

LEONARD BERNSTEIN



RETNA

Few musicians in our century have been as celebrated as Leonard Bernstein. His fame was “modern,” boosted by TV coverage, the recording industry, and world travel—just like today’s popular artists. He was one of the first jet-setters, speeding around the world, signing autographs, reveling in a **flamboyant** lifestyle, and cavorting with presidents and movie stars.

But Bernstein was not a fly-by-night musical idol created by media hype to which we’ve become accustomed. He was a profoundly gifted, well-educated musician and leader with boundless energy and enthusiasm. True, he was privileged—and lucky—but he also worked extremely hard throughout his life. The result? Excellence as composer, conductor, recording artist, teacher, and TV personality.

(1918 – 1990)

A DETERMINED STUDENT

Lenny loved music even as a toddler, calling or crying until someone would play the piano or record player. As a child, he was asthmatic and often sick, so he spent his homebound hours listening to all kinds of music. When he was 10, his aunt gave his family her old piano. He began taking lessons, playing hour after hour. As he grew older, he became strong, athletic, and attractive; people of all ages were drawn to his charming personality and ability to play virtually any popular piece.

But Lenny’s father had another destiny in mind for his son. Sam Bernstein had come to America at age 16 with nothing and had built up a comfortable middle class life for his family. He wasn’t about to see his son become a musician, which he equated with the wandering, ragged **klezmers** back in the Russian ghettos. He wanted his firstborn to take over the prosperous family business.

So when Lenny needed a better piano teacher (at \$3 a lesson), his father refused. Lenny got the money himself by teaching neighborhood kids for \$1 a lesson and playing in a jazz band on weekends. Convinced of his son’s determination, his father proudly presented him with a new grand piano for his bar mitzvah!

YOUNG VIRTUOSO

Lenny’s musical training, however, remained a small part of his broad education. He was accepted into the prestigious Boston Latin School with its rigorous college prep curriculum, and at night he attended Hebrew school in the tradition of his rabbi ancestors. After schooling, there were piano lessons, as well as hours spent going to concerts.

He attended college at Harvard University, where he enjoyed courses in many subjects in addition to music. With so many talents, he wasn’t sure which way to go. It was the great conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos who encouraged him to pursue conducting. So he spent three years with some of

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the best conductors and composers at the Tanglewood Music Festival and the Curtis Institute of Music.

FROM "LENNY" TO "LEONARD"

At 25, Lenny was accepted as assistant conductor for the New York Philharmonic, one of the finest American orchestras. It was there in 1943 that he got his big break. Prior to a concert to be broadcast across the U.S., guest conductor Bruno Walter became ill, and Lenny was called in to take his place. Announced as "the debut of a full-fledged conductor who was born, educated, and trained in this country," his performance wowed the audience and critics alike.

Then came years of honing his skills. He conducted the regular season of the City Symphony of New York for three years, and he served as guest conductor throughout America, Europe, and the then-new nation of Israel. In 1958 he landed the perfect job—music director of the New York Philharmonic. He broadened the predominantly European repertoire, inspired the players with his profound musical understanding, and impressed audiences with his exuberant, muscular style of conducting.

BERNSTEIN AS COMPOSER

But that wasn't all. Bernstein became known nationally, not just from recordings, but also through the new

medium of television. Via TV, millions enjoyed the Philharmonic concerts, Young People's

Concerts, and his music appreciation courses. His magnetic personality, brilliant

mind, and down-to-earth approach brought the world of classical music to people of all ages and backgrounds.

Meanwhile, he was composing, often with Aaron Copland as his mentor. He wrote mostly orchestral

and choral works for the theater and concert hall. Some of his works, however, reveal his strong religious heritage. The often performed choral-orchestral work *Chichester Psalms*, the ballet *Dybbuk*, and his choral symphony entitled *Kaddish* all draw directly on his Jewish background, while *Mass*, a theater piece, reflects his wife's Catholic upbringing.

His most famous compositions, however, are **secular** works for the theater. *On the Town*, depicting three sailors on shore leave in New York City, was very successful. His film score for *On the Waterfront* won an Oscar nomination in 1954. And over the years, the musical *Candide* has enjoyed several revivals.

West Side Story, perhaps his most popular work, has thrilled millions worldwide. Always a man of passion, Bernstein was deeply moved by the musical's "Romeo and Juliet" story relived among the gangs of modern New York City. He was also inspired by his creative team, who were among the best in the business. The result was an operatic musical that reached virtually everyone, bringing together popular and classical, simple and complex, old and new. Perhaps *West Side Story* really is the great opera that Bernstein had always wanted to write...

A LASTING LEGACY

Throughout his successes, Leonard Bernstein struggled with personal and professional conflicts. He was a very complex man. But he never lost the incredible energy and love of life that infused his music-making. Even in his last year, aged and weakened by cancer, he inaugurated a music festival in Japan and conducted Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in Berlin to celebrate the reunification of Germany. The life of this very American, yet truly international musician, demonstrates that the language of music has no borders.

BERNSTEIN at a glance...

Composer/conductor/
pianist from the United
States born in 1918

Used the medium of
television to bring the
world of classical music to
people of all ages and
backgrounds

Wrote both sacred and
secular works, including
compositions for
film and stage

Activity 1 – Bernstein

ARTICLE WORKSHEET

NAME _____ DATE _____

1. What happened when Lenny was 10 years old that changed his life?

2. What convinced Lenny's father of his determination to be a musician?

3. After getting a broad education at Harvard, how did Bernstein come to pursue conducting?

4. How did Bernstein get his big break?

5. Who served as Bernstein's mentor when he began composing?

6. Name some of the famous compositions Bernstein wrote for the theater.
Which was his most popular work?

7. What famous orchestral work did Bernstein conduct in Berlin to celebrate the reunification of Germany?
