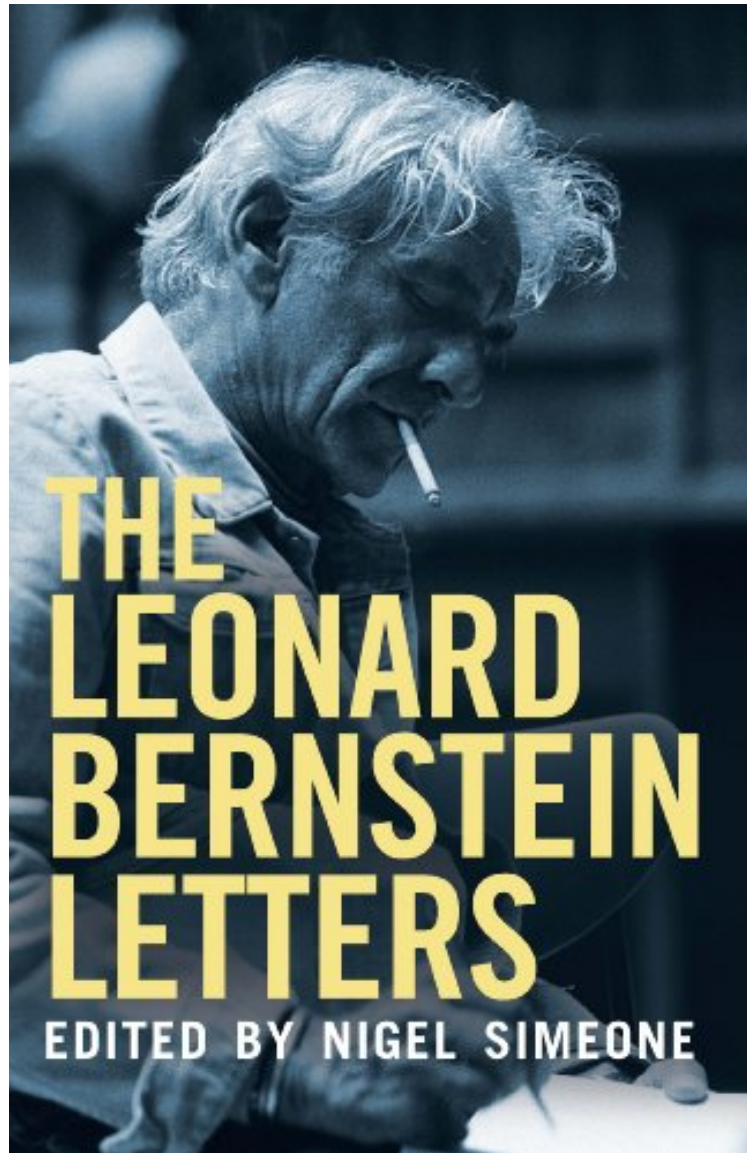


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The Leonard Bernstein Letters

Leonard Bernstein

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Leonard Bernstein : The Leonard Bernstein Letters before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Leonard Bernstein Letters:

45 of 47 people found the following review helpful. Engrossing - a must for any Bernstein fan
By T. Fisher
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.

15 of 16 people found the following review helpful. Biography in episilatory form... By Jill Meyer

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 advise 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.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The Musical Elite Stayed in Touch By A.R.

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.

Leonard Bernstein was a charismatic and versatile musician—a brilliant conductor who attained international superstar 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.

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)