

# Debut performance with the New York Philharmonic--Leonard Bernstein (November 14, 1943)

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Essay by Barry Seldes (guest post)\*



*Bernstein*

On the afternoon of November 13, 1943, composer Leonard Bernstein was at the piano in New York's Town Hall accompanying the soprano Jennie Tourel in performance of his song cycle "I Hate Music." Although the work had had its premier in Lenox, Massachusetts, some months before, this performance was the work's New York debut, important enough that the 26 year-old composer had his family come from Boston to celebrate with him.

This performance was of a piece with the rise of Bernstein's career. Two years before, in June 1941, he had graduated from Curtis Institute as a conducting major under the mentorship of Fritz Reiner. He had then begun working with mentor Serge Koussevitzky at Tanglewood. Over the next year, he moved to New York, performed with friends Betty Comden, Adolf Green, and Judy Holliday in satirical musical comedies, did some jazz arranging, and performed some recitals. On August 25, 1943, just two months before the Town Hall concert with Tourel, he was hired as assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic by its music director Artur Rodzinski. And only a few days later, he was approached by a budding choreographer, Jerome Robbins, about composing a balletic work, "Fancy Free," that would integrate classical and vernacular dance, a combination of forms that were precisely what Bernstein had dreamt of as far back as his undergraduate thesis--a music that integrated concert hall with American vernacular music. He had just recorded his Clarinet Sonata, and was awaiting the premier performance of his profoundly meditative symphony, "Jeremiah."

And now, on November 1943, he was performing his "I Hate Music" with Tourel in New York.

It was in the midst of his family celebration, after the recital, when Bernstein received a phone call from Bruno Zirato of the Philharmonic management alerting him that Bruno Walter, scheduled to lead the Philharmonic the following afternoon, was feeling ill. Moreover, Rodzinski, who had driven to his home in the Berkshires, was potentially snowed in and might be unable to travel back to New York. In short, were neither Walter nor Rodzinski available to conduct the scheduled works--Schumann's "Manfred Overture," Miklos Rozsa's, "Theme, Variations, and Finale," Strauss's "Don Quixote," and Wagner's Overture to "Der Meistersinger"--the barely fledgling Bernstein, who had not rehearsed with the orchestra, might have to lead the Philharmonic in a full fledged public performance--a performance, by the way, that was to be broadcast across the Columbia national network. Zirato must have heard Bernstein's heart stop because he quickly added that Bernstein need not worry: Zirato was sure that Walter would be at the podium the next afternoon.

With this in mind, Bernstein continued to celebrate, after which he went home to study the scores "just in case," finally getting into bed at 4am. He had breakfast with his family later in the morning, and then bid them farewell as they left for their train back to Boston.

Shortly thereafter, at 9:30am, Zirato called with news: Walter was still ill, Rodzinski was unavailable, and therefore Bernstein was on! He got in touch with his family to turn around and stop them from boarding the train to Boston and have them return, and then he set himself into motion.

Before rushing to the concert hall, Bernstein made a quick detour to visit Walter who, sick as he was, had agreed to receive Bernstein at his home to go over certain passages in the program. Walter had prepared the orchestra thoroughly, but there was plenty of room for a new conductor to introduce his own approach, which also meant the possibility of messing things up, not the least with the opening of the "Manfred Overture," which required a deft baton downbeat that had the potential for a miscue that could mess up the piece, not to mention Bernstein's debut. There was also a viola problem that Walter brought to Bernstein's attention. While we do not know precisely what the problem was about, we do know, according to Walter's biographers, Eric Ryding and Rebecca Pechevsky, that Walter and the violist, William Lincer, were in sharp disagreement over the viola's representation of Sancho Panza. Walter expected coarse and rude, Lincer, refined. Apparently the matter seemed settled in Walter's favor, but it is entirely possible that Walter would have warned Bernstein of this potentially unsettling matter.

Whatever Bernstein's internal disposition, by the time he reached Carnegie Hall, he found the means to appear in total control. Olin Downs, the "New York Times" critic, observed Bernstein "advance ... to the podium with the unfeigned eagerness and communicative emotion of his years." And with the conclusion of the concert, Downs wrote, Bernstein had not only exhibited "brilliant musicianship" but "his capacity to release and control the players."

Fortunately, we have a recording of that concert as aired by Columbia, including the “Star Spangled Banner,” with audience singing. We hear a robust Schumann, a colorful Rozsa and a wonderfully tender and proportioned Strauss. (Because Columbia only broadcast 75 minutes, the Wagner was not included in the broadcast.) Discussing the “Don Quixote” performance, Downs noted that Bernstein “gave the work a living physiognomy, and communicated no small measure of its satire, its pity, even a hint of its poetical flight.” Bernstein’s performance, Downs wrote, “indicated a fine comprehension, with emotional as well as intellectual flexibility, and the perception of learning, proportion, and climax which drove the music home. And there was the interpretive artist’s conviction which establishes its truth.” It was clearly a smashing performance.

The “Times” headlines broadcast the message: “Bernstein shows mastery of score.”... “Youthful conductor carries out an exacting program in sudden emergency.”... “Reveals his authority.” In short order, newspapers across the nation carried the message that a star had been born.

And thus it was that Bernstein, heretofore a back-of-the-house underling, had seized this unique occasion to demonstrate his extraordinary powers of leadership and interpretive gifts to audiences in New York and across the country.

*Barry Seldes, Ph.D, Rider University professor of Political Science emeritus, is the author of “Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician” (University of California Press, 2009).*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.