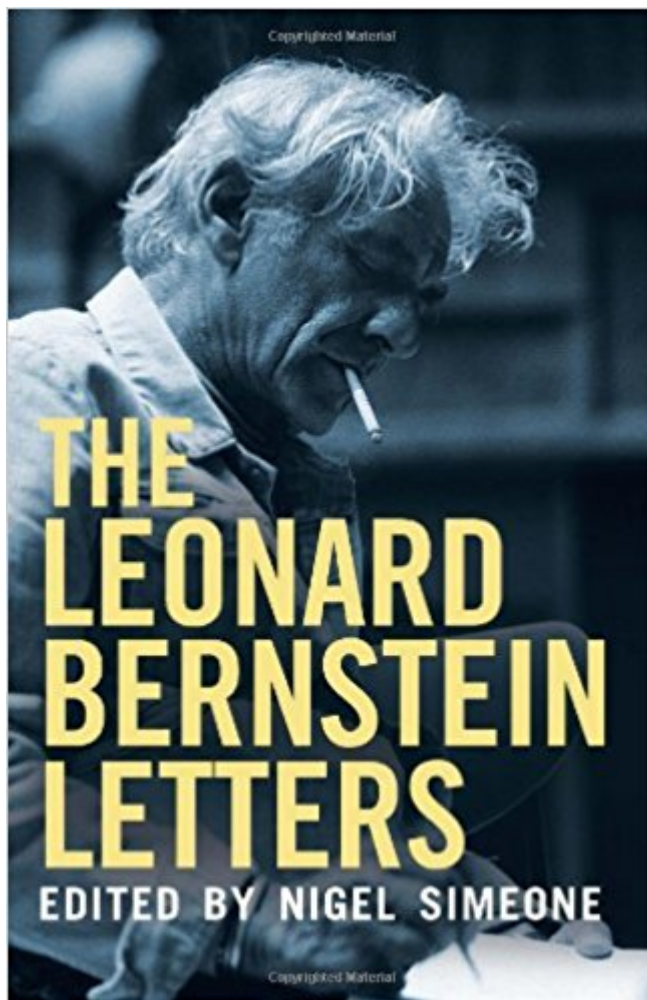




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The Leonard Bernstein Letters



Synopsis

Leonard Bernstein was a charismatic and versatile musician – a brilliant conductor who attained international super-star status, and a gifted composer of Broadway musicals (*West Side Story*), symphonies (*Age of Anxiety*), choral works (*Chichester Psalms*), film scores (*On the Waterfront*), and much more. Bernstein was also an enthusiastic letter writer, and this book is the first to present a wide-ranging selection of his correspondence. The letters have been selected for the insights they offer into the passions of his life – musical and personal – and the extravagant scope of his musical and extra-musical activities. Bernstein's letters tell much about this complex man, his collaborators, his mentors, and others close to him. His galaxy of correspondents encompassed, among others, Aaron Copland, Stephen Sondheim, Jerome Robbins, Thornton Wilder, Boris Pasternak, Bette Davis, Adolph Green, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and family members including his wife Felicia and his sister Shirley. The majority of these letters have never been published before. They have been carefully chosen to demonstrate the breadth of Bernstein's musical interests, his constant struggle to find the time to compose, his turbulent and complex sexuality, his political activities, and his endless capacity for hard work. Beyond all this, these writings provide a glimpse of the man behind the legends: his humanity, warmth, volatility, intellectual brilliance, wonderful eye for descriptive detail, and humor.

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Customer Reviews

“With their intellectual brilliance, humour and wonderful eye for detail, Leonard Bernstein's letters blow all biographies out of the water. His galaxy of correspondents

includes Stephen Sondheim, Boris Pasternak and Jacqueline Kennedy. Full of fresh information and the authentic voice of a constant seeker. *The Economist* (named a 2013 Book of the Year) (The Economist 2013-12-07) "His collaborator Betty Comden once noted, in a letter to Bernstein, that he saved every scrap of correspondence. You will be grateful . . . a rich collection of letters to and from Bernstein, filled with revelations about his musical and personal lives. James R. Oestreich, New York Times (James R. Oestreich New York Times) "Bernstein's versatility and ambition were such that he spent a lot of time trying to figure out who he was which also meant searching for American music and for the future of music generally. This book doesn't resolve Bernstein's quest. But it's an invaluable resource, and the quest itself continues to fascinate and to matter. Joseph Horowitz, The Wall Street Journal (Joseph Horowitz The Wall Street Journal) "The correspondence from and to the remarkable conductor is full of pleasure and insights. New York Times Book Review (Editors' Choice) (New York Times Book Review) "Exhaustive, thrilling [and] indispensable. Elysa Gardner, USA Today, starred review (Elysa Gardner USA Today) "Energetic, intimate . . . an eye-opening volume: a glimpse into the personal life of a legend. Jeff Lunden, NPR "Weekend Edition Sunday" (Jeff Lunden NPR "Weekend Edition Sunday") "Bernstein emerges as highly literate, compassionate, astonishingly busy and gifted almost beyond measure. Kirkus Reviews (starred review) (Kirkus Reviews) "A hugely entertaining chronicle of a enviable life, and a trove of musical and show-business gossip. Adam Kirsch, The New Republic (Adam Kirsch The New Republic) "What terrifying letters you write: fit for the flames is what they are. Just imagine how much you would have to pay to retrieve such a letter forty years from now when you are conductor of the Philharmonic." Aaron Copland to Leonard Bernstein in 1940 (Aaron Copland) "[It's] full of both serious and gossip correspondence between the musical genius and such friends as Stephen Sondheim, Betty Comden and Aaron Copland. Joe Meyers, CTNews.com (Joe Meyers CTNews.com) "This incredible collection of letters gives us a glimpse into the depth and breadth of Bernstein's world. The sheer volume of correspondence, all beautifully presented and annotated by Nigel Simeone, shows us that Bernstein loved the written word as much as the musical word! Marin Alsop, musical director, The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (Marin Alsop) "A document of a golden age. Jimmy So, The Daily Beast (Jimmy So The Daily Beast) "The book consisting of 650 letters both from and to Bernstein,

dated between 1932 and 1990 – is not merely interesting. It is fascinating, enlightening and a veritable page-turner that will keep you up nights, ruin your sleep and wreak all sorts of havoc for 600 pages.

• Steve Suskin, *Playbill* (Steve Suskin *Playbill*) – “His letters have a tremendous zest, and a good journalistic eye, too, and since he was often at the right place at the right time, at some of the key moments in his 20th-century history, this gives them a wider interest.

• Christopher Hart, *The Sunday Times* (Christopher Hart *The Sunday Times* 2013-10-20) – “A marvelously entertaining new book . . . The Leonard Bernstein Letters makes it possible to take stock of Bernstein’s weaknesses – his enthusiasm could lead to sentimentality, and clearly his fame became a kind of bubble. But these pale in comparison with his energy, joy, and absolute dedication to music. It’s sad to think that our culture will probably never produce someone like him again.

• Adam Kirsch, *Tablet* magazine (Adam Kirsch *Tablet* magazine) – “The Leonard Bernstein Letters . . . contains so much that is startling and unknown that all past books, including his own, become instantly inadequate. Don’t take my word for it. On the jacket, Bernstein’s official biographer, Humphrey Burton, declares that, with this book in hand, I want to start all over again.

• Norman Lebrecht, *Standpoint Magazine* (Norman Lebrecht *Standpoint Magazine* 2013-11-01) – “Someone’s choice of letters [are] superbly amplified by his exhaustively researched footnotes, which manage to identify and flesh out even the most obscure of his subject’s multifarious correspondents.

• Stephen Walsh, *The Spectator* (Stephen Walsh *The Spectator* 2013-11-16) – “In Nigel Simeone’s editorial labour of love *The Leonard Bernstein Letters* some of the most entertaining letters come from Bernstein’s correspondents.

• Sameer Rahim, *The Sunday Telegraph* (Sameer Rahim *The Sunday Telegraph* 2013-11-24) – “Like Britten, Bernstein was an assiduous correspondent, and *The Leonard Bernstein Letters* is a vast, absorbing canvas of a life lived at full speed, with a cast list that reads like a who’s who of American cultural life in the 20th century.

• Adam Lively, *The Sunday Times* (Adam Lively *The Sunday Times* 2013-11-24) – “Magnificent and long-awaited.

• Maria Popova, *Brain Pickings* (Maria Popova *Brain Pickings*) – “This anthology of Bernstein’s correspondence, assembled by Nigel Simeone, shines a light on the famous conductor and composer’s private thoughts.

• WQXR.org (WQXR.org) – “For . . . eloquent and moving testimony read the entry for 25 November 1963 in *The Leonard Bernstein Letters* edited by Nigel Simeone, the contents of which give an . . . overview of a liberal American

century. •Chris Ford, The Guardian (Chris Ford The Guardian 2013-12-28) “[Bernstein’s] manifold legacy, including these letters, lives on. •John Simon, The Weekly Standard (John Simon Weekly Standard) “The . . . mainly unpublished correspondence both from and to Bernstein, between 1932 and 1990, shines a light on this unique figure’s thoughts, work and passions, his voice ringing clear with warmth and candour. . . he was a remarkable artist and human being elusive in his complexity, yet evoked, through these letters, with undeniable presence. •Teresa Levonian Cole, Country Life (Teresa Levonian Cole Country Life 2014-01-29) “Simeone has managed to encapsulate a central tradition in the history of music of the last century as seen through the correspondence of one of its most important exponents. •Paul Seydor, Absolute Sound (Paul Seydor Absolute Sound) “Opens a window into the world of one of the most accomplished and brilliant artists of the 20th century. •Irene Javors, The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review (Irene Javors The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review) “Time and again, The Leonard Bernstein Letters demonstrate how the composer and conductor lived in overdrive. •Carol Oja, Harvard Magazine (Carol Oja Harvard Magazine) “A rich selection of letters to and from Bernstein, meticulously edited by Nigel Simeone. . . Alive with spontaneous intelligence, Leonard Bernstein’s letters display exactly this unforced intimacy, though there were moments when he no doubt knew that posterity was listening in. •Morris Dickstein, TLS (Morris Dickstein TLS 2014-07-18)

Nigel Simeone is well known as a writer and speaker on music and is the author of several books including Leonard Bernstein: West Side Story. He lives in Northamptonshire, UK.

Leonard Bernstein was a prolific correspondent, and this book, apparently, only begins to scratch the surface of the sheer amount of letters available. What we have here is truly fascinating and gives tremendous insight into the personality and character of Leonard Bernstein, as well as biographical details I had no idea about. All areas of his life are covered, including music, family, fame, sex and more. What emerges is a picture of a true wunderkind whom everybody loved, a people magnet who had many real and strong friendships. I found the early letters, before he reached his intense fame, to be most satisfying. We are privy to long letters both to and from Bernstein which illustrate the kind of relationships he had and the kind of boy and young man he was. The picture that emerges is very appealing. I was surprised by the extent to which he was, from the start, in close

contact with the musical greats of his day. For example, he appears to have struck up a fast friendship with Aaron Copland long before he achieved any notoriety whatsoever. And I was actually shocked to learn that he had an ongoing sexual relationship with conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos, 24 years his senior, while still in his very late teens or early twenties. Maybe I'm the last guy to find out about this, but I had no idea. There was great enjoyment for me in many of the small details of this book as well. For example I was surprised to read how much he loved "Bolero" as a teenager, based on his letters raving about it. (Later, in one of his "Young People's Concerts", he said he wanted to play Bolero as an illustration of what orchestration is, because "it couldn't really illustrate anything else.") The later letters shed less light on Bernstein's inner life, but are still quite fascinating. To (over)generalize, later in his life a lot of the letters are from people who want various things from him, such as the opportunity to perform with him. For example, Harpo Marx asking if he could come on a "Young People's Concert" to conduct Haydn's "Toy Symphony", or Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau asking if he could sing Kurwenal in planned "Tristan" performances, or a letter from a 10-year-old Yo Yo Ma saying he'd be happy to play concertos with Bernstein. These are all fascinating in their own way and highly entertaining, although the substance of Bernstein's personality tends to shine through a bit less as the book becomes more filled up with correspondence of this type. His correspondence with his wife, Felicia, is particularly hard-hitting, for example when she lays on the line that he is "a homosexual and may never change" but is willing to accept him as he is. Their relationship is one of the most touching aspects of the book, and Bernstein's love for his wife never seemed to me to be in doubt despite the sexual and fidelity problems later on. Based on the editor's description of the sheer amount of available correspondence to and from Leonard Bernstein, perhaps a more accurate title for this book might be "The Leonard Bernstein Letters: Volume 1". It seems likely to me that there will be more if this book is successful. I would not regret that. This book is a satisfying read that enriched my familiarity with Leonard Bernstein the musician and Leonard Bernstein the man a hundredfold. That is in part because I knew so little about him to start, but also because the correspondence included here paints such a vivid portrait. I'm sure it's not a complete one, but I feel it is a terrific start. Highly recommended for anyone who wants to get a taste of Bernstein's personality, and above all the love and emotion he could inspire in others.

Biographies can be written many different forms and by using different primary sources. A biographer may use interviews, if the subject is of recent vintage, as well as original source material such as letters and other documentation. Usually biographers use a combination of all these

methods. In his biography of Leonard Bernstein, biographer Nigel Simeone uses mostly letters - he calls himself an "editor" - to and from Bernstein to form the basis of his book. Most of the letters are from Bernstein between the ages of 15 and mid-60's; his prime creative years. A biographer using letters has to set certain parameters on what he will focus about his subject. In Bernstein's case, so much of his life was public - played out on stages and rehearsal halls all over the world. His private life was written about in his letters to friends and relatives - all except, seemingly, his sexuality. Bisexual from an early age, Bernstein married at the age of 33 to a Chilean actress and fathered three children. From his letters, he seemed to have led a happy life with Felicia and the children. "Seemed to" is the important phrase here because by other accounts, he struggled with his attraction to men all his life. In fact, in the 1970's, he left his wife for another man and returned to her as she was dying of cancer. These facts were never alluded to in the letters included in the text; Nigel Simeone writes a short general introduction to each period of this life and includes facts apart from what appeared in the letters. Most of the letters show Leonard Bernstein as the brilliant showman and intellect he was. Curious about almost everything and everybody, he wrote prodigious amounts of music in all styles and forms. Noted for "West Side Story", he also wrote liturgical music played around the world - from Israel to Chichester in England. As conductor for the New York Philharmonic, he conducted both his own original work as well as the works of other great composers. He worked with young people on expanding their musical appreciation. He was famous around the world and he gloried in his fame. From his letters, Leonard Bernstein was a man who seemed to value his friends and his family. He wasn't a loner, as many geniuses are, but seemed to enjoy being with people. Bernstein, even as a youngster of 15, was corresponding with some of the leading musicians of his time, with a confidence rare in a teenager. And, he, in turn, was generous with his time and advice to other, younger musicians. I realise I'm using the word "seemed" a lot in this review. And that's because what we are given by the use of the subject's letters is what the editor/biographer wants to give the reader. It's what he feels is important; Simeone chooses the letters that best illustrate what he wants to focus on as biographer. Is that any better or worse than a biographer using more conventional sources? I honestly don't know, because I didn't know what I wasn't "getting" from Simeone's book. Simeone also annotates almost each letter with additional information about the sender/recipient. Simeone's biography of Leonard Bernstein is a very good book.

The letters in this volume cover the period 1932-1980. For one thing, they indicate how stifling things could be in the U.S. for people in the arts during the McCarthy era. The likes of Poulenc,

Lukas Foss, Stravinsky, many other musical greats, and remarkable women such as Martha Gellhorn, Betty Davis, Bernstein's wife Felicia, and countless others reveal their conflicts and affection for each other, and sometimes their hypocrisy, in this highly enjoyable collection of letters. Bernstein's temperamental side shows up infrequently. There is one footnote on page 428 that relates an interesting incident: during a dress rehearsal for *West Side Story*, Leonard B. was so enraged to hear that the orchestration of the opening bars of "Somewhere" had been changed, he ran down to the pit, demanded that the conductor, Max Goberman, give the first bars to an unaccompanied flute and shouted, "take that Hollywood s*** out!" The volume is ably edited by Nigel Simeone. Quite a privilege, to put an ear to the keyhole and listen to these gifted geniuses let loose. A.R.

The intensity of Bernstein's public and private life, his extraordinary range of acquaintances, and the significance of composing to his sense of accomplishment are all made clearer through these letters. I followed his conducting, recording, and composing career ever since his NYPO radio broadcasts and Young People's Concerts in the 1950's. These letters have rounded out my understanding of a musical figure who had significant and continuing impact on my life.

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