Leonard Bernstein, the original

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An engrossing portrait of a gifted – and conflicted – man

Leonard Bernstein made his debut as the conductor of the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall on November 14, 1943, replacing Bruno Walter, who had the flu. Although he had never rehearsed the compositions on the program with the orchestra, the 25-year-old received a standing ovation at the end of concert.

A star had been born. Until his death in 1990, Bernstein composed for concert halls and the Broadway stage, conducted orchestras around the world, introduced classical music to baby boomers through nationally televised Young People’s Concerts, and attained a celebrity status rarely bestowed on a person of his profession.

In Leonard Bernstein, Allen Shawn, who teaches composition and music history at Bennington College and authored a biography of Austrian composer and painter Arnold Schoenberg, provides an engrossing portrait of this gifted – and conflicted – man. Shawn does not ignore the claims of critics that Bernstein embraced celebrity, fame and publicity at the expense of art. He insists, however, that Bernstein’s “life was original” – and that his compositions have remained captivating and vital long after the work of most of his contemporaries has “begun to sound historical.”

Not surprisingly, given his background, Shawn is at his best when he examines Bernstein’s music. Candide, he writes, features a surreal deployment of genres, including a polka, barcarolle, schottische, waltz and gavotte, which are “often at odds with the locales in which they are placed.” The operetta’s score is described as “Haydnesque, by way of Prokofiev.”

The music for West Side Story, Shawn suggests, approaches “Shakespearian intricacy.” While characterizing the score as “almost Beethovenian in its reliance on a few motives and interval combinations to unify its heterogeneous sections,” he reminds us that the story gave Bernstein an opportunity to revel in Latin American music. He did so by deploying the rhythmic ambiguity of the Mexican huapango, Puerto Rican seis rhythms, and claves, maracas and pitched drums in the song “America,” which is sung by the “immigrants,” and bebop-tinged jazz for the self-styled “American” characters.

Shawn also focuses his musicologist’s lens on Bernstein’s traditional compositions, including Chichester Psalms, which he indicates attained “a perfection of form and stylistic focus” even as it linked abstract music to music intended for the Broadway stage. Critics may be emboldened to dismiss Bernstein’s more “serious” work, he speculates, with a mixture of solemnity and sarcasm, “simply because its language did not intimidate them.”

In dealing with other aspects of Bernstein’s personal and professional life, Shawn is somewhat less successful. To be sure, he supplies an incisive and judicious account of Bernstein’s struggles with his sexual identity, his marriage, family relationships and numerous affairs following the death of his wife. In discussing
Bernstein’s politics, however, Shawn mentions his subject’s affiliation with “left-leaning” organizations, the blacklisting by CBS radio and television and the US State Department in 1950, the US Passport Office’s refusal to renew his passport in 1953, and the “humiliating exoneration that must have both relieved him and crushed his self-respect” – but does not adequately explain Bernstein’s views on the issues of his day. Nor does Shawn provide context for the decision of Leonard and Felicia Bernstein to host a fund-raiser for the Black Panthers in their Park Avenue apartment in 1969.

Informing Bernstein’s politics, Shawn implies, was his strong Jewish identity and support of Israel. Early in his career, Shawn reveals, Bernstein rejected the recommendation of mentor Serge Koussevitzky that to boost his career, he change his name to Leonard S. Burns. Bernstein also made extensive use of the Bible as well as Hebrew and Yiddish texts and musical practices in his classical and Broadway compositions. Speaking at a Madison Square Garden benefit for the United Jewish Appeal after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, he called for leaders to be guided by learning and reason, “the two basic precepts of all Judaistic tradition.”

With his ability to speak Hebrew and his affinity for Israel and its people, Shawn writes, Bernstein was a fervent Zionist. In 1951, he took the Israel Philharmonic on an American tour. Among the frequent concerts he conducted in Israel were three in the aftermath of the Six Day War. During this visit, he prayed at the Western Wall and played Yiddish songs for wounded soldiers.

It seems fitting, then, that in 1990, as the police-escorted motorcade of 20 black stretch limousines carrying the body of this dynamic Harvard-educated grandson of a rabbi to Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery, stalled for a while in heavy traffic outside the East River tunnels, “hassidic Jews, mothers with baby carriages, people of all ages and ethnic backgrounds” stopped to watch. And that when the motorcade resumed its journey, workmen removed their hard hats, and everyone shouted “Goodbye, Lenny!”

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