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Leonard Bernstein in His Studio: A Reminiscence of the Composer's Method

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The studio, the place where artists create the work they leave to the world, is a kind of sacred space. For Leonard Bernstein, it was his inner sanctum, where he would spend nearly all his private time studying scores, composing, conversing on the telephone, and writing letters, poetry and prose. It was also the place he usually received collaborators and had important business meetings with his manager and potential new working partners. During the day, it could be a swarm of activity full of assistants copying music and personal notes and phone messages constantly being delivered on paper notes. Post-its were quite new in 1982, when I first entered Bernstein's Manhattan studio, and to him they were indispensable.

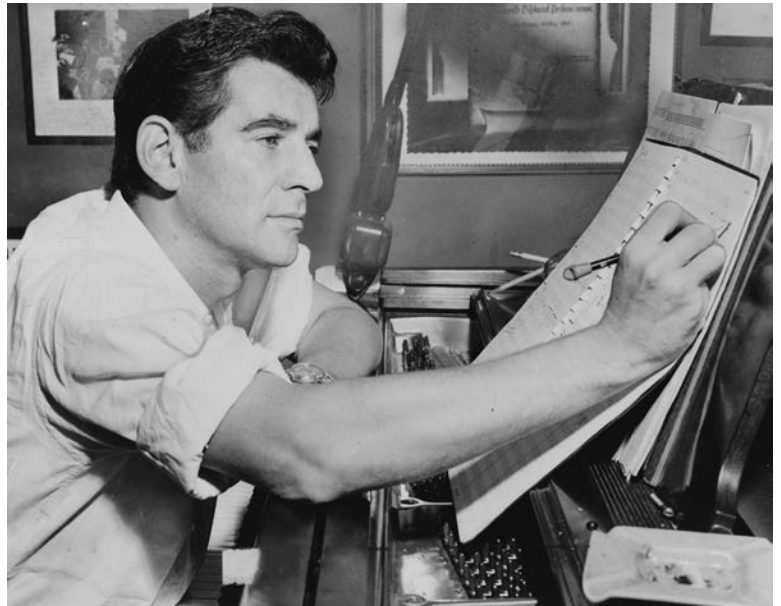
Bernstein worked in two studios. His favored composing place was an hour drive from Manhattan at his estate named Springate.

Located in Fairfield, Connecticut, the studio was on a secluded twenty-two acres of old growth trees, sprawling lawns, a productive vegetable garden, a large main house, a pool, and tennis court. The other studio was in New York City at the Dakota Apartments on West 72nd. The famous building was constructed in the 1880s. The local lore is that it was so named because, at that time, going that far north from downtown New York was like traveling to Dakota.

I was twenty-five when I first visited Bernstein's Manhattan workspace. I had spent the previous summer as a student of Bernstein's in Los Angeles with a dozen other young conductors and an entire orchestra of young colleagues. The teachers were Bernstein, Michael Tilson Thomas, Dan Lewis, Herbert Blomstedt, Joseph Gingold, and others. Our concerts at the Hollywood Bowl were billed as a kind of West Coast Tanglewood in its inaugural year.

Later that year, in the fall of 1982, I was in New York, and Bernstein (affectionately known by friends and students as "LB") called me around midnight. "Come over. We are reading through some of my new opera I'm writing. I need another pianist." LB knew about my piano skills since I had played some of Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* for him. Blitzstein had been a mentor to Bernstein, and LB had played that same show when he was a student at Harvard.

LB's studio was usually most active between the hours of four p.m. (just after his breakfast) and five or six a.m. He often tried to get some sleep just as the sun was about to rise. The dead of night was when LB seemed to do most of his creative work in the last decade of his life. It was usually quiet and lonely—two important elements that seem to give his muse the space to inhabit his inner ear.



Bernstein composes at the piano, 1955
Photo by Al Ravenna, courtesy of the Library of Congress

Leonard Bernstein in His Studio (cont.)

Being an upper-West Side New Yorker myself, I arrived in under half an hour. After being carefully scrutinized by the Dakota security (cautious since the fairly recent murder of John Lennon at the building's entrance), I was led to apartment twenty-three. The apartment was on the east side of the building with an impressive view of Central Park, just above the treetops. I entered the studio with a spontaneous leap, landing on two feet with my arms in a ready, fighting position as if to say "Here I am! Bring it on!" "See? What did I tell you?" Bernstein said to his librettist, Stephen Wadsworth, meaning something like "I told you he was game." The studio had an entire massive wall of scores, with a ladder and a ladder rack, so you could slide left and right and access the upper shelves (the Dakota has sixteen-foot ceilings). In front of the wall of scores was a huge wooden desk with all kinds of books, scores, phones, a Tiffany lamp, and scraps of post-its with little notes for everything going on in his life. Across from the desk was a couch and a few chairs and a coffee table in front. To the right of this sitting area was a small bar that was always full (mostly of cheap Ballantine's scotch, something I would get very used to over the next seven years), and, behind that, a fireplace. To the other side, against the shuttered windows, was the piano. In those days it was a Baldwin, though it later became a Bösendorfer.

Bernstein took pride that he had never made a commercial endorsement of any product. No commercial sellout for him! He turned down the furriers Blackgama and their six-figure sponsorship AND their \$20,000 full-length black mink coat. He turned down Mercedes and all the others. I'm a little sorry he didn't agree to being on a Wheaties box, which might have lifted the athleticism of conductors in the eyes of Americans. One of the only companies to earn Bernstein's support was Baldwin. The company had supported his mentor Serge Koussevitsky when he founded Tanglewood by providing instruments for the new summer home of the Boston Symphony. Baldwin continued to do so for decades.

The studio was filled, as ever, with LB's cigarette smoke. He was smoking low tar and nicotine cigarettes and adding an Aqua Filter to each one, supposedly to create a "healthier smoke." The ash trays were always close to overflowing and, of course, the scotch was always on hand. "Want a drink?" he asked. "No thanks. Just show me the piece!" I replied. An hour later we had roared through three arias, all singing away in our faulty and raspy bass-baritones. "The workshop is in two days. See you there."

And so began my apprenticeship to LB. I was still a postgrad at the Hartt School of Music in Hartford, Connecticut, just an hour or so from Fairfield, LB's preferred composing spot. His late wife Felicia had appointed the historic house with all requisite comforts and plenty of room for guests, collaborators, and family. The horse stables on the property had been converted into a music studio, with a grand piano, a porch with a beautiful dogwood tree emerging from its center, a couch (to lie down on and let music enter his semi-consciousness in a half-sleeping state), and a beautiful old stand-up desk (you actually stood at the desk) where he did his composing and orchestrating when he wasn't scribbling furiously at the piano. This is the spot where he wrote his *Chichester Psalms*, the Third Symphony ("Kaddish"), *Arias and Barcarolles*, most of *Concerto for Orchestra*, and a good deal of his opera, *A Quiet Place*.

I was fascinated to observe how one of his small musical ideas might get discarded and eventually find a home in another piece where it felt organic and right, as if it had always been there. It was also the case for LB that small ideas, completed as piano pieces or short songs, could be expanded into larger musical ideas. I observed how a passage could become emotionally transformed and become something serious or heart wrenching where it had been in a comical context before, and vice-versa. His "trunk" music—sketches of ideas, fragments or entire pages filled with notes—was usually on hand. There were many ideas that hadn't found a home yet and he never knew when one of these musical orphans might find a home in a new piece. He often verbally repeated Aaron Copland's advice to him: "Never throw anything away!" You just never knew what might end up being the perfect musical idea, given the right context.

When his mother Jennie was approaching her eighty-eighth birthday, he wrote a beautiful little song for the occasion. A gentle, tender waltz, the lyric addressing his mother by name, expressing his affection

Leonard Bernstein in His Studio (cont.)

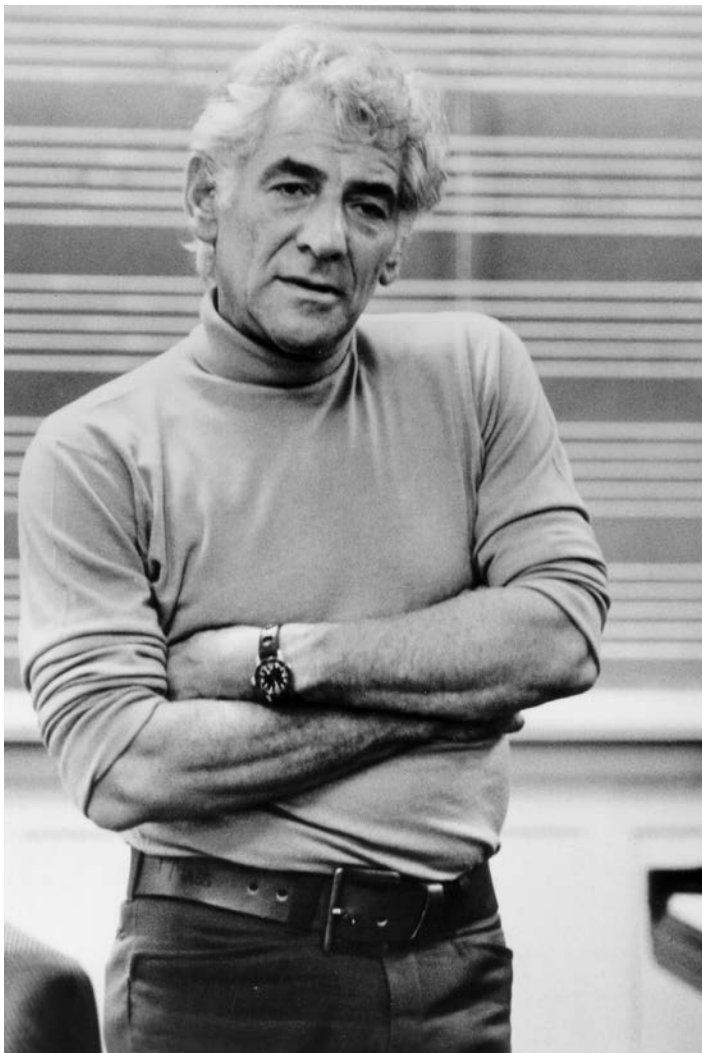


Photo by Paul de Hueck
Courtesy of the Leonard Bernstein Office

for her and how, now, she shared the magic number of eighty-eight with the other great love of his life, the piano, which has eighty-eight keys. Bernstein certainly knew he had written something special. A few years later, his friend and head of the artist division of the Baldwin Piano Co., Jack Roman, passed away. There was a celebration of his life and, at the service, LB played the same poignant Schumann-esque waltz he had written for his mother, only, this time, without the birthday lyric. The modest piano solo was entitled “In Memoriam” and was used by LB throughout the scourge of the AIDS crisis as more and more friends and colleagues were claimed by the disease. I played it at his secretary Helen Coates’ memorial service at the Dakota a few years later. Finally, it found its permanent home as the last song of *Arias and Barcarolles*. The piano solo now has a descant of two voices humming in simple harmony to the beautiful melody. It is the perfect ending for a song cycle that mostly examines relationships in the American family.

“Mr. And Mrs. Webb Say Goodnight,” also from *Arias and Barcarolles*, began musical life as the Prologue of LB’s musical adaptation of Bertold Brecht’s *The Exception and the Rule*. An unfinished project, originally involving Stephen Sondheim, Jerome Robbins, and John Guare, it was resurrected for another examination in the mid 1980s. To start the show, Jerome Robbins wanted a circus-like atmosphere to disarm the audience before plunging into the dark subject matter. LB came up with a

rollicking, jolly, jig-like tune in 6/8 time. Robbins loved it, and the lyricist and playwright on the project John Guare (Steve Sondheim was now busy with other theatrical projects) was given the task of writing a lyric that fit the tune. “Just give me a dummy lyric so I don’t leave out any beats” said Guare. After three minutes he went home with “Betty Co-ed” to guide him, complete with a built-in rhyme scheme:

Betty Co-ed
Has lips of red
For every eager Harvard boy...

Thirty years earlier, Marc Blitzstein supplied the dummy lyric for the melody of what later became “Somewhere” from *West Side Story*. “There’s a place for us. A time and place for us,” penned by Stephen Sondheim, had its first vocal expression as “There Goes What’s-His-Name. Unhappy What’s-His-Name,” thanks to Blitzstein’s dummy lyric.

It was finally decided that the rambunctious music of the Prologue (known by its anagram “Poor Glue”) to the Brecht show couldn’t really bear a lyric. The words would have to come in a later section, set to another tune. The original music stood alone in order to set the tone, get the actors onstage, and

Leonard Bernstein in His Studio (cont.)

establish characters. The entire project was abandoned after many months of casting and a Lincoln Center Theater workshop. But LB knew he had something fun. In “Mr. And Mrs. Webb Say Goodnight,” the “circus music” reemerged as a raucous four-hand piano piece being played by two sons of the Webbs, Malcolm and Kent. They are singing and improvising at the piano in the wee hours of the morning (“a quarter to four!” cries their exasperated mother Kenda).

The opening Prelude of *Arias and Barcarolles* also had an earlier life in a short and turgid piano solo, “Meditations Before a Wedding,” written on the eve of his daughter Jamie’s wedding to David Thomas. In “Meditations Before a Wedding,” after a quasi-improvisatory opening, an uneven groove in the left hand appears with a pattern alternating between the time signatures of 3/4 and 7/8—creating an off-balance, agitato nervousness, typical of Bernstein’s style. The lyric “I love you. It’s easy to say it and so easy to mean it, too” appears with the instruction “Not to be sung aloud.” In *Arias and Barcarolles*, the Prelude has a stormy introduction. The original meditative quality from the piano score is discarded and the storminess gives way to the nervous 3/4 + 7/8 figure, the lyric now sung aloud by a mezzo and baritone, introducing two characters (which, I believe creates some irony and danger). It suggests the relationship may well be in trouble. The significance of this music being written in his Dakota studio the night before the wedding reminds me of Bernstein composing his opera *Trouble in Tahiti*, a story of a failing marriage, during his honeymoon.

In 1984, during the creation of his opera, *A Quiet Place*, Bernstein invited me to his country studio in Connecticut. Hans Weber, the recording engineer who made all of LBs recordings for Deutsche Grammophon, had arrived from Germany and was there to listen to playbacks of the Brahms Symphonies with the Vienna Philharmonic. Weber was legendary for his keen ears and his great knowledge of the classical canon. He had made most of Herbert von Karajan’s recordings over the decades and was held in reverence by his colleagues. This would be the final chance for LB to make any adjustments or edits before the imminent release. This time, the studio was full of cables and amplifiers and speakers. As we entered the studio, we passed an old hand-painted screen of people dressed in costumes and wearing masks. “*Un Ballo in Maschera*” said Herr Weber, and LB said “Yes it is! How did you know?” I had my Brahms scores and followed along intently during these sessions. LB, ever the teacher, pointed out beautiful details of the orchestration: “That’s a classically great example of invertible counterpoint;” “Listen to those trumpets in simple octaves. That’s unique to Brahms. It makes the entire orchestra shine.” He asked Herr Weber for a stronger bass line here and a little more impact from the timpani there. The recordings had been made from live performances and tiny flaws and audience noise clearly annoyed Herr Weber. “Ach, Husten!” [coughing] he exclaimed, shaking his head in dismay as some member of the audience marred the glorious horn solo in the Second Symphony. But his really big bugaboo was “Stampfen!,” which he pointed out repeatedly. The “stomping” was Bernstein’s own which occurred in particularly dramatic moments, like a subito forte, or a tutti exclamation after a downbeat (his stomp coming on the downbeat itself). Weber rolled his eyes, and LB shrugged his shoulders helplessly in apology. Wanting to make a contribution, I blurted out “I couldn’t hear the horns in that last passage.” Weber looked at me, shocked. A quick rewind of the magnetic tape revealed that of course they were there, beautifully enmeshed in the texture. “Can we bring them out just a little?” LB asked, humoring me. Weber replied with “Aber natürlich!,” his usual “can do” answer.

Technology was taking a larger role in concert life, and, after the invention of commercial digital music, all kinds of new musical innovations were coming on the market. One day, a large machine arrived at Springate for installation in the studio. The latest invention from Raymond Kurzweil, the new machine could interface with the piano and take virtual dictation from a free improvisation, printing out and playing back what one had just played. This gave the musician an advantage of being able to improvise freely without trying to remember and write down what he/she had just made up. It also had the disadvantage of deciding for you what the meter was and where bar lines occurred. This ended up causing lots of work just

Leonard Bernstein in His Studio (cont.)

to untangle the machine's arbitrary decisions and Kurzweil's machine didn't last long. Most technology didn't work too well for LB. His ability to break a machine within hours, or to have the latest and greatest electronic wonder just not work at all became known among the family and people in the office as the "Bernstein curse." This didn't prevent LB from including the DX7 (the keyboard synthesizer of choice in the 1980s) in the orchestra for *A Quiet Place*. The advantage of the DX7 was that it could cover a lot of instrumental ground. It could sound like an electric guitar, make drum sounds, and imitate a harp. This was a big space saver when trying to squeeze an orchestra into a Broadway or opera house pit. Bernstein wasn't a novice when it came to electronic composing. *West Side Story* features an electric guitar and *Mass* begins with a quadrophonic recording. However, every time he physically got close to a musical electronic device, there was a lot of nervousness.

We were in the mostly pre-cellphone, pre-personal computer age, and we didn't yet have Finale or Sibelius or any other software that allowed us to write music digitally. Communications were made by a land line phone, telex, or the newly-arrived fax machine. In the 1980s, LB used to send me birthday messages by telegram. Music was all copied by hand. When LB would write something, he would often hand it over to me, or his other assistant Charlie Harmon, or Jack Gottlieb (LB's erstwhile assistant since the late 1960s, semi-retired by the late 1980s). "Put this into fair copy," he would say, meaning, make a clear, legible, mistake-free version. This was done on music manuscript paper, written with Alpheus Music Writers, LB's pencil of choice. After a page or two was finished, LB would proof it, making corrections in red. These "fair copies" were xeroxed and used for rehearsals and, sometimes, even performances, until Boosey and Hawkes could get around to engraving them for publication. Getting a piece into print was an arduous task that took years. Every now and then, a newly printed score would arrive for LB's approval, like galleys coming to a novelist from his publisher. Mistakes would often endure edit after edit, driving LB to distraction.

Life in the Bernstein studio was always exciting. LB was constantly composing and his work product mostly took the form of paper, filled with long hand and musical notation. Everything has been preserved, even drafts of sonnets, lyrics, personal notes, instructions to assistants written on post-its, personal letters (he wrote many), as well as his date book, where he scribbled down who would make good company for a dinner party that night. All these writings and sketches now live at the Music Division of the Library of Congress. A likeness of LB's Dakota studio, lovingly archived and curated, may be seen on display at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University in Bloomington. His three grown children own the Springgate property. The studio is now called the Casita and is regularly full of grandchildren, guests, and people loved by LB and his family.