

Leonard Bernstein

1918-1990



You could say that **Leonard Bernstein** (*BURN-styne*) was a Renaissance man. He had so many talents. He was a world-famous American conductor, composer, pianist, music educator, author, and humanitarian. He had a larger-than-life personality, and he loved people. And people loved him!

In August of 1918, Bernstein was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He was the son of Ukrainian-Jewish parents, Jennie (née Resnick) and Samuel Joseph Bernstein, both of whom immigrated to the United States from Rovno (now Ukraine). To his friends and to many others he was simply known as "Lenny". When he died in 1990, his funeral procession passed a construction site in Manhattan, and the workers stood along the sidewalk, removed their hardhats out of respect, and waved to his coffin, calling "Goodbye, Lenny!" He was definitely a man of the people.



EARLY YEARS

His father was the owner of The Samuel Bernstein Hair and Beauty Supply Company. It held the New England franchise for the Frederick's Permanent Wave Machine, whose immense popularity helped Sam get his family through The Great Depression.

When Leonard was ten years old, his aunt Clara sent her upright piano to her brother Sam's house. Lenny began teaching himself piano and music theory and was soon begging for lessons. Lenny's father was initially opposed to young Leonard's interest in music and refused to pay for his piano lessons. Back in Russia, where Sam grew up, musicians were the poorest of the poor, and Sam wanted to spare his son this hardship. But Lenny couldn't be stopped! In order to make money to pay for his own lessons, he began to give lessons to young people in the neighborhood. One of his students, Sid Ramin, became Bernstein's most frequent orchestrator and lifelong beloved friend.

In 1935 Bernstein enrolled at Harvard College, where he studied music. Bernstein graduated from Harvard in 1939 with a Bachelor of Arts *cum laude* ("with honors"). After graduating from Harvard, Bernstein enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. At Curtis, Bernstein studied conducting with Fritz Reiner (who is said to have given Bernstein the only "A" grade he ever awarded anyone.) Fun Fact: Curtis is a highly respected music school which only accepts the top tier of talented musicians. (The acceptance rate is 2%!) Their low acceptance rate is because students don't pay a cent to attend...so they'd better be good!

Bernstein met a beautiful actress one night at a party hosted by the concert pianist Claudio Arrau. She was Felicia Cohn Montealegre, who happened to be one of Arrau's students. Leonard and Felicia were married on September 10, 1951. They had three children: Jamie, Alexander, and Nina. By the time they were married, Bernstein was already internationally known, and after his death, his daughter Nina was asked if the children had realized their father's fame when they were young. She replied that they knew he was a musician and a conductor, but they had no idea he was SO famous until one day when they were watching one of their favorite cartoons on television, *The Flintstones*. In that episode the Flintstones and the Rubbles were excited that they were able to get tickets to see Leonard Bernstein conducting. (In the cartoon he was called "Leonard Bernstone" - a play on words, since the cartoon is set in the Stone Age). If he were mentioned in their cartoon, he MUST have been famous! 😊

Here is a very short clip of part of that cartoon:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gy75VoLv04c>



LIST OF WORKS

As a composer he wrote in many genres, including symphonic and orchestral music, ballet, film and theatre music, choral works, opera, chamber music, vocal music and works for the piano. His best-known work is the Broadway musical *West Side Story*, which continues to be regularly performed worldwide, and has been adapted into two feature films (1961 and 2021). His symphonic works include three named symphonies (The *Jeremiah* Symphony, *The Age of Anxiety*, and *Kaddish*), plus *Chichester Psalms* and *Serenade after Plato's "Symposium."* His theater works include *On the Town*, *Wonderful Town*, *Candide*, his film score *On the Waterfront*, and his *MASS*. He also wrote a song cycle *I Hate Music*, and several sets of short pieces for piano solo...his *Anniversaries*.

AS BROADWAY COMPOSER

West Side Story was a ground-breaking musical written in the late 50's as Manhattan's gang warfare was constantly in the news. Bernstein and Arthur Laurents wanted to make a musical that was current and relevant, highlighting the current gang situation in New York City. They used the basic framework of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; Romeo and Juliet became Tony and Maria, from rival gangs (Sharks and Jets). The Sharks were Puerto Ricans, and the play confronted the problems that immigrants had in coming to this country. The famous *Romeo and Juliet* balcony scene was replaced by Tony and Maria on her fire escape. Tony tried to keep the gangs from fighting, but Riff (Jets) and Bernardo (Sharks) are both stabbed in a gang fight at the end of Act I. In the final scene of Act II, Tony is shot, and a heart-broken Maria makes the gangs see that killing one another is senseless.

West Side Story is known for a high level of dancing. Its director/choreographer, Jerome Robbins, was allowed an 8-week dance rehearsal period in preparation for opening night, when most shows only got four weeks. The Sharks and the Jets not only have to sing and act, they must be accomplished dancers, as well.

The show was a sensation. Here is one review from the *New York Daily News*, which was entitled “West Side Story: A Splendid and Super-Modern Musical Drama:”

“The American theatre took a venturesome forward step when the firm of Griffith & Prince presented *West Side Story* at the Winter Garden last evening. This is a bold new kind of musical theatre – a juke-box Manhattan opera. It is, to me, extraordinarily exciting ... the manner of telling the story is a provocative and artful blend of music, dance and plot – and the music and the dancing are superb. In [the score], there is the drive, the bounce, the restlessness and the sweetness of our town. It takes up the American musical idiom where it was left when George Gershwin died. It is fascinatingly tricky and melodically beguiling, and it marks the progression of an admirable composer ...”

This was the first time a musical had so much death and such a dark theme. Bernstein hated racism and was always searching for peace throughout his life, so this was his attempt to highlight the tragedy that comes from gang violence. The show ran for almost two years, from 1957-1959, and closed after 732 performances. After the Broadway run, a film was made in 1961. The cast album from the film was No. 1 on the *Billboard* chart for a record 54 weeks. Recently in 2021 a second film adaptation was released by Stephen Sondheim, who was the original lyricist back in 1957.

Here are clips for you to watch...listen closely to Bernstein’s music...it is fantastic!

Watch the gym scene first where they dance the *Mambo*...the gangs are taking turns showing off to each other. This is a clip from the 1961 movie. You can watch the whole clip, but you are welcome to skip to the Mambo at 2:20.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbgt5byRQUs> (5:36)

Now watch this link of Anderson and Roe playing their version of *Mambo* as a piano duet.

<https://vimeo.com/160710319> (2:37)

They performed this on a Steinway Grand called the “Spirio” which allowed them to record themselves playing *Mambo* so that they were free to leave the keyboard as it continued to play to drum on the case and do other things inside the piano.

Another famous scene in *West Side Story* is when the Puerto Rican girls sing *America*. This is a supercut using clips from both the 1961 and the 2021 movies. Before you watch this clip, though, please do the following rhythmic exercise:

Set a steady tempo for yourself counting to 6 over and over: “1 2 3 4 5 6, 1 2 3 4 5 6,” etc.

THEN count the following with a steady beat, saying the big numbers louder than the small ones:

1 2 3 4 5 6 1 2 3 4 5 6

(I like to be in A-mer-i-ca)

This is the basis for the rhythm throughout *America*, and it is a great example of “hemiola” (he-me-OH-la) where a composer switches from a compound meter to a simple meter by changing the accents BUT without actually changing the time signature. He goes back and forth between $\frac{6}{8}$ meter and $\frac{3}{4}$ meter throughout the piece.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0jVQT0Brzw> (4:55)

Our last link of *West Side Story* is a medley played by the 5 Browns. These pianists are siblings who have made a concert career for themselves. They all attended the Juilliard school in NYC and were the first and only family to have five siblings at the school. Their version of *West Side Story* starts with the opening scene where the gangs are prowling the streets and snapping their fingers, and the music sets up the tension between the gangs, then they make a brief nod to *Mambo* before ripping into *America*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYi0qZ30L1s> (3:02)

There are other wonderful pieces from this show, and I encourage you to look these up as well...all featuring Tony and Maria: *Maria, Tonight, Somewhere, and One Hand, One Heart*. Just search on Youtube. 😊

In 1953 playwright Lillian Hellman approached Bernstein about writing an updated version of Voltaire's *Candide*, which was originally a satire against the Catholic church and its purging of heretics in Voltaire's day. She saw a parallel in the "Washington Witch Trials," fueled by anti-Communist hysteria and waged by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Lillian and Lenny worked together for a number of years, and although the play faltered on Broadway (only lasting 2 months), the score was recorded by Columbia records and was a huge success. Here is the overture to *Candide* conducted by Bernstein late in life...listen for all of the meter changes and tricky rhythms:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=422-yb8TXj8> (4:41)

Bernstein collaborated with friends Betty Comden and Adolph Green on a musical called *On the Town*, about three sailors on shore leave in NYC for 24 hours. Each of the three sailors meets and quickly connects with a woman. It was first produced on Broadway in 1944 and was made into a film in 1949, starring Frank Sinatra, and Gene Kelly. Here is a video of perhaps the most famous song of the show...maybe you have heard it? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7CIgWZTdgw> (3:06)

Like George Gershwin, Bernstein enjoyed commercial success on Broadway and later in Hollywood, which made his life quite comfortable. He also received large salaries as a conductor of major orchestras. (Today a mere musician in the New York Philharmonic can make an average yearly salary of \$800K or more...how much more does the conductor make?) Throughout his lifetime, Bernstein moved up through a string of posh flats as his wealth increased, ending at The Dakota, which is considered to be the first luxury apartment building ever built in NY in 1884. The building is stunning, as you can see from the picture below. Today if you wanted to buy a flat with 3 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms it would cost you close to \$10 million dollars!



AS CONDUCTOR

As a conductor, Bernstein was the first American to receive international acclaim. He received many honors, including seven Emmy Awards, two Tony Awards, sixteen Grammy Awards including the Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Kennedy Center Honor. His film score for the classic *On the Waterfront* (starring Marlon Brando) even received an Oscar nomination for best film score, although it didn't win.

Bernstein was the first American-born conductor to lead a major American symphony orchestra. Before he came along, only foreign conductors were considered worthy of the task. He was music director of the New York Philharmonic and conducted the world's major orchestras...in most cases he was the first American to conduct these world-class orchestras. He conducted all over Europe, the Soviet Union, Israel, and Japan.

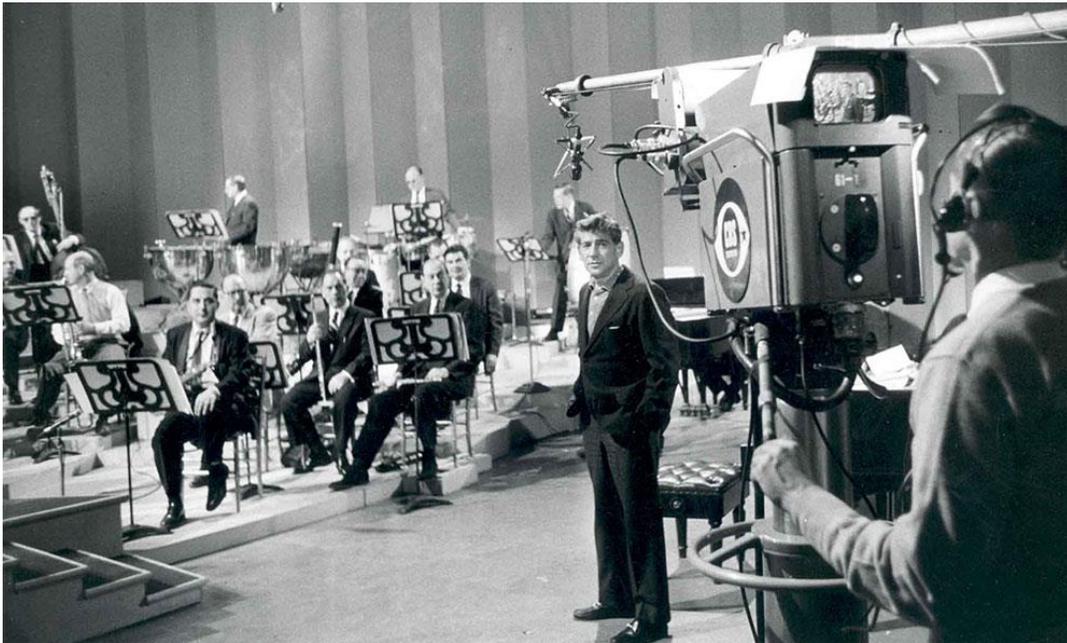
His was a Cinderella story regarding his conducting career. He had been named the assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic as a young 24-year-old. The guest conductor, Bruno Walter, had become ill and couldn't conduct the Sunday afternoon concert. Lenny was given a few hours' notice and with no rehearsals he climbed onto the podium and led the orchestra in a triumphant performance. The audience went wild, and his success was immediate.

Here are just a few photos of his conducting...as you can see, he was exuberant and flamboyant. (By the way this isn't a photo from his debut....this is later in life...his hair is greying here.)



AS EDUCATOR

He was the first conductor to share and explore music on television with a mass audience. As a father of three children, he realized that music education was incredibly important for children young and old. Through his educational efforts, including several books and the creation of two major international music festivals, he influenced several generations of young musicians. Below is a photo of Bernstein and the NY Philharmonic as they filmed their Omnibus program on CBS. *Omnibus* was created to "raise the level of American taste" with educational entertainment.



On Sunday afternoons, the NY Philharmonic would play a matinee concert for children, which was also televised. Each week Lenny would carefully craft the script himself, and in this way you can see his witty and charming personality, as well as his high level of intelligence. Here is a link to one of Bernstein's Omnibus programs:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_Eo0qYrugY (11:00)

He also spent most of his summers with young musicians in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts at Tanglewood Music Center. Tanglewood was established in 1937 as the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. There are three schools there: The Tanglewood Music Center, Days in the Arts, and the Boston University Tanglewood Institute. Bernstein established conducting classes there for young musicians, and he helped launch many careers.

AS A SERIOUS COMPOSER

Being a conductor was a time-consuming job, and so composing music was often put on the back burner. Leonard had great success as a conductor, and because he was such a "people person" he loved being on the podium, making music with others. Composing, on the other hand, was a very lonely pursuit, and he often struggled to produce anything that he felt was worthwhile. Like so many famous and talented people, he felt that his work was never good enough, and he was always disappointed that his "serious" music wasn't taken seriously by the "classical" musicians. He had had great commercial success with his musicals, which labeled him a Broadway composer, and he couldn't shake that image people had of him.

After several years of conducting the New York Philharmonic, he took a one-year sabbatical in order to compose. He received a commission from Chichester Cathedral and so during his sabbatical, he wrote the beautiful *Chichester Psalms* for Chorus, Boy Soprano (or Countertenor) and Orchestra. What is a commission? A commission is a special request from a person or a group for a composer to produce a special piece, usually with a dedication to that person or group in the title or listed under the title. The composer is usually paid handsomely for this request. Chichester Cathedral in England had an annual festival in which they would commission a work each year. The amount to be paid Bernstein was never decided upon, and Bernstein didn't press anyone for money...by this time he was a wealthy man. *West Side Story* was earning \$2000 per week in royalties, and any fee received for writing Chichester would have been far outmatched by later income for performing rights and from publication of the score and the parts.

Here is the second movement, based on the 23rd Psalm and the 2nd Psalm. If you click on "more" below the recording, you can follow the Hebrew text with English translation. Leonard insisted on using the original Hebrew text, and he said he couldn't imagine the Psalms any other way.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7ADzn9ZPLQ> (5:49)

As a pianist, Bernstein wrote short piano compositions which he called *Anniversaries* over the course of 40 years. These *Anniversaries* were named for people who were important in his life...family members, friends, colleagues...and these short pieces were presented as birthday gifts through the years. Here is a recording of his *Four Anniversaries*. The movements are 1. Felicia Montealegre (his wife), 2. Johnny Mehegan (a jazz pianist/friend), 3. David Diamond (a fellow composer), 4. Helen Coates (his former piano teacher/secretary) Besides these *Four*, he also published *Seven Anniversaries*, *Five Anniversaries*, and *Thirteen Anniversaries*. This particular video is also interesting because it includes many photos of the composer as a young man.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4v66mfvPdSO> (6:15)

AS A HUMANITARIAN

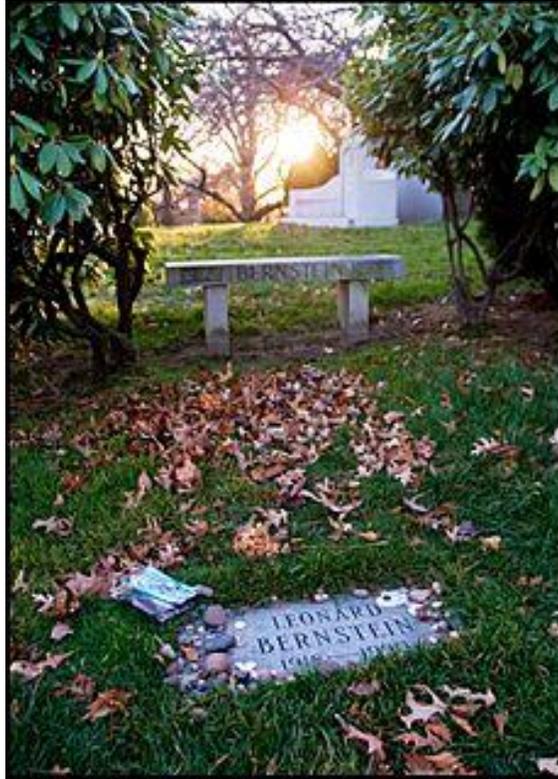
A lifelong humanitarian, Bernstein worked in support of civil rights; protested against the Vietnam War; advocated nuclear disarmament; raised money for HIV/AIDS research and awareness; and engaged in multiple international initiatives for human rights and world peace. One example was a concert series he arranged in Japan, called "Peace for Hiroshima" after World War II.

Near the end of his life, he conducted an historic performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in Berlin to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall. The concert was televised live, worldwide, on Christmas Day, 1989. For years Berlin had been divided into communist East and democratic West, and finally the wall came down. Lenny took the bold step to change Beethoven's words to fit the occasion. Instead of the choir singing "Freude" (which is "Joy"...that's why we know the hymn as "Ode to Joy") he changed the word Freude to "Freiheit" (which means freedom.) Finally the inhabitants of East Berlin were free to cross over to West Berlin...to see relatives they had been cut off from for 28 years. By 1991 the wall had been completely removed, except for a few fragments left in place as memorials.



Lenny hammers the wall

Bernstein announced his retirement from conducting on October 9, 1990. He died five days later, in his New York apartment at The Dakota, of a heart attack brought on by mesothelioma. He was 72 years old. A longtime heavy smoker, he had emphysema from his mid-50s.



Bernstein is buried in Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York, next to his wife and with a copy of Mahler's Fifth Symphony opened to the famous Adagietto lying across his heart. (If you want to de-stress from a hectic day, this piece...obviously one of his favorites...can be heard at this link...a BEAUTIFUL composition by Gustav Mahler conducted by Lenny and the Vienna Philharmonic.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bj6KLv7kv2Q> (12:07)