the United States.

The tragedy is that we have failed to learn from his example. I suspect that if he were alive he would be astonished at how little classical music matters in our nation. He would be appalled at how vulnerable and invisible orchestras and classical music are in the politics of the nation and their communities. Are we educating a new generation of amateurs and listeners? Are we exploiting new technology the way Bernstein did to advance the cause of the art of music? Have orchestra managers and boards really tried to make their institutions relevant to the communities they serve? Why has the concert repertoire narrowed to a few masterpieces and experienced a persistent dumbing-down? Why so little new music and such a meager representation of music from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Why have we failed to prevent the marginalization of classical music? There certainly are token efforts—a single

concert to support immigrants, and a few efforts at streaming, educational outreach programs, and tweeting gimmicks. But the repertoire remains mired in a predictable and distorted representation of the past and endless repetitions of a few masterworks and embarrassing efforts to curry popular attention with movie music and scores from the musical theater. And audiences, public support, and patronage are in decline.

Bernstein’s career is therefore more relevant today than ever. Classical music and orchestral music in particular can find new audiences and gain a lasting significance in American culture and society. In Bernstein’s spirit Michael Tilson Thomas has made the San Francisco Symphony an important part of the city and he has pioneered with new ideas and new ways of thinking with the New World Symphony in Florida. He has advocated American music and thereby honored Bernstein’s example. Gustavo Dudamel deserves praise for using the Los Angeles Philharmonic to adapt the achievements of El Sistema in that city and for speaking out recently as an advocate for democracy in his home country of Venezuela.

The proper way to honor Bernstein’s memory and achievement is to do more than perform his music. We in the world of classical music must pick up where he left off and make orchestras and concert life crucial to our communities. We must render our artistic tradition an ally of humanism and civility. We must engage in the national struggle against intolerance, prejudice, vulgarity, and ignorance. We must reach a wide public, restore the variety and depth of the historic repertoire, promote new music, harness new technology, and share in the joy of music in a manner that mirrors our commitment to freedom, social justice, and democracy. That is the right way to celebrate, on his 100th birthday, the phenomenon that was Leonard Bernstein. **S**

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Lenny and the League

The American Symphony Orchestra League, as it was known until 2007, enjoyed a long relationship with Leonard Bernstein. As early as 1959, well before Bernstein had become a classical-music legend/superstar, the League bestowed its highest honor, the Gold Baton, on Bernstein “for his television concerts for young people.” Bernstein had begun hosting broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic’s Concerts for Young People the previous year, when he was named the orchestra’s music director—and television was still a relatively new technology.

In 1980, Bernstein gave the keynote address at the League’s Conference, held in New York City. As Chester Lane reported in the August 1980 issue of *Symphony*, “Despite his enormous prestige in the orchestra world, Bernstein opened his address on June 18 with a disarming question: ‘Why me?’ He was alluding to the fact that he had no conducting projects slated for 1980, having reserved the current year ‘exclusively for composing.’ ... Bernstein’s musings on the history of orchestras and orchestral music, however, dispelled all doubts about his claim to authority on the subject. His message was an upbeat one: orchestras have a rich and interesting past as well as a promising future.” (See excerpts from his address at right.)

As part of the League’s American Conducting Program, in 1988 Bernstein worked with three rising conductors during the League Conference in Chicago. Bernstein was in town to conduct the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and all through the week Bernstein ran a masterclass with conductors Leif Bjaland, John Fiore, and Kate Tamarkin. In a special event for Conference delegates, each young conductor led a Strauss work on the first half of a Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert, leaving the second half to Bernstein’s rendering of Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 1. The program was repeated for a CSO subscription audience the following night.



League of American Orchestras

Leonard Bernstein delivers the keynote address at the League of American Orchestras’ 1980 Conference in New York City.

Excerpts from keynote speech by Leonard Bernstein at the American Symphony Orchestra League Conference, June 18, 1980

Let’s ask ourselves: Whence cometh this remarkable phenomenon, this *monstre sacré* known as the Symphony Orchestra? Was it born full-blown, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter? Not at all; it grew and developed concomitantly with the growth and development of a musical form called the symphony, a tonal and dualistic conception which, along with its allied forms of concerto, symphonic poem, and the rest, traversed a fantastic arc from Mozart to Mahler.... The truth is that our present-day



League of American Orchestras

Standing at the lectern from which he delivered his keynote address at the League’s 1980 Conference, Leonard Bernstein is flanked by (left) departing League Board Chairman Karney Hodge and (right) Conference Chairman Irma Lazarus. From far left to right are New York Philharmonic Board Chairman Amyas Ames; National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Livingston Biddle; soprano Beverly Sills, who had just received the League’s Gold Baton award; and newly elected League Board Chairman Mark Bernstein.



Jim Steere



As part of the League's American Conductors Program, Bernstein worked with rising conductors and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra during the 1988 League Conference. Pictured: San Francisco Symphony Affiliate Artist Assistant Conductor Leif Bjaland works with Bernstein and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*.

symphony orchestra is not basically different in concept or composition from that of 1910, say, in spite of the tripling or quintupling of wind instruments, or the addition or invention of the plethora of percussion instruments which sometimes these days seem to be invading the whole stage.



Jim Steere

At the League's American Conductors Program, Bernstein worked with rising conductors and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra during the 1988 League Conference. In photo, Kate Tamarkin, music director of the Fox Valley Symphony Orchestra, rehearses Strauss's *Don Juan* with Bernstein and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Theoretically, one could say that the symphony, as a form, reached its ultimate possibilities with Mahler—certainly Mahler thought so!—but in fact we know that major symphonic works of real significance continued to be written for another thirty-five years.... One cannot simply dismiss such symphonic masterpieces as have come from Sibelius, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Hindemith, Schoenberg, Cop-

land, Stravinsky, Schuman, Bartók.... Curious, isn't it, that the last really great symphony, in the broad classical sense of the term, was Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*, dated 1945, exactly coincident with the end of World War II? It is as though that apocalyptic bomb had demolished not only Hiroshima but, as a side effect, the whole tonal symphonic concept as well....

Where does that leave the symphony orchestra now? Obsolete? A doomed dinosaur? ... In fact, it is precisely in these last thirty-five years that symphony orchestras have had their heyday, have burgeoned and flourished as never before.... The last thirty-five years have seen a creative ferment unprecedented in musical history; composers have struck out in any number of directions, producing a wealth of new works. Not symphonies, maybe, but so what? Where is it written that what we have come to call symphonies must constitute the exclusive repertoire of the symphonic orchestra? We have extraordinary new works from Carter and Berio and Crumb, Boulez, Stockhausen, Foss, Rorem, Corigliano, Schuller ... And these new works do make new demands on our standard orchestra of 70 strings and 30 winds and a handful of percussionists.... These composers are compelling orchestral musicians to hear in new ways, especially in nontonal music; to listen much more attentively to one another ... to be adventurous in much the same way as Beethoven compelled the Haydn orchestra to venture into new territory, or as Debussy did with the orchestra of César Franck.... This rich new area seems to demand different

schedules, different approaches, even, at times, different personnel from those serving at the altar of Brahms....

Then where, you ask, is the time and energy to come from that will permit all this to happen without killing our artists with overwork, or driving them mad with stylistic somersaults? Ah, that is where you come in, my friends: it is your imagination; your new inventive ideas; your flexibility, cooperation, and goodwill that can save the situation. I realize that I am speaking to a highly diverse and composite group representing all aspects of the American symphonic worlds: conductors, managers, agents, composers, union officials, orchestral players, board members—all, I am sure, devoted music lovers, and, I assume, all gathered here at this great conference precisely to determine how to save the situation.... Use this week as a springboard, and then go on learning and understanding one another more and more deeply. It can no longer be Us against Them; it must be only Us. There is no Them—not if music is to survive ...

My friends, all of you together: Interdisciplinary education can do wonders. Understanding and flexibility can do wonders. Yes, even money can do wonders. But the energy, the energy to put all these wonders into action—where does it come from? It will come from where it has always come from: it will come from the love of music, the sheer aesthetic delight in this most mysterious and rewarding of all the arts; from the sporting sense, the instinct for continuity, and the joyful and total dedication of our selves to the art we have sworn to serve. **S**