



*Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music* is the “first large-scale museum [exhibition](#) to illustrate Bernstein’s life, Jewish identity, and social activism,” according to the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, where you can catch it until Sept. 2. (A national tour will follow.) There are artifacts ranging from Bernstein’s piano (a Baldwin, though he used to invoke another manufacturer to tell people how to pronounce his name: “No one ever called a Steinway a STEEN-way!”), an annotated copy of *Romeo and Juliet* in which he formulated ideas for *West Side Story*, the mezuzah from his studio, the *ketubah* from his marriage to Costa Rican actress [Felicia Cohn Montealegre](#), and his family Haggadah ... which, unsurprisingly, contains additional sheet music. There are dozens of photos, hand-drawn set designs, snippets of costume fabric, personal letters, album covers, and illustrations. There’s the earliest known photograph of teen Lenny conducting; his trademark impressive swoop-y matinee-idol hair is already evident as he theatrically leads a Jewish summer-camp orchestra of seven nebbish-y boys with triangles and tiny cymbals. (The photo is grandiloquently labeled “Onota Rhythm Band and Leonard Bernstein, 1937.”)

Celebrations of Bernstein’s 100th birthday are taking place all [around the world](#), including performances of his greatest work: *West Side Story* in South Africa, *Candide* in San Francisco and Los Angeles; *Fancy Free* in Tuscaloosa; and six different operas and theatrical works this summer at Tanglewood, where Bernstein began his career. There’s also a traveling [exhibit](#) by the Grammy Museum and, of course, a hashtag campaign ([#BernsteinAt100](#)). Philadelphia, where Bernstein attended the [Curtis Institute of Music](#), naturally wanted in on the action. “Around three-and-a-half years ago, we started to think about how we’d make our mark exploring Bernstein’s life in a way that hadn’t been done,” curator Ivy Weingram told me in an interview. “We started thinking about his search for a solution to ‘the 20th-century crisis of faith,’ which was a phrase he used in a letter to a teacher in 1979.” (The typed letter—with edits and cross-outs by Bernstein, clearly indicating that he’d labored over it—is in the NMAJH show.)

The exhibit does a superb job leading the viewer through Bernstein’s life—from his childhood as the son of a wig manufacturer in Lawrence, Massachusetts, to his bravura 1943 debut at age 25 as the last-minute substitute conductor for the New York Philharmonic, to his triple-threat success as a conductor, Broadway hitmaker, and classical composer. But the show also serves to

illustrate a quote from Bernstein featured prominently on one wall: “This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.”

I admit I didn’t know much about Bernstein’s history of activism through music. A section of the exhibit devoted to *On the Town* (created by the all-Jewish production team of Jerome Robbins, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green, who was an old pal of Bernstein’s from Camp Onota) examines just how groundbreaking the 1944 Broadway production was. The show combined elements of classical, jazz, boogie-woogie, and blues (today that might be called culturally appropriate, but back then it was an indication of taking African-American music as seriously as white European classical music). The cast was multiracial, with African-American and white dancers clasping hands while singing “New York, New York, a helluva town” (two decades [before](#) a white woman touching a black man’s arm on TV triggered a scandal). The production’s dressing rooms were also integrated, as indicated by a letter on display, signed by the entire male chorus, demanding an electric fan. One of the female leads was played by the Japanese-American ballet dancer [Sono Osato](#), whose father—who ran a tea house in Chicago—had been imprisoned the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. (After being interned for six months as an “alien enemy,” he remained on parole and wasn’t allowed leave Chicago until 1945, so he wasn’t allowed to travel to attend his daughter’s opening-night performance.) The show had a female technical producer and stage manager, and an African-American music director. “The movie version and revivals mostly didn’t pick up on how progressive that first version was,” Weingram said. “At least not until Misty Copeland was cast in the last revival.”

The exhibit also delves into Bernstein’s 1948 trip to Germany under the auspices of the U.N., where he conducted an orchestra of Holocaust survivors in D.P. camps. There’s the program, photos (in which Bernstein looks haunted), and a film of some elderly survivors looking back on the experience. “Bernstein conducted ‘Rhapsody in Blue,’ which was one of his go-to pieces of healing for others and for himself,” Weingram said. “He said he cried his heart out. And yet it still took him a lifetime to wrestle with the traumas of the 20th century in his original works, including *Kaddish* and *Mass*.”

Unsurprisingly, Bernstein’s activism brought him to the attention of McCarthyite politicians. He was one of 140 people [named](#) in *Red Channels*, a roundup of supposed Communist sympathizers in entertainment. (Weingram pointed out to me that one-third were Jews.) Unlike [Robbins](#), Bernstein wasn’t called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee; he never named names. But when he needed a passport in 1953 to conduct *Tosca* at La Scala (the first American invited to do so), he had to sign an affidavit disavowing communism. The museum provides a laminated copy of Bernstein’s extensive—and heavily redacted—[FBI file](#), acquired under the Freedom of Information Act, for visitors to page through.

Bernstein pissed off authority figures much earlier than that, though. His businessman father didn’t want him to go into music, a field he viewed as flighty and uncertain. And the exhibit includes a virulent letter appended to his 1939 Harvard senior thesis, “The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music” (which claimed that America’s sound “derived from the blending of New England choral traditions, music brought to America by immigrant communities, and ‘Negro Jazz’”), from a professor noting, “I thoroughly disapprove of Mr. Bernstein’s arrogant attitude and of the air of superiority assumed by him. His otherwise

interesting analysis of the modernistic idiom would have gained much without this display of immature, juvenile, and unjust criticism. With this reservation, I accept his thesis for honors but would like to see that my objections are made known to him.” Damn.

There are video clips of a 1967 trip to Israel to conduct Mahler’s Second Symphony (in Hebrew) with the Tel Aviv Philharmonic. Interviewed while riding in a convertible, jauntily smoking with his elbow jutting out of the window, Bernstein observes in his plummy midcentury mid-Atlantic actor-y voice, “It’s just thrilling to see Jews and Arabs mingling ... I mean, this is what it’s all about, isn’t it? It’s what life’s really about!” (Ah, well.) Why’d he choose that Mahler symphony? “It’s Israel’s story,” he observes. “Threats, destruction, and resurrection.”

The museum also shows how Jewish sounds imbue Bernstein’s own compositions. A clever interactive installation lets visitors pick up wooden blocks with the names of several Bernstein works engraved on them. Placing a block into a specially built station, you learn about the Jewish melodic building blocks of each work. *Jeremiah* (Symphony No. 1), for instance, incorporates the *haftarah* blessings, which we hear in shul form and in their symphonic permutation; in *West Side Story*, we hear how the Jets’ call to action is awfully reminiscent of a shofar blast.

*West Side Story* was another show with an all-Jewish production team, including Bernstein, Robbins, Arthur Laurents, and Stephen Sondheim. Fans will enjoy learning about the show’s evolution from *East Side Story*—a battle between Jewish and Catholic youths on the Lower East Side, set at the convergence of Easter and Passover and opening with a Seder—into the familiar story of gang violence between Puerto Rican and “American” kids. “Eventually Bernstein decided that making the characters Jewish reflected an older generation’s Lower East Side,” Weingram said. “He projected Jewish otherness onto the Sharks, seeking recognition as full Americans by the Jets.” Young visitors will love the supercut of *West Side Story* moments in pop culture, showing how resonant the show’s songs have been for generations. On half a large screen we see scenes from the 1961 movie; on the other half we see a succession of parodies and references: The Muppets, Melissa McCarthy as Sean Spicer on *SNL*, Gap ads, 1970s variety-show Cher, Adam Sandler and Jack Nicholson, Nathan Fillion, *Flight of the Conchords*, Taylor Swift. (My 13-year-old daughter Maxine’s fave: Homer Simpson singing “[I Like Pizza](#)” in the style of “I Feel Pretty.”)

Another video installation looks at *Mass*, an ambitious antiwar piece that Bernstein composed for The Kennedy Center in 1971. (President Nixon got wind of the vibe and skipped the performance.) “The celebrant” experiences a crisis of faith in an almost-three-hour journey, structured like a Catholic Mass, featuring two choirs, gospel and rock elements, and a dance interlude. (Like his beloved Mahler, Bernstein was seriously extra, as the kids say—or *ungapatchka*, as the olds say—in his symphonic compositions.) Snippets of the performance are juxtaposed with moments of chaos and beauty like the ones that haunted and touched Bernstein: the Kennedy assassination, anti-Vietnam protests, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Baltimore symphony’s tribute to Freddie Gray, the cast of *Hamilton* confronting Mike Pence.

The exhibit does have some gaps. Presumably because the museum worked closely with Bernstein’s family, it puts an entirely happy face on Bernstein’s challenging marriage. While acknowledging that Bernstein had romantic relationships with men before, during, and after his

marriage, the show maintains that Felicia and Lenny's "dedication to each other's success and happiness persisted until the couple separated in 1976." (If they were so happy, why did they separate?) A little Googling turns up a beautiful, raw, undated [letter](#) in the Library of Congress's newly released [collection](#) of Bernstein documents, from Felicia to Lenny pleading with him to explore his homosexuality (with the promise he wouldn't give her any details, and with the caveat that he should return home to her); a *Los Angeles Times* [story](#) offers details about the young man Lenny left Felicia for ... and his feelings of guilt. The show also doesn't mention that despite his advocacy for African-American artists, the Philharmonic was sued in 1969 for discrimination against African-American musicians. (At the time of the suit, the orchestra had had only one African-American musician in its 101-year history: Bernstein, who took the helm in 1958 as the first American-born conductor and the first American Jewish conductor to lead a major orchestra, hired violinist Sanford Allen in 1962 ... and no one else.) Still, the show conveys the charisma, brilliance, moral struggles, humor, and charm of one of the greatest figures of American music.