

# Leonard Bernstein: Music, Maestro Please

by Michael Curtis



I hear music when I think of you, a lovely strain inside of me. Somewhere, these words must delight the recipient being honored at the large number of events, musical, literary and cultural, commemorating the 100th anniversary of his birth on August 25, 1918. Louis Bernstein, who changed his name to Leonard at the age of 15, was the son of emigree Ukrainian Jewish parents. His father had a beauty supplies business, but “Lenny” preferred supplying music, the food of love.

The events honor the complex personality, a heavy chain smoker and imbibor of liquor, especially Rob Roys, who cannot be easily characterized because of the vast array of his gifts: composer of a wide variety of works, symphonic and orchestral, choral, opera, and musicals on Broadway, the first great American conductor, director of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, musical TV host and star, educator and interpreter of music, skilled pianist, champion of other composers, political activist. The initiator of Young People’s Concerts

on TV was an elitist and the musician who was prominent in making the music of Gustav Mahler more well known. Appropriately, he is buried with a copy of the score of Mahler's 5th symphony.

The very public Bernstein, soon "Lenny," became an international celebrity in his early and middle age years because of the success of his Broadway shows, *On The Town*, *West Side Story*, *Candide*. Off Broadway, his oeuvre included three symphonies, the third being the *Kaddish* symphony in 1963 dedicated to the memory of the assassinated JFK, *Chichester Psalms*, and the *Mass* in 1971. *The Mass: Theatre Piece for singers, players, and dancers* was composed at the request of Jacqueline Kennedy, to be part of the program for the opening of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. in 1971. Bernstein's most controversial work, it is a mixture of different styles, classical, jazz, blues, rock, uneven musically, and a mixture of sacred and secular texts, Latin, English, and Hebrew. It is a work of tension incorporating the loss and possible recovery of faith, a challenge to divine authority, and an anti-war declaration. It concludes, "The Mass is ended: go in peace." The *Mass* reflects Lenny's political and social concerns, the age of anxiety, the JFK assassination, the Vietnam War, the civil rights problems.

Lenny's political activism started while a Harvard student with his interest in the production of the agit play in music, *The Cradle will Rock* by Marxist Marc Blitzstein, first performed under the direction of Orson Welles in 1937, but considered dangerous by Washington, D.C. From the beginning Lenny was concerned with liberal and leftist causes, opposed to nuclear weapons. He admired some politicians, especially JFK, and had antipathy towards others such as Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon. His first opera, *Trouble in Tahiti*, in 1952, was critical of American society. Lenny, who had written a college thesis on the absorption of race elements into American music was affected by the assassination of Martin

Luther King, Jr.

That activism was displayed, and widely criticized, when he hosted a party in his large Park Avenue duplex apartment on January 14, 1970. Ninety guests were invited to raise funds for the Black Panthers. Earlier, 21 Panthers had been indicted, and 13 were still in jail, or on bail, on charges of conspiring to kill police and organizing a number of bomb plots around New York. The party was intended to pay legal fees and support the families of the Panthers in jail. Bernstein pledged to give the fee from his next concert. However, the party was ridiculed first in the *New York Times* in an article by Charlotte Curtis and then was mercilessly mocked by Tom Wolfe in an article in *New York Magazine* on June 8, 1970. In it, Wolfe coined the phrase “radical chic” to satirize the support for radical causes by celebrities and socialites who had a comfortable life style.

Lenny was a generous philanthropist as well as supporter of causes including a love of Israel. If not pious, Bernstein was proud of his Jewish heritage, Jewishness and Jewish jokes. Lenny wrote the music for the ballet *Dybbuk* with its Kabbalah rites. Yet, the Jewishness was nebulous. The family celebrated raucous seders, lighted Hanukah candles, but also had a Christmas tree, On Yom Kippur, Lenny and his son Alexander went “shul-hopping,” listening to cantors in synagogues in Manhattan. One amusing incident was on the day of the Kennedy Center honors, which happened to fall on the first night of Hanukah. Lennie, who was being honored, asked President Jimmy Carter for a place in the White House where he could light the Menorah. Carter complied with the request. Culturally, rather than religiously, the Bernstein family was very Jewish. They used Yiddish expressions such as “Oy vey,” and were involved in Jewish music, literature, and with Jewish theater people. Lenny was eager to have his son Alexander bar-mitzvahed. Bernstein’s first large scale orchestral work, composed in 1943, was Symphony, No. 1, *Jeremiah*.

Lenny first performed in "Palestine" in 1947 before the State of Israel was created, then in September 1948 for the 5,000 soldiers in Beersheba and then gave 40 concerts in 60 days, in 1957 he performed at the inaugural concert at the Mann Auditorium in Tel Aviv, and in 1967 at Mt. Scopus to commemorate the reunification of Jerusalem.

Bernstein's public life and accomplishments are well known. We now know more about his private life and behavior from a new book *Famous Father Girl* by Jamie Bernstein, his oldest child, who loved her father. She struggled to become a professional musician, then became a writer and broadcaster. Jamie provides an absorbing account of a complex and troubled man, a combination of intellect, charm, energy, sexuality and seduction. It is a story of egotism, of a man who sadly declined in later years and became addicted to drugs and alcohol, but who was a caring and loving parent.

Lenny and Jamie shared a mutual love of the Beatles, especially John Lennon. Jamie was fascinated that Lenny on first hearing the Beatles song *Norwegian Wood* exclaimed it used a sitar, and that a C trumpet was used in *Penny Lane*. Lenny introduced Jamie to recordings of Leadbelly, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday.

Father and daughter also loved playing word games on the floor together. But she was hurt when Lenny preferred to attend the awarding of a Harvard honorary degree to Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich rather than attend her Harvard diploma ceremony.

Jamie tells of the affluent family life: Manhattan residences at the Osborne on West 57th Street, with its sooty grandeur, Park Avenue, the Dakota, and a summerhouse in Greenwich, and the many extraordinary parties attended by well known personalities Lauren (Betty) Bacall, Steve Sondheim, Mike Nichols, Betty Comden and Adolf Green, Lillian Hellman, Isaac Stern, and Jerome Robbins. Lenny had a colorful assortment of

valets and chauffeurs. She tells of his habits, a heavy smoker, starting at breakfast, and consuming four packs a day.

Jamie tells of the uneven relations between her parents who married in 1951. Her mother, the beautiful and witty Felicia, had grown up in Chile and was an actress who performed once as Joan of Arc. Jamie never saw her parents fight, and the subject of money, that had troubled Lenny's father's marriage never came up. But underlying the marriage was the fact that he was gay or bisexual, though Lenny denied it to his daughter. Lenny, after a number of liaisons with men, left Felicia for a gay lover in 1976, though he did return when she was ill.

Surprisingly, a man who was always elegant in public, is recalled as clumsy, as in Yiddish *lappes*. He broke objects, had no visual sense, and bad taste in clothes. He was a poor driver, but with seeming automotive invulnerability, never got a ticket. In later years he declined, became more addicted to drugs and alcohol, had prostate problems, and was self-indulgent. He was disappointed by the failure of a musical *1600 Pennsylvania* which he had composed with Alan Jay Lerner. He was depressed, hated getting older, unhappy about his diminishing physicality. In contrast to the days when he was surrounded by people, in his last years Lenny disliked the lonely process of composing.

Lenny's public life was glitter and gay in the best of all possible worlds.

Privately, his life resembled the lines from *Candide*, we're neither pure, nor wise, nor good, we'll do the best we know and make our garden grow.