

# There was far more to Leonard Bernstein than mere charisma

By Fred Mazelis  
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The commemorations of American composer, conductor and pianist Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) continue in this 100th year anniversary of his birth, with concerts, several new books and various media commentaries.

Among the more interesting and provocative comments was the recent article by Alex Ross, the chief music critic of the *New Yorker* magazine. Ross (born 1968) has written intelligently on the field of classical music, particularly in his wide-ranging and informative work, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (2007).

Ross's brief comment in the *New Yorker* is headlined, "Hero Worship." While he praises Bernstein as a conductor, composer and educator, Ross also suggests that he has been somewhat overrated.

The centenary has, according to Ross, seen Bernstein portrayed "as a kind of musical superhero, who conquered every medium he touched: conducting, composing, Broadway shows, education, television, the intricate game of American celebrity."

"His charisma was indeed potent," Ross writes, "but as Bernstein recedes into history he seems more a product of his time than an agent of transformation." He adds, "How posterity will judge this volcano of a man remains to be seen. His career offers a lesson in the perils of hero worship: the future of classical music cannot consist in waiting for another telegenic superstar."

And further: "The aspirational America of the mid-twentieth century was looking for a Bernstein—a native genius who could knock off Broadway tunes as fluently as he conducted Brahms—and one was duly found. There will not be another, not because talent is lacking but because the culture that fostered it is gone."

It is not clear from Ross's remarks whether he thinks that what he terms hero worship had a negative effect on Bernstein himself, or whether the public role of this

larger-than-life figure in some way inhibited his contemporaries and those who have followed him.

More significant, however, is the reference to the composer as "more a product of his time than an agent of transformation." Of course, like any important figure, he was both, but Ross's elevation of the first element has the effect of diminishing what Bernstein accomplished, as well as his musical legacy. The impression is given that Bernstein was a talented man who merely came along at the right time.

In what way was Bernstein the product of his time? Ross refers simply to "the New Deal era," but there was also the fact that Bernstein was shaped by a left-wing, socialist milieu, in which he played an active role. He tried to remain true to these early influences in later decades, and on this basis he did in fact have an impact on his time and beyond.

Bernstein rose to prominence during the years of the postwar economic boom, but it is far too one-sided to say that "aspirational America" simply found and used him. The boom era itself was contradictory. In its early years, it was dominated by the ferocious witch-hunt associated most prominently with Sen. Joseph McCarthy. Bernstein tried to resist McCarthyism, only reluctantly and to his lasting shame signing a legal affidavit attesting to his opposition to "Communism." These were also the years in which he produced such remarkable works as *Candide* and *West Side Story*.

By 1960 the relative political quiescence of the Eisenhower decade was giving way to the most explosive period of the civil rights struggle, followed immediately by the ghetto rebellions, the growing movement against the war in Vietnam and a growing strike wave. This was also part of "aspirational America." There was not only the complacent middle class and prosperous America, as Ross seems to suggest, but the struggles of the working class and the young generation. Bernstein sought to

reflect the struggles for social change, and this found certain expression in both his musical theater work, his tenure at the New York Philharmonic and his Young People's Concerts.

It is quite true that the culture that nurtured Bernstein is gone, and also that there will be no simple replica of him in the future. But that does not mean that there is nothing further to be learned from this period—or that there will be no more figures of his dimensions, or even greater. The questions that arise include: what happened to that culture? And are there conditions under which some of the themes championed by Bernstein can again find musical expression?

Ross is silent on this score. His assessment of Bernstein is bound up with a theoretical and aesthetic outlook, one that has been influenced at least in part by the Frankfurt School, the noted intellectual émigrés from Nazi Germany who rejected Marxism and drew the most pessimistic conclusions from the rise of Hitler. Alongside their positions on the alleged “impotence” of the working class, these figures proclaimed that the Enlightenment was itself the source of repression and dictatorship.

Theodor Adorno, a classically-trained composer and sociologist, and a noted member of the loosely connected Frankfurt School, insisted that tonal and melodic music—music like that composed by Bernstein and others in the period up until approximately 1960—represented nothing but an instrument for the subordination of the population to the capitalist ruling class.

Ironically enough, although Bernstein may have been put forward as a semi-official spokesman of musical America, it was the conceptions of Adorno that were utilized by the imperialist intelligence agencies during the Cold War. Somewhat analogously to the development of abstract expressionism in the field of painting, musical atonality and its growing popularity in critical and academic circles in the capitalist West were equated with “freedom,” as opposed to the Stalinist bloc, where this music was forbidden. The Stalinist perversion of socialism, with its crude dictation of what was permissible and its attacks on genuine artistic creativity, made the work of the Cold War propagandists easier.

Ross does not address this specifically in his article, and he also says nothing about Bernstein's famous Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1973, where the composer attempted to account theoretically for the persistence of tonal music and what he considered the artificiality of musical substitutes like dogmatic serialism.

The changes in musical culture during this period

reflected a pessimistic rejection of tonality as the music of the past, as hopelessly out of date and associated with what were termed the naïve hopes of the left. Bernstein resisted the then-fashionable attacks on tonality.

This past is not simply dead and gone. Why is it not possible to envision conditions under which new Bernsteins will emerge—men and women who can accomplish the equivalent of what Ross describes as Bernstein's ability to combine “Broadway” and Brahms? Why is it not possible, in general, to imagine the “average human type” rising to new heights?

In any case, Ross's suggestion that Bernstein belongs only to the past is being increasingly refuted by historical and intellectual developments. It is the once-fashionable advocates of dogmatic atonality that have been largely rejected. The verdict is becoming clearer with each passing decade. Bernstein's legacy is quite secure. The jury is still out on contemporary composers, some of whom utilize elements of atonality, but not in an exclusivist or dogmatic fashion.

It is safe to say, however, as regards American composers, that future generations will be listening far more to the works of Bernstein, Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland and Scott Joplin, than to contemporaries of Bernstein like Elliott Carter and Milton Babbitt. Carter, Babbitt and others, although serious musicians, devoted themselves to what could be termed academic research. Bernstein, on the other hand, pursued, as biographer Allen Shawn put it, “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.”

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