

Washington Jewish Week

Leonard Bernstein's faith on exhibit in 'Power of Music'

MARCH 22, 2018 BY [RACHEL KURLAND](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



LEONARD BERNSTEIN

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PHILADELPHIA — If your sole association with the works of Leonard Bernstein is a 1970s-era Animal from The Muppets drumming to the tune of “America,” you’re not completely wrong. Whether you know much about the famous composer, many latter generations relate to his world through musical recreations seen on “The Simpsons,” “Glee,” even “Family Guy.”

In celebration of Bernstein’s centennial, the National Museum of American Jewish History here will show “Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music,” March 16 through Sept. 2. It delves into the second-generation American Jew’s memorable moments throughout his career and lesser-known accomplishments.

NMAJH Associate Curator Ivy Weingram said the museum tells a snippet of his story on the first floor, but has never had a full exhibition. With his local connection to the Curtis Institute of Music and his centennial, she said it was perfect timing.

She approached the exhibit through the lens of Bernstein’s search for a solution to the 20th-century crisis of faith, which heavily influenced his life.

“He was raised on Talmud and Torah, and that music that he heard in synagogue had quite a lasting impression on him,” Weingram said.

On and off the stage, Bernstein heavily supported social change. He lived through World War II, the Holocaust, the Cold War and the Vietnam War, all while his personal crisis of faith challenged him.

In an interactive piece of the exhibition, visitors can play with building blocks, each representing a different musical piece, like “Candide” or “Mass.” Visitors put a block in a central interactive slot, which triggers notes to play on a big projection. Each side of the block plays a different verse, explaining Jewish influences of the work or the score itself.

One block explains the opening song to “West Side Story,” for example, which was influenced by the shofar.

“Bernstein said it was inspiration for the way the Jets signal to each other,” Weingram noted. “Once you hear it, you can never unhear it.”

Walking through the exhibit, you feel the essence of what was important to Bernstein, including his own name. When he made his debut at 25, he chose to keep his last name though others told him to change it to appear more American.

“He was constantly walking the fine line of wearing his Jewish identity on his sleeve and being known as an all-American maestro,” Weingram said.

Bernstein’s family loaned the museum many nostalgic items, like a piano, conducting suit, photographs, mezuzah from his studio, seder plate and his ketubah.

Like any proud Jewish parent, Bernstein's father kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings lauding his accomplishments. The headline: "Father in Tears at Boy Conductor's Triumph."

In 1948, Bernstein went on a conducting tour of Europe, where he was asked to visit a displaced persons camp to play with a small orchestra of survivors; he accompanied them on piano. One of those survivors, as explained in a testimonial in the exhibit provided by the USC Shoah Foundation, eventually became a violinist for The Philadelphia Orchestra.

At the same time that he was touring the world and seeing firsthand the dark results of the war, he was also making his Broadway debut with "On the Town."

A lighthearted romp on the surface, "On the Town" broke a lot of barriers on stage. Bernstein was one of the first to cast African-American dancers. The interracial cast playing sailors was far ahead of its time, when real sailors were still segregated.

"He certainly didn't have to do that," Weingram said. "He was from a privileged home. His father had a successful business. He went to Harvard. He went to Curtis. He was an insider in more ways than he was an outsider. But I think it says a lot about his character."

NMAJH CEO Ivy Barsky added that people who don't know much about his works and Bernstein aficionados alike can appreciate the exhibit.

"His Jewish roots, Jewish wisdom and Jewish values affected who he was as a musician, a conductor, a composer, a professional, an activist, an educator," she said. "For everyone, there will be epiphanies of learning."

Bernstein made close connections with Israel, too, conducting 25 seasons for the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

Bernstein collaborated with young lyricist Stephen Sondheim and frequent partner Jerome Robbins for "East Side Story" — the original title, which told the story of Jewish-Catholic rivalry on the Upper East Side on the eve of Passover and Easter.

The museum features an original copy of "Romeo and Juliet," which Bernstein annotated in the margins of Act 1, toying with a song titled "It's the Jews."

In one of his datebooks on display, Bernstein detailed his plans for the week: On Thursday, "West Side Story" debuts (also on Rosh Hashanah). The next day, "fly to Israel."

A 1982 tour schedule also details the day before a world tour: He went to a musical salute for Sen. Ted Kennedy, a seder and a play at Harvard featuring his daughter.

"That speaks to the kind of man he was, that his Jewish identity, his politics, his family were the three legs of the stool of his life," Weingram said.

Another interactive piece shows the “West Side Story” film aside dozens of commercials and TV shows that used the musical for satirical or narrative inspiration.

Weingram said it shows the lasting impact of Bernstein’s iconic work, even for her 8-year-old son. When he saw a clip of Will Ferrell singing “Maria” on “The Tonight Show,” he said, “Oh, it’s the guy from ‘The Lego Movie,’” she laughed.

“We have people on our staff who didn’t know who Leonard Bernstein was,” Barsky admitted of younger generations. “They didn’t know “West Side Story” was Leonard Bernstein. But when they see that supercut of “The Muppets” and a Gap ad and “Family Guy,” that has some staying power and resonance.”

For Bernstein, Weingram added, “the essence of Judaism was asking questions and always learning and teaching.” He always had a Passover seder and synagogue-hopped on Yom Kippur to hear different cantors.

“There’s something for everyone in this exhibition,” she continued, “whether you’re a music student, whether you love Broadway, whether you love history, whether you love American history, or whether you love The Lego Movie with Will Ferrell in it.”

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