



## Bernstein, Leonard (1918-1990)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Throughout the 1960s, Leonard Bernstein was undoubtedly the most visible proponent of classical music in American culture. Through his outgoing personality and resourceful uses of the media, particularly television, Bernstein introduced "highbrow" culture into the homes of middle America, while also defending rock and roll as "real" music and espousing radical causes.

Given his overwhelming celebrity and acclaim as a composer, conductor, pianist, and lecturer, the meteoric career of this son of Russian Jewish immigrants would seem to exemplify the all-American success story; yet, for most of his life, the specter of the closet lurked threateningly behind the glamorous and often brash public image of Leonard Bernstein.

Born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, on August 25, 1918, Bernstein studied at Harvard University, the Curtis Institute, and the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, where he came to the attention of maestro Serge Koussevitzky, who mentored the early stages of his career.

In 1944, the twenty-six-year-old Bernstein was called on at the last minute to replace maestro Bruno Walter in conducting the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The public notice and acclaim that resulted from this performance thrust the young musician into the limelight, and he was soon in demand as a conductor and teacher throughout the United States and Europe.

In 1958, Bernstein was appointed musical director and chief conductor of the New York Philharmonic, a post he retained until 1969, and he remained conductor laureate until his death.

In 1959, at the height of the Cold War, he traveled with the Philharmonic to the Soviet Union, where the orchestra performed his Second Symphony, entitled *The Age of Anxiety* after the W. H. Auden poem that inspired it, an apt work for the given historical moment.

Bernstein was also a noted (if, at times, controversial) opera conductor as well, and is remembered for his performances and recordings with the Vienna State Opera, the Metropolitan Opera, and La Scala. In the latter venue, Bernstein scored a significant triumph when, in December 1953, he made his house debut on short notice, conducting Maria Callas in what would become one of her signature roles, the title character in Luigi Cherubini's *Medea*.

Bernstein simultaneously pursued a very diverse career as a composer, creating "serious" pieces, including three symphonies, three ballets, the choral work *Chichester Psalms* (1965), and *Mass* (1971), a theater piece commissioned for the opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D. C.

His best known works, however, are those he wrote for the Broadway musical stage, including *On the Town* (1944), *Wonderful Town* (1953), *Candide* (1956; revised as an opera, 1982), and the highly popular *West Side Story* (1957).



Leonard Bernstein in 1945.  
Photograph by Fred Palumbo, 1945.  
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Bernstein's respect for popular music is also evinced by the fact that his classical compositions frequently attempt to synthesize jazz and pop themes into more traditional classical styles.

By the early 1960s, Bernstein was one of the most prominent cultural figures in American society. Through his association with the Kennedy family and his media appearances, he exerted a tremendous influence in presenting the fine arts to the American public in a manner free from the social snobbery with which they are so often associated.

He was one of the first orchestral conductors to utilize the relatively new medium of television, and his frequent appearances familiarized the general public with his flamboyant style and extravagant gestures at the podium, mannerisms that infuriated many "purists" but established him as a familiar figure in many American living rooms.

Through his televised educational series of Young People's Concerts (1958-1972), he demonstrated that classical music was not just accessible to the masses but that it could even be *fun*.

Unlike most classical musicians, Bernstein was outspoken in his political views, particularly on the Vietnam War and civil rights issues. His *Mass* disturbed many critics and listeners with its unambiguous anti-war sentiments. So did some of his well-intentioned but nonetheless eccentric gestures, such as inviting members of the Black Panther party, a radical group of African-American militants, to his cocktail parties to mingle with socialites and other representatives of the cultural elite.

As a result, he was exposed to barbs and ridicule in the press (satirist Tom Wolfe labeled Bernstein and his actions as paradigms of "radical chic") and occasionally booing from New York Philharmonic audiences. His advocacy of rock and roll drew derision from classical and rock camps alike.

In spite of Bernstein's public avowal of unpopular causes, he was, for much of his career, unwilling to risk exposure of his homosexuality. Indeed, the social mores of the 1950s and 1960s were such that a revelation of homosexuality would undoubtedly have destroyed the celebrity and influence he had attained.

In 1951, Bernstein married the Chilean actress Felicia Montealegre, with whom he had three children. Bernstein nonetheless engaged in a number of homosexual relationships over the years. In the mid-1970s, the couple separated, and Bernstein attempted to live an openly gay life with Tom Cochran, who had been his lover since 1971. A year later, he returned to his wife, who was by this time terminally ill.

After Montealegre's death in 1978, Bernstein became increasingly open about his gayness; even so, as his daughter observed after his death, his need for a "middle-class sensibility" kept him from living a completely gay life.

Bernstein's final major composition, the opera *A Quiet Place* (1983), positions a bisexual male character, who functions as the mediator between the other, more conflicted characters, at the center of the action. The opera's message is one of reconciliation and acceptance among all people.

Although increasingly in ill health in his final years, Bernstein continued to perform and record until his death from a heart attack on October 14, 1990.

As a conductor, he had a vast repertoire and recorded frequently, often in collaboration with the greatest singers and solo musicians of the postwar era. As a result, he has left an extensive and remarkable legacy of recordings and video performances that will ensure his reputation as an intelligent and enthusiastic conductor, composer, and musician for generations to come.

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### **About the Author**

**Patricia Juliana Smith** is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com).

Patricia Smith (born 1955) is an American poet, spoken-word performer, playwright, author, writing teacher, and former journalist. She has published poems in literary magazines and journals including *TriQuarterly*, *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, and in anthologies including *American Voices* and *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry*. She is on the faculties of the Stonecoast MFA Program in Creative Writing and the Low-Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing at Sierra Nevada College. Discover Book Depository's huge selection of Patricia Juliana Smith books online. Free delivery worldwide on over 20 million titles. We use cookies to give you the best possible experience. By using our website you agree to our use of cookies. Home. Contact us. Smith, Patricia Juliana. Publication date. 1997. Topics. Woolf, Virginia, 1882-1941 -- Characters -- Lesbians, English fiction -- Women authors -- History and criticism, Lesbianism in literature, Homosexuality and literature -- Great Britain -- History -- 20th century, Women and literature -- Great Britain -- History -- 20th century, English fiction -- 20th century --. History and criticism. Publisher. SIDELIGHTS: Patricia Juliana Smith is a scholar focusing on homosexuality and gay and lesbian culture. A frequent contributor to journals, Smith has edited several volumes dealing with gay and lesbian themes, and wrote *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction*, a 1999 release that traces the emotions caused by a loss of personal identity in the works of Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing, among others. Smith and Blackmer gathered the writings of musicologists and literary critics to explore this phenomena, and create an "ebullient and carefully researched" introduction, according to Mockus, who stated: "En Travesti tries to bridge a disciplinary gap between musicology and literary studies; it doesn't quite achieve its lofty goals, but it's well worth the effort."