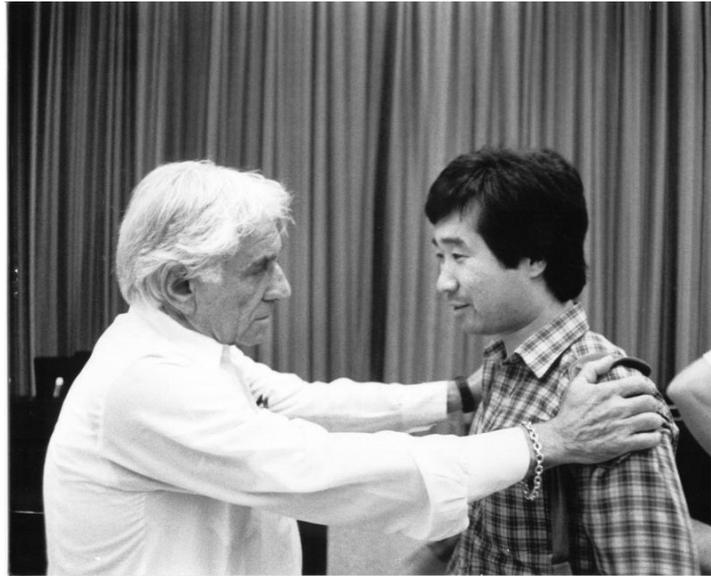


Meeting My Mentor:

One of the greatest musicians in the 20th Century, Leonard Bernstein (Lenny to his close associates) was honored by the city of Houston, Texas in 1983. He had a premiere of his opera, *A Quiet Place*, and a gala concert with the Houston Symphony. The opera was autobiographical and Lenny was going through a period of growing pains producing this work with the Houston Grand Opera. At that time, I was working as Assistant Conductor for the Houston Symphony, and the



orchestra played for the Houston Grand Opera. Naturally, I was “taken in” as one of Lenny’s entourage. This meant I would be spending time with Lenny at all the rehearsals, concerts, and post-concert parties. After the premiere and subsequent performances of his opera, I kept up with Lenny anytime I was free, and his door was always open for me. I have many wonderful memories about him, and here are a few moments I can vividly recall.

Candide Overture:

Lenny used to tell me his private thoughts regarding his music. This was always the best way to get to know him. The Houston Symphony gave a gala concert for him in that month, and our Music Director, Sergiu Comissiona, conducted the first half of *Candide* and Lenny conducted the second. I was sitting right next to Lenny in the first half of rehearsal when Sergiu conducted the Overture. Lenny said, “a great tempo!” I proceeded to tell him the tempo was much slower than his New York Philharmonic recording. Immediately, he told me that when he recorded it for the first time, he was so excited that the tempo he took was excessively fast. He advised me that when I conduct this piece, it has to “swing.” The recording he made with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in mid-1980’s is the right tempo.

Facing Death:

I had a tremendous time studying with him at the Los Angeles Philharmonic Institute. While he was in Los Angeles, he stayed at the cabana suite in the Beverly Hilton Hotel, separated from the main building. One night Lenny, his manager, his personal assistant, and friends were having an after-dinner discussion at his suite, when a man came into the room to rob them at gunpoint. The gun was aimed at Lenny. He later told me that he thought this might be the end of Leonard Bernstein. In that moment, his thoughts were

about finally getting to meet the greats: Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, etc. When he got to Mahler, the robber disappeared. He thanked Mahler for his power to get rid of the criminal. In actuality, while Lenny was imagining his own heaven, his manager gave the robber a couple hundred dollars to make him leave.

Conducting Style:

Lenny's conducting style was far from conventional. He was the music and I saw that in him as he passionately moved around the podium. While attending an electrifying concert performance of the Israel Philharmonic, conducted by Lenny, his dynamic movement put him in danger. The last piece they performed was Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini*. Near the end of piece, the music builds to an ecstatic level, and Lenny, as always, went airborne to give the most powerful downbeat. However, this time he did not land on the podium, but slipped off and landed between the music stand and the podium. To the back of the orchestra musicians, he disappeared completely from their view. Those orchestra musicians stood up, and continued playing. Lenny got up saying, "I am all right," then finished the piece in the most exciting way I have ever heard. The audience exploded with a huge reaction. I rushed backstage while people were still cheering. There, I found Lenny just coming off from the stage, already having his usual post-concert ritual: a glass of Ballantine's Scotch in one hand, and a cigarette in the other. He saw me, put his arms on my shoulder, and told me, "my dear, you may have just witnessed the Fall of Bernstein!" In that moment, I saw him as a Roman Emperor, describing a great tragic event. Nothing was small for Bernstein.

Why?:

Lenny was a fantastic pianist, conductor, composer, educator and humanist. He was always at the center of the crowd. Everyone wanted to talk to him, and wanted to be recognized by him. To me, he was my biggest mentor, musical father, confidant, and I am forever grateful that he shared his passion, knowledge, insights, and very private thoughts with me. I miss him every time I stand on my podium. He used to ask me simply "Why?" I was supposed to know the answer to this question anytime I conducted a piece of music. This was the question and answer to music, conducting, and this amazing life.