

Randall Thompson (at keyboard), director of Curtis in 1941, with his orchestration students; Bernstein is standing directly behind Thompson

PHOTO: CURTIS ARCHIVES



Leonard Bernstein's two years attending Curtis left a lasting mark—on the student and the school.

# “A Deeply Moving

**EDITOR'S NOTE** Leonard Bernstein (Conducting '41) was born on August 25, 1918. Throughout 2018, musicians and audiences worldwide are celebrating the centenary of this iconic conductor, composer, and pianist—who was shaped in part by the two years he spent studying conducting at Curtis. Materials in the school's archives, including a speech in 1975 marking Curtis's 50th anniversary, offer unique insights on his student experience, and how Curtis influenced his musicianship.



Leonard Bernstein's relationship with Curtis began in the fall of 1939, when he was accepted as a conducting student under Fritz Reiner. A Harvard graduate, he had also attracted considerable notice in classical circles, studying with Aaron Copland and gaining the friendship of the Minneapolis Symphony's music director, Dmitri Mitropoulos. His burgeoning acquaintance with Mitropoulos had put him on the path both to conducting and to Reiner, who was then a teacher at Curtis.

Leonard Bernstein in his college years  
PHOTO: CURTIS ARCHIVES

At first fortune seemed to be smiling on Bernstein. Though his application came late in the year, Reiner had not yet chosen his class due to delays resulting from his European engagements. Bernstein's entrance examination and acceptance took place on October 5, three days after the start of the school term.

Unfortunately, this providential start soon soured in the face of targeted, negative preconceptions about Bernstein that ran rampant throughout the school. "I was not a smash hit with the student body," he recalled in a speech given in 1975 to mark Curtis's 50th anniversary year. "As you can imagine, they regarded me as a Harvard smart-aleck, an intellectual big shot, a snob, and a show-off. I know this to be true because they later told me so." This undisguised resentment, combined with Bernstein's difficulty in adjusting to what he saw as Curtis's insular attitude, served to make his first year a veritable social minefield.

For Bernstein brought to Curtis more than just his Harvard education. He also brought his Harvard experience. That experience had promoted involvement in world affairs (which, in 1939, were rife with uncertainty and fear) and included protests, charged political and philosophical discussions, and musical performances in support of campus activist groups.

Bernstein conducting a few years after his Curtis graduation PHOTO: BETTMANN



# Experience”

BY KRISTINA WILSON

For Bernstein, Harvard had fostered an environment that seamlessly blended together philosophy, literature, and music, allowing him to flourish not only as a student, but as a citizen.

Whether Bernstein presumed that a similar atmosphere would exist at Curtis is not known. What is known is his dismayed reaction to his new environment. He likened walking through Curtis, whose campus was housed in three repurposed mansions of the Philadelphia elite, to walking through an alien land. "The school at the time was a fairly accurate reflection of the isolationist attitude that gripped a large part of our country. The motto was: Avoid entanglements. Curtis was an island of musical enterprise. There seemed no one with whom I could share my feelings, at least not among the students. Those first few months were lonely and agonizing."

## SOLACE IN STUDY

Driven by a need to alleviate his despondency, Bernstein plunged himself into his studies—an act which, though unintentional, fostered friendships with his instructors that in some cases lasted well beyond his Curtis years.

There was the new Curtis director and orchestration instructor, Randall Thompson—himself a product of Harvard—who favored a broader, more inclusive Curtis curriculum that deemphasized virtuosity rather than venerated it. His thoughts about Curtis's then deeply ingrained insularity echoed (and expanded on) Bernstein's own. Musically, too, the two men proved to be in sync; in the summer of 1940, Bernstein conducted Thompson's Second Symphony at Tanglewood, earning his teacher's praise for his sympathetic and skillful conducting.

### MORE ONLINE

Read blog entries and view artifacts of Bernstein's Curtis connection at

[www.curtis.edu/Bernstein](http://www.curtis.edu/Bernstein)

Richard Stöhr's Counterpoint and Harmony class, with Bernstein in the back row (second from left)

PHOTO: CURTIS ARCHIVES



Then there was the Austrian refugee Richard Stöhr (Counterpoint and Harmony), whom Bernstein later called “remarkable and gentle,” teaching species counterpoint—a subject that at Harvard had been considered, in Bernstein’s words, too “old hat,” but that the young conductor would find vital to his success. In fact, so enduring was Stöhr’s influence that Bernstein showed his continued gratitude many years later by funding his teacher’s hospice care.

Bernstein’s solfège and score-reading teacher, the “lovable and gifted” Renée Longy-Miquelle, not only taught him invaluable lessons in the classroom, but opened her apartment to him for companionship and French home cooking, usually consisting of a single menu item she called “Fried Soup,” a concoction of her own devising.

Even the two Curtis teachers who struck abject terror into most students’ hearts, Isabelle Vengerova (Piano) and Fritz Reiner (Conducting), garnered—and reciprocated—Bernstein’s respect and admiration.

## BERNSTEIN'S CURTIS ORBIT

As soon as he entered Curtis, Bernstein quickly formed lasting attachments to his teachers.\*



### RANDALL THOMPSON | ORCHESTRATION

“A composer, an intellectual, and—good Lord!—a Harvard man. I studied orchestration with him, and we became instant and fast friends.”

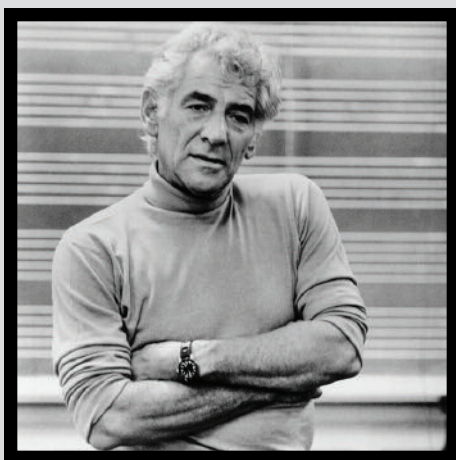


PHOTO: PAUL de HEUCK/COURTESY OF THE LEONARD BERNSTEIN OFFICE, INC.

## CURTIS CELEBRATES THE CENTENARY

This spring Curtis pays tribute to the musical legacy of Leonard Bernstein (1918-90) with performances in Philadelphia and on tour.

### CURTIS ON TOUR: LEONARD BERNSTEIN CENTENARY CELEBRATION

Works by Bernstein, Copland, and Gershwin are performed by two alumni, tenor Dominic Armstrong and clarinetist David Shifrin, as well as student pianist Jiacheng Xiong and the Zorá String Quartet, currently in residence at Curtis, in February and March. The nationwide tour kicks off in Philadelphia, with stops in Arizona, California, Florida, Oregon, and Washington, D.C. [www.curtis.edu/BernsteinTour](http://www.curtis.edu/BernsteinTour).

### CURTIS OPERA THEATRE: A QUIET PLACE

In partnership with Opera Philadelphia and the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, the Curtis Opera Theatre presents the American premiere of Garth Edwin Sunderland’s chamber version of Bernstein’s opera on March 7, 9, and 11 at the Perelman Theater in Philadelphia. A concert version of the production will be presented in New York City on March 13 at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College. [www.curtis.edu/Opera](http://www.curtis.edu/Opera)

### BERNSTEIN, IDENTITY, AND A QUIET PLACE

The Curtis Institute of Music, Opera Philadelphia, and the National Museum of American Jewish History join together March 1 for a panel discussion featuring museum curator Ivy Weingram; Mikael Eliassen, artistic director of the Curtis Opera Theatre; and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon.

\* Quotes on Reiner, Vengerova, Thompson, and Longy-Miquelle from Leonard Bernstein, February 1975, Philadelphia; Stöhr from Leonard Bernstein letter to Hans Sittner, St. Michael’s College Archives

PHOTOS: CURTIS ARCHIVES, ST. MICHAEL’S COLLEGE ARCHIVES



Bernstein in an early-career publicity photo  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE LEONARD BERNSTEIN OFFICE, INC.



## NEW FRONTIERS

In Bernstein's second year, everything changed. Although he enjoyed the friendships forged with his instructors, he was thrilled when the iciness of his Curtis peers suddenly began to thaw. A dramatic event—the jealousy of another student culminating in a thwarted physical threat against Bernstein, Reiner, and Thompson—was the catalyst that led to this cessation of hostility, and “foes became friends, overwhelmed with sympathy ... what bliss.”

Bernstein's joy at this favorable shift only increased when he came to the realization that “as I got to know my newfound friends, I found to my surprise that they were indeed very much interested in the world at large, in philosophical and political concepts. And musically, many of them did care about more than virtuosity. They cared about style and period, about scholarship, about the composer in society, about *interdisciplinary* thought.” Bernstein had come to an astonishing realization: that he, like his fellow students, had been



### ISABELLE VENGEROVA | PIANO

“Never had I had a piano teacher so demanding and tyrannical as my dear Isabella Afanasiovna Vengerova.”

### FRITZ REINER | CONDUCTING

“Suddenly I was studying with the great and fanatically severe Fritz Reiner.”



## A TRIUMPHANT RETURN

Leonard Bernstein returned to the Curtis Institute of Music in 1984 to conduct the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in his Symphony No. 2 (“The Age of Anxiety”) and *Chichester Psalms*. The gala concert at the Academy of Music also featured Curtis faculty member William Smith conducting works by Berlioz and Saint-Saëns, with violin faculty member Aaron Rosand (also a Curtis alumnus and still teaching today) as soloist. Their performance capped a weeklong celebration of the school's 60th anniversary.

The 60th-anniversary concert, and the rehearsals that preceded it, were a memorable experience for Curtis students. “Their reaction to your conducting was one of unbounded joy,” wrote Curtis director John de Lancie to Bernstein soon afterwards, “and I am bombarded with the question, ‘Is he coming back?’”

Bernstein was then at the height of his fame, and worldwide demand for his presence made scheduling difficult. But a date was eventually found in February 1990. Students and faculty alike looked forward to the date with eager anticipation. But it was not to be. Bernstein was forced to cancel due to ill health, and nine months later, he passed away at the age of 72.

“THEIR REACTION TO YOUR CONDUCTING WAS ONE OF UNBOUNDED JOY, AND I AM BOMBARDED WITH THE QUESTION, ‘IS HE COMING BACK?’”



Leonard Bernstein conducting the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in 1984  
PHOTO: CURTIS ARCHIVES

equally guilty of harboring preconceived ideas—about Curtis, about his peers, and about his place among them.

This epiphany, along with the marked contrast between his first and second years at Curtis, left Bernstein with a complicated set of memories when he graduated in May 1941. However, 33 years later, during his speech for Curtis's 50th anniversary, Bernstein made it clear that time and age had finally reconciled what the young Bernstein could not.

“When I think back on my two years in Philadelphia, my immediate memory is of a deeply moving experience, full of hard work, intense relationships, and fascinating new frontiers to cross. ... [But] the more I dig into my memory of those two Curtis years, the more of a mixed bag I find it to be.” Still, it was from this very mixed bag that Bernstein drew a most fitting conclusion, simultaneously defining both the perplexed Curtis student and the consummate maestro he ultimately became.

“It all works out in the end. ... Beauty is truth, and truth, beauty.” ◇

Kristina Wilson is the archivist at the Curtis Institute of Music.



#### RENÉE LONGY-MIQUELLE | SOLFÈGE

“Nor had I ever studied good, old-fashioned solfège, and now here was the lovable and gifted Renée Longy to teach it to me.”

#### RICHARD STÖHR | COUNTERPOINT

“A remarkable teacher, a patient, gentle and deeply learned man, he taught me a great deal.”



## THE ONLY CLEAR BEACON

“OUR TRUTH, IF IT IS HEARTFELT, AND THE BEAUTY WE PRODUCE OUT OF IT, MAY PERHAPS BE THE ONLY REAL GUIDELINES LEFT.”

When Leonard Bernstein returned to Curtis in 1975 to speak at an event marking the school's 50th anniversary, he concluded his remarks with an eloquent argument for the power of art.

“I still hear people asking: What have we artists to do with oil and economy, survival and honor? The answer is Everything. Our truth, if it is heartfelt, and the beauty we produce out of it, may perhaps be the only real guidelines left, the only clear beacons, the only source for renewal of vitality in the various cultures of our world. Where economists squabble, we can be clear. Where politicians play diplomatic games, we can move hearts and minds. Where the greedy grab, we can give. Our pens, voices, paintbrushes, pas de deux; our words; our C-sharps and B-flats can shoot up higher than any oil well, can break down self-interest, can reinforce us against moral deterioration. Perhaps, after all, it is only the artist who can reconcile the mystic with the rational, and who can continue to reveal the presence of God in the minds of men.”

—Leonard Bernstein  
February 27, 1975  
Philadelphia



Bernstein rehearses the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in 1984.

PHOTO: NEIL BENSON/CURTIS ARCHIVES