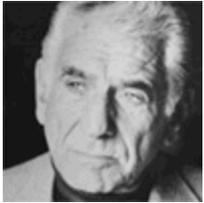


## Leonard Bernstein



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Leonard Bernstein—celebrated as one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century—ushered in an era of major cultural and technological transition. He led the way in advocating an open attitude about what constituted "good" music, actively bridging the gap between classical music, Broadway musicals, jazz, and rock, and he seized new media for its potential to reach diverse communities of listeners, young and old. Longtime conductor of the New York Philharmonic, renowned composer of works for the concert hall and Broadway stage, glamorous television personality, virtuosic pianist, and committed educator, Bernstein was a multi-tasker long before the term was coined. Bernstein—or "Lenny," as he was often affectionately called—was an extravagantly gifted musician with a common touch. He maintained a life-long focus on advocating for social justice, notably civil rights at home and peace around the world. Bernstein's restless creative vision defies traditional categories, with a limber affinity to combining styles and genres in unexpected ways. He wrote music that was often thoroughly accessible on the surface yet presented rewarding challenges for performers. In the process, he shaped works that appealed to musicians of all calibers. Leonard Bernstein was born in 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and the family soon after relocated to Boston. His parents, Samuel Bernstein and Jennie Resnick, were Russian Jewish immigrants whose upward mobility was rapid. As a child, the young Bernstein studied piano and discovered the sheer fun of working in theater. He directed teenage friends in summer productions of *The Mikado*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and *Carmen* (the latter performed in drag and in Yiddish). Thus central traits of the adult Bernstein were apparent early on, including his precocious musicianship, affinity for theater, talent for leadership, and delight in working with young people. Bernstein graduated from Boston Latin High School, then Harvard College (Class of 1939). Two years later, he received a diploma in conducting from the Curtis Institute of Music. While an undergraduate, Bernstein forged a significant alliance with Aaron Copland, impressing the older composer with performances of his *Piano Variations*. Bernstein later recalled tossing off the *Variations* at college parties. "I could empty a room, guaranteed, in two minutes," he quipped. Marc Blitzstein also became a valued mentor: the two men first connected when Bernstein directed *The Cradle Will Rock* as a college senior. During these early years, Bernstein made his first major forays into composition, writing chamber music with a modernist edge. His *Piano Sonata* (1938) reflected his ties to Copland, with links also to the music of Hindemith and Stravinsky, and his *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* (1942) was similarly grounded in a neoclassical aesthetic. The composer Paul Bowles praised the clarinet sonata as having a "tender, sharp, singing quality," as being "alive, tough, integrated." It was a prescient assessment,

which ultimately applied to Bernstein's music in all genres. Bernstein's professional breakthrough came with exceptional force and visibility, establishing him as a stunning new talent. In 1943, at age twenty-five, he made his debut with the New York Philharmonic, replacing Bruno Walter at the last minute and inspiring a front-page story in the *New York Times*. In rapid succession, Bernstein produced a major series of compositions, some drawing on his own Jewish heritage, as in his Symphony No. 1, "Jeremiah," which had its first performance with the composer conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony in January 1944. "Lamentation," its final movement, features a mezzo-soprano delivering Hebrew texts from the Book of Lamentations. In April of that year, Bernstein's *Fancy Free* was unveiled by Ballet Theatre, with choreography by the young Jerome Robbins. In December, Bernstein premiered the Broadway musical *On the Town*, another collaboration with Robbins. While the conception of these two dramatic works was closely intertwined, their plots, music, and choreography were quite different. *Fancy Free* featured three sailors on shore leave in a bar, showing off their physical agility as they competed for the attention of two women. The men were tightly bound to one another. *Fancy Free* fused gymnastics, vaudeville, and cartoons with modern ballet, Latin rhythms, and swing dances. *On the Town* also centered around three sailors, and dance was again central to telling the story. Yet in the Broadway show, the sailors tour New York City to find romance—and just as importantly, they are pursued aggressively by self-confident women. *On the Town* marked Bernstein's first major collaboration with Betty Comden and Adolph Green. It also established a life-long tension between his devotion to high art and popular culture. Bernstein later recalled that the Russian-American conductor Serge Koussevitzky, another of his core mentors, said of *On the Town*: "Good boy, Lenushka, it is a noble jezz." Betty Comden added crisply to that memory: "But don't do it again." Bernstein's ascent continued in the post-war years, and the geographic range of his activities broadened as trans-Atlantic travel resumed. In 1946, he debuted in Europe, conducting in Prague and London. That same year he met the Chilean actress Felicia Montealgre Cohn, whom he married in 1951. Bernstein's life-long devotion to the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra also began during this period. Two major post-war compositions were the ballet *Facsimile* (1946), conceived with Jerome Robbins and premiered by Ballet Theatre, and Symphony No. 2, "The Age of Anxiety" (1949), first performed by Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In both works, Bernstein explored personal challenges in a world emerging from trauma. *Facsimile* concentrated on a romantic tangle of two men and one woman who "grappled with abstract psychological ideas," as *Life Magazine* described it at the time. The ballet portrayed "moods of passion, jealousy and boredom that attack . . . 'insecure people.'" Symphony No. 2, for orchestra and piano solo, was based on W. H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, a book-length poem. Like *Facsimile*, the symphony probed isolation and loneliness in the modern world. It was written in two large "parts": "The Masque," one of its internal sections, features an infectious jazz-based piano solo. Once again, core traits of Bernstein's style were present: confronting the realities of contemporary life while negotiating a balance between popular and concert idioms. During this same period, Bernstein composed *Four Anniversaries* (1948) and *Five Anniversaries* (1949–51), written for piano solo. Each segment was dedicated to a different friend – a technique related to the musical portraits of Virgil Thomson. From 1950 until 1958, when Bernstein accepted an appointment as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, he focused on composing music for the stage, together with

one film score. This highly productive phase yielded *Peter Pan* (1950), *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952), *Wonderful Town* (1953), *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Candide* (1956), and *West Side Story* (1957). In 1954, Bernstein debuted in the "Omnibus" series, inaugurating a long and successful career on television. Among this remarkable series of theatrical scores, *West Side Story* stands as a towering achievement, ranking as one of the most famous works of all time, regardless of genre. Bernstein's collaborators included Arthur Laurents (book), Jerome Robbins (choreography), and Stephen Sondheim (lyrics). The show confronted urban gang violence and discrimination against new immigrants. At the same time, it delivered compelling entertainment. The edgy finger snaps at the opening of the show are among the core sound bites of the 20th century. The Overture to *Candide*, which Bernstein premiered in a concert version with the New York Philharmonic in 1957, became another of his most beloved works. The Overture is often programmed as a curtain-raiser—a four-minute burst of energy with a lickety-split tempo and dazzling virtuosity. When Bernstein's leadership of the New York Philharmonic began in 1958, it moved his career as a conductor to the fore. He immediately began televising the orchestra's "Young People's Concerts," which have touched the lives of countless viewers over the decades; he promoted the music of American composers with vigor; and he gained renown as an interpreter of Gustav Mahler's music. Under Bernstein's direction, the Philharmonic moved to Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, and it made highly publicized tours of Europe, the Soviet Union, Latin America, and Japan. Bernstein's creative life continued during these years, albeit at a slower pace. In 1961, a film version of *West Side Story* was released, contributing substantially to the canonization of the work. Then in 1963, Bernstein premiered his Symphony No. 3, "Kaddish" in Tel Aviv. Based on a traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, the symphony was written for narrator, soprano, boys' choir, and SATB choir, with orchestra. The assassination of John F. Kennedy occurred a few weeks before the work's first performance, and Bernstein dedicated the piece to the memory of a president who shared his progressive ideals. During the 1964–65 season, Bernstein took a sabbatical from the Philharmonic to free up time for composition, and *Chichester Psalms* (1965) was a major result. Yet another work targeted to diverse performers and audiences, it has joined the ranks of Bernstein's most-performed compositions. While drafting *Chichester Psalms*, Bernstein said he wanted the music to be "forthright, songful, rhythmic, youthful," which is precisely what he achieved. *Chichester Psalms* pulsates with hybridity. Responding to a commission from an Anglican cathedral, the work incorporated texts from the Hebrew Bible while drawing upon the rhythms and harmonies of jazz. In 1969, Bernstein stepped down from the New York Philharmonic, taking on a new role as Laureate Conductor. While launching a major new phase as a world-renowned guest conductor, notably with the Vienna Philharmonic, Bernstein also reaffirmed his commitment to composition, producing an impressive series of works that have yet to receive the attention they deserve. An ambitiously eclectic work, *Mass: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers* was composed in 1971 for the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. Stephen Schwartz was co-lyricist, and Alvin Ailey the choreographer. Written for a cast of over 200, including a rock band, marching band, multiple choruses, and pit orchestra, *Mass* had few precedents. The work resounds with Bernstein's pacifist and ecumenical passions, highlighting youth culture and issues of social justice. With *Mass*, Bernstein "went electric," as Bob Dylan and Miles Davis had done a few years earlier. In 1974, *Dybbuk*, the third ballet of Bernstein and

Robbins, received its debut with the New York City Ballet. In it, they turned to their shared Jewish heritage, drawing on a Yiddish folk drama. Then during the American Bicentennial, Bernstein opened a brand-new Broadway musical: *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* (1976), with a book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner. The show was written in the wake of Richard Nixon's impeachment and cast a skeptical eye on residents of the White House, portraying a race-based upstairs-downstairs scenario in which the ruling class was white and the servants were black. The critical reception was harsh, and the show closed after only a few nights. *A White House Cantata*, a work for chorus, was arranged posthumously from segments of *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, and it has enjoyed considerable success. Other notable compositions from Bernstein's final period include *Slava!* (1977), which is an energetic concert-opener. *Slava!* also drew upon excerpts from *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* and was dedicated to the Russian cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich. The opera *A Quiet Place*, with a libretto by Bernstein and Stephen Wadsworth, appeared in 1983, with a major revision the following year. Conceived as a sequel to *Trouble in Tahiti*, the opera revolved around a family that has gathered for a funeral and grapples with one another's differences. Other late works include *Concerto for Orchestra ("Jubilee Games")* (1986–89), with its popular Benediction for baritone and orchestra, and *Missa Brevis* (1988), a choral work based on Bernstein's *The Lark*. Bernstein died in 1990. In an ongoing tribute to its esteemed maestro, the New York Philharmonic continues to perform the Overture to *Candide* without a conductor. At the same time, ever-new CD and DVD releases keep his presence quite vivid in the public sphere. Bernstein's songs constitute a major part of his legacy. Often conceived within larger works, they include "New York, New York" and "Some Other Time" from *On the Town*; "It's Love" from *Wonderful Town*; "Make Our Garden Grow" from *Candide*; "One Hand, One Heart," "Tonight," "Maria," "I Feel Pretty," and "Somewhere" from *West Side Story*; "A Simple Song" from *Mass*; and "Take Care of this House" from *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*. "The tunes themselves . . . make or break a show score," Bernstein once acknowledged, and writing memorable tunes—the kind that give singers a thrill and capture an audience's imagination—is a separate skill from composing a symphony. Bernstein's brilliance resulted from a capacity to do both. At times, his tunes fuse popular song with operatic flourishes, and their distinctive beauty often emanates from unconventional harmonies and melodic intervals. Think of the soul-searching leap that opens "Somewhere" or the gripping tonal ambiguities of "A Simple Song." Some of his songs have entered a pantheon of America's all-time greatest hits. The intimate declaration of commitment in "One Hand, One Heart" has been reiterated at countless weddings, and "New York, New York" serves as an informal theme song for the city it celebrates. Other notable vocal works by Bernstein include *Songfest*, a cycle for six singers and orchestra from 1977, and *Arias and Barcarolles*, a suite of songs for mezzo-soprano and baritone that reflects on life's odyssey through love and marriage. It was his last major work. Viewed as a whole, Bernstein's compositional output was exceptionally varied, with a core trait of transcending traditional boundaries. He thrived in collaborative, creative environments. He had a deep love for the community-based musicianship of the symphony orchestra, and he wrote with great joy for the Broadway stage. Bernstein's delicious sense of humor sparkled all over the place. Yet he also had the courage to tackle the most profound questions of the human experience. \_\_Carol J. Oja\_\_ New York, 2015