Bernstein, Leonard (1918-1990) Encyclopedia Article

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After his sensational 1943 debut with the New York Philharmonic, conductor Leonard Bernstein overnight became an American folk hero with a mythic hold on audiences. His rags-to-riches story particularly appealed to a nation emerging from the Depression and learning about the Holocaust.

Raised in a Hasidic home, Bernstein attended Harvard and seemed the quintessential Jewish artist struggling against obscurity and prejudice. His compositions for the musical theater, such as *West Side Story,* became classics, and his classical compositions became welcome additions to orchestral repertories. He was hailed by mass audiences for demonstrating that it was possible to treasure the old while welcoming the new.

Leonard Bernstein

Lenny, as Bernstein was popularly known, turned frequent television appearances into "Watch Mr. Wizard" episodes to explain classical music. College teachers claimed that he was not an original thinker and that many of his statements were oversweeping. Nonetheless, untold hundreds of thousands of admirers would continue to revere him, long after his death.

Further Reading:

Secrest, Meryle. *Leonard Bernstein: A Life.* New York, Knopf, 1994.