Entertainment — **The Arts**

'Late Night' takes a spin through Leonard Bernstein's big brain

by **Peter Dobrin**, Classical Music Critic 🐦 @InquirerPeter | ✉ pdobrin@phillynews.com

Most families have their share of photos ready to show to visitors. Jamie Bernstein's family album just happens to be more musical than most.

Lights down, soundtrack up: Leonard Bernstein and Michael Tilson Thomas jousting for elbow room while playing a four-hand "The Rite of Spring." Bernstein's voice on a piece of 78 rpm acetate, sending a message to Jerome Robbins about progress on a new work and apologizing for the sloppy playing. Here's one of his favorite tunes, Noel Coward's "If Love Were All," performed live and quite movingly by pianist John Musto and soprano Amy Burton.

Jamie Bernstein summons forces musical and archival in *Late Night With Leonard Bernstein,* which made a one-night-only appearance (and ran not so late) Saturday at the National Museum of American Jewish History on Independence Mall. The script by Bernstein's daughter and George Steel (the show is produced by Copland House) isn't linear biography or musicological investigation. More of a musical séance, it's probably the most *haimisch* two hours (to borrow from the Yiddish for "homey") anyone will spend in the presence of the composer-conductor-musical explainer this centenary year.

Jamie Bernstein calls it a "guided tour inside my father's brain," and what a brain it was. Jamie never quite comes out and says it, but Bernstein was one of the great musical synthesizers in a century of great synthesizers (he died in 1990). For this show, she has hung her story on the idea that inspiration often arrived at late-night parties with musicians and creative types, or through other moments of nocturnal instigation.

One night in 1943, she tells us, Bernstein gets a knock on the door of his studio above Carnegie Hall, and it's Jerome Robbins with an idea for a show about three sailors on leave in New York. It becomes *Fancy Free* and *On the Town*. We hear about Bernstein playing Copland's "Piano

Variations" at a birthday party for Copland. It's New York City in the mid-20th century, and he hangs out with Betty Comden and Adolph Green.

📷 **KATEY FAHRINGER**

Jamie Bernstein with pianist Michael Boriskin (seated) performing "Late Night with Leonard Bernstein" at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia.

As Jamie wended her way down memory lane, the musicians in various combinations provided the musical evidence. And here is where the kernel of inspiration in this show resides. The musical lineage of *West Side Story* is made clear when Jamie explains how Bernstein visited Key West, heard radio signals from Cuba, and started writing *Conch Town*. That score was never finished, but when pianist Musto played an excerpt, a famous tune surfaces: "America." Other musical progenitors – pieces whose material ended up in the *Mass* or a concerto or symphony – made for illuminating moments.

On the one hand, *Late Night With Leonard Bernstein* is an act of devotion. But it also represents a paying back of debts. Bernstein existed in a particular time and place, and he absorbed it all. A charming video clip of the composer singing [Marc Blitzstein](#)'s "Zipper Fly" explains one aspect of Bernstein's compositional style. Pianist Michael Boriskin played "For Aaron Stern" from *Thirteen Anniversaries*, which blends Satie-like elegance with Bernstein's familiar sense of songful hope, as well as "Lullaby for JZ," a spare, mysterious gem.

The show ends with "Some Other Time" from *On the Town*, which, after all we've heard and learned, arrives like a moment of distillation. Musto, Boriskin and Burton gave it a marvelous

sense of tranquility and unwinding. But it's also a piece about grappling with unfinished business in life.

"Oh well, we'll catch up some other time," says the lyric. The music, though, isn't so sure, and it's that complexity and contradiction that helps to explain what made Bernstein a musician of remarkable layers, like all the greats.