

“A Department Store of Music”

Paper Given at the Chicago Literary Club—October 15, 2018

For an entire month, it was hard to escape the celebrations honoring famed musician, Leonard Bernstein, born on August 25th, 100 years ago, in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

August was taken up with paying tribute to, arguably, the most accomplished musician of the 20th Century, a musical genius whose talents knew no bounds: pianist, author, Norton lecturer at Harvard, young children’s educator, humanitarian, composer and one of the century’s greatest conductors.

He clearly deserved the praise and all the performances of his scores, including a restaging of his last major composition, *MASS*, in Chicago and New York.

The former New York Times’ music critic, Donal Henahan, called him, “one of the most prodigiously talented and successful musicians in American history.” The range of his musical creations is impressive. Not many of his admirers know that his musical output, according to Wikipedia, spanned more than 100 compositions in a variety of genres.

A snapshot of Bernstein’s breadth reveals the following: three symphonies, three operas with *Candide* as an operetta, ten musicals,

including *"On The Town"*, *"Peter Pan"* and his signature work, *"West Side Story"*, three ballet scores, the film score to *"On The Waterfront"*, chamber music, piano, vocal and choral works too numerous to mention.

The New York Times headlined a cover story on Bernstein's 80th year that called him "A Master of It All". It is no wonder that Igor Stravinsky, assessing the volume of this outpouring, dubbed Bernstein "a department store of music".

He was a towering figure who consumed life in big gulps. He was not only a musician but a celebrity who enjoyed popular appeal for nearly five decades. Both men and women found his leading-man looks and outsize personality highly attractive and seductive. His concerts drew raves, his projects stirred intense interest, while his personal life generated unwelcome gossip and controversy, as with his hosting a benefit for the Black Panthers.

This paper, however, does not dwell on an abridged achievement side of Bernstein's life. Perhaps owing to my reporting instincts, I set out to discover the lesser-known and even negative aspects of his biography that paint a more complete portrait of the man.

While his musical gifts were undeniable, he was also a troubled man. Yo Yo Ma, who knows a thing or two about the music business, recently told an interviewer that, "Huge ego is often matched by huge insecurity."

My curiosity was piqued since I had, for three years in the early 1980s, worked in the office that handled press affairs for a number of top classical musicians including Mr. Bernstein. I did not handle LB's account (how we referred to him in the office). That was the domain of the savvy lady I worked for, Margaret Carson, who enjoyed a sizable reputation of her own in music circles.

She jealously guarded access to Bernstein and other conductor clients such as Michael Tilson Thomas and Neville Marriner. My realm was the chopped liver list of a other dozen accounts. But, in my final month at the office, I was put in charge of arranging a live appearance by Bernstein on "Good Morning America" that contained more than its share of drama. More about this later.

Now, 33 years since my work as a music publicist, I went looking in the record to flesh out a fuller picture. I focused on his youthful years and details of his early and late career, either unknown or hidden from view for good reason.

A finding that surprised me was that, despite all his accolades and musical achievements, Bernstein required constant adulation and praise from friends and associates. I now believe that the source of this insecurity were the deep-rooted conflicts within him over his musical legacy and his sexual identity.

An early detail is that Bernstein's birth name was Louis, a name he never used and legally changed to Leonard at age 16. A friend, on hearing the news of the confusion over names, suggested that might account for a life that Bernstein himself called schizophrenic. His was a life torn between composing and conducting, writing art music and show tunes, between a hetero- and a homosexual identity.

While on the topic of names, there remains wide confusion over the proper pronunciation of his name. When he entered Harvard, a memo was sent out that his name was spelled Lenny, not ending in ie but with a y. Early in his career, Bernstein said he preferred the democratic Yiddish *Bernsteen* to the aristocratic German *Bernstyne*. In later years, Bernstein preferred the German pronunciation.

While he received unconditional love all his life from his mother, Jennie, and sister, Shirley, he had a tempestuous, conflicted relationship with his father, a deeply religious Jewish immigrant from Ukraine. Sam Bernstein struggled in America at first, eventually becoming the successful owner of a hair supply company.

Sam's wish was that Lenny should join the family business but the son rebelled in favor of pursuing his musical studies. Bernstein began his piano studies at the age of 10 when the family received the gift of a mahogany

upright from "Crazy Clara", an aunt who was a nudist, a sun worshipper, an exercise fanatic and a lover of music.

Bernstein wrote about his first encounter with that piano. "I remember touching this thing the day it arrived, just stroking it and going mad. I knew, from that moment, that music was 'it'. There was no question in my mind that my life was to be about music."

It's reported that, one day, after Leonard conducted a concert at Tanglewood, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's summer home, Sam told a reporter, "Every genius had a handicap. Lenny had a father."

That early defiance of his father became a telltale aspect of Bernstein's personality for his entire life: his refusal to be intimidated, corrected or told what he could and could not do. Were he told not to do something, he would do it.

As an aside, Charlie Harmon, Bernstein's personal assistant, tells a story related to that trait. Lenny was giving a recital at Indiana University with noted cellist, Janos Starker. He was visibly drunk and his hands were recklessly swatting the piano keys. Harmon, who was turning pages, leaned over and suggested that Bernstein needn't continue when the maestro turned and said quite loudly, "Don't ever tell me what to do!".

Lenny's father was very upset by his son's choice. But, eventually, he came to accept his son's great talent and told a reporter, after his son

enjoyed some success, "How should I know he would become Leonard Bernstein?"

When he entered Harvard in 1935, Lenny thought of himself as a pianist. Edwin Geller, Bernstein's roommate, had to endure Lenny's midnight serenades. "Everyone thought he was a genius and recognized it....he'd go after dinner to the freshman Union Hall and play for hours. There was nothing he couldn't play. You could test him: popular, Gilbert and Sullivan, jazz, the classics—he could do it all and sing it too."

Bernstein told colleagues that his future career plan was to enter the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and become a concert pianist. It's not clear when he decided to turn to conducting. Upon returning from an audition at Curtis in the summer of 1936, he said he intended to audition for the post of assistant conductor of the Harvard Orchestra.

When it came to conducting, he studied with the best: Fritz Reiner, soon-to-be appointed head of the Pittsburgh Symphony and Serge Koussevitsky, the charismatic head of the Boston Symphony.

Many popular press accounts portray Bernstein as having enjoyed a greased glide path to success. Not so. He actually experienced several stumbling blocks on his climb to stardom. Except for two unplanned twists of fate, he might never have become the leader of the New York Philharmonic and reaped all the subsequent glory.

Success in the music business means cultivating important connections and being willing to pay most any price for one's career. One week in 1937, Bernstein met conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos who, impressed by LB's talent as a pianist, invited him to that week's rehearsals of the Boston Symphony. There is some controversy as to whether Mitropoulos seduced Bernstein or the other way around but several friends believed that a liaison occurred. The wife of a famous musician, who knew both men, said, "You don't get there unless you go to bed. Whoring is part of the business."

Bernstein even wrote a lightly-disguised short story for class about a conductor, named Eros Mavro, and Carl, a music student. He wrote that "Carl began to feel a great and awful love for this man." When Mitropoulos left his post in Boston, he gave Bernstein his photograph and some advice—"Do not sleep in too soft a bed." The young student followed Mitropoulos to Minneapolis in 1938 where the conductor had been appointed to lead the Minneapolis Symphony. He stayed for a week but left disappointed.

Mitropoulos later helped Bernstein get an audition at Curtis for Fritz Reiner's conducting class which he passed, receiving the only A from Reiner. While at Curtis, he learned that Mitropoulos wanted him to be the pianist and assistant conductor in Minneapolis. Bernstein anxiously waited weeks for word of such an appointment. But on April 19, 1940, a telegram arrived which said, "It is not wise to stop studying for a doubtful season for you

here. Am awfully sorry—Dimitri.” It seems the musicians union had objected to having a 21-year-old as assistant conductor.

The news sent Bernstein into despair. He wrote to his friend, David Diamond, saying that tailoring his life toward that failed, single-minded objective had included “the sexual life which I have abandoned.” A possible meaning was that he had abandoned his heterosexual pursuits for the good of his career. Up to that point, Bernstein had courted a sizeable number of female admirers.

That same summer would prove a pivotal moment in his life. LB came under the wing of Koussevitsky. The great man invited him to attend the new music school he was opening at Tanglewood in the Berkshires. By that time, Bernstein had given up the idea of being a concert pianist. Serge urged his protege to switch to conducting like his composer friends, Aaron Copland, William Schuman and Roy Harris, had urged earlier.

The maestro opened up new possibilities for Lenny. In later years, Bernstein said that Koussevitsky became his surrogate father. He had the chance at the music school to conduct constantly. By the end of September, Bernstein believed he was being groomed as an assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony. He imagined making a sensational debut and that a career of fame and riches would follow.

That dream was not to happen in Boston but in New York. He was appointed assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic in September, 1943 after meeting with Arthur Judson, the orchestra's manager. Koussevitsky advised him to ask for \$12,000 a year. Instead, he agreed to handle the 28-week season for a salary of \$125 a week or \$3,500.

Fate struck a mere two months later when guest conductor, Bruno Walter, took ill. The call went out to Bernstein that he would conduct the November 14, 1943 concert in his place. It's not clear if he had been alerted the night before or merely the same morning.

Bernstein, at 25, went on and was a smash. Violinist Jacques Margolies said of that afternoon, "The idea was he'd follow us, only it didn't work out that way. You just couldn't believe a young man could create that kind of music....the orchestra stood up and cheered (at the end). We were open-mouthed. That man was the most extraordinary musician I have met in my life."

Bernstein's performance landed him on the front page of *The New York Times*. He became instantly famous since the concert was carried nationally on CBS Radio; a host of concert engagements followed.

Then, fifteen years later, fate's fickle finger was to favor Lenny again. Howard Taubman became the new music critic at the Times in September,

1955. He attended the Philharmonic's concerts every Thursday evening and began writing critically about the orchestra.

Bernstein biographer, Joan Peyser, says that what Taubman found was "deplorable". And who was the Philharmonic's music director at the time? None other than Dimitri Mitropoulos. Taubman wrote, "Mitropoulos was struggling, the orchestra was shot, the entire enterprise was in grave trouble." What was needed was "shock therapy".

He wrote that diagnosis in a Times article on April, 1956, titled "The Philharmonic—What's Wrong with It and Why". It hit like a bombshell. The aftermath arrived six months later.

Two days before the season's opening concert, the orchestra issued a press release that stated: "At the direction of its music director, Dimitri Mitropoulos, the New York Philharmonic has engaged Leonard Bernstein to share the direction of the orchestra beginning with the 1957-58 season."

By the start of the following season, Bernstein was appointed the chief conductor and the man who had promised him a job with the Minneapolis Symphony twice and failed to deliver was now being replaced by his one-time protégé. It was a bitter turn of events.

Bernstein's appointment was remarkable for three reasons: At 40, he was incredibly young to assume such a prestigious position. Maestros of that era were men in the 60s and 70s. Secondly, he was an American, the first

such to head a major orchestra, when those bodies normally turned to Europe to fill a vacancy and, finally, he was a Jew. Yet, Lenny had a way of sweeping all such reservations aside, such was his charisma and musical intellect.

Bernstein remained with the New York Philharmonic until 1969, resigning because he said he wanted to devote more time to composing. When he left, he had conducted the orchestra 1,247 times, a figure greater than any previous conductor.

For the next 31 years, fortune shone brightly on Leonard Bernstein, the conductor and composer. He kept a furious pace of concert appearances. Almost all of 1970, his first year of retirement, was taken up with the Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, the Philharmonics of Vienna and Israel, the Vienna State Opera, the London Symphony Orchestra, summer at Tanglewood plus a dozen other dates. He drove himself hard with little free time. Yet, he insisted that he had been composing.

He conquered audiences and critics wherever he appeared. However, offstage, his personal life was filled with turmoil and sadness arising from his homosexual identity, a cultural no-no in those times.

His inner struggle with his two natures had its roots as early as his days at Harvard. Each of the off-campus houses had special identities. Bernstein biographer, Joan Peyser, says that Lowell House attracted

musicians while Eliot House attracted intellectuals and homosexuals. Bernstein chose Eliot House and formed lifelong friendships with Aaron Copland, David Diamond and Marc Blitzstein, known gay men.

At Tanglewood, Koussevitsky wondered about Lenny's identity. His doubts were raised when Bernstein abruptly disappeared on the day before his engagement to Jacqueline (Kiki) Speyer, daughter of the Boston Symphony's English horn player, was to be announced. When he reappeared, he told Kiki that he had seduced a boy and was in love with him. She reported this to Koussevitsky who asked Bernstein if he was a "pederast".

Another time, Bernstein was conducting at La Scala in 1953, the first American conductor to be accorded such an honor, when the star, Maria Callas, demanded "I want to know the truth and all the truth: Are you homosexual?" There was no answer.

Bernstein realized that, for the good of his career, he needed to marry. That would not be difficult, given his looks. Orchestra trustees at the time wanted a chief conductor with a spouse for socializing with major supporters and fundraising. They didn't want anyone suspected of being homosexual.

Thus, in September, 1951, Bernstein married a beautiful, elegant Chilean stage and television actress, Felicia Montealegre. They genuinely loved each other and Lenny maintained a regular, family man identity at first

while Felicia bore three children. She was the calm, stabilizing influence and the voice of caution that Bernstein needed.

Yet, it was a marriage of convenience. They had an understanding that, as long as Lenny did not embarrass her publicly, he was free to pursue his affairs. Soon after the wedding, Felicia writes to her husband and says in part, "You are a homosexual and may never change" and "I am willing to accept you as you are, without being a martyr or sacrificing myself on the L.B. altar. (I happen to love you very much—this may be a disease and if it is what better cure?) Let's try and see what happens if you are free to do as you like, but without guilt and confession, please! The feelings you have for me will be clearer and easier to express—our marriage is not based on passion but on tenderness and mutual respect."

The marriage experienced its greatest crisis in 1976. Felicia was ill at the time, she'd had a mastectomy. One day, she found her husband in bed in their apartment with a lover. She threatened that, unless the lover left the city that day, she would "make a public scandal". Up until that moment, she told friends she had refused to believe Lenny was really a homosexual.

That same year, Bernstein left Felicia for Tom Cothran, his male lover. On October 26, Felicia announced their separation. Bernstein continued his affair with Cothran but the relationship didn't last. Angus Whyte, a musician and photographer, who knew Bernstein, said, "Bernstein was impossibly

demanding and spoiled and his life style was such that hardly anyone could live with him." Another close friend offered this analysis: "Leonard required men sexually and women emotionally."

Lenny's sister, Shirley, explained his repeated failures to establish relationships with men. "He'd have this fling, thinking he had found the love of his life, but then he would always end up discovering that this wasn't 'it'".

Biographer Meryl Secrest wrote that friends thought Lenny had not realized the effect of his behavior on his wife and children or the effect of the breakup on himself.

Six months after the separation, in April, 1977, Bernstein engaged his wife to perform in a piece by British composer, William Walton. A reconciliation soon followed with Bernstein going back to the Dakota apartment to live with his wife and family.

In July, Felicia was diagnosed with lung cancer. Bernstein bought a house for her in East Hampton, Long Island and cancelled all his concert dates to be with her. When she died a year later, on June 16, 1978, Bernstein was devastated and rued his behavior and neglect of her to his final days.

The aftermath of her passing, writes Secrest, were the "worst six months of his life." Bernstein grieved and felt he had played a role in her

dying. He wrote, "I went to psychiatrists but nothing helped. I thought I was finished."

After her death, he became more reliant on alcohol. The years of smoking four packs a day added to the wear and tear. Phillip Ramey, a friend and fellow composer, told him "No one can feel sorry for you if you are killing yourself." David Diamond noticed that, "after Felicia's death, his descent into hell really began."

Whyte was called upon to cheer him up. He said, "Part of the problem was that his 60th birthday was coming up and it was not a joyful occasion. He'd always been the kid; suddenly he was gray-haired and overweight." By 1982, Bernstein was still the eminent conductor but, offstage, he was moody, often drunk and hanging out with a new entourage of young men.

A year later, Bernstein's new opera, *A Quiet Place*, premiered at the Kennedy Center. The director, Peter Mark Schifter, noticed a marked decline in LB's appearance. "Physically, by the time I met him, he was very unprepossessing, very short, with jackets too small and buttons popping, going to seed."

Schifter saw Bernstein in the opera's character of Francois who tries to reconcile the opera's feuding family members. "Bernstein was a very tormented guy and his sexuality was a big thing," said Schifter. "In a way, he wanted to sleep with the world. It wasn't just sex but a deep hunger for

connectedness." Late in life, Bernstein grew to see his homosexuality as a curse and sought professional help to no avail.

As the final days drew near, he remained a towering conducting eminence. But, privately, he held true to Koussevitsky's belief that, in music, the composer is the most exalted member. Bernstein continually denigrated his early, magical Broadway scores and agonized over his failure to write "a great symphony" and leave a true classical legacy.

During his lifetime, critics saw his works for the popular stage as too serious and his works for the concert hall as too theatrical to be taken seriously. Aaron Copland, in 1949, called it "conductor's music—eclectic in style and facile in inspiration."

Critics are now reevaluating that very eclecticism in his music and being more generous in assessing its worth. Thus, his legacy, an issue which tormented him during his life, may, going forward, be seen as a valuable addition to 20th Century American music. Ravinia has already announced a multi-year retrospective of his songs and lesser-known works.

Anthony Tommasini, the Times' chief music critic, said, in his glowing review of *Mass* in July, that the composer was "pilloried (in 1971) for daring to draw from myriad sources and popular styles...a 'wild mélange of everything' as a previous Times critic put it. Today, when it's the norm for composers to blend traditions, his approach seems ahead of its time."

Bernstein died twenty-eight years ago, on October 14, 1990, at the Dakota apartment of a heart attack.

Secrest ends her book with a list of the maestro's vices and virtues: "It is true that he was a man of large faults, narcissistic and vain, erratic in his judgments, intolerably demanding, pettish and unpredictable; tiresomely preaching the virtues of a disciplined life while seemingly unable to direct his own, faults magnified by the public figure he presented to the world. But one could nevertheless give him credit for consistency in his goals and achievements, for taking part in the great debates of his age, for being committed and involved to the last. Even his strongest detractors had to concede that Lenny never lost his enthusiasm. It is a word derived from the Greek '*enthousiasmos*', meaning divine possession or inspiration: God-inspired." He was all that, for sure.

Now, to go from the sublime to the ridiculous, let me relate the story of my small supporting role with Bernstein's 1985 "Journey for Peace" tour, where he traveled to the two atomic-bombed cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to mark the 40th Anniversary of their destruction in a gesture of peacemaking solidarity.

When Maggie left the office that July to accompany Bernstein on the tour, her parting instructions as she went out the door were "Get Press!". I was left in charge of the office for the next two weeks.

Getting press was a relatively easy thing to do when the client was Leonard Bernstein. I figured that the Times and other major papers would already cover the culminating concert in Hiroshima on August 6th, so getting on one of the morning TV shows seemed the best call.

Since "Good Morning America" was then the top-rated morning show, that was my first call. I had to go through a few layers to get a talent booker for the program. LB was definitely talent. I made my pitch and we soon had an agreement to have Lenny appear via satellite during the 7:30 to 8 a.m. time slot. The timing worked out perfectly since Japan time is 13 hours ahead and their night would coincide with morning in New York.

As the day approached, I checked the thick binder with the entire itinerary for the tour. Lenny was to start in Athens before proceeding to Japan. I looked at the Athens date, the program and the starting and end times. The book said the concert would last two hours.

I don't know what made me think I should confirm the schedule but, knowing Lenny's habit of running overtime, I determined to call the concert hall in Athens the day following their concert. When I reached the orchestra manager in Athens and asked what time the concert had ended, he couldn't believe my question at first and thought I might be an imposter. Finally, after assurances that I did work for Bernstein's office, he told me that the

concert had ended at 10:40 p.m. Athens time. Bad news since, on my sheet, the concert was supposed to end at 10 p.m.

I called the ABC producer back and told him of the longer-than-scheduled performance time. He realized he had to cancel the order for the arranged half-hour satellite slot and move it an hour ahead. He was very thankful since, without the time change, Lenny wouldn't have appeared and ABC would have been out \$30,000 for satellite time.

I hung up feeling quite pleased. When I called Maggie that evening in Japan with the good news, she told me that she had landed Dan Rather who spoke with Bernstein and CBS would run the interview sometime.

Again, that was not good news. On television, every station wants exclusive access to the star. I now had to call ABC back and tell them that Rather was also on the case. The producer was not pleased, "That does it. We don't want it anymore." I pleaded with him to give me 24 hours to find a solution. He agreed but didn't sound convinced.

When I called ABC the next morning, I pitched my proposition. It's true that CBS had an interview with Bernstein, I told him, but then spoke these exact words: "Yeah, but CBS has Lenny on film in the can and I'm offering you Lenny live!" Bingo, those were the magic words. ABC scored its coup by airing Lenny live, coming offstage seven minutes before the show's 9 a.m. close, wearing a kimono and sweating profusely. By the way, CBS

aired their Rather clip on their morning show at the exact same time! An incredible double coup.

It was the proudest moment on which to end my three-year association with The Carson Office. Maggie and Lenny took it all in stride, never knowing what rescue role this sorcerer's apprentice had played.

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