

## CALENDAR

## MUSIC

## MR. BERNSTEIN GOES TO WASHINGTON, IN AGITATION

BY STEPHEN CERA

WASHINGTON—Leonard Bernstein, extravagantly talented, intensely emotional and articulate man that he is, does not mince words.

Bernstein the celebrity has been tagged everything from trendy bleeding heart to apostle of radical chic, but the sincerity of his public declarations is as real as the fervor of his musical state-ments.

Whether the subject is the Vietnam war, the Middle East, American presidential politics or the state of contemporary music, the 62-year-old composer and conductor speaks his mind.

Recently, Bernstein received some publicity for remarks he made about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Not long ago in New York, he shocked a black-tie audience at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel which was celebrating publication of the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

Instead of talking about the new 20-volume dictionary, as had been anticipated by almost everyone, Bernstein lamented the Kennedy assassination 17 years before, calling it "a conspiracy at the highest levels of American government."

The champagne-sipping crowd of luminaries was stunned. One spectator, an assistant managing editor of the Wall Street Journal, tried to shout down Bernstein, and was himself shouted down.

Bernstein has not forgotten the occasion.

In December the composer-conductor was in Washington to accept the 1980 Kennedy Center Honors for lifetime achievement in the performing arts. The gala salute at the Kennedy Center to the five honorees—Bernstein, actor James Cagney, choreographer Agnes de Mille, actress Lynn Fontanne and opera singer Leontyne Price—was nationally telecast.

During a limousine ride from a downtown Washington hotel to an appointment with President Carter at the White House, the musician talked about his remarks in New York. He was wearing a gray suit and brown cowboy boots and the multicolored, ribboned medal from the Kennedy Center around his neck.

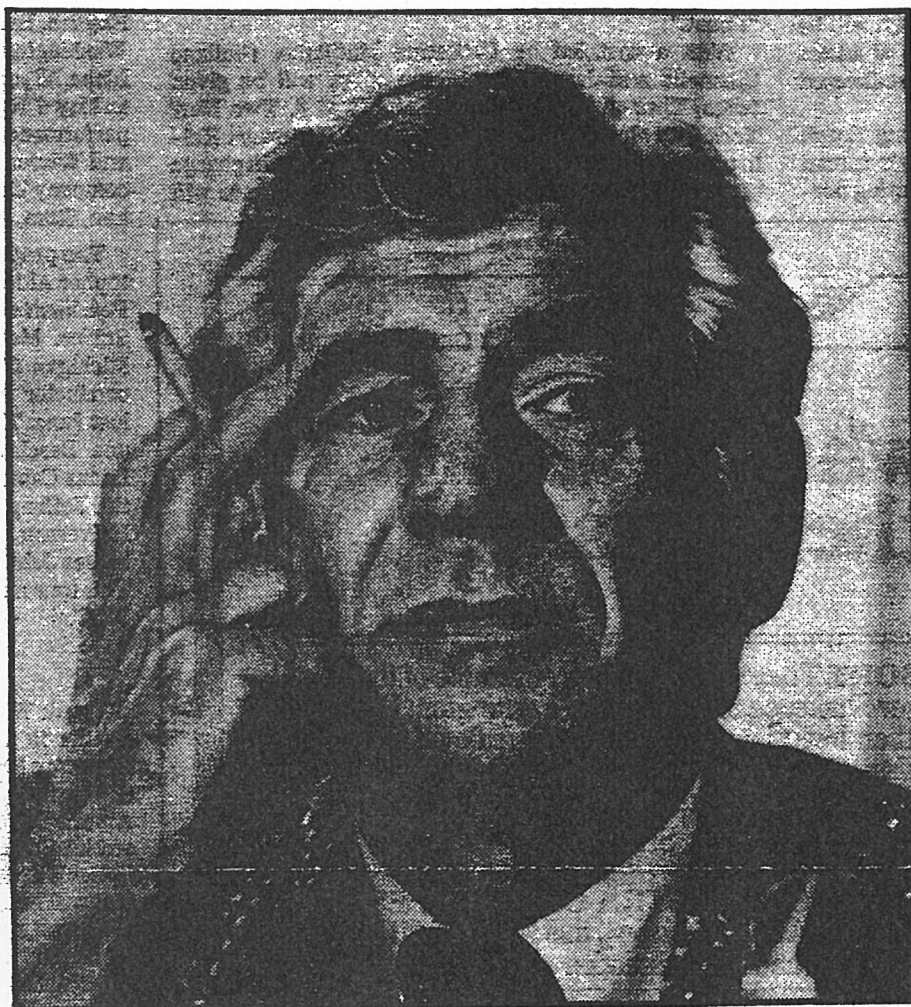
"I would like to rectify or clarify that much-misunderstood occasion," he said, drawing slowly on a cigarette.

"The point I was trying to make is that nobody ever mentions it—the *Yahrtzeit*. It is a Yiddish word denoting the anniversary of a death.

"On a *Yahrtzeit* you light a candle and remember your father or mother or whomever you are commemorating. And we have had no *Yahrtzeits* about this unbelievable murder of our most adored President. Not last year, nor the year before, which was a round-numbered year, the 15th anniversary. Nor, as I can remember, even the 10th. No editorials.

"It occurred to me over these years that with this lack of recognition there must be something that is holding the American people back, inhibiting them from wanting to confront the issue, even though God knows it's been confronted a hundred times.

"The Warren Commission, new books all the time, new leads, a new congressional subcommittee this last year, which was given a lot of money to follow up new leads, and they came up with very curious results.



Leonard Bernstein

Instead of talking about the new music dictionary, Bernstein shocked a black-tie audience by calling the Kennedy assassination 'a conspiracy at the highest levels.'

"In the first place they said all their new leads led to blank walls, all the witnesses were dead. Which is in itself a very peculiar fact. And they had new ballistics statistics, new photographs of it. We never really heard what it was that they had, what they were investigating. They just said, 'We now give up; we've gone as far as we can go. We're sorry, we have nothing new to report.' It doesn't seem, somehow, right. Something's being concealed. And maybe a great deal is being concealed."

There was a macabre coincidence Bernstein could not have foreseen when we spoke. The day after our talk, John Lennon, a member of the rock group whose music helped lift spirits after the JFK assassination, was himself gunned down in front of the New York building which was home to both Lennon and Leonard Bernstein.

The conversation soon turned to Bernstein's own music.

"I wish I could report more results in 1980, especially a work of musical theater, because that was the main objective. I spent the first six months working on one with Arthur Laurents; it was real-

ly marvelous. The title was 'Alarms and Flourishes.' And after six months, it turned out it wasn't going in the right direction.

"After that I settled down and did a lot of little pieces that I promised to do. I did my Divertimento for the Boston Symphony Orchestra's 100th birthday. I did a little musical toast for Andre Kostelanetz, all these little pieces that take a long time.

"I think I worked about a month on that 2½-minute Kostelanetz piece, getting the orchestration just right, getting the form. I didn't work exclusively on that, but I worked very hard on it, and on the Divertimento. Then I also finished a piano piece that I love very much called 'Touches,' which is to be the competition piece for the Van Cliburn Piano Competition this year, which means that every contestant has to learn it.

The limousine turned the corner onto Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Look, they have a menorah in Lafayette Square; how nice! I brought our menorah down to light Hanukkah candles—all the kids will be here together—Jamie is 28, Alexander 25, and Nina, 18.

They love to sing those prayers."

The conductor launched into a Hanukkah song in Hebrew as the car pulled into the White House driveway.

"And I'm about three-quarters of the way finished with a piece of which I am also fond. That is a flute solo and string orchestra piece called 'Chailil,' which means 'flute' in Hebrew.

"It is written in memory of a 19-year-old flute player who was killed in his tank in 1973 in the Sinai, who was a fantastic flute player apparently. I never heard him, but he was being primed for the Israel Philharmonic and everybody was crazy about him.

"His parents came to me then and asked if they could commission me to write a piece, and I said no, I don't do commissions like that for money, but someday I'll write a piece. Then I forgot about it. And this year I got an idea for a flute piece and I suddenly remembered this boy, and so it will be written in his memory, and if all goes well and I finish it and get it orchestrated in time, Rampal will give the premiere in Israel in May."

What about the old project to write an opera based on Nabokov's "Lolita"?

"I sure do remember it, I think about it a lot. But I've never been able to beat the problem of the literariness of that book and also the fact that it's a one-character book. It's a Humbert Humbert soliloquy. And if you try to rewrite that in dramatic form with a 12-year-old nymphet, what does she sing? And whom do you get to sing it? Who is going to sing it in an opera house?

"You have got Fischer-Dieskau to sing Humbert Humbert, which he wants to, but it turns out to be a male solo cantata. And I've fought with this, and I've talked to various playwrights and librettists about it, and they can't solve it, and it's a shame, because for some reason I'm attracted to that for the stage.

"This year, the conducting will be almost nonstop, especially since I have to make up for some of the things I canceled in 1980. I didn't conduct at all in 1980, except Aaron Copland's 'Lincoln Portrait,' which I did twice, and that's it.

"Otherwise, I haven't held a stick in my hand since November of 1979. No, there was one other exception and that's when Zubin Mehta did the Kostelanetz piece and brought me out for a bow and the audience was yelling and stamping and so it was decided to repeat it, and as I was leaving the stage he stuck the baton in my hand and ran. So I had to conduct this two-minute piece, and that's the other exception.

"Right now I'm trying to finish the flute piece and to get 'Tristan und Isolde' into my head, because this month I start rehearsing for that in Munich.

"It is a very interesting plan. We're taking three weeks in January to prepare and present in concert form Act I only, and that will be filmed and taped. And then again three weeks in April for Act II, three weeks in October for Act III. By the end of the year we'll have a complete, uncut, un-tired tenored 'Tristan.' And then the plan is to make a film to that, for which I have some special ideas I think will make an extraordinary film."

Time to go into the White House.

"Hail to the cheese," Bernstein said, smiling, and climbed out of the car. □

Cera, who regularly contributed reviews to *The Times* several years ago, is now music critic for the *Baltimore Sun*.