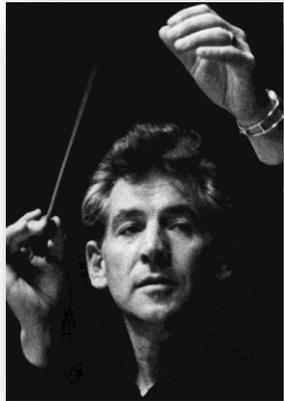


LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Bisexual U.S. Composer and Conductor

(1918-1990)



Iconic 20th century musician Leonard Bernstein was the first conductor born and educated in the United States to receive worldwide acclaim. As a maestro, Bernstein is best known as music director of the New York Philharmonic, with whom he presented the televised “Young People’s Concerts” for CBS, which remain the most successful classical music appreciation programs ever presented on television. As a composer, Bernstein produced an array of works, from symphonies to ballets to Broadway shows, including the musicals *Candide*, *On the Town*, and his best-known work, *West Side Story*, on which he collaborated with Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins and Stephen Sondheim. Bernstein regarded famed composer Aaron Copland as both friend and mentor. He was also profoundly influenced by conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos, whom he would succeed years later at the Philharmonic. Although Bernstein lived a bisexual life in his younger years, the repressive atmosphere of the McCarthy era played a role in steering him toward a traditional marriage in 1951, which provided him with a lifestyle more conducive to a public career in those times. He fell in love with and married actress Felicia Cohn Montealegre and fathered three children. The advent of the “Gay Liberation Movement” of the 1960s and 70s may have encouraged him to be a bit more open in the pursuit of his desires – but his marriage and home-life anchored him. Though he and his wife did experience a yearlong separation in the mid-1970s, they remained close and did not divorce. It was not until after her death in 1978 that Bernstein came to live his life more openly. In recognition of a lifetime of achievements, he received the Kennedy Center Honors in 1980 – an award befitting a man who had become a legend in his own time. Just five days after announcing his retirement in 1990, Leonard Bernstein died of heart failure after complications resulting from a pleural tumor. He remains one of the most enduring, beloved and influential figures in the history of American music.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate Prior Experience: Before today, what did you know about this famous American Composer and Conductor?
2. Read the biography above and explore additional links at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/leonard-bernstein>.
3. Group Discussion: In his early life, Bernstein struggled to gain acceptance for his decision to pursue a career in music. Who were his major influences and mentors during the early years? Were his relationships with men a consideration?
4. Extend Knowledge: How did Bernstein’s ability as a musician impact his decision to become a conductor/director during the 1940s-1950s?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. How did Bernstein’s bisexuality impact his marriage to Felicia Cohn Montealegre in 1951 and their family’s dynamics? Were their children aware of their father’s other relationships? In what way did his marriage factor into his decision to live his life more openly in 1976?
2. Read [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Bernstein#Personal life](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Bernstein#Personal_life) and describe in your own words his challenges and personal struggles.
3. Examine <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/144/p2620/> and explain what Peter Drucker meant when he called Bernstein’s life “a tragedy.”

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Read <https://www.thejc.com/lifestyle/features/leonard-bernstein-my-wonderful-dad-1.33896>. How does Bernstein’s daughter, Jamie, describe her father’s life and devotion to family?
2. Although Bernstein was devoted to his family, he was involved with men throughout his life. Review this link: <http://gayinfluence.blogspot.com/search/label/Leonard%20Bernstein>. How did his focus on keeping his marriage and his family together impact his desire to live with his lover, Tom Cothran?
3. Read this quote by biographers Secret and Kaiser: *“Bisexuality is a thorny label. Do we call Bernstein bisexual because he married and fathered three children? The recently deceased Arthur Laurents did not think we should. He said Bernstein was a gay man who married.”* Given that Bernstein also had relationships with women outside of his marriage, would you consider him bisexual or “a gay man who married [a woman]”? How do you feel about the way Bernstein comported himself?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. In your opinion, has society changed enough to understand the choices Bernstein made – and why he made them?
2. Conduct and advance search for bisexuals at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced>. Read their stories and explain how/if would you advocate for them.