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# Leonard Bernstein: Conductor, Educator

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LEONARD BERNSTEIN: CONDUCTOR, EDUCATOR

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LEONARD BERNSTEIN: CONDUCTOR, EDUCATOR

by

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THESIS

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## Introduction

There is a common theme that those individuals who are considered the most influential minds of history share – that is the unquenchable desire for knowledge. Leonard Bernstein is no exception to this theme. Bernstein’s daughter, Jamie, describes her father using the Hebrew phrase, “Torah Lishmah,” which means a “raging thirst for knowledge.” She further describes her father this way – “His brain was on fire with curiosity. And what he loved most was to communicate his excitement to others.”<sup>1</sup> It is of utmost importance that any discussion of Leonard Bernstein begins with acknowledgement of this passion for information. The purpose of this paper is to delve into the life and work of Leonard Bernstein and his contributions to the world – more specifically – the world of music. The discussion will focus primarily on his contributions to the field of conducting as well as some of his educational endeavors. This will be achieved using biographical information and audio/visual recordings of his conducting and teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Jamie Bernstein, *Leonard Bernstein: A Born Teacher*,  
[www.leonardbernstein.com/educator.htm](http://www.leonardbernstein.com/educator.htm) . Accessed 11/21/11

## Chapter 1: Who was this man they called “Lenny”?

Leonard Bernstein was born to Jennie Resnick and Sam Bernstein on August 25, 1918 at Lawrence General Hospital in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Both of his parents were Jewish immigrants to the United States and the Jewish faith was a major part of Bernstein’s childhood. His parents originally named him Louis, after Jennie’s late grandfather; however, both parents preferred the name Leonard. From the beginning of Bernstein’s life, his parents referred to him as Leonard, Lenny, or Leo – as did everyone who knew him. When Bernstein turned 16, he borrowed his mother’s car and officially changed his name in the town registry.

Lenny’s parents exposed him to music from a very young age by way of the radio but it wasn’t until he turned 10 years old that he began his journey as an instrumental musician. As a child, Bernstein was often sick with asthma attacks and a severe allergy to dust. One biographer stated that “with the arrival of Aunt Clara’s piano, ten-year-old Leonard’s general health improved, he became self-confident, and almost overnight he shot up to become the tallest boy on the block.”<sup>2</sup> It is safe to say that the addition of this piano to the Bernstein household changed young Leonard’s life forever. At first, young Lenny learned piano by imitating the sounds that he heard on the radio and as he improved, he began taking lessons from Frieda Karp once a week for one dollar. By the time he was 13, he was outplaying his teacher so he began studying with Susan Williams at New England Conservatory. By age 14 Bernstein was composing, arranging, and setting for piano virtually everything he could get his hands on. Throughout his childhood, Lenny was obsessively curious about nearly everything. He loved to take mechanical objects apart and figure out how they worked. This became a theme throughout his life, especially with regard to musical composition.

Lenny was gifted in academics and was accepted into the extremely competitive Boston Latin School beginning in grade 6. This was helpful in preparing him for the educational experiences he

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<sup>2</sup> Humphrey Burton, Leonard Bernstein. (Doubleday, New York. 1994), 10

would have for the rest of his life. As Lenny was succeeding academically he continued to excel in piano playing and began to have thoughts of pursuing music as a career. Though apprehensive at the prospect of spending money on a low-paying profession such as music, Bernstein's father continued to pay for his son's piano education. He even sponsored Lenny's first public performance that was broadcast on the radio. Leonard continued to grow musically and intellectually and was still fascinated with music. His father continued to support Leonard's pursuit of music but purely as an "idealistic" endeavor.<sup>3</sup>

Young Lenny's journey into the world of professional music proved to have its challenges. He had great success as a young musician but was not considered to be a "prodigy" per se. He did not reach the level of compositional expertise of Mozart or Mendelssohn as early in life.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, his grades were good enough upon completion at Boston Latin to be accepted into the prestigious Harvard University. The intellectual stimulus of being a student at Harvard fueled Bernstein's longing for knowledge and prepared him well for his education at Curtis Institute in Philadelphia as well as for his life beyond higher education.

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<sup>3</sup> Burton, Leonard Bernstein, 28

<sup>4</sup> Burton, Leonard Bernstein, 32

## Chapter 2: Becoming the Conductor

### The New York Years

“Practically no one – not even the musicians who work for him, or, for that matter, his doctor’s office nurse – calls [Bernstein] anything but Lenny.”<sup>5</sup>

In the fall of 1943 Leonard Bernstein became the assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic – though a more appropriate term might be “assistant *to* the conductor” at this time. During this period, assistant conductors of symphony orchestras in the United States tended to have jobs other than conducting. Briggs describes Bernstein’s duties this way: “Although the assistant conductor’s name appears on the program in larger type than that of the concertmaster, his principal function may prove to be that of bringing coffee and sandwiches to the conductor at rehearsal.”<sup>6</sup> Bernstein knew of the possible difficulties he might face as an assistant conductor, especially in relation to advancing in the conducting world. The dynamic of professional orchestras functioned such that, when a conductor stepped down or retired, another music director would take their place. Assistant conductors did not generally get to “move up.”

In November 1943, one man’s illness became Bernstein’s fortune. Bruno Walter was guest conducting the New York Philharmonic in three concerts, contracted the flu after the second concert and was unable to conduct the final concert on that Sunday afternoon. After a long night, a nervous Leonard Bernstein took the podium to a “polite, perfunctory spatter of applause.”<sup>7</sup> The concert consisted of Schumann’s “Manfred” Overture, Strauss’s *Don Quixote*, Rózsa’s *Theme, Variations and Finale*, as well as the Prelude to *Die Meistersinger*. Two hours after taking to the stage, after the final cut-off, Bernstein turned around to an immediate, resounding standing ovation from the audience at Carnegie

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<sup>5</sup> Jane Fluegel, *Bernstein Remembered*, (Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc, 1991), 55

<sup>6</sup> John Briggs, *Leonard Bernstein: The Man, His Work, and His World*, (The World Publishing Company: Cleveland, New York, 1961), 75

<sup>7</sup> Briggs, *Leonard...World*, 83

Hall. He had just completed his debut performance as an American-born, American-trained conductor of a major symphony orchestra.<sup>8</sup> Immediately following this performance Bernstein's career began to "[soar] upward like a string of booster rockets, in a series of explosions each more spectacular than the last, and with no ceiling in sight."<sup>9</sup>

Over the next few years, Bernstein began to grow in popularity among musicians and non-musicians as a conductor, composer and educator. At the same time he had many professional ups and downs. He travelled all over the world to orchestras including the New York City Symphony, Israel, Boston and others conducting and performing works by himself and others. In 1959, Bernstein became the joint conductor of the New York Philharmonic with Mitropolous. It was at this time that he began to use a baton. He felt that it gave him much more clarity in the beat with much less effort. According to Briggs, this took some adjusting to. It was noted that during certain moments of extreme passion in the music, the baton would slip out of his hand and fly at the members of the orchestra.<sup>10</sup>

The years that Bernstein spent with the New York Philharmonic are among his most influential as a professional musician. January 2, 1958 marks the day that Bernstein made his debut as principal conductor and music director-elect for the orchestra.<sup>11</sup> After officially becoming the music director of the orchestra, Bernstein had a conversation with the *New York Times* in which he stated, "My job is an educational mission."<sup>12</sup> It was in this spirit that he began to restructure the concert schedule. He began to produce themes for programs as well as introduce the famed "Young People's Concerts" throughout his tenure in New York. Though he had some detractors, Bernstein was widely respected and *extremely* loved throughout his conducting career by those who played for him as well as the general public.

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<sup>8</sup> Briggs, Leonard...World, 81

<sup>9</sup> Briggs, Leonard...World, 85

<sup>10</sup> Briggs, Leonard...World, 207-208

<sup>11</sup> Burton, Leonard Bernstein, 283

<sup>12</sup> Burton, Leonard Bernstein, 290

## **Conducting after the New York Philharmonic**

During the last few years of his career in New York, Bernstein had the strong desire to further invest himself in the art of composition. In 1966, he announced his decision to retire in 1969 upon the conclusion of his contract with the orchestra. These last years in New York were characterized by still-great musical offerings and a great deal of travelling for Bernstein. His first guest appearance outside of the United States came in 1966 when he was invited to conduct the Vienna Philharmonic in the pit of the opera *Falstaff*. He was so successful in his debut as guest conductor of this orchestra that there was talk of him becoming the permanent conductor of the orchestra since Karajan had stepped down from that position, though, Bernstein would not commit to accepting the job.<sup>13</sup> Upon retiring from his full-time career with the New York Philharmonic as its Music Director in 1969, “Almost all of 1970 was completely taken up with the New York Philharmonic (including a tour of Japan), the Metropolitan Opera, the Vienna Philharmonic, the Israel Philharmonic, the Vienna State Opera...the London Symphony Orchestra, summer at Tanglewood, and a dozen other such dates.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout the rest of his life, Bernstein continued to conduct as a regular guest at many of these venues, as well as others all over the world. In addition to his conducting appearances, Bernstein was also invited to Harvard University to deliver six Norton Lectures, which he entitled, “The Unanswered Question.” These lectures explored the enigma that was (and is) modern music – i.e. “music in our time.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Meryle Secrest, Leonard Bernstein, (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1994), 310-315

<sup>14</sup> Secrest, Leonard Bernstein, 325

<sup>15</sup> Burton Bernstein and Barbara B. Haws, Leonard Bernstein: American Original, (Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York, Inc., 2008), 145

## Chapter 3: Educating the Public

In order to gain a full appreciation for the master educator that Bernstein was, it is important to have an understanding of a few of his most successful and widely known educational exploits. Two of the most important parts of Bernstein's educational life were the *Omnibus* lectures and the *Young People's Concerts*. Though there were many other teaching opportunities, these two covered the largest and broadest audience. The typical format of each concert or lecture was similar throughout each series so the following two sections summarize the first *Young People's Concert* and the first of the *Omnibus* lectures with the aim of understanding the goals and effects of each.

### **The Young People's Concerts: 1958-1972**

During his tenure as the music director of the New York Philharmonic, as mentioned above, Bernstein made it his goal to educate as many people as possible. One of the most important and effective ways that he was able to educate the public was the creation and performance of his *Young People's Concerts*. Throughout these fourteen years, Bernstein would lead a total of 53 *Young People's Concerts*.<sup>16</sup>

The first of these concerts took place two weeks after his appointment as the music director of the New York Philharmonic. This concert was entitled *What Does Music Mean?* Bernstein had a way with words and a gift for captivating whatever audience he was addressing. For example, at the beginning of this first *Young People's Concert* he asked the audience what any particular piece of music is all about. Then he played a piece of music and asked the rhetorical question, "What do you think this tune is about?"<sup>17</sup> He then explained his daughter's reaction when he played the same excerpt for her. In less than one minute he had captivated his adult audience with a question about the meaning of music and his audience of young children with a story of his daughter. He was able to simultaneously relate to everyone in every age group in his audience.

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<sup>16</sup> Jack, Gottlieb, ed., Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts, (Doubleday: New York, 1992), 345-360

<sup>17</sup> Gottlieb, Young People's Concerts, 1

Bernstein explained that music is just a bunch of notes that have no inherent meaning. He compared musical notes to English words and mentioned how they're different. He used the example of the word "rocket." That word immediately brings a picture to the mind of the listener. Bernstein then said that "one little note all alone: means nothing."<sup>18</sup> He explained that when a composer writes music he has a plan and that plan gives the composition meaning. That meaning may be something completely different than what we associate the tune with in our minds but it is, in fact, a meaning. Some pieces have actual stories that are associated with the music (e.g. *William Tell*) and we might associate them with a different story line. That is acceptable, but he stressed the importance of getting to know the composer's intentions for his composition.<sup>19</sup> Following this explanation Bernstein shows his audience how to *find* meaning in the *music alone*. He uses his voice and his hands as a way to illustrate how the composer has written the music to make sense with itself. He uses the example of a conversation or argument between two people. He sings the phrases, playing the part of each character, and shows how music can be conversational.

Following this introductory discussion he begins to bring in parts of the orchestra. He tells the story of *Don Quixote* with the various sections in the orchestra responding to his prompts. The trick is that he told the wrong story! He showed the audience how easy it would be to associate a different meaning to the same music.<sup>20</sup> Bernstein moves on from talking about the story music tells to what meaning the music actually holds as well as why music makes us feel certain ways. He finishes this portion of the program by instructing people to "Sit back and relax, enjoy [music], listen to the notes, feel them move around, jumping, hopping, bumping, flashing, sliding – and just enjoy THAT."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gottlieb, Young People's Concerts, 4

<sup>19</sup> Gottlieb, Young People's Concerts, 8

<sup>20</sup> Gottlieb, Young People's Concerts, 8-9

<sup>21</sup> Gottlieb, Young People's Concerts, 31

## Omnibus

*Omnibus* was premiered on November 9, 1952 over the CBS television network as a weekly series that first aired from 4:30-6:00 P.M. on Sunday afternoons. According to Ron Simon of the Museum of Broadcast Communications, “The most stimulating and original of the electronic teachers was Leonard Bernstein, who single-handedly enlarged the possibilities of musical analysis and performance on television.”<sup>22</sup> The first lecture that Bernstein gave for this series was on Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*.

From the moment that master of ceremonies Alistair Cook introduced him, Bernstein was able to captivate the audience without saying a word. Painted on the floor of the set was the first page of the score for Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*. Bernstein was standing in a narrow spotlight conducting the Symphony of the Air (formerly the NBC Symphony Orchestra) through the first eight notes of this dramatic work. As he continued with his analysis of this major work he brought an “intellectual passion of excitement and discovery to his subject” that hooked viewers.<sup>23</sup>

Bernstein proceeded to take his audience on a journey through the writing process of Beethoven based on discarded sketches that Beethoven himself produced. Leonard began to make classical music accessible to the general public by reminding his viewers that Beethoven, even while writing the great work that is his *Fifth Symphony*, struggled with what exactly to put in the score. Bernstein stated that Beethoven wrote down at least “fourteen versions of the melody that opens the *second* movement of this symphony.”<sup>24</sup> Leonard walked to the piano and began to play the final version and a few of the discarded versions. He stressed that after eight years and fourteen years of struggle, Beethoven finally produced that beautiful tune that is the theme for the second movement. He proceeded to make the point that it is not the notes that provide inherent meaning – they are not capable of creating meaning – rather,

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<sup>22</sup> Ron Simon, *Omnibus: U.S. Cultural Series*, <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=omnibus>, (Accessed 11/21/11)

<sup>23</sup> Simon

<sup>24</sup> Leonard Bernstein, *The Joy of Music*, (Amadeus Press: New Jersey, 2004), 87

the notes are the “springboard for the symphonic continuity to come.”<sup>25</sup> Upon describing the process of finding the melodic theme for music, Bernstein began to take the audience through the orchestration process. Using members of the orchestra, he showed why certain orchestrations would not work and why certain orchestrations would work. He then showed copies of the score to the camera to show how many times Beethoven would cross or scratch out various voicing’s in favor of more effective ones. Moving back to the beginning of the work, Bernstein began to talk about musical development. He played various options for the opening of the piece and explained that they did not work, guiding the ears of his audience to a more critical state of listening.

One of the more intriguing moments of the broadcast was when Bernstein played an excerpt that made logical and musical sense and proceeded to explain to the audience why Beethoven did *not* choose this as his final version. When he played the sketch that eventually turned into the final arrangement he explained how this version had much more emotion and inherent ferocity. He states, “The other, although good, seems pale beside it.”<sup>26</sup> Before finishing the broadcast with a performance of the first movement of this *Fifth Symphony*, Bernstein concluded his presentation by speaking to the constant struggle that Beethoven went through in order to produce this masterpiece as well as the wealth of masterpieces he created in his lifetime.

Over the next number of years, Bernstein would grace the set of *Omnibus* many times and each time he would speak on a new subject. Titles of these continuing presentations included: *The World of Jazz*, *The Art of Conducting*, *American Musical Comedy*, *Introduction to Modern Music*, *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach*, and *What Makes Opera Grand?*<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bernstein, *The Joy of Music*, 87

<sup>26</sup> Bernstein, *The Joy of Music*, 101

<sup>27</sup> Bernstein, *The Joy of Music*, 106-278

### **What made these events unique?**

Part of what made the *Young People's Concerts* and *Omnibus* presentations so unique and successful was the way that Bernstein carefully scripted each event. Prior to the first *Young People's Concert* Bernstein sent a handwritten draft of his script for the show claiming that, "A Typewriter is too noisy. I love the silence of a pencil and paper. I'm too self-conscious to dictate. I find myself mumbling when I write, because it is to be spoken, not read. Sometimes I realize that my voice has been going on for an hour."<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that Bernstein specifically notes that he writes as if he were speaking – in effect, he writes things down so that he can speak more clearly and articulately when the time comes. Each draft is revised numerous times by Bernstein's own hand until it is perfect in his eyes. It is this specific intention that helps to make his presentations of these concerts so memorable. It should also be noted that until these *Young People's Concerts*, the New York Philharmonic had only been seen on television once in 1954. In addition to appearing on television, it was Bernstein's wish and command that the concerts appear unedited so as to preserve the spontaneity and improvisation of the live performance. The concert series was so popular that it was shown, and gained a following, in twenty-nine different countries – a tribute to Bernstein's charisma and overall skill and influence as an educator and conductor.<sup>29</sup>

Bernstein's skill as an educator was recognized on multiple occasions, through various media outlets. A review of his presentation, *Introduction to Modern Music*, in 1957 stated that he was able to, "[show] what his subject was all about by analyzing it and tracing its historical background."<sup>30</sup> He "...used his varied gifts as a conductor, pianist, lecturer, actor and audiovisual educator..." to help the audience understand whatever topic he was discussing on that occasion.<sup>31</sup> Following each *Omnibus*

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<sup>28</sup> Secrest, Leonard Bernstein, 245

<sup>29</sup> Secrest, Leonard Bernstein, 245

<sup>30</sup> Bernstein uses varied gifts on omnibus, (1957, Jan 14), *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, pp. 23, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/113979106?accountid=7121>

<sup>31</sup> Bernstein...omnibus, p. 23

presentation, the New York Times usually ran an article reviewing the previous night's presentation. Most, if not all, of these articles are positive and recap the content discussed by Bernstein. The end of one such review is as follows, "Mr. Bernstein emphasized power to communicate as one of the conductor's chief gifts. The conductor must use his arms, face, eyes and fingers, he said, and through the lecture one was aware that Mr. Bernstein was using all these and more to communicate his ideas to the listeners."<sup>32</sup> Bernstein once said, "I am a fanatic music lover. I can't live one day without hearing music, playing it, studying it, or thinking about it. And all this is quite apart from my professional role as a musician."<sup>33</sup> Bernstein's love for music permeated all aspects of his life and his love for it intrigued, fascinated, and enticed people of all age levels and walks of life.

Bernstein's goal with each of his television and radio broadcasts was, in short, "music education for the masses" – listeners young and old alike. Critic Harold Schonberg made an observation after the first *Young People's Concert* in a review. He said, "[Bernstein] conducted excerpts by Beethoven, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky and, of all composers, Anton von Webern. The children listened to the wispy ultra-modernist with much more complacency than do their parents. As a matter of fact, they liked it."<sup>34</sup> It could be said, based on this observation, that Bernstein's goal was achieved.

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<sup>32</sup> R. P., "Conductor Gives Demonstration of His Craft for Television Audience," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Dec 05, 34-34, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/113379169?accountid=7121>.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Gradenwitz, Leonard Bernstein: The Infinite Variety of a Musician, (Berg Publishers, New York, 1987), 257

<sup>34</sup> B. Bernstein and Haws, ...American Original, 90-97

## Chapter 4: Works that have been transcribed for Wind Band

Though Bernstein is highly regarded as a conductor and educator, he was also a great composer. While he was alive, he rarely had the satisfaction of hearing his works played. That is not the case in recent years. Orchestras all over the world have “re-discovered” his works and have programmed them more often. Of the works being played by orchestras, many have been transcribed for the wind band medium. The following several of examples that help to explain why Bernstein’s music “works” for the wind band.

### *Overture to “Candide”*

History has proved Bernstein’s adaptation of Voltaire’s *Candide* to be one of his most successful works for the musical stage.<sup>35</sup> The overture to this musical has been transcribed for wind band and is performed with great frequency all over the world. There are a few elements of this transcription that make it so effective for wind band. The integrity of the melody, musically and technically, is kept even though the melody is in the woodwinds rather than strings. This is a testament to Bernstein’s ability to compose virtually transcendent melodic material. His melodic material is transcendent in that it can be performed in any medium (piano, orchestra, wind band, choir) and can be just as effective in communicating its mood and meaning in all of them.

### *Profanation*

This work is the second movement from Bernstein’s *Symphony No. 1, “Jeremiah.”* It was dedicated to Bernstein’s father and was created as an emotional work.<sup>36</sup> The work itself is chaotic, rhythmic, fast-paced, and riddled with mixed meters. Arranged in 1952 by Frank Bencriscutto, the rhythmic nature of *Profanation* lends itself to the wind band medium. The percussive attacks,

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Miles, Teaching Music Through Performance in Band: Volume 1, (GIA Publications, Inc., Chicago, IL, 1997), 341

<sup>36</sup> Richard Miles, Teaching Music Through Performance in Band: Volume 2, (GIA Publications, Inc., Chicago, IL, 1998), 621

asymmetrical meters, and meter changes can be accentuated and emphasized by the articulation of the wind instruments.

## Conclusion

For the rest of his life, people were influenced and inspired by Bernstein wherever he went and by whatever he said. The kind of person and musician that Leonard Bernstein was can be described best by his brother, Burton. “Just as long as people care...about something finer in life than power and money and their imagined superiority over others there will always be Lenny around to educate, entertain, edify, move and inspire – to change us all in some wonderful, subtle way.”<sup>37</sup> In many ways, Bernstein’s life can be summed up in his own words that closed out his *Omnibus* presentation on Beethoven. Bernstein’s final remark of the broadcast is powerful, moving, and in a way, autobiographical.

“And so Beethoven came to the end of his symphonic journey, for one movement, that is. Imagine a whole lifetime of this struggle, movement after movement, symphony after symphony, sonata after quartet after concerto. Always probing and rejecting in his dedication to perfection, to the principle of *inevitability*. This somehow is the key to the mystery of a great artist: that for reasons unknown to him or to anyone else, he will give away his energies and his life just to make sure that one note follows another inevitably. It seems rather an odd way to spend one’s life; but it isn’t so odd when we think that the composer, by doing this, leaves us at the finish with the feeling that something is right in the world, that something checks throughout, something that follows its own laws consistently, something we can trust, that will never let us down.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Burton Bernstein, *My Brother Lenny*, [www.leonardbernstein.com/person.htm](http://www.leonardbernstein.com/person.htm)  
(Accessed 11/1/11, 12/1/11)

<sup>38</sup> Bernstein, *The Joy of Music*, 105

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## **Vita**

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