

One of the greatest musical figures of the 20th century

The centenary of Leonard Bernstein—Part 2

By Fred Mazelis
25 August 2018

This is the second and concluding part of a series on the life and career of Leonard Bernstein, born 100 years ago August 25. The first part can be accessed [here](#).

The great success of *West Side Story* in 1957 was soon followed by Leonard Bernstein's inaugural appearance on the podium with the New York Philharmonic as its "music-director-elect." For the next 11 years, his life was largely consumed with all the duties associated with leading one of the world's major orchestras, including programming, performance, auditions and a host of administrative and publicity tasks.

Bernstein quickly placed his stamp on the Philharmonic. In the first few years he programmed series of concerts on American music of the 20th century, the contemporary avant-garde, and above all the music of his illustrious predecessor as conductor of the Philharmonic, Gustav Mahler, who had led the orchestra exactly 50 years earlier, from 1909 to 1911.

Mahler's works, including song cycles and his nine symphonies (plus an uncompleted tenth), are now performed regularly, but before these emotional and lengthy works were championed by Bernstein they had appeared relatively rarely on concert programs. A Mahler symphony was on every Philharmonic program between December 31, 1959 and February 21, 1960. Not everyone was pleased. Well-known critics Irving Kolodin and Howard Taubman were openly dismissive when Bernstein led Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony with the New York City Symphony in 1947.

The early Bernstein years at the Philharmonic also saw much touring, including a famous trip to the Soviet Union in 1959. The conductor also programmed work which provoked intensely negative reactions in the audience, including electronic music and works by composers such as the "chance compositions" of John Cage and the strict serialism of the avant-garde scourge Pierre Boulez. Boulez would go on to succeed Bernstein at the Philharmonic in the 1970s.

Bernstein was not embracing the work of Cage and Boulez, but rather insisting that it be listened to and not dismissed in advance. He included contemporary works to illustrate what he referred to as "Twentieth Century Problems in Music." He also introduced most of these works, in some cases clearly indicating they were not to his taste. It should also be noted that for the rest of his life he generally avoided the contemporary work of such figures as Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and others.

Some listeners and critics found fault with Bernstein's exaggerated and emotional gestures as a conductor. Video broadcasts of his concerts show him in action, his style contrasting sharply with that of his contemporaries and also his own mentors, like Koussevitzky and Mitropoulos.

While some found his style distracting, Bernstein won the affection of both audiences and musicians. All over the world the musicians responded, as the conductor's obvious passion and sincerity were communicated, and produced sublime performances. Bernstein had earlier, in his inimitable fashion, explained the nature of a conductor's responsibilities to a huge television audience in his 1955 Omnibus program.

The Philharmonic years were accompanied by the televised Young People's Concerts, which continued even after Bernstein gave up the principal conductor's post, and only ended when he took the time off to prepare his Norton Lectures at Harvard, which were delivered in 1973.

The Young People's Concerts were seen by a larger audience than had witnessed Bernstein through all of his decades on the podium. Millions saw the broadcasts and films that were produced and loaned to schools. According to biographer Humphrey Burton, "the programs were dubbed into twelve different languages and syndicated in forty countries...From Hungary it was reported that the 'Young People's Concerts' were a popular as 'The Flintstones' and were actually beating 'Bonanza' in the ratings."

It is important to note that Bernstein did not pander or search for the lowest common denominator to reach his young audience. When discussing opera, he made a point of saying it had nothing to do with the "furs and diamonds" sometimes displayed by wealthy patrons. Instead of the usual "music appreciation" class that students had suffered through in the past, here there was lively discussion of such elements as melody, harmony and counterpoint.

Bernstein wrote every word of each of the scripts of these concerts. He later said, "the Young People's Concerts are among the favorite, most highly prized activities of my life."

The Norton Lectures, established in 1925, were an annual lectureship in "poetry in the broadest sense," used to invite creative figures and scholars to give a series of six talks. Bernstein used the one-year professorship to discuss musical aesthetics at a time of division and crisis within the field of classical music. *The Unanswered Question*, the title of Bernstein's lectures, is the name of a work by American composer Charles Ives, and was Bernstein's way of referring to the uncertain outlook for classical music.

Much has been written about these lectures, more than 400 pages in length and with numerous musical examples throughout. Basing himself on the theory of linguistics developed by Noam Chomsky, Bernstein discussed his views on the future of music, in particular what he pointed to as the universality of tonal music across different cultures.

Bernstein's attempt to develop what he saw as an analogous relationship between different languages and different forms of Western music was criticized by some as flawed, but his fundamental thesis has been vindicated by developments over the past half century. He took an unpopular stand against the dogma of atonality that had marginalized composers who sought to continue and develop the traditions of the past. As biographer Allen Shawn sums it up, "In a period in which serious music seemed in danger of becoming disconnected from its social purpose—to become a form of pure research—he was arguing that good composers should not abandon the aims of the giants of the past who had created art on the highest level that still resonated with the intuitive understanding of lay listeners."

As already noted, however, the defense of tonality was not the same as

finding a way to actually carry forward “the aims of the giants of the past.” Bernstein himself recognized that his Philharmonic years coincided with a virtual absence of new compositions from him. He completed only two works during this period of more than a decade: his Symphony No. 3, *Kaddish*, in 1963, and *Chichester Psalms* in 1965.

While it was true that he lacked as much time to devote to composing during this period, there were also other factors at work. As perhaps the most famous classical music figure in the world, Bernstein’s role gradually began to change somewhat. He rubbed shoulders with powerful representatives of the corporate and political establishment, including President John F. and Jacqueline Kennedy. Earlier he had officiated at the groundbreaking for the new Lincoln Center in New York, with President Dwight D. Eisenhower present, and he conducted the inaugural concert there in 1962, with Jacqueline Kennedy in attendance and greeting him after the performance.

Bernstein’s fame was surely merited, and the conducting and educational work he carried out during these years was astonishing. At the same time, he was becoming more of a semi-official public figure. In the past, he had drawn inspiration from his life as part of a left-wing milieu of artists and intellectuals. In the first half of the 1960s he was the virtual spokesman of American culture at the height of the postwar economic boom. It was a different atmosphere, one less conducive to new composition.

The inclusion of avant-garde works at the Philharmonic was not of course objectionable. It took on a different significance, however, considering the fact that Bernstein, the heir to a very different tradition, had nothing of his own to offer.

The major work Bernstein did manage to complete during this period, the *Kaddish* symphony, reflected some of these issues. The work, which it took the composer two years to finish, includes a soprano soloist, chorus, boys’ choir and a speaker.

Here, as in his later *MASS*, Bernstein leans toward spirituality, even while voicing skepticism about God and his role. As Shawn observes, the symphony “presents the idea of faith as something lost but still attainable.” There is clearly an autobiographical element in the work, reflecting Bernstein’s own religious doubt but also his search for a spiritual solution to the dilemmas facing humanity. Though not regularly observant, Bernstein strongly identified with his Jewish heritage.

The role of the speaker in *Kaddish* reflects a certain turn inward by the composer. The spoken text detracts from the music, which, combining elements of both tonality and atonality, does not come together as a coherent whole. The piece has a confessional and largely subjective character, with the composer basing himself on the general concept of Judaism’s religious prayer for the dead, but impressing upon it his own moods and feelings. Bernstein invested much work on *Kaddish*, and there are arresting musical moments, but as a whole it is not successful, and is not often performed today.

The last two decades of Bernstein’s life saw the continuation of his international conducting career, with the cultivation of a particularly close collaboration with the world-famous Vienna Philharmonic. The 1980s saw the production of a series of BBC films as well as historic recordings of the symphonic cycle of his beloved Mahler and other works. These form a vital part of Bernstein’s unparalleled legacy as an interpreter of the most powerful music spanning the mid-18th to the mid-20th centuries.

Bernstein also did significantly more composing than in the 1960s, but he told intimate friends that he felt unfulfilled, unable to compose the great work, particularly a great opera, for which he had been searching for many years.

These were also years of sadness and tragedy in his personal life, particularly the loss of his wife in 1978, under circumstances where he felt plagued by guilt because their separation had immediately preceded her final illness. The 1980s brought the AIDS crisis, with the deaths of

many friends, including a former lover.

An attempt to return to Broadway with *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, a show timed for the bicentenary of the Declaration of Independence in 1976, was his only musical theater failure. There were some shorter works that are performed more frequently, including *Songfest* (1978), the *Divertimento for Orchestra* (1980) and *Arias and Barcarolles* (1988). Significantly, however, when he did turn to composing major works, Bernstein moved toward spiritual and purely psychological approaches.

MASS, from 1971, formally titled *Mass: A Theatre Piece for Players, Singers and Dancers*, was commissioned by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and its performance was part of the opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. The work, based in part on the Latin mass, along with English text furnished by Bernstein and lyricist Stephen Schwartz, consists of 32 separate movements in many different musical styles. The general impression at times is one of incoherence, with sections reminiscent of the rock operas *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, alongside music more in the style of modernist and contemporary composers like Copland and Stravinsky.

There are fascinating and moving musical moments, but the thrust of the work is religious and subjective, with the Celebrant as the main figure, amongst a massed group of choirs, singers and orchestra. Once again, as in the *Kaddish* symphony, the theme of *MASS* is relatively banal, that of skepticism and above all the search for faith as the answer to the mystery and the crisis of human civilization.

A *Quiet Place*, premiering in 1983, was Bernstein’s second foray into opera, or the third if *Candide* is also included. In 1951-52 he had composed *Trouble in Tahiti*, a portrait of a troubled suburban marriage. A *Quiet Place*, with Stephen Wadsworth as librettist, was conceived as a sequel to *Trouble in Tahiti*, focusing on the same family 30 years later. After a poor reception, the opera was turned into a three-act version incorporating the earlier *Trouble in Tahiti* in the form of a flashback in the second act. This version was recorded in 1984. Its New York premiere did not take place until 2010, with the New York City Opera.

A *Quiet Place* also has autobiographical overtones. Dealing with tensions in a contemporary family, at times it gives the impression of Bernstein seeking to come to terms with the tensions in his own life, as a son, husband and father. There are moments, especially in the final act, when one senses Bernstein seeking a musical way forward by developing his own past styles. As with *MASS*, this work has been only rarely performed.

Bernstein had not changed his general political outlook during these decades. In the late 1960s, he spoke out strongly in response to the escalation of the US war in Vietnam. He was increasingly discouraged, however, artistically and politically. A discussion with cultural critic John Gruen in 1967 is particularly revealing. Bernstein argued, as Shawn reports, that “the last noble strains of symphonic music had been written by a great composer able to rise above the limitations of Soviet strictures, Dmitri Shostakovich.” In the US and Western Europe, in contrast, the “best works of art are works of despair now...”

“Relating this situation to the social and political realm,” Shawn continues in his biography, Bernstein “said that ‘what the present crisis really boils down to is not only a crisis in faith...It’s a crisis of world revolution...based on the right to eat. And we of the West, who insist on the right to eat at other people’s expense, seem to be doing everything we know to prevent this revolution from taking place.’”

Here Bernstein seems to be echoing in part the radical views of Martin Luther King, Jr., which would be stilled a year later with his assassination. Like King, Bernstein was outraged by oppression and inequality, but he saw the problem as one of the “West” as a whole, and the answer in trying to push the Democratic Party to the left. He was an active backer of the presidential campaign of Eugene McCarthy after the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in April 1968.

This background is not unrelated to his work as a composer. Bernstein's early compositions were characterized by an optimistic, lively tone. His relative silence as a composer in the later period reflected political discouragement, a feeling, as indicated above, that conditions in the US were in some way inhibiting his creative abilities. His views, by his own admission, could find no musical voice, as they had in the past.

An article written by Bernstein for *High Fidelity* magazine in 1967 gives some idea of both the political sensitivity of the composer, as well as his disillusion and disorientation. In one sentence he references Auschwitz, Vietnam, McCarthyism, Hungary, Suez, the Bay of Pigs, the murder in Dallas, the "Trotskyite purges," Black Power, Red Guards and the Arab encirclement of Israel. As biographer Humphrey Burton concludes, the "unbroken melancholy had a deadening effect on his creativity."

In this regard, the failure of Bernstein's attempt in 1968 to collaborate with Jerome Robbins on a musical based on *The Exception and the Rule*, the striking one-act play by Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), was significant. Brecht, the left-wing German playwright, had gained fame in the US the previous decade with the immensely successful revival in 1954 of the Kurt Weill-Brecht collaboration, *The Threepenny Opera*. (Intriguingly, in 1952, Bernstein had conducted a concert performance of the latter work at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts.). There was clearly something holding Bernstein back.

From his earliest days as a composer, Bernstein was a fierce advocate of tearing down divisions between so-called "high" and "low" music. He often explained that great composers of the past, including Haydn, Brahms and Mahler, had always based themselves on folk elements. He also insisted on the enormous value of American jazz as an art form.

If there was one issue on which he resisted his mentor Koussevitzky, it was his opposition to a snobbish dismissal of musical theater. Bernstein went from Broadway musicals to the conductor's podium repeatedly in the 1950s. A major factor when he was hired by the New York Philharmonic was his ability to appeal to very broad audiences.

And yet Bernstein had the misfortune, if one may use that word, of living during those decades when the gulf between "serious" and popular music was continuously widening. First, this took the form of the rigid dogmas of atonality and serialism propagated in the post-World War II period and entrenched in the universities. Alongside this, elite traditionalists who populated the boards of major symphony orchestras put forward a conservative view that also tended to segregate classical music and its audience from the broader population. At the same time, these decades saw the decline and decay of popular music into increasingly formulaic commercial products.

In his search for a way forward, Bernstein experimented in some of his last work with both atonality and with a banal form of "multicultural" postmodernism. In his *MASS* in particular, there is an approach somewhat analogous to that of conceptual art. The mood—that of skepticism and the call for a kind of spiritual rebirth—takes precedence over the musical content. The result is preachy and insincere.

Bernstein matured during a period when masses of working people envisioned a world of equality and opportunity, a world beyond the present of capitalist oppression and war. He described himself as a socialist, and he was shaped by the struggles that dominated the first half of the century. This was a time when an element of social reform was still available to American capitalism. Through the medium of left-wing cultural figures, the New Deal—reflecting American capitalism's fear of a revolutionary explosion and the appeal of socialism—brought music and theater to millions of workers. Internationally, despite the awful degeneration of the Russian Revolution, the Soviet working class made enormous progress in cultural terms as well as in literacy. It was this that made possible the abovementioned "noble" symphonic work of Shostakovich, referred to by Bernstein.

But Bernstein and his generation were deeply affected by the betrayals of their hopes for social equality. The isolation of the Soviet Union and the betrayal of the revolution at the hands of the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy had an incalculable impact, sabotaging struggles all over the world and discrediting the ideals of socialism for subsequent generations.

Significant in this context is the gravitation of Stalinism and Stalinist-influenced trends in the direction of so-called proletarian culture or "socialist realism." Stalinism encouraged a fraudulent populism and anti-intellectualism. "High art" became something impermissible or looked upon with suspicion from the late 1930s onward. This marked a change from the 1920s, when classical composers like Ravel, Milhaud and Gershwin had eagerly borrowed from jazz.

Culture came under the symmetrical blows of Stalinism and the anti-communist witch-hunt. Each of these phenomena had consequences for Bernstein's career. In his earlier years, there had been plenty of difficulties, especially the witch-hunt, and also, despite a close circle of friends, the stigma of homosexuality, at a time when this normal sexual expression was labeled an illness by the psychiatric profession.

McCarthyism was pushed back, but anti-communism remained entrenched. Liberalism seemed to revive for what turned out to be its Last Hurrah, in the years of John F. Kennedy and then the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson. At first this fed an optimism, as a rejuvenated Bernstein engaged with his various collaborators.

But it was Cold War anti-communist liberalism that held sway during all of these years. Bernstein and others made a kind of bargain with the devil of anti-communism as the witch-hunt receded. Ignoring the lessons of Stalinism, the composer held fast to a belief in liberal reform.

By the 1960s, however—the decade not only of the civil rights, labor and antiwar struggles but of political assassinations and the beginning of the unraveling of the postwar boom in the US—Bernstein felt the ground shift beneath his feet. The liberal wing of the ruling class, unable to maintain a program of even modest social reform, began its long and steady march to the right. Bernstein was not politically prepared for the deepening crisis. He could not grasp the trajectory and fate of American liberalism. He often resisted the move to the right, but found himself increasingly isolated.

These were the conditions in which Bernstein lost his musical bearings. He could not simply take the path of his hero, Mahler, from early in the 20th century. He could not find a subject to inspire him as in the past. He either turned away from social and political themes, as in *A Quiet Place*, or tried to embrace elements of the New Left counterculture, as in *MASS*.

The last two decades of Bernstein's life coincided with the first 20 years of the uninterrupted social counterrevolution, an onslaught that has continued in the US under Republican and Democratic administrations alike. The beginnings of this sharp shift to the right ensnared Bernstein and Felicia Montealegre in 1970, when they hosted a fund-raiser in their Manhattan apartment for the purpose of assisting in the legal defense of the Black Panther Party.

The event at the Bernsteins was in fact aimed at defending the civil liberties of the Panthers, who were being targeted for frame-ups and assassinations during this very period. Panther leader Fred Hampton had been killed in Chicago just one month before the legal defense fund-raiser organized by Felicia Bernstein. When the Panthers involved in the New York case finally came to trial in 1971, they were all acquitted. But the Bernsteins' outspoken defense of the civil liberties of the Panthers provoked a hysterical reaction from the ruling class, including its "newspaper of record."

New York Times society columnist Charlotte Curtis had attended the event, and wrote a sarcastic and demeaning account the next day. The *Times* published an editorial the following day accusing the Bernsteins of "elegant slumming" and declaring, among other things, that "Responsible

black leadership is not likely to cheer as the Beautiful People create a new myth that Black Panther Is Beautiful.” Journalist and author Tom Wolfe followed a few months later with a venomous attack on what he called “radical chic.” The FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover orchestrated a venomous letter-writing campaign to the Bernsteins, who received threats and hate mail, while Bernstein was picketed at Philharmonic Hall.

As the rightward shift of official liberalism continued, Bernstein often fell politically silent. In 1988, he published an op-ed article in the *Times* one week before the presidential election. Entitled, “I’m a Liberal and Proud of it,” it was clearly intended as a mild rebuke to hapless Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis, who was careful to avoid the “L-word” on the campaign trail. Bernstein’s rededication to liberalism was a cry of confusion and despair, however, since he could not draw any conclusions as to why the party of Franklin D. Roosevelt was abandoning its earlier claim to stand for the working class and social reform.

Somewhat similarly, Bernstein expressed dismay at developments in Israel. He attended a public ceremony in which right-wing Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir launched into an anti-Arab chauvinist attack. “They are burning books again,” he told a friend. “What has happened to my Israel?” But he held onto his lifelong Zionism, long after the claim that it was the solution to anti-Semitism had been exposed as a fraud.

The fundamental question was the absence of a powerful and vibrant socialist workers’ movement. The ferment of Bernstein’s early years had been stamped out by the historic betrayal of the hopes and struggles inspired by the Russian Revolution, both by Stalinism and the pro-capitalist unions and reformist Social Democracy. The ruling class onslaught had dire consequences for the broader culture, as well as in the attacks on living standards and basic rights. This is the basic reason for the partial stilling of Bernstein’s voice in his last decades.

When all the twists and turns of Bernstein’s remarkable 50-year career are taken into account, however, it is clear that his legacy, 100 years after his birth and 75 years after he first found fame, shines brightly.

His pianism and pedagogy, his principled defense of musical tonality and the thousands of performances he led as conductor around the world speak for themselves. His legacy as a composer must be appreciated and understood in light of the conditions and obstacles he faced. On this basis one can also look to music’s future with optimism, as new and young composers come forward in response to renewed social and political struggles.

* * *

Books and links:

Leonard Bernstein: An American Musician, Allen Shawn, Yale Univ. 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

The legacy of Leonard Bernstein: a book review

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=3A45VcmyenA>
Young People’s Concerts:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wW9n6XV7x8E>
Bernstein on “The Art of Conducting”:

https://www.snagfilms.com/films/title/leonard_bernstein_omnibus_episode_3

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

Bernstein conducting Mahler’s Resurrection Symphony No. 2:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9_ONIz8XKA&list=PL11BBE2F95BB04209

Concluded

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>