

The Remarkable, Musical Mr. Bernstein



by DAVID R. LINDSAY

A noted conductor, pianist and composer at 38, he creates "because I must"

ROLL ALL the daydreams of a young musician into one, clap your hands to make them come true, and you have the story of Leonard Bernstein, America's most versatile musician. Today, at 38, he is a renowned conductor, pianist and composer—equally adept at classical or modern themes—and working on a dozen different musical projects at once.

"Time," he says, "is my worst enemy."

Bernstein first fell in love with the tinkle of an out-of-tune piano when he was a schoolboy of ten in Boston. His father, a wholesaler of beauty supplies, hoped his son would grow up to be a clever businessman, and make money. Leonard's Aunt Clara intervened. She had an old upright piano and, needing a place to store it, sent it to the Bernsteins. The boy performed some one-finger experiments, and that did it. Soon he was asking his parents to listen to tunes he had made up.

The elder Bernstein did not approve. "But he said that it was okay to take piano lessons if I didn't get too serious about music," Bernstein recalls.

But he *was* serious. He managed to continue his lessons all through school and went on to concentrate on music at Harvard.

When composer Marc Blitzstein's informal musical show, *The Cradle Will Rock*, was banned in Boston, young Bernstein put it on in Harvard's Sanders Theater. By ancient treaty, the theater was off-limits to the local constabulary. Instead of an orchestra, the accompaniment for the show is furnished by a piano, played on stage, with the pianist acting as director and co-ordinator of the production. In New York, composer Blitzstein had

done the job. At Harvard, Bernstein did. "Better than I," the composer said.

After college, the family disagreement over Bernstein's love of music reached such a raucous pitch that he left home, determined to make his own way in the New York musical world. When he couldn't get a job, he applied for and won a fellowship to study conducting at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

"Actually, I wanted to be a composer," he says.

While at Curtis, he spent his summers in Massachusetts, studying at Tanglewood. Director of Tanglewood's Berkshire Music Center was the late Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Koussevitzky made Bernstein his protégé and during public concerts allowed him to conduct the Tanglewood orchestra. At one performance he led the orchestra, chorus and a piano soloist simultaneously. Bernstein was a great success.

After finishing at Curtis, the young musician returned to New York with glowing recommendations and little else. That period he calls "Bernstein's Valley Forge." He gave lessons at \$1 an hour—"piano, voice, anything." When he wasn't teaching or looking for work, he spent his time composing or practicing.

Finally, Bernstein landed his first small job in music, taking down on paper the improvisations of jazz greats as they let their musical imaginations run free. Now he could afford a dingy,

one-room studio apartment gloriously located among the rehearsal rooms at the top of Carnegie Hall.

Then Artur Rodzinski, musical director of the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, hired him as an assistant conductor. Assistant conductorships, like understudy assignments in plays, can be passports to nowhere. But on a Saturday evening in November, 1943, his telephone rang. Bruno Walter, the famous German conductor, was ill with a stomach disorder and might not be able to conduct the next day. Rodzinski was in Massachusetts and couldn't get down till Sunday afternoon. Sunday morning, Bernstein learned he would have to conduct, without rehearsal, before a sophisticated Carnegie Hall audience and on the air over a nationwide network.

First he visited Walter, who sat up in bed swathed in blankets and whispered his explanation of the program. Then he put on his best suit—not the usual conductor's daytime formal striped pants and Oxford coat, but a gray sack suit. When he mounted the podium that afternoon, programs rustled all over the hall as the audience looked for information about the handsome, dark-haired 25-year-old up there.

Bernstein said afterward that he couldn't remember much except that the orchestra played wonderfully. The usually unemotional *New York Times* was so excited it put its critic's report of Bernstein's triumph on the front page and devoted an editorial to it. Bernstein had arrived.

All at once his whole life changed. The composing of his "Valley Forge" days paid off. By the end of

the following year, his first symphony "Jeremiah," has been played in New York and Boston and had won a prize. He had conducted the Philharmonic several times, as well as the Boston and Pittsburgh symphonies. With choreographer Jerome Robbins he had turned out a hit ballet, *Fancy Free*. With Adolph Green and Betty Comden doing the words, the ballet had been expanded into *On the Town*, a full-fledged Broadway musical success.

Wherever there was an orchestra and a big hall, he dashed by air, train, car, and boat. No concert of his, his secretary insists, ever had an unsold seat.

"I conducted constantly," Bernstein recalls, "and what writing and composing I did was done in airports, on trains, and in waiting rooms." But he managed to finish a second symphony for piano and orchestra and perform it himself, and he met a pretty South American girl. Later, he also finished a second ballet.

The girl, Felicia Montealegre Cohn, had come to New York from Santiago, Chile, ostensibly to study piano but really to act. She was introduced to Bernstein by a friend who told her, "I want you to meet a man you ought to marry."

Whenever Bernstein was in New York and could get time off from his music, he saw Felicia. But music was the more demanding, and he kept rushing about all over the world, often remaining away for months at a time.

Several years later, in 1951, they were married and took a house in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where Bern-

stein started writing music again. But Charles Munch, who had succeeded Koussevitzky at Boston, had a heart attack. Bernstein was asked to fill in. He dropped everything and did. But although his concerts were a great success, he yearned to get back to Mexico.

A call from George Abbott, the Broadway producer, prevented that. He had a show all set. The cast was signed, the costumes and scenery ordered, the theater engaged, and rehearsals scheduled to start in five weeks. Would Bernstein write a few songs with Adolph Green and Betty Comden to put some pep into the score?

"I said I wouldn't write songs to put into someone else's score; it wouldn't be fair. 'But we've only got five weeks,' Abbott said. 'You couldn't do a whole new score in five weeks?' I asked Adolph Green and Betty Comden if they thought we could. They said sure. I said sure. And we did."

BERNSTEIN recalls that he just couldn't learn to say no. Asked to join the music faculty of Brandeis University, he said yes. Urged to write the music for the movie *On the Waterfront*, he said yes. Asked by Columbia Records to make some LPs, he said yes. And when playwright Lillian Hellman suggested that Voltaire's *Candide* would make the framework for a new musical, Bernstein again said yes, and a collaboration began.

The latest development in his career came recently when he was named co-director, along with Dimitri Mitropoulos, of the New York

Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra for the 1957-58 season.

He is still up to his ears in projects. Currently, he has another musical in the works, temporarily entitled *Romeo*. In addition, he has to prepare scores for conducting and recording dates, write a composition commissioned by the Boston Symphony, put together and play Book-of-the-Month record commentaries, and plan and write television programs.

"Shifting from one thing to another is my kind of vacation," he says. "I don't get tired from working but from talking. Conferences about what you're going to write take longer than the actual writing. Music itself is never tiring to me. Music is fun."

In his apartment there are three pianos. At parties, he tends to drift toward one and just keep playing. When Adolph Green is around, he ad libs funny words to Bernstein's improvisations. Sometimes they make up satiric operas.

Bernstein says he can't go to a restaurant that plays records or a radio and eat. "Even if they play the sappiest stuff, I must listen to it."

Though music is fun, he explains, it isn't necessarily easy. When he composes, he writes and rewrites. "I throw away and constantly reject. Days may go by and I haven't one note to show on paper." When he makes records, he plays and re-plays pieces, parts of pieces, and sometimes only phrases. Finally, from reels of tape, the record is edited into a finished performance.

"All music is creation," he says. "You create because you can and you must. It's a way of communicating, of reaching out to people. It's one of the most mysterious and deeply moving experiences you can have."

Asked which he really prefers, composing or playing, Bernstein says: "When I have to put down what my occupation is, I'm always tempted to write 'beachcomber.' I love to loaf, play games, do puzzles, play with the kids" (he has a four-year-old daughter and a year-old son), "go to the movies, lie on the sand. It's very important to loaf. That's when the ideas build up."

"I know it sounds corny, but I guess what I want to do is what will serve music best."

