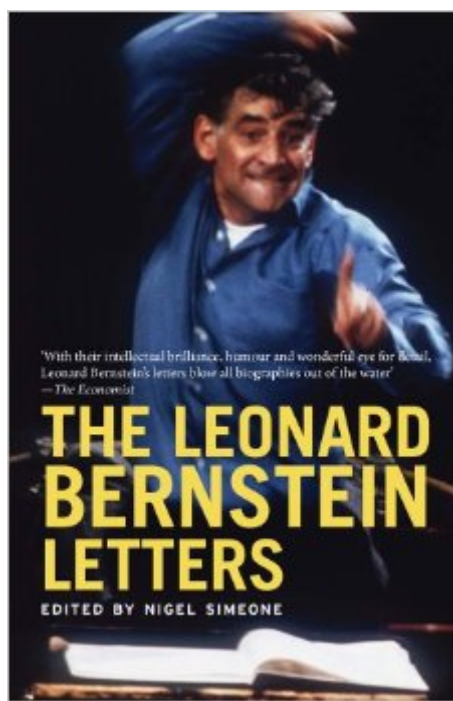


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The Leonard Bernstein Letters



Synopsis

Leonard Bernstein was a charismatic and versatile musician. Bernstein's letters tell much about this complex man, his collaborators, his mentors, and others. Based on these letters, this title demonstrates the breadth of Bernstein's musical interests, his constant struggle to find the time to compose, and his turbulent and complex sexuality.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

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.

Leonard Bernstein was a man of many accomplishments. There are so many extant recordings of Leonard Bernstein still holding top positions in the ranking for fine performances to remind us what a brilliant conductor he was, as well as repeats of his inimitable Young People's Concerts for television (some would say he was proudest of his own achievements as a teacher), his writing of symphonies and other classical works, his brilliance as a composer of musicals (West Side Story, Candide, On the Town, Wonderful Town, Mass), and the introduction to American audiences of the works of Gustav Mahler and the works of fellow contemporary composers - so very many achievements that to truly pay homage to this man would take volumes - or the very personal letters contained in this excellent book edited and commentated by Nigel Simone. This book contains the

letters written over a span of 60 years and are delivered to us in chronological order - a wise decision on the part of Simone as they allow us to hear and watch and feel him mature from the hyperactive young gay man whose letters tells us more about his personal life than anyone would have expected, to his later years as a very happily married man (to Felicia Montealegre from 1951 to her death in 1978 - a Costa Rica-born American stage and television actress who performed the spoken roles in Bernstein's works for orchestra) and family man. He hobnobbed with the famous people of his time and since his time (1918 - 1990) had none of the current Internet forms of communication or faxes, his communications are all in letter form. Filled with history, eloquent writing, and more intimacy and insights than we have ever enjoyed, this rich treasure book has it all. Included are many photographs of important moments in his life.

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