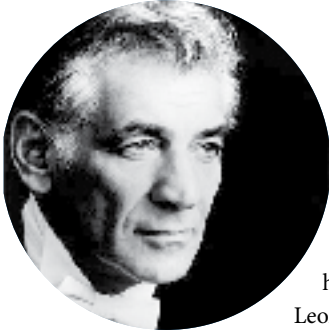


Leonard Bernstein: "Music's Monarch"

by Laurie Shulman



A great many Americans grew up with the three "B"s in music almost as surely as they did the three "R"s in school. Reading, writing and arithmetic were the stuff of elementary education; Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms were the cornerstones of classical music. Music lovers know that a disproportionate number of other great composers have last names beginning with the second letter of the alphabet: Bartók, Berg, Berlioz, Bizet, Britten and Bruckner, to name just a handful. The Minnesota Orchestra focuses this month on America's great 20th-century "B": Leonard Bernstein.

When Bernstein died in October 1990, *The New York Times* ran his obituary at the top of its front page, calling him "Music's Monarch." Teenagers and 20-somethings who have grown up with iPods, ring tones and YouTube may find such a sweeping headline puzzling—Leonard *who*? To older Americans, however, Leonard Bernstein was a household name. For half a century, he dominated America's musical life like no other figure.

a master communicator

The festival's all-Bernstein programs touch on most, if not all, of this man's domains: Broadway and ballet, film and television, opera and operetta, symphonic literature, even a Mass. But with any sampling of his wonderful compositions, we are only scratching the surface of Bernstein's prodigious gifts. His almost superhuman talent also encompassed stellar work as a pianist, conductor, author, teacher, poet and lecturer. In short: he was a master communicator.



Bernstein at the piano, 1944.

Born in 1918 to Russian Jewish immigrant parents in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Bernstein was a bit of a late bloomer: he didn't begin formal piano lessons until his early teens. He was, however, smart, gifted, motivated and hard-working. Soon he had an impressive keyboard command of jazz, boogie-woogie and Tin Pan Alley standards as well as the classical repertoire.

Bernstein enrolled in Harvard in 1934, studying composition and orchestration. Piano remained his principal interest, and by the late 1930s he was giving concerts as pianist-composer and publishing writings on music. Thanks largely to Dimitri Mitropoulos, he had also become interested in conducting. They had met in 1937, the same year the Greek conductor became music director of the then-Minneapolis Symphony. Two years later, shortly before graduating, Bernstein made his debut on the Harvard podium.

Soon Bernstein was studying with Serge Koussevitzky at the Berkshire Music Center, admitted to a master class in conducting that the Russian maestro limited to only five participants. Bernstein was the class star, and Koussevitzky adopted him as his heir apparent. For Bernstein, the Berkshire experience launched what would become a lifelong relationship not only with Koussevitzky, but also with the Center and its Tanglewood Festival.



Bernstein, 1939; photo inscribed to his piano teacher, Helen Coates.



The composer at work, 1945.

overnight fame

On Koussevitzky's recommendation, Artur Rodzinski hired Bernstein in 1943 to be assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic. His big break occurred when he was a last-minute substitute for the ailing Bruno Walter: he conducted a concert broadcast nationally, and it was a huge success.

Writer Peter Gutmann quotes a recollection of that historic concert by Jacques Margolis, a violinist with New York Philharmonic:

"You just couldn't believe that a young man could create that kind of music.

Here were players in their 50s and 60s with long experience. And here this little snout-nose comes in and creates a more exciting performance. We were supposed to have gone over it with Bruno Walter, we had rehearsed it with him and performed it with him, and this had nothing to do with Bruno Walter. The orchestra stood up and cheered. We were open-mouthed. That man was the most extraordinary musician I have ever met in my life."

The audience clearly agreed, and *The New York Times* placed its review on the front page. Virtually overnight, Bernstein was famous.

The blur of his activities over the next two decades is astounding. Reams of marvelous music flowed from his pen, including the ballet *Fancy Free*, the *Jeremiah* and *Age of Anxiety* Symphonies, the soundtrack to the film *On the Waterfront*, the operetta *Candide* and, of course, Broadway's *West Side Story*.



"a natural asset"

In 1954 he wrote and appeared in several telecasts of *Omnibus*, a CBS series exploring various aspects of the cultural arts. Bernstein focused on how to understand Bach and Beethoven. His programs drew wide audiences and ecstatic reviews. In the *New York Herald Tribune*, TV critic John Crosby wrote:

"This is the sort of teaching that I had visions of television doing in all the arts and sciences. One great teacher bursting with vitality and personality and information could spread his culture all over the country, assaulting you in a physical wave to such a degree that a short course in opera sticks in a million craniums forevermore. It's quite a feat if you can bring it off and Bernstein can and does. He's a natural asset, that young man, and one we should treasure."

Four years later, Bernstein inaugurated the now legendary series of Young People's Concerts. That series, which continued for 15 years, was syndicated in translation to some 40 countries around the globe. In America, tens of thousands of baby boomers learned to love classical music through Bernstein's pioneering programs.

WAMSO founder and Minnesota Orchestra Life Director Rosalynn Pflaum welcoming Bernstein to Minneapolis to conduct the then-Minneapolis Symphony, 1947.



Indeed, Bernstein’s impact as educator was perhaps equally great as his achievement as conductor and composer. He was an ambassador for music in multifarious ways, always communicating his passion—whether moderating a children’s concert or delivering the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard.



Bernstein conducting Mahler’s Ninth Symphony with the Vienna Philharmonic.

Somehow he maintained a frenetic conducting schedule as well. As music director of the New York Philharmonic from 1958 to 1969, he toured extensively with the orchestra, raising its international profile—and his own. His obsession with the symphonies of Gustav Mahler was a prime reason those works were assimilated into the standard orchestral repertoire.

Even Vienna, the city of Mahler and home to the illustrious Vienna State Opera and Vienna Philharmonic, was captivated by Bernstein’s charisma and sheer musicality. On the occasion of Bernstein’s 70th birthday in 1988, Marcel Prawy, longtime director of education at the Vienna State Opera, reminisced:

“Vienna’s love affair with the Maestro started with Der Rosenkavalier—a new production (1968) of this most Viennese of all operas, staged by the most Viennese of all stage directors, Otto Schenk, at the Staatsoper. Was it really necessary, some people asked themselves, to engage an American to teach our musicians how to play Richard Strauss? Gloom was predicted for the rehearsals. But he came and worked on an unusual cello decrescendo in the prelude to the Italian singer’s aria and on previously uninterpreted nuances in the waltz. Total authority was established at once; total love followed soon thereafter....Leonard Bernstein and Vienna, reciprocal love.”

Bernstein was no saint. His well-publicized indiscretions plagued him for much of his adult life. On balance, however, one remains in awe of his level of productivity and his extraordinary gift for dissolving the boundaries that can exist between various “compartments” of music: classical, jazz, pop, rock, Broadway. (Were he around today, one feels certain he would have embraced hip-hop.)

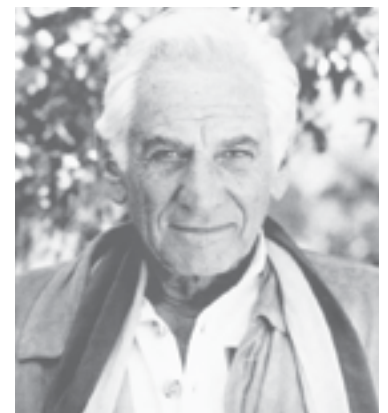
the composer’s legacy

His most enduring legacy, of course, is his compositions. In the popular arena, *West Side Story* arguably changed the course of Broadway musical theater. Bernstein’s serious concert works now are being reevaluated and appreciated for their originality, compositional skill and emotional appeal. Despite the stylistic sprawl among his compositions, however, they are curiously of a piece. There may be shifting proportions of passion, reverence, humor, tenderness, grief, *chutzpah* and delicacy in Bernstein’s music. But a fierce determination to communicate music’s visceral power courses through every work that he wrote.

In this 90th birthday season, 18 years after his death, Bernstein remains an icon of 20th-century America: a musician who lived larger, and more creatively, than virtually any other.

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Dallas-based author and annotator Laurie Shulman provides program notes for five orchestras around the country as well as for chamber music series and summer festivals; she is also a popular pre-concert speaker and writer of CD liner notes. She focused on European history before earning a Ph.D. in historical musicology at Cornell University and regularly contributes to The New Grove and other significant classical music publications. This is the fifth year the Minnesota Orchestra has counted her among its annotators.



Bernstein’s final portrait, 1990.