

One of the greatest musical figures of the 20th century

The centenary of Leonard Bernstein—Part 1

By Fred Mazelis
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This is the first part of a two-part series on the life and career of Leonard Bernstein.

Leonard Bernstein, the American composer, conductor, pianist and teacher, who was born 100 years ago on August 25, 1918, and died on October 14, 1990, was one of the greatest musical figures of the 20th century.

The centenary of his birth is being marked around the world. The celebrations include 2,000 events on six continents. In the two weeks leading up to the actual date of the centenary, concerts have been scheduled in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Fort Worth, the Tanglewood Festival in Massachusetts and the Guthrie Center in Minneapolis, among many other American locations.

Bernstein's operetta masterpiece *Candide* is being presented at the Santa Fe Opera, the Glimmerglass Festival in upstate New York and as far away as Helsinki, Finland. Major concerts and other events are scheduled in Puerto Rico, Britain, Germany, Austria, Hong Kong, Mexico, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Australia and Indonesia, which is a far from complete list. Bernstein's compositions and recordings are being broadcast on radio and television worldwide.

Bernstein has already been the subject of many biographies, memoirs and studies. Among the most useful are the exhaustive account (simply *Leonard Bernstein*) by the British music producer and Bernstein collaborator Humphrey Burton, from 1993; *Leonard Bernstein: An American Musician*, a concise history by composer and educator Allen Shawn, published in 2014, focusing particularly on Bernstein's musical development and legacy; and Barry Seldes's 2009 volume, entitled *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of An American Musician*. I have largely drawn upon the Burton, Shawn and Seldes books for the following assessment of Bernstein's life and legacy.

There was simply no one else in the modern era who combined Bernstein's genius as a composer, conductor, educator and pianist. Each of these aspects of the life of this multi-faceted musician could easily merit a lengthy essay. Those who have written on Bernstein, however, have found it understandably difficult to separate the strands of his various musical contributions. Perhaps the best description was given by the Polish-American pianist Arthur Rubinstein (1887–1982), himself one of the greatest virtuosos of the century. After a 1966 concert, Rubinstein described Bernstein as “the greatest pianist among conductors, the greatest conductor among composers, the greatest composer among pianists... He is a universal genius.”

The various elements of Bernstein's musical life were inseparably linked by an all-consuming passion to communicate with his audience, which to Bernstein meant all of humanity. In this decisive respect, he was the polar opposite of those like his contemporary, the 20th century atonal composer Milton Babbitt, who notoriously declared in a 1958 magazine article, “The composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute and voluntary withdrawal from [the] public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its

very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition.”

As a composer, Bernstein was undoubtedly best known for his major works for the musical theater: *On the Town*, *Wonderful Town*, *Candide* and *West Side Story*. But he also composed three symphonies, much other orchestral music, several ballets, chamber music, two operas and other vocal music. According to Humphrey Burton's foreword to the 2017 edition of his biography, in the roughly quarter of a century after the composer's death, interest in his music continued to grow, as measured both in royalties from performances of such works as *West Side Story*, as well as the fact that even a lesser-known work, *Chichester Psalms* (1965), had received over 900 professional performances since his death.

The scale of Bernstein's career as a conductor is suggested by the size of the anniversary box set of all of his audio and DVD recordings—121 CDs and 36 DVDs—that is now available from Deutsche Grammophon and Decca. In the last 20 years of Bernstein's life, he conducted 42 different orchestras, including the world famous Vienna Philharmonic, the London Symphony, the Royal Concertgebouw of Amsterdam, the Israel Philharmonic and, of course, the New York Philharmonic, which made him laureate conductor in 1969, when he left after 11 years as music director.

The third major leg on which Bernstein's legacy rests is as an educator. On this score, there is simply no competition, before or since. Between 1958 and the end of 1971, Bernstein presented 53 televised “Young People's Concerts.” Before these programs, which introduced classical music to millions of young listeners, Bernstein was already well known through his appearances on the CBS television “Omnibus” series. He inaugurated this aspect of his career with a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in 1954. This was followed, over the next few years, by programs entitled “The World of Jazz,” “The Art of Conducting,” “American Musical Comedy,” “Introduction to Modern Music,” “The Music of J.S. Bach” and “What Makes Opera Grand?”

Leonard Bernstein was born into an immigrant Russian-Jewish family in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Samuel Bernstein, his father, had escaped poverty and Tsarist oppression as a teenager in 1908. By the time of Leonard's birth, he was already on his way toward business success as a beauty products wholesaler in the Boston area and elsewhere in New England. His mother, Jennie, also born in the Ukraine, arrived in the US in 1905, at the age of seven.

Leonard began piano lessons at ten years old and quickly advanced. When he showed an increasing desire to make music his life's goal, however, his father strongly resisted, and it was only the younger man's determination, coupled with the recognition of his teachers and the unmistakable signs of his genius, that gradually weakened the older man's opposition.

By the time Bernstein entered Harvard in the mid-1930s, his gifts were increasingly apparent. The young man was not the stereotypical prodigy who has difficulty interacting with others. He was quite the opposite—an

extrovert, supremely self-confident but also able to listen, soak up knowledge and gather around him a wide circle of friends.

Bernstein was only 19 when he met three of the musical figures who had a lasting impact on his career. These included the conductor Dmitri Mitropoulos (1896–1960) and the composer Aaron Copland (1900–1990), both about 20 years Bernstein’s senior, who became lifelong friends and mentors. He also met a young lyricist, Adolph Green, who along with his collaborator Betty Comden would play a major role in another side of the young man’s budding career, in the musical theater.

The growing circle of collaborators was not the outcome of blind luck. Everywhere he went he immediately impressed his peers. As Shawn puts it, “He seemed to know every song ever written, lyrics included... Years later, as Comden wrote, if they forgot an old lyric, they would call Leonard and he would immediately sing the entire song for them.” And this was combined with an ability to organize musical productions, to sight read with amazing speed and an equal facility with classical music theory and composition.

Bernstein also met Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964) around this time. Blitzstein became well known for *The Cradle Will Rock*, the 1937 musical about labor struggles that was directed by the young Orson Welles and staged in New York City in defiance of an attempt to shut it down. Blitzstein was for a period of time a member of the American Communist Party and Copland was sympathetic to the CP. Green and Comden were also left-wingers. Bernstein traveled in these circles and moved sharply to the left during his Harvard years. Copland and Blitzstein were major influences on both Bernstein’s music and his political outlook.

It was the era of the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism in Germany and Spain, the explosive growth of industrial unionism in the US and the growing portents of a second world war. A broad layer of workers and intellectuals was attracted to socialism. Bernstein and others looked with sympathy on the Soviet Union, but for the most part did not distinguish between the Stalinist perversion of socialism and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Their militant but ill-defined anti-fascism was channeled into support for Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party via the policy of the Popular Front, which claimed that support for bourgeois liberalism was the only means of stopping the Nazis.

Bernstein threw himself into his music and also sought to use his gifts for political causes. After he saw *The Cradle Will Rock* in New York he returned to Harvard and organized a performance there. In the late 1930s and also during World War II, he lent his name to various campaigns in which the American Stalinists played a role.

These activities would come back to haunt the young composer and conductor during the vicious anti-communism of the McCarthy period. As early as the 1939 production of *The Cradle Will Rock* at Harvard, the FBI had opened a file on Bernstein. J. Edgar Hoover’s political police noted his appearances with such figures as Paul Robeson, Dashiell Hammett, Rockwell Kent and Lena Horne in the 1940s.

In 1940, Bernstein had come to the attention of Serge Koussevitzky (1874–1951), the Russian-born conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and one of the most admired figures in the field of classical music. Koussevitzky quickly took Bernstein under his wing at the Tanglewood Summer Music Festival, which had just been founded in western Massachusetts.

Copland and Koussevitzky insisted that Bernstein dedicate himself to becoming the first famous American-born conductor. Others, including American composer Virgil Thomson, urged him to concentrate on composing. Bernstein himself tried to juggle the different aspects of his musical career over the next decade, including dividing his composing efforts between musical theater and the concert stage. For the most part, however, he followed the stern instructions of Koussevitzky to focus on conducting.

On the strength of his musical gifts, Bernstein became assistant

conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra when he was only 25 years old. Then, on November 14, 1943, conductor Bruno Walter took ill and the young assistant was called upon to substitute. After only brief last-minute consultation with Walter, Bernstein led the orchestra in a demanding program that included Schumann’s *Manfred Overture*, Richard Strauss’s *Don Quixote* and Wagner’s Overture to *Die Meistersinger*. The response was electric, both in Carnegie Hall and across the US as the result of the nationwide radio broadcast. From that day forward, Bernstein’s name never dimmed in musical circles and among the broader public as well.

Bernstein’s three-pronged musical career, between the time of his Carnegie Hall debut and his death 47 years later, falls roughly into several somewhat overlapping periods. He later confessed to the enormous stress of dividing his life between what he termed the “introspective” process of composing and the conductor’s life as “an extrovert.”

From 1943 to 1957 he split his time between conducting (including a three-year stint as the conductor of the New York City Symphony in the late 1940s) and composing, including—in the 1950s—some of the works for which he is most renowned. These were also the years in which his historic television presentations began.

This was followed by the period 1958 to 1969 in which he led the New York Philharmonic. The 1960s was the decade in which Bernstein reached the summit of his fame, but it was also one in which he did almost no composing and his reputation began to suffer, with critics faulting both his conducting and composition.

His retirement from the Philharmonic was followed by two decades in which he continued with a hectic and fulfilling schedule of conducting and also composing. For the most part, however, this was a period in which Bernstein was beset with doubts about his composing career.

In discussing Bernstein as composer, conductor and educator, it must also not be forgotten that, as is generally acknowledged, he could have enjoyed an international career as a concert pianist had he so chosen. To mark his centenary, an 11-CD box set has been issued of his recorded performances as a pianist, including renditions of some of Mozart’s piano concertos, concertos of Beethoven and Shostakovich, Bernstein playing the Ravel *Piano Concerto in G* and Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* while conducting from the keyboard, and Bernstein accompanying some of his friends and colleagues, including singers Christa Ludwig, Jennie Tourel and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, in songs of Mahler, Schumann, Brahms and others.

Bernstein had already begun a composing career before the Carnegie Hall debut. Some chamber music, including his clarinet sonata and a trio for piano, violin and cello, dates from the early 1940s. In 1943 he entered a New England Conservatory of Music competition for the best new work by an American composer. Bernstein was inspired to write his *Jeremiah* Symphony, a three-movement work played without pause. The third movement, featuring a mezzo-soprano soloist, borrowed from a *Lamentation* based in part on Hebrew liturgical themes he had composed some years earlier.

The *Jeremiah*, written as an angry lament in the face of the Nazi extermination of most of European Jewry, did not win the prize, but it marked a step forward for the young composer. This youthful work has a distinctive character, including some passages that call to mind the tragic music being composed at exactly that moment by Dmitri Shostakovich.

Bernstein also met the young choreographer Jerome Robbins (1918–1998) in 1943, and the two men quickly became a creative team. The first product of their collaboration was the ballet *Fancy Free*, which premiered to great acclaim the next year. *Fancy Free* was followed in December 1944 by *On the Town*, a musical based on the same concept as the ballet—that of sailors on shore leave in New York—but with a somewhat changed story and with different music. With Betty Comden and Adolph Green now working with Bernstein as lyricists, the result was

the first of the major theatrical successes for the composer over the next 15 years or so.

Fancy Free and *On the Town* were characterized by a musical idiom that became synonymous with Bernstein. It was a distinctive voice, an optimistic and popular one that fused elements of jazz, popular song and classical technique into a satisfying whole. Within a year of his splashy Carnegie Hall debut, Bernstein had followed with success in a very different arena, the Broadway musical theater. Some of the songs from *On the Town* have become standards, including “New York, New York,” “I Can Cook, Too,” “Carried Away” and “Lonely Town.”

Koussevitzky did not approve of Bernstein’s excursion away from the conductor’s podium. It is not possible to overestimate the influence the Boston conductor had on the young musician, and for the most part the composer shifted gears once again back to conducting for the rest of the 1940s. There were some exceptions, however, and one of them was Bernstein’s Second Symphony, *The Age of Anxiety*.

Very loosely inspired by the lengthy poem of the same name by W. H. Auden, this work is not programmatic in character. In essence a concerto for piano and orchestra, it was premiered in 1949 by the Boston Symphony under Koussevitzky. *The Age of Anxiety* shows a somewhat gloomier and pessimistic side of Bernstein’s outlook, one that came forward at various times in the course of his career. Auden’s poem was said to be influenced by the psychology of Carl Jung. This was Bernstein turning inward to an extent, expressing an alienation that afflicted wide layers of the intelligentsia in the wake of the Holocaust.

The 1950s became the heyday of Leonard Bernstein as a composer. It was also, between 1950 and 1954, the peak of the anti-communist witch hunt. Many careers of left-wing actors and performers were destroyed or derailed, especially in Hollywood, and some succumbed in the form of premature death or suicide. A number of Bernstein’s close friends, like Copland, faced at least temporary difficulties. Bernstein himself was listed as a “fellow traveler” in the notorious *Red Channels* publication in 1950. His application for a passport renewal was rejected in 1953, jeopardizing an upcoming international tour, until he submitted a humiliating legal affidavit confessing to alleged naïveté in his political associations and attesting to his anti-communism.

Biographer Shawn sums up this painful episode when he writes that Bernstein “surely must have felt he was betraying those who had stood up under pressure, or those who, like Paul Robeson, had had their international careers ruined because of their views. Signing his name to the document made a mockery of his own contempt for the investigation, which he actually regarded as ‘a farce,’ an incursion on free speech, and part of a strategy to undermine support for legitimate revolutions abroad.”

There is ample reason to believe that, on some level, this experience haunted Bernstein for the rest of his life. His real naïveté was not about the alleged danger of Marxism, but about the nature of the capitalist state and imperialist reaction. In the end, he had not “named names,” as did Robbins and filmmaker Elia Kazan, but he had given in to the witch hunters. Bernstein worked with both Robbins and Kazan in the next few years—with Robbins on *West Side Story* and with Kazan on the film *On the Waterfront*, for which Bernstein wrote the score.

The early 1950s also saw a major turning point in Bernstein’s personal life. The composer, who made little secret of his homosexuality to close friends and colleagues, had also had a number of relationships with women. In 1951, after much hesitation, he married the Chilean-born actress Felicia Montealegre, with whom he had three children: Jamie, Alexander and Nina. Bernstein’s wife knew and accepted the fact that he was gay. The marriage lasted 27 years, until her death from cancer in 1978. It was an unconventional union, with the composer reportedly having a number of discreet relationships with men, but there is no doubt that he and Felicia shared a deep and loving bond. In the mid-1970s, however, they separated for a brief period before he returned, caring for

her in her last days.

Amidst the big changes in his family life as well as the stresses brought on by the witch hunt, Bernstein’s composing career flourished. One factor was undoubtedly the death of Koussevitzky in 1951. Although Bernstein mourned the passing of his beloved mentor, he also felt freer to return to the musical theater.

Wonderful Town, which opened in 1953, was another collaboration with the team of Comden and Green. It was based on *My Sister Eileen*, a series of autobiographical short stories by Ruth McKenney, later turned into a play and a movie, about two young women from the Midwest who come to New York in the 1930s to look for jobs and fulfillment. There was also a political subtext, insofar as McKenney had been part of the left-wing milieu and a member of the Communist Party at the time her stories were written. *Wonderful Town* was another success in the mold of *On the Town* almost ten years earlier. Its songs include the classics “Ohio” and “A Little Bit in Love,” along with the famous opening number, “Christopher Street.”

The pinnacle of Bernstein’s achievements in the musical theater came with the operetta *Candide* and the musical *West Side Story*, opening in quick succession in 1956 and 1957.

The fusion of music and lyrics in *Candide*, based on the satirical novella of the same title (published in 1759) by French Enlightenment writer Voltaire, was far more complex and scintillating than in the composer’s previous work. Lillian Hellman’s libretto was heavily criticized, and clearly the artistic relationship between Hellman and Bernstein, while they remained personally close, was not what the composer enjoyed with Comden and Green. The subject was a more ambitious one than had so far been undertaken by Bernstein, and the original production was unsuccessful.

Candide went through numerous rewrites and productions with different librettists. A successful version ran on Broadway in 1973. Eventually, an “opera version” was completed, enjoying a successful run at the New York City Opera in 1982, with a subsequent revival in 2017. A concert version in London in 1989 starring, among others, Adolph Green, June Anderson and the incomparable Christa Ludwig as the Old Lady, and conducted by Bernstein less than a year before his death, was a stunning success and was captured on video.

Candide has been performed all over the world in recent decades. There were many who found fault with the adaptation, but they missed its artful combination of seriousness and fun. Bernstein’s music was never more sophisticated and marvelous, drawing on many different musical styles. This is a work that belongs in opera houses as much as Franz Lehar’s *The Merry Widow*, with its old-fashioned Viennese charm and melodic waltz tunes. “I Am Easily Assimilated,” “Quiet,” “Eldorado,” “What’s the Use?” and the brilliant coloratura aria “Glitter and Be Gay” are some of *Candide*’s most famous numbers, moments of beautiful lyricism alongside gleaming wordplay. The Overture has become an orchestral staple, and the original cast album, starring Barbara Cook and Robert Rounseville, remains a glorious expression of Bernstein’s genius more than 60 years later.

West Side Story, with collaborators Jerome Robbins and Stephen Sondheim, was Bernstein’s biggest commercial and popular success. Bernstein complained at times that some musical numbers he prized were being sacrificed at the insistence of his collaborators. In this writer’s opinion, the final outcome is a somewhat less challenging and original experience than *Candide*, but it has its undisputed claims to greatness. Its score includes such classics as “Something’s Coming,” “Maria,” “One Hand, One Heart,” “I Feel Pretty,” “Tonight” and “There’s a Place For Us.”

The musical is remarkable for its passionate and searing protest against American society, communicated through the eyes of rival gangs of American and Puerto Rican descent. Its political strength is its depiction

of the essential commonality of aspirations and problems of the rival, battling gangs, both of which endure poverty and police repression. Appearing at the height of the post-war boom, when academia and official society were obsessed with the image of the “affluent American” and the supposed scourge of juvenile delinquency, the work resonated deeply with a mass audience, and continues to do so today.

Critic Harold Clurman, one of the founders of the famed Group Theatre in New York in the 1930s, was one of the few who attacked *West Side Story*, terming it “phony” and claiming it indulged in “popular showmanship.” As has been pointed out, similar criticism was directed at *Show Boat* and *Porgy and Bess* in their time. What Clurman would not acknowledge was the connection between the power of the words and music, and the musical’s sincere defense of racial and social equality.

Candide was no doubt seen by Bernstein as an answer to the witch-hunters, who had only recently retreated somewhat, in the wake of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s censure by the US Senate in 1954. All of Bernstein’s efforts on Broadway had featured, in a broad sense, social or political themes. *On the Town* and *Wonderful Town* dealt with the lives of ordinary people and their struggles. *Candide* was more pointed in its satire, and *West Side Story* updated Shakespeare’s tale of Romeo and Juliet to present a theme of unity in the face of ethnic tensions and prejudice.

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Books and links:

Leonard Bernstein: An American Musician, Allen Shawn, Yale University Press, 2014

Leonard Bernstein, Humphrey Burton, Faber and Faber, 1993

Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician, Barry Seldes, University of California Press, 2009

Candide (1989 performance):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMizHnyuiNY>

West Side Story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Af3L9btBhuQ>

Jeremiah Symphony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3A45VcmymenA>

Bernstein conducting and performing George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH2PH0auTUU>

To be continued

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