

Leonard Bernstein essay



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Leonard Bernstein was born as Louis Bernstein in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He was the son of Ukrainian Jewish parents who were Jennie and Samuel Joseph Bernstein; His father was a supplies wholesaler from Rovno, which is now Ukraine. Despite of his family name, he was not related to film composer Elmer Bernstein. His family spent summers on vacation at their home in Sharon, Massachusetts. His grandmother insisted that his first name be Louis, but his parents always like Leonard, so that's what they called him. He officially changed his name to Leonard when he was fifteen, shortly after his grandmother's death.

His father was a businessman and owner of a bookstore in downtown Lawrence; it is standing today on the corners of Amesbury and Essex streets. His father initially opposed Leonard's interest in music when his was young, but in spite of this, when Leonard was a teenager, his father took him to orchestra concerts and eventually began to support his music education. Bernstein was very young we he started listening to piano performances; he was immediately captivated; he subsequently began learning piano seriously when the family acquired his cousin's piano. When he was a child, he attended the Garrison Grammar School and Boston Latin School. He was very close to his sister when he was a child, and would often play entire operas or Beethoven symphonies with her at the piano. He had a variety of piano teachers when his was young including Helen Coates, who would later become his secretary.

He graduated in 1935 from Boston Latin School, and attended Harvard University, where he studied music. One of his friends at Harvard was philosopher Donald Davidson, with whom he played piano four hands.

Bernstein wrote and conducted the musical score for the production Davidson mounted of Aristophanes' play *The Birds* in the original Greek. Bernstein used some of this music in *Fancy Free*. During his time at Harvard he was briefly an accompanist for the Harvard Glee Club. Bernstein also mounted a student production of *The Cradle Will Rock* directing its action from the piano as the composer Marc Blitzstein had done at the premiere. Blitzstein, who heard about the production, subsequently became a friend and influence on Bernstein.

After completing his studies with a B. A. cum laude in 1939, he enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. During his time at Curtis, Bernstein studied conducting. Unlike his years at Harvard, Bernstein appears to not have enjoyed the formal training environment of Curtis, although later in life he would mention an important teacher that taught him there name Fritz Reiner, who is said to have given Bernstein the only A he ever awarded.

After he left Curtis, Bernstein lived in New York where he shared a flat with one of his friends. He took jobs with a music publisher, transcribing music or producing arrangements under the pseudonym Lenny Amber. During this period in New York City, Bernstein enjoyed an elaborate social life that included relationships with both men and women. In 1940, Bernstein began his study at the Boston Symphony Orchestra's summer institute, Tanglewood, in the conducting class of the orchestra's conductor, Serge Koussevitzky.

On November 14, 1943, he was appointed assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, where he made his major conducting debut at

sudden notice, and without any rehearsal. The next day, The New York Times carried the story on the front page and their editorial remarked, “ It’s a good American success story. The warm, friendly triumph of it filled Carnegie Hall and spread far over the air waves.” He became instantly famous because the concert was nationally broadcast, and afterwards started to appear as a guest conductor with many US orchestras. From 1945-47 Bernstein was the Music Director of the New York City Symphony Orchestra which had been founded the previous year by the conductor Leopold Stokowski. The orchestra was aimed at a different audience with modern programs and cheaper tickets than the New York Philharmonic.

In addition to becoming known as a conductor, Bernstein also emerged as a composer in the same period. In January of 1944 he conducted the premiere of his Jeremiah Symphony in Pittsburgh. His score to the ballet Fancy Free choreographed by Jerome Robbins opened in New York in April 1944 and this later developed into the musical on the Town with lyrics by Comden and Green that opened on Broadway in December of 1944.

After World War II, Bernstein’s career on the international stage began to flourish. In 1946 he made his first trip to Europe conducting various orchestras and recorded Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G as soloist and conductor with the Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1946, he conducted opera for the first time, with the American premiere at Tanglewood of Benjamin Britten’s Peter Grimes, which had been a Koussevitzky commission.

In 1947, Bernstein conducted in Tel Aviv for the first time, beginning a life-long association with Israel. The next year he conducted an open air concert

for troops at Beersheba in the middle of the desert during the Arab-Israeli war. In 1957, he conducted the inaugural concert of the Mann Auditorium in Tel Aviv; he made many recordings there.

After much personal struggle and a turbulent on-off engagement, he married Chilean actress Felicia Cohn Montealegre on September 10, 1951. One suggestion is that he chose to marry partly to dispel rumors about his private life to help secure a major conducting appointment, following advice from his mentor Dimitri Mitropoulos about the conservative nature of orchestra boards. Bernstein's sexuality has been a matter of speculation and debate. Arthur Laurents, who was Bernstein's collaborator in *West Side Story*, said that Bernstein was "a gay guy who got married. He was conflicted about it all. He was just gay." Another friend of Bernstein's, said that she thought "he required men sexually and women emotionally." The early years of his marriage seem to be happy, and no-one suggested they didn't love one another. They had three children, Jamie, Alexander, and Nina. There are reports though that Bernstein did sometimes have brief extramarital liaisons with young men, which several family friends have said his wife knew about.

Bernstein was a visiting music professor from 1951-56 at Brandeis University and he founded the Creative Arts Festival there in 1952. In 1954 Bernstein made the first television lectures for the CBS arts program *Omnibus*. The live lecture entitled "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony" involved Bernstein explaining the work with the aid of musicians from the former NBC Symphony Orchestra and a giant page of the score covering the floor.

In late 1956 Bernstein conducted the New York Philharmonic in concerts that were to have been conducted by Guido Cantelli, who had tragically been killed in an air crash in Paris.

He became a well-known figure in the United States through his series of fifty-three televised Young People's Concerts for CBS, which grew out of his Omnibus programs. His first Young People's Concert was televised a few weeks after his tenure as principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic began. He became as famous for his educational work in those concerts as for his conducting. The Bernstein's Young People's concerts were the first, and probably the most influential series of music appreciation programs ever produced on television, and were highly acclaimed by critics.

In 1959, he took the New York Philharmonic on a tour of Europe and the Soviet Union, portions of which were filmed by CBS.

In 1960 Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic held a Mahler Festival to mark the centenary of the composer's birth. In 1962 the New York Philharmonic moved from Carnegie Hall to Philharmonic Hall in the new Lincoln Center. With his commitment to the New York Philharmonic and his many other activities, Bernstein had little time for composition during the 1960s. The two major works he produced at this time were his Kaddish Symphony dedicated to the recently assassinated President John F. Kennedy and the Chichester Psalms which he produced during a sabbatical year he took from the Philharmonic in 1965 to concentrate on composition. To try and have more time for composition was probably a major factor in his decision to step down as Music Director of the Philharmonic in 1969, and to

never accept such a position anywhere again. After stepping down from the New York Philharmonic, Bernstein continued to appear with them in most years until his death, and he toured with them to Europe in 1976 and to Asia in 1979.

Like many of his friends and colleagues, Bernstein had been involved in various left wing cause and organizations since the 1940s. He was blacklisted by the US State Department and CBS in the early 1950s, but unlike others his career was not greatly affected and he was never required to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. His political life received substantial press coverage though in 1970 due to a gathering hosted at his Manhattan apartment. Bernstein and his wife held the event seeking awareness and money for the defense of several members of the Black Panther Party against a variety of charges. The New York Times initially covered the gathering as a lifestyle item, but later posted an editorial harshly unfavorable to Bernstein following generally negative reaction to the widely publicized story.

A major period of upheaval in Bernstein's personal life began in 1979 when he took the decision that he could no longer repress his homosexuality and he left his wife Felicia for a period to live with the writer Tom Cochran. The next year she was diagnosed with cancer and eventually Bernstein moved back in with her and cared for her until she died in June 16, 1978. Cochran himself died of AIDS in 1981. Bernstein is reported to have spoken of his terrible guilt over his wife's death. Most biographies describe that his lifestyle became more excessive and his personal behavior sometimes cruder after her death. However, his public standing and many of his close friendships appear to

have remained unaffected, and he resumed his busy schedule of musical activity. Bernstein received the Kennedy Center Honors award on 1980. For the rest of the 1980s he continued to conduct, teach, compose, and produce the occasional TV documentary.

On December 25, 1989, Bernstein conducted Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in East Berlin's Schauspielhaus as part of a celebration of the fall of the Berlin Wall. He had conducted the same work in West Berlin the previous day. The concert was broadcast live in more than twenty countries to an estimated audience of 100 million people.

Bernstein made his final performance as a conductor at Tanglewood on August 19, 1990, with the Boston Symphony playing Benjamin Britten's "Four Sea Interludes" from Peter Grimes, and Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. He suffered a coughing fit in the middle of the Beethoven performance which almost caused the concert to break down.

He announced his retirement from conducting on October 9, 1990, and died of pneumonia and a pleural tumor five days later. He was 72 years old. He was a longtime heavy smoker, and had battled emphysema from his mid-50s. On the day of his funeral procession through the streets of Manhattan, construction workers removed their hats and waved, yelling "Goodbye, Lenny." Bernstein is buried in Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York next to his wife and with a copy of Mahler Fifth lying across his heart.

I chose Leonard Bernstein because of his enormous contribution throughout his life. He accomplished so many things at such a young age, and never stopped accomplishing those types of things until his death. I believe he

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would still be alive today if he hadn't been battling emphysema all those years. He was an American conductor, composer, music lecturer and pianist. He was among the first born and educated in the United States of America to receive worldwide acclaim. According to The New York Times, he was "one of the most prodigiously talented and successful musician in American history."

His fame from his long tenure as the music director of the New York Philharmonic, from his conducting of concerts with most of the world's leading orchestras, and from his music for West Side Story, as well as Candide, Wonderful Town, On the Town and his own Mass.

Bernstein was also the first conductor to give numerous television lectures on classical music, starting in 1954, continuing until his death. In addition, he was skilled pianist, often conducting while performing piano concertos simultaneously.

As a composer he was prolific, writing symphonies, ballet, music, operas, chamber music, pieces for the piano, other orchestral and choral works, and other concert and incidental music, but the tremendous success of West Side Story remained unequaled by his other compositions.