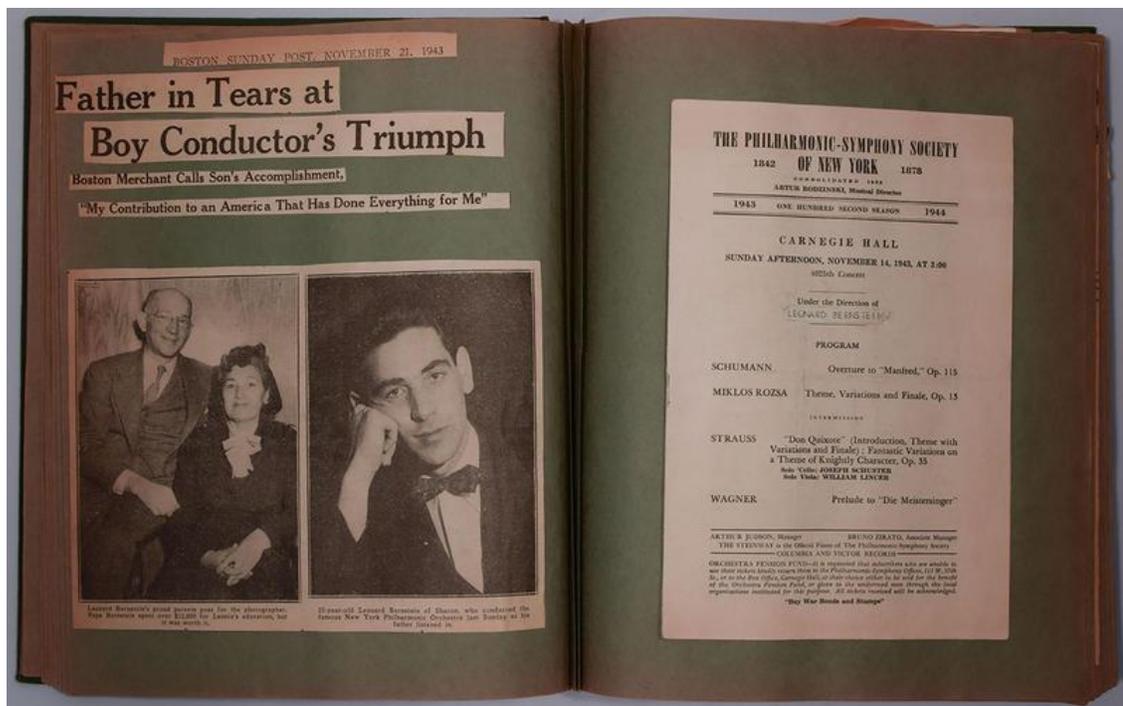




9 Things You Should Know About Leonard Bernstein: A Teenager's Perspective

By Caroline Zager • Aug 23, 2018

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A page from Sam Bernstein's scrapbook on his son's career in music. Left: clippings from The Boston Globe, Bernstein's hometown newspaper. Right: The Carnegie Hall program from Bernstein's debut with the New York Philharmonic, altered by his father

Courtesy of the Bernstein family

As a 16-year-old “musical theatre kid,” I’ve always linked the name Leonard Bernstein with *West Side Story*, and those familiar songs that never fail to bring a smile to my face, from “America” to “Somewhere.” I love them all.

But my knowledge of Bernstein was limited to the Jets, the Sharks, Maria, and Tony. Little did I know that there was so much more...

The centennial of his birth is August 25th, 2018 and a lot of fuss is being made this year. So when I heard about the exhibition, [*Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music at the National Museum of American Jewish History*](#), I thought I’d check it out.



Caroline at the National Museum of American Jewish History

I was lucky enough to go on a guided tour with **Ivy Weingram**, the curator of the show who opened my eyes to the impact of Bernstein's music, and his influence on the world.

I discovered that Bernstein was a conductor, educator, activist, humanitarian, *and* composer. And one thing remained consistent in all of his roles: he followed his heart.

Beyond *West Side Story* there’s a lot to learn about Bernstein and all of the interesting facets of his life. Here are some that especially stood out to me.

1. Bernstein’s father didn’t want him to pursue music. Born in 1918 to Ukrainian Jewish immigrants, Jennie and Samuel Bernstein, one of two things were expected of Bernstein. One—to inherit and manage his father’s beauty supply business, or two—to become a rabbi. However,

when Bernstein began taking piano lessons at age 10, it became clear that his path would not include working in industry or attending rabbinical school.

His father initially opposed Bernstein's interest in music and even wrote to his son's piano teacher, making sure that he "not regard his music as a future means of maintenance." (See letter in slideshow above.)

Nevertheless, Bernstein believed that music could change the world and, regardless of his father's concerns, did what he knew was right for himself, despite it being a difficult road to take.

2. Bernstein's childhood synagogue played a big role in helping him form his identity. Growing up, Bernstein attended a conservative synagogue, Mishkan Tefila (Sanctuary of Prayer), in Boston. This synagogue was unique in that it approached Jewish worship with a progressive attitude. For example, they featured organ music and a mixed-gender choir in their services, which was uncommon for conservative synagogues at the time. Bernstein was so impacted by the beauty of the music and sense of equality he felt at synagogue, that he found ways to incorporate his faith into his music. For instance, in the overture of his operetta *Candide*, you'll hear what's supposed to sound like the shofar, a ram's horn that's blown on Jewish High Holy days.

3. Bernstein was pressured to change his name. In the early 1940s, during WWII, Serge Koussevitzky, the conductor of the Boston Symphony at the time, served as Bernstein's mentor. He had converted to Catholicism from Judaism to avoid being discriminated against and advised Bernstein to change his name to "Leonard S. Burns." He thought that having a less Jewish-sounding name could help Bernstein with furthering his career, but the young conductor responded, "I'll do it as Bernstein or not at all"—and that's just what he did.

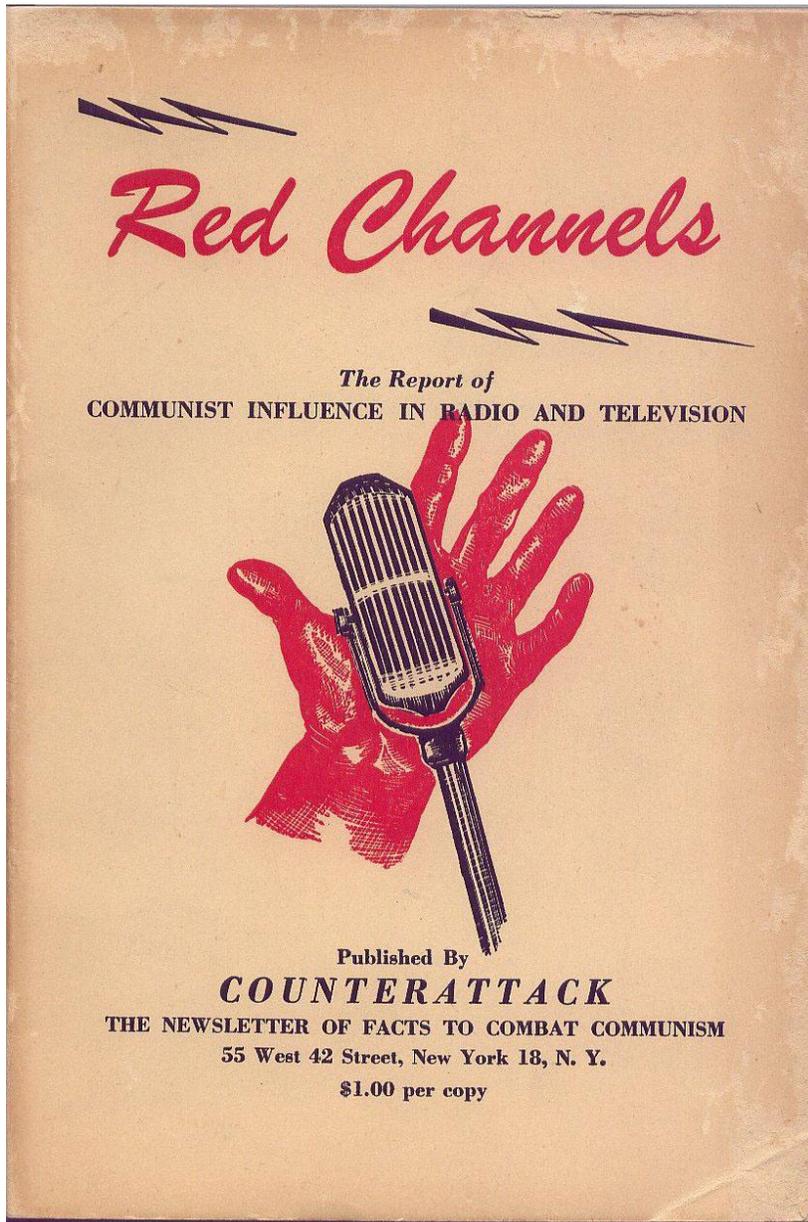
Years later, Bernstein received a letter from Solomon Braslavsky, a teacher from his childhood synagogue, that I think best shows Bernstein's loyalty to his identity. Braslavsky writes, "you reached your goal by your OWN merit (no strings, no politics) and with your OWN NAME. It is neither BERNini nor STEINKovsky. It is what you always were, what you are and what you always will be."

And one thing remained consistent in all of his roles: he followed his heart.

4. Bernstein was an overnight sensation. After having recently been appointed assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Bernstein made his Carnegie Hall debut conducting on November 14th, 1943 when he was asked to stand in for guest conductor Bruno Walter with less than 24-hours notice. The program was very difficult, featuring the works of Schumann, Miklos Rozsa, Strauss, and Wagner. Nevertheless, Bernstein delivered an incredible performance and made the front page of the *New York Times* the following morning—the rest is history!

5. Bernstein was an avid civil rights activist. Something that was extremely important to Bernstein over the course of his entire life was equality. Bernstein advocated for social change

through his work. When he made his Broadway debut with *On the Town* in 1944, he featured African Americans in high-profile roles. This was the first time that African Americans and whites were treated equally on the Broadway stage and, as noted by Joe Bastic in his review for *The People's Voice* in 1945, the casting in *On the Town* represented “the biggest, most important thing that has ever happened to Negroes in the American theatre.”



Credit National Museum of American Jewish History, 2009.22.1, Dedicated in honor of George Ross by Jane Barr Pino

6. Bernstein was tracked by the FBI. For as long as Bernstein conducted, he never shied away from staying involved with the most pressing issues of his time. As a result, he ended up in an anti-Communist report titled, *Red Channels*, by Joseph McCarthy. Weingram noted that "*Red*

Channels spelled the end of many entertainment industry professionals' careers, either because they were blacklisted as a result, called to testify before Senator McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee and had their reputations damaged, or both." Bernstein was one of the lucky few who managed to avoid McCarthy's hearings. However, he was still closely monitored by the FBI, who compiled an 800-page file on all of his activities.

7. Bernstein was a devoted advocate for Israel throughout his entire life. He made frequent trips there and even conducted what was first the Palestine Symphony Orchestra and then the Israel Philharmonic across 25 different seasons, more than most orchestras with which he worked.

Bernstein firmly believed that music had the power to bring people together, so during Israel's War of Independence, [he arrived in the desert outpost of Be'er Sheva to entertain troops and townspeople](#). Weingram explained, " On a makeshift stage, he led the Israel Philharmonic in three pieces, including Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*." In the midst of a war, with the Israeli and Egyptian armies mobilized in Israel's southern desert, the country stopped to listen to an orchestra.

8. Bernstein led 53 Young People's Concerts. Bernstein is well-known for the Young People's Concerts he led during his time as music director at the New York Philharmonic. These televised programs, accessible to all, instilled an appreciation of classical music within an entire generation of young people. He made these programs a centerpiece of his work and even continued to lead them until 1972, despite having stepped down as director of the Philharmonic in 1969. Bernstein later referred to these concerts as being "among my favorite, most highly prized activities of my life." In fact, Bernstein's Young People's Concerts are still widely viewed today, see below...

9. Bernstein passed away five days after retiring. Bernstein announced his retirement from conducting on October 9, 1990 and died at his apartment in New York City only five days later of a heart attack brought on by mesothelioma. He was 72 years old.

Leonard Bernstein was so focused on his work and all that he could do to make the world a better place. He spent every second, up until he passed away, doing just that.

There's free admission at the [NMAJH](#) on Friday, August 24th from 1 to 5 pm and all day on Saturday, August 25th! You can get 2-for-1 admission through September 2nd by mentioning code "WRTI" at the door!

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