

Entertainment & Life

'Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music' exhibit reveals many sides of legendary composer and conductor



The exhibition at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia explores Bernstein's "search for a solution to the 20th-century crisis of faith."

One of the final pieces displayed in "Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music," the expansive and illuminating new exhibition at the National Museum of American Jewish History, is a seemingly trivial artifact that curator Ivy Weingram believes sums up three of the most important priorities in the life of the legendary conductor and composer.

It's his itinerary for a 1982 tour with the LA Philharmonic, scheduled to begin in Boston. Day one shows three activities: a fundraiser for Ted Kennedy, a Passover seder and a play at Harvard that featured his daughter, Nina.

“It tells a lot of stories,” Weingram said following a preview tour. “It points to his politics, his Jewish identity and his family really being at the core of all that was important to him besides his music.”



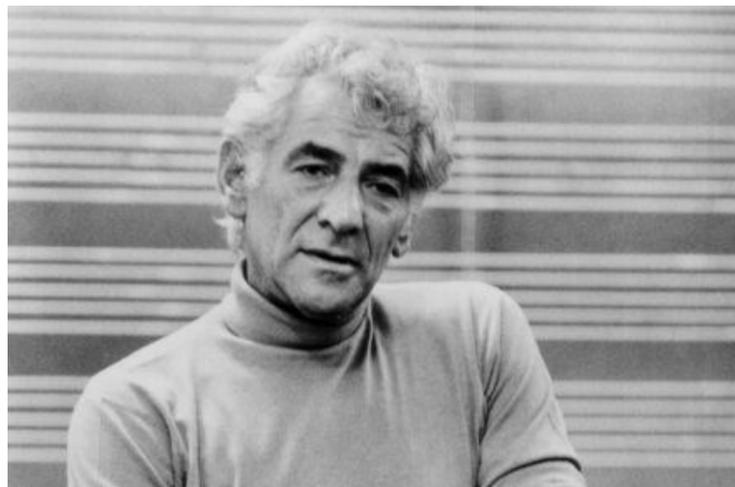
Bernstein’s music is, of course, a major element of the exhibit, which runs through Sept. 2 and, according to his children, is one of at least 2,500 events around the world celebrating the 100th anniversary of his birth (Aug. 25, 1918).

But the exhibit also focuses heavily on his life, his Jewish identity and his social activism while exploring, in Weingram’s words, “what he often referred to

as the work he has been writing his whole life: a search for a solution to the 20th-century crisis of faith.”

Visitors to the exhibition on the museum’s fifth floor are greeted by a Bernstein quote about this quest next to a giant, black-and-white video clip of him conducting as a young man. It’s a striking first impression and sets the tone for a journey through his life and work that features approximately 100 artifacts and photographs from public and private collections.

The exhibit includes items you might expect to see — the Steinway piano he played as a teenager, his conducting suit and baton, an entire section devoted to “West Side Story” — and those you might not — a full copy of his thick FBI file after he was suspected, along with many other prominent Jews at the time, of Communist activity in the 1950s, as well as a portion of his affidavit denying the accusations.



“Leonard Bernstein (who died in 1990) lived through very tumultuous times in the 20th century,” Weingram said. “World War II and the Holocaust, the Cold War, the Vietnam era, a time of great social upheaval, all of which would challenge the many facets of his complex and complicated identity.

“I’ve been asked, what did he say the solution to the 20th-century crisis of faith is? Did he ever find a solution? I think the exhibition is really about the how and why, not necessarily the what.

For Leonard Bernstein, the essence of Judaism was asking questions and pushing and debating and constantly searching. It was about that journey.”

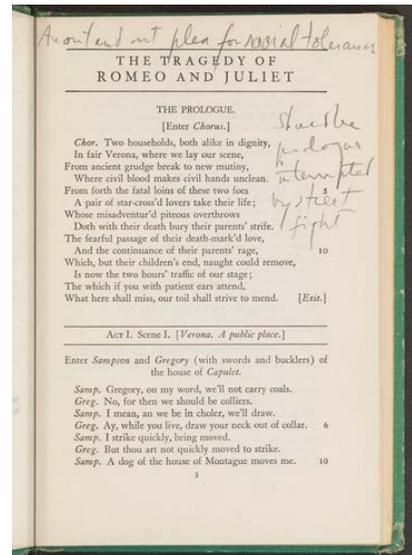


The exhibit is arranged mostly chronologically, starting with his years growing up in Lawrence, Massachusetts and featuring such gems as the letter his father sent with a check for lessons to Leonard’s piano teacher, stating that “I prefer that he does not regard his music as a future means of maintenance.” (Weingram cited his father’s famous quote: “How was I to know he would grow up to be Leonard Bernstein?”)

The section on his early life also includes a photo of Bernstein in Rittenhouse Square while he was a student at the Curtis Institute of Music.

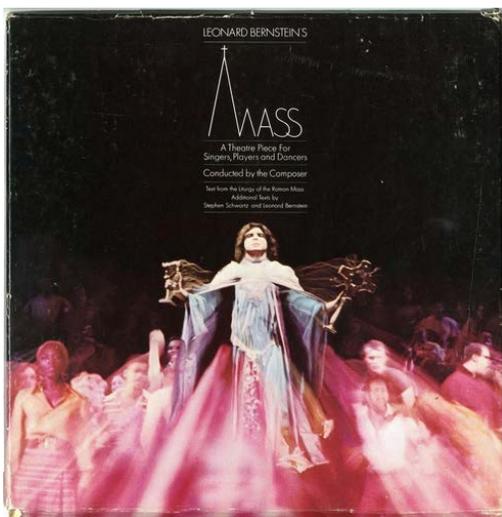
The first of several interactive installations features nine blocks, each representing a different Bernstein composition. By

placing the blocks in an electronic docking station, visitors are treated to one of six different videos about each composition, depending on which side of the block they choose.



Bernstein’s social conscience is demonstrated early in the exhibition through artifacts from a concert he conducted with a small orchestra of Holocaust survivors at a displaced-person’s camp in Munich in 1948.

There is a program from the concert, a photo of him with the orchestra and a citation he received for his contributions to the spiritual well-being of Holocaust survivors.



There is ample information about “On the Town,” the 1944 Broadway musical that broke barriers with its racially integrated cast, including Japanese-American ballet dancer Sono Osato in a main role.

“It was a bold move for Bernstein and his collaborators in ‘On the Town’,” Weingram said. “They were all young, in their 20s, and were already figuring out how to use the stage as a way to break social barriers.”



A large section of the exhibition is devoted to “West Side Story,” the smash 1957 Broadway musical based on “Romeo and Juliet” that was adapted into an Academy Award-winning movie in 1961. The exhibit traces the musical from its roots (it was originally conceived as “East Side Story,” about Jewish and Catholic gangs) all the way to its lasting cultural influence, with an original film featuring clips of modern performers such as Will Ferrell and Taylor Swift delivering songs from the show.

Highlights of the “West Side Story” section include Bernstein’s annotated copy of “Romeo and Juliet,” an audition list for the film (including Warren Beatty) and an early scene from the “East Side Story” script that would have taken place at the home of a Jewish aunt during Passover.

“Eventually, they realized

this was the story of their parents’ generation, this was an immigrant story, and it wasn’t the story of the 1950s,” Weingram said. “At the time, Puerto Rican gang violence was making headlines in Chicago and New York, and a light bulb went off that this was a contemporary tale that could be told.”

The exhibition includes a variety of films and sound installations, including clips of interviews with high-profile Bernstein fans such as actor Mandy Patinkin and playwright Tony Kushner. Another original film is devoted to the cultural climate in America around the time of Bernstein’s “Mass,” the ambitious work he composed at the request of Jacqueline Kennedy to mark the opening of the Kennedy Center in 1971.

Not all of the artifacts speak to Bernstein’s music or social activism. Some are just personal treasures, such as the engraved kiddush cup, a family heirloom, given to him by his wife, Chilean actress Felicia Montealegre, on their wedding day in 1951. (Though Bernstein was gay, the couple were married until her death in 1978, and had three children.)

If you go

“Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music”

When: Through Sept. 2

Where: National Museum of American Jewish History, 101 S. Independence Mall East, Philadelphia

Special events: **March 26:** 6th Annual Freedom Seder Revisited; **April 18-22:** Jamie Bernstein Takeover, five days of music, film and conversation featuring Bernstein’s daughter; **May 22:** Only in America Gala in New York City, with live music from Lea DeLaria; **June 3:** “For Lenny,” performance by pianist Lara Downes and stories from Bernstein’s son, Alexander; **April 6-Aug. 24:** Free Fridays, featuring free admission 1 to 5 p.m. on Fridays

Museum hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays; 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

Museum admission: Adults, \$15; seniors (65 and up) and youth (13-21), \$13; children 12 and under, free.

Information: 215-923-3811; nmajh.org

Weingram called the kiddush cup one of her favorite items in the exhibit. Like almost everything else, it has a story to tell.

“I think the ‘wow’ moment is discovering the stories behind the stories people thought they knew about Leonard Bernstein,” she said. “The stories behind his compositions, the stories behind his activism, how he expressed that, the real humanitarian side behind him, that you got some of on the podium, and you got a lot of off the podium.”