

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments December 1990

Leonard Bernstein, 1918-1990

On the late Leonard Bernstein.

Leonard Bernstein's death in October will strike many as the tolling of a bell, not just for this great career, but for the prospects once entertained for American music. Ever since he burst upon the concert stage at the age of twenty-five, triumphantly filling in for the venerable Bruno Walter as conductor with the New York Philharmonic on a Sunday CBS radio broadcast, Bernstein seemed to be the answer to American music lovers' prayers: a dynamic, exciting, homegrown genius bubbling with vitality. And when this young musical Tarzan turned out, with the writing of the ballet score *Fancy Free* (1944), to be a marvelously gifted composer as well, our native pride could know no bounds. Those of us who were fortunate enough to witness what now seems the infant Bernstein at the end of World War II remember an omni-talent: a conductor, a pianist, on occasion even a singer and, one easily imagined, a soft-shoe dancer too, a personality willing and able to capture each audience on its own terms. As his career unfolded in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it transpired that this exciting classical musician also had a flair for the Broadway-pop world; Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957) quickly became not just a commercial hit, but a part of our own folklore. What more could we ask from a mere musician than that he bring together in his art European and American music, high and low culture? Then there were the Bernstein CBS "Omnibus" music-education programs on television; here, for the musical audience, was presumptive proof that the torch of great music could be, and was actually being, electronically passed on to the young.

For a time in the 1960s, when Bernstein was Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, and the first American to hold such an exalted post in our orchestral life, it seemed that the cultural circle had been squared. Bernstein's box-office success at the Philharmonic was indeed extraordinary; there was even a waiting list—how odd that sounds today!—for those who wished to become subscribers. And then it all somehow seemed to turn down. At the end of the 1960s Lenny (for that was how he was known to all the interested parties) resigned from the Philharmonic, the victim, it appeared, of an increasingly bad critical press. He said he wanted to devote his time to composition; instead he devoted his time to making a conquest, on the podium, of Europe in general and of Vienna in particular. From being a native-born American musical triple-threat, he became an international maestro, one of the three conductors alive, it was said (the others being Sir Georg Solti and Herbert von Karajan), who could actually sell out a house. He wrote a fairly

limited number of new compositions, including a few works, like the much-plumped *Mass* (1971), that made a stir in the media; others of his late works seemed like nothing so much as the reoccupation of familiar territory.

As he grew more distant from his homeland, his once flamboyant political behavior also cooled. The erstwhile supporter in the 1960s of the Black Panthers, notably pilloried in one of Tom Wolfe's most savage and memorable attacks, he seemed reduced to sticking a finger in President Bush's eye when the President wished to award the conductor an arts medal; the *casus belli* appeared to be the controversy over purported censorship at the National Endowment for the Arts, but the overall effect was that of an aging *enfant terrible* who still wanted to be *terrible*.

Bernstein's death will have immediate practical effects on the domestic musical scene. The New York Philharmonic, just now planning the first seasons of the very German Kurt Masur as Music Director, had clearly been counting on extensive use of Bernstein's guest-conducting services to shore up the American aspect of the orchestra's activities; the Philharmonic will not find replacing him an easy task. However little interested in American music this quintessentially American figure had seemed of late, the sad fact is that as long as he remained active, he continued to be our best-known musician and our brightest musical personality. The sad news of Leonard Bernstein's death can only serve to remind us of what he, and we, had once hoped to be.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 9 Number 4 , on page 2
Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
<https://newcriterion.com/issues/1990/12/leonard-bernstein-1918-1990>