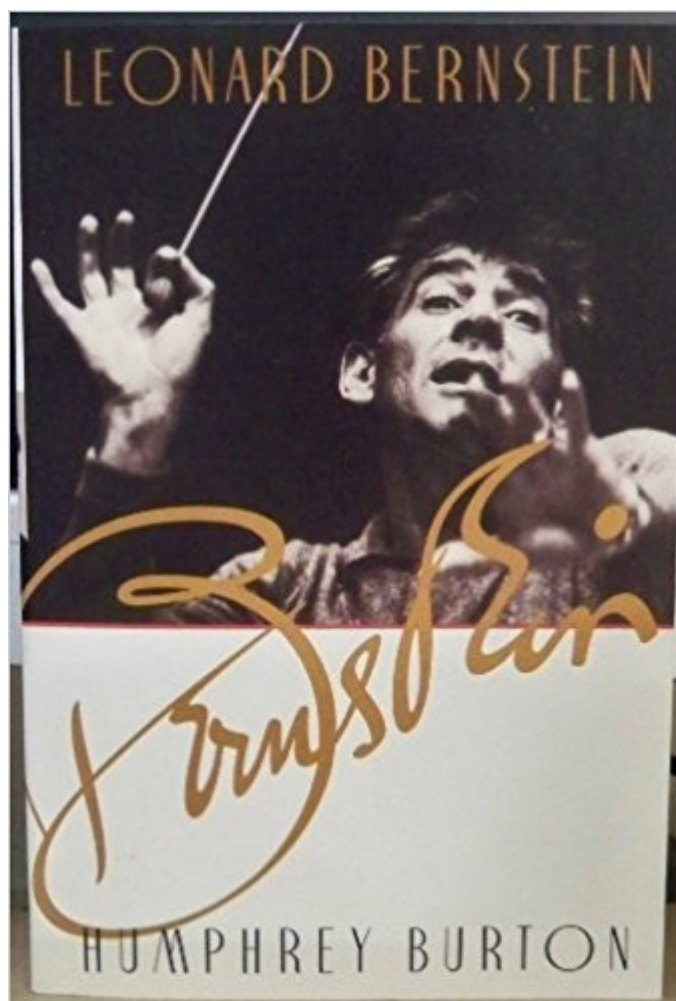


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Leonard Bernstein



Synopsis

The definitive biography of one of the most influential, flamboyant, and multifaceted musical talents of the 20th century, a man whose concert hall performances inspired generations of musicians and music lovers, and whose theatrical triumphs dazzled Broadway. From the Trade Paperback edition.

Book Information

Hardcover: 594 pages

Publisher: Doubleday; 1st edition (April 1, 1994)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0385423454

ISBN-13: 978-0385423458

Product Dimensions: 1.8 x 6.5 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 19 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #360,733 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #85 in [Books > Arts &](#)

[Photography > Music > Biographies > Classical](#) #6601 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature](#)

Customer Reviews

Flamboyant composer-conductor Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), who was America's ambassador to the world of serious music for most of his jam-packed life, has long needed a sober, well-researched and encompassing biography, and this is it. There have been tactful hagiographies (John Gruen), malicious deconstructions (Joan Peyser) and ambivalent inside stories (Burton Bernstein); but Burton, a British TV producer who knew Bernstein well but was no acolyte, has created, with the aid of family archives, a wealth of interviews and an interested layperson's sound musical knowledge, a full-length study unlikely to be surpassed. It is in many ways a tragic story, not of genius unrecognized--if anything Bernstein was overpraised in his life, both as composer and conductor--but of a protean nature overcome by the demands of celebrity status and an overweening ego. From the start "Lenny" was a determinedly colorful character, insistent on the limelight, extravagant of gesture and emotion. Whether he could have become a great composer, rather than a highly talented musical entertainer whose best-remembered work remains his Broadway musicals, will never be known; for his whole professional life was an agonized tightrope walk between the frenzies of adulation that greeted his conducting and his guilty sense that he was betraying his creative gift by not spending more time in the workroom. And even the slim body of

work he did create in his crowded life emerged more often than not from collaborations with lyricists and librettists, almost as if he was afraid to be alone with his muse. Bernstein was a man who owed much to his Jewish heritage (and Burton adroitly notes how much of his serious music had Jewish roots) and experienced a strong sense of guilt about his bisexuality, particularly after the death of his betrayed wife Felicia. But as the reader begins to wonder whether such anguish is inescapable for a non-heterosexual American artist, there is the example of Bernstein's friend Aaron Copland to ponder: a man secure in his gay sexuality who created what is arguably a much more lasting body of work and had a greater influence on the musical life of his time. The fact that a biography can raise such questions is a tribute to the tact and imagination that infuse this one. Bernstein owes Burton a posthumous hug for having told it straight, with affection but no blinkers. Photos. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A sensitive, well-balanced account of the great American maestro's life and works. Biographer Burton, for over 20 years Bernstein's television and video director, neatly avoids most of the pitfalls that wait for a close friend who attempts an authoritative portrait within a very few years of the death of its subject. While generally admiring Bernstein the creative dynamo, Burton rarely gushes, unlike at least one other recent memoirist. Nor does he trash Bernstein for his emotional and sexual excesses; indeed, Burton deals with the intimate side of Bernstein's life, particularly his homosexuality and his guilt at the rift it caused between him and his wife, Felicia, during her last troubled years, with nonjudgmental candor and a lack of sensationalism. The core of the book is a straightforward chronological narrative. Into a lifetime scarcely longer than seven decades, Bernstein seemingly packed several lifetimes of composition (both "serious" and Broadway), conducting, and teaching. Even in a book of this length, the sheer amount of mental and physical activity described is hardly less exhausting to read about than it must have been to experience. Burton earns the reader's trust by declaring at the outset that the real Leonard Bernstein is to be found in his many recordings and videotaped performances; nonetheless, Burton unfailingly provides the context of each of Bernstein's own compositions (including ones left unfinished) and a survey of contemporaneous critical response (for instance, *Mass*, which Burton thinks is Bernstein's "most original work" from the point of view of musical form, was called "magnificent" and "stupendous" by certain leading critics, "pretentious and thin" by others). Burton would probably admit that the images of Bernstein the conductor and musical pedagogue are still so powerfully etched in our consciousness that an objective appraisal of Bernstein's own music is not yet possible. Simply the best of the Bernstein biographies so far. (First printing of 60,000;

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It took me about 2 months to finish reading it, not because it wasn't a page-turner, but because it was a long book and also I'd been busy. It was actually a great page-turner. I could read on and on for 5-7 hours without a break. Bernstein's personal letters to his friends and colleagues, including Aaron Copland, his thesis at Harvard, etc. were all very inspiring to read. There were quite a bit of poems he wrote also. The positive and negative sides of the great man were also well delivered without getting vulgar. I really appreciated the author's knowledge about music and the classical music world and system. The book makes you feel like you're living the life closely with the great man and gets you intellectually, musically, emotionally involved. You experience with him every success and failure Bernstein went through. His talents were beyond human in some way, yet he was a man just like you and me. Sometimes his talents were greater than he as a man, and as a result the world occasionally saw him fall apart. The book is honest about his failures and misbehaviours without being accusatory. It makes you want to forgive the man for the wrongs he'd done. The burden he was carrying as genius was more than an ordinary man could bear. The book also covers the Jewish culture, politics, world events, how Bernstein and his genius contributed to the world and American history, etc. in relations to his achievements. There are enough interviews with his friends and family, reviews on Bernstein's works, letters etc. but the author uses his own narratives to tell us about the man, which is, I think, why this book is more solid and readable. Only, I wish there were more photographs. But oh well, you can't ask for everything. Great, inspiring book. I might read it again.

Humphrey Burton has written a tremendous biography of Bernstein (1918-1990). It is filled with details and insights into the man, his conducting, and his own compositions. Bernstein was renowned as a composer, as a performer on the piano, as a conductor, and as an educator, and Burton highlights all of these aspects. Bernstein was also gay, or bisexual; Burton indicates early on, "The reference to Bernstein's sexual problems underscored the confusion he felt about his sexuality, a confusion which he would continue to confront in his final year at Harvard." (He married in 1951, and had three children, to whom he was devoted.) When he met Aaron Copland for the first time (at one of the "salons of the New York intellectual elite"), Bernstein told him he was a great fan, and announced that he could play Copland's Piano Variations from memory; Copland challenged him to do so, and he did. Bernstein later recalled, "So I played it, and they were all---he

particularly---drop-jawed." Thus began a lifelong friendship between the two, that Burton chronicles in numerous places in the book. After the 1944 premiere of *On the Town*, he accepted the advice of famed conductor Serge Koussevitsky and devoted himself to conducting. "Composing became a holiday diversion, fitted in between conducting tours and preseason parties. His activities as a pianist were restricted to playing the same handful of concertos with every new orchestra he conducted." In a speech Bernstein made in 1963, he said, "The composer comes first. In the beginning was the Note, and the Note was with God; and whoever can reach high for that note, reach high, and bring it back to us on earth, to our earthly ears— he is a composer and to the extent of his reach partakes of the divine." When his culminating work *Mass* (1971) was being produced, Bernstein said that "I feel young again, twenty-five years old, as I was when I was doing *On the Town*." The 1972 production of *Carmen*, which won a Grammy in 1973, yet so exhausted Bernstein that "apart from his own work, and a revival of *Fidelio* in Vienna, he never again conducted an opera in an opera house." Burton also clarifies the misreporting of Bernstein's exchange with a Black Panther leader in 1970 (the reporting made it seem as if Bernstein was engaging in "radical chic," erroneously reporting him as having said, "I dig absolutely"). One of Bernstein's major innovations was his work on television. From 1958-1972, Bernstein hosted and conducted "Young People's Concerts." As Burton notes, "They have never been rivaled in popular television education." Burton also opines that Bernstein's 1973 Norton Lectures at Harvard "have proved to be among the most valuable and stimulating contributions ever made to musical education." All in all, this is a detailed and very perceptive portrait of one of the most influential American musical figures of the 20th century. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!

One of the best biographies I've read of Leonard Bernstein.

Excellent and a page turner.

Well worth the time to read.

I devoured this book! Classical music is slowly fading into obscurity, partly because we no longer have a Leonard Bernstein. He was the very face of classical music in America. This book captures Bernstein in all his glory.

Wonderful read. If you are a Bernstein fan this is required reading.

Excellent book. Incredible value.

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