

## CHAPTER I

### *Education*

*Paul R. Laird*

The ability of Leonard Bernstein to move successfully between various endeavours depended upon his probing intellect; his admirable talents in the areas of music, speech, writing, languages, and history; and his strong knowledge of Western culture. He had the opportunity to combine his gifts with a first-class education. Samuel Bernstein did not want his eldest child to become a musician, but he desired that all three of his children attend elite universities; indeed, in order, Leonard went to Harvard, Shirley graduated from Radcliffe, and Burton was a Dartmouth alumnus. The family obviously valued education, despite the fact that neither parent graduated from high school. Leonard Bernstein's general education included attending William Lloyd Garrison School in Roxbury through to sixth grade, the Boston Latin School for the next six years, and four undergraduate years at Harvard. His musical training included private piano tuition from age ten and through his years at Harvard; solid training in the academics of music during his college career, in addition to rich extracurricular activities; professional training as a pianist and conductor at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia; and studying conducting with Serge Koussevitzky for two summers at Tanglewood. A survey of Bernstein's educational experience will help demonstrate how he emerged as a well-educated musician ready to excel as a pianist, conductor, and composer from a relatively young age.

Bernstein remembered the William Lloyd Garrison School fondly. According to biographer Humphrey Burton, the teachers perhaps did not discover his intellectual potential, but late in his life Bernstein recalled that 'Everything they taught me was fun to learn, whether history or spelling.' He enjoyed singing the most. Bernstein described his teachers: 'God bless those lovely ladies; there was something special about them, maybe their being good old-fashioned Boston Catholics.'<sup>1</sup> From the age of eight, Bernstein also enrolled in Hebrew school at the family's Temple

<sup>1</sup> Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 8.

Mishkan Tefila, which required two additional hours of classes each day after public school.<sup>2</sup>

In the autumn of 1929, Bernstein won a place at the Boston Latin School, the oldest public school in the United States and one that maintained very high standards; only one in three students who entered graduated from that institution. Students studied Latin each year, with an average of forty lines to be translated every night; the curriculum also included four years of French, a choice of Greek or German (Bernstein chose the latter), as well as other humanities beyond languages, science, and mathematics. For his first two years, he also had to go to Hebrew school in the afternoon. Boston Latin was a long ride on public transportation from Bernstein's home. His family had moved to Newton, meaning that they had to pay tuition for Boston Latin. One of Bernstein's favourite teachers was Philip Marson, who taught English literature; the musician stated that the instructor 'taught me how to learn'.<sup>3</sup> Marson remembered, years later, that Bernstein was consumed by literature: '*Hamlet* and *Macbeth* set him afire. He was tremendously absorbed. A great reader, he loved Milton, Browning, and Shelley. He ate up Untermeyer's *Anthology of Modern Poetry*.'<sup>4</sup> Burton reports Bernstein's delight in the works of Ovid and Keats, and in trying to separate the truth of English history from its presentation in Shakespeare's plays.<sup>5</sup> Bernstein had musical opportunities in the school's glee club and orchestra – with which he played piano solos during his last three years – and he was co-author of the 1935 class song.<sup>6</sup> His school awards included those for the highest overall grade point average and for reading in 1929–30 and for Latin in 1932–3.<sup>7</sup> During his senior year, he was a member of the French and physics clubs. Despite all of his academic success, Bernstein's parents remembered him doing little homework.<sup>8</sup> However, his performance at Boston Latin School helped make possible his acceptance into Harvard College.

As a boy, Bernstein learned the sting of anti-Semitism from various neighbourhood bullies. At Harvard he encountered an institutionalized racial policy: Jews could not comprise more than 10 per cent of an entering class. He also was never elected to the Signet Society for students with interests in the arts or invited to take part in the famous Hasty Pudding

<sup>2</sup> Meryle Secrest, *Leonard Bernstein: A Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 14. <sup>3</sup> Burton, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Peyser, *Bernstein: A Biography* (New York: Beech Tree Books/William Morrow, 1987), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Burton, 28. <sup>6</sup> Burton, 30–1.

<sup>7</sup> Allen Shawm, *Leonard Bernstein: An American Musician* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Peyser, 35.

Show, despite his qualifications as a performer.<sup>9</sup> As a student and a performer, however, Bernstein persevered, taking part in many extracurricular activities, especially those related to performance. The music curriculum at Harvard is an academic discipline. The faculty included several important figures: composer/theorist Walter Piston, composer Edward Burlingame Hill, musicologist A. Tillman Merritt, and musicologist/composer Hugo Leichtentritt. They had much to offer Bernstein, and they surely helped the future conductor and music educator develop his analytical skills and knowledge of music history. Bernstein lived a full life at Harvard and left himself little time for his schoolwork, and sometimes even for class attendance. He was able to do assignments quickly, but occasionally ran into problems in the classroom. Merritt gave Bernstein a C+ in counterpoint, remarking that he was the only Harvard music professor that ever gave the student the grade that he deserved.<sup>10</sup> Given the fact that Bernstein had once commandeered a class with a petty, arcane argument and also had written a dissonant, modern dance for piano instead of the requested example of sixteenth-century counterpoint,<sup>11</sup> Merritt surely felt justified in docking Bernstein's grade. In terms of academic work outside of music, Bernstein especially enjoyed David Prall, a philosophy professor who taught aesthetics. Bernstein attended Prall's classes with some regularity and frequented discussion groups at the professor's home. Prall was adept at finding parallels between the arts and managed 'to express a view of the way the arts combined the intellectual and the sensual, that must have confirmed Leonard in his own creative outlook'.<sup>12</sup> Given the way that Bernstein compared music to other arts and disciplines in his *Young People's Concerts* and other lectures, Prall probably had a major influence on his thinking. When he learned that Bernstein had fallen in love with Aaron Copland's *Piano Variations*, the professor purchased Bernstein the sheet music and encouraged him to write a paper on it. Copland's challenging work became an important part of Bernstein's solo piano repertory. He was deeply affected when Prall died in October 1940 at the age of fifty-four.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to his academic music study – counterpoint, history, advanced harmony, fugue, and orchestration – and work in aesthetics with Prall at Harvard, Bernstein's curriculum included, among other subjects, English literature, Italian, German, ancient Greek philosophers, and political science. Bernstein wrote a senior honours thesis: 'The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music'. Copland advised

<sup>9</sup> Burton, 33. <sup>10</sup> Peyser, 39. <sup>11</sup> Shawm, 32–3. <sup>12</sup> Shawm, 33. <sup>13</sup> Burton, 88.

Bernstein not to 'try to prove too much' in his document,<sup>14</sup> but Bernstein wrote energetically, with broad strokes, and argued his case with details, strong opinions, and numerous musical examples. Leichtentritt was nonplussed:

I thoroughly disapprove of Mr. Bernstein's arrogant attitude and the air of superiority assumed by him. His otherwise interesting analysis of the modernistic idiom would have gained much without this display of immature, juvenile and unjust criticism. With this reservation I accept his thesis for honors, but would like to see that my objections are made known to him.<sup>15</sup>

As shown in Chapter 37 on 'Major Writings', Bernstein utilized ideas from his thesis in future projects. He graduated *cum laude* from Harvard with an A.B. in music.

Bernstein benefited handsomely from his academic training at Harvard in terms of his future career, but his four years at the elite institution also included worthwhile extracurricular opportunities and fortuitous contacts. Bernstein was well known as a pianist at Harvard. At social gatherings he was usually found at the instrument, playing both classical and popular music. For a time, he accompanied the Harvard Glee Club, but lost the opportunity due to being chronically late to rehearsals. Bernstein sometimes accompanied silent films for the Harvard Film Society, once impressing a large audience for *Battleship Potemkin* with an exhilarating mixture of 'Copland's *Piano Variations*, extracts from *Petrouchka*, and Bernstein's own paraphrases of Russian folk songs'.<sup>16</sup> In 1938, he became music editor for the *Harvard Advocate*, writing music criticism for the college paper while also publishing reviews of Boston Symphony concerts for the national journal *Modern Music*. Bernstein shared a subscription to the Boston Symphony so that he could attend concerts every other week. He often went home on weekends to attend synagogue, practice his own piano, give lessons, see his family, and keep up with friends from high school. Two major projects occurred late in Bernstein's last semester. He composed a forty-minute incidental score for a production of *The Birds* by Aristophanes for the Greek Society and served as music director for the two performances on 21 and 22 April 1939 – his first conducting opportunity. Then, with the Harvard Dramatic Club, Bernstein produced Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* on 26 May. Bernstein played the piano

<sup>14</sup> See Nigel Simeone, ed., *The Leonard Bernstein Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 25–6.

<sup>15</sup> Burton, 51. <sup>16</sup> Composer and fellow Harvard student Irving Fine, quoted in Burton, 41.

part on stage from memory, just as Blitzstein had done in the famous Broadway premiere in June 1937. The composer was in attendance and very impressed with Bernstein; they became good friends. Bernstein played piano for conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos at a Harvard reception in January 1937. Mitropoulos knew he had met a special musician and invited Bernstein to attend his week of rehearsals with the Boston Symphony, and then in April 1938 paid the student's travel expenses to Minneapolis so that he could attend a week of Wagner rehearsals. These experiences showed Bernstein what it meant to be a conductor. He met Aaron Copland at a dance recital in New York City on 14 November 1937 and went to the composer's loft afterwards for his birthday party; Copland became one of Bernstein's best friends, an important mentor, his lover, and an informal teacher in composition.<sup>17</sup> Just a few weeks later, Bernstein met the composer William Schuman, who was staying at Eliot House – the student's Harvard residence – when the Boston Symphony played one of his symphonies. They conversed for hours, and Bernstein gained another influential, lifelong friend who could help open opportunities for him.<sup>18</sup>

Bernstein's private training as a pianist constituted most of his musical education in performance before enrolling at the Curtis Institute of Music in the autumn of 1939. His instrumental training began at about age ten with Frieda Karp, a young woman in his neighbourhood. A few years later, Bernstein moved onto Susan Williams at the New England Conservatory of Music. When Samuel Bernstein learned that these lessons would cost \$3 and saw that his son was serious about music, he objected, beginning a long dispute between father and son. This teacher's unorthodox ideas about technique might have damaged Bernstein's future on the instrument.<sup>19</sup> At the urging of a friend, Bernstein auditioned at fourteen for Heinrich Gebhard, one of Boston's leading teachers. He assigned the young man, who needed an instructor with a firm hand, to his assistant, Helen Coates – Bernstein's first serious musical influence, who later became his lifelong secretary. Coates took a deep interest in her new student, insisting on some discipline, helping him straighten out his technique, and leading him through the amounts of repertory that he was capable of assimilating. Coates scheduled his lessons at the end of the day so that they could talk and she could help him notate his first attempts at composition. Bernstein had occasional lessons with Gebhard while in high school and studied with him while a student at Harvard. He loved his work with the German-born

<sup>17</sup> Burton, 17. <sup>18</sup> See Chapters 27 and 32 in this volume on both Copland and Schuman.

<sup>19</sup> Burton, 17.

pianist, and years later wrote an appreciative introduction for Gebhard's *The Art of Pedaling*.<sup>20</sup> Bernstein started to become known as a pianist in the Boston area, making his concerto debut on Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Major with the State Symphony Orchestra on 31 October 1937 and then playing Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* twice with the same ensemble in summer 1938.<sup>21</sup> In his last two years at Harvard, Bernstein formed a piano duo with fellow undergraduate Harold Shapero; they performed together numerous times.

Bernstein graduated from Harvard with little idea of what he might do with his degree. Copland attended *The Birds* and thought that Bernstein had a future as a conductor; Mitropoulos had told the young musician the same thing. When Bernstein started to look for training in late summer 1939, there was no possibility for a fellowship that autumn at the Juilliard School of Music, but his mentors helped arrange an audition with Fritz Reiner, a Curtis Institute conducting professor. Once Bernstein had been accepted, Mitropoulos even assisted Bernstein financially.<sup>22</sup> He was twenty-one years old – late to be starting in a music school for the first time. Reiner, at the time music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony, was a stern taskmaster who expected his conducting students to know what each instrument was doing in every measure of the score in addition to having analytical knowledge of the work. His own conducting style was austere, with basic gestures and little emotion showing in his face – almost the polar opposite of the style that Bernstein later adopted – but Reiner's students benefited from the discipline of his training. He was grim in the classroom and belittled his students with cutting remarks, but Bernstein flourished under his tutelage. At the end of the first semester, he was the only student to receive an A from Reiner.<sup>23</sup> Bernstein also studied piano and had hoped that he might enter Rudolf Serkin's piano studio, but he was too old and they assigned him to study with Isabelle Vengerova, a strict Russian pedagogue who subjected Bernstein to stringent standards of performance.<sup>24</sup> She helped students to develop a fine, legato touch and supervised Bernstein's development of a professional technique. Bernstein also studied score-reading with Renée Longy-Miquelle, a discipline at which he was particularly adept. The teacher became enamoured with the student and for a time they became lovers.<sup>25</sup> The school's director while

<sup>20</sup> See Bernstein's 'Introduction' in Heinrich Gebhard, *The Art of Pedaling: A Manual for the Use of the Piano Pedals* (New York: F. Colombo, 1963). Also quoted in Leonard Bernstein, 'My Teacher: Heinrich Gebhard', *Listen* 1 (December 1963): 3.

<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 11 on *Rhapsody in Blue*. <sup>22</sup> Burton, 65. <sup>23</sup> Secret, 67. <sup>24</sup> Burton, 64–5.

<sup>25</sup> Burton, 67–8.

Bernstein was there was composer Randall Thompson, with whom Bernstein studied orchestration.

Older than his peers and supremely self-confident, Bernstein was unpopular with his fellow students and disliked Philadelphia. Letters to friends document his unhappiness, but also demonstrate the pride that he had in his accomplishments, such as his success in piano recitals and performances that he led with the Curtis Orchestra. During his first year he heard that Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony, had founded a summer music school at Tanglewood where a small class of conductors would work with a student orchestra. Reiner told him that he could not return to Curtis if he studied with Koussevitzky.<sup>26</sup> Bernstein went to Tanglewood anyway and found his principal model in the effusive Russian; Bernstein's experience at Tanglewood in the summer of 1940 appears to have been the most significant educational experience of his life. Koussevitzky wanted Bernstein to work with him for the 1940–1 season. Randall Thompson was not about to lose one of Curtis's best students and brokered a compromise between Reiner and Koussevitzky that involved collaboration between Curtis and Tanglewood, ensuring that Bernstein would finish his Master of Music degree at Curtis, and also easing Bernstein's financial strain with a no-interest loan and free lunches.<sup>27</sup> He earned excellent grades that year and finished with a flourish, leading the Curtis Orchestra in a performance of Brahms's *Serenade in A Major* and playing works by Scriabin and Ravel on Vengerova's final studio recital. In addition, that year he published two arrangements (one for single piano and one for double piano) of Copland's *El Salón México*, played piano in radio performances from Curtis, wrote a violin sonata, taught at a private school, and directed a chorus. Right after graduation, Bernstein rushed back to Boston to finish his incidental score for *The Peace* by Aristophanes, a Harvard student performance like *The Birds* two years earlier. That summer he again worked with Koussevitzky at Tanglewood, basking in the man's regard for his talent and honouring his mentor's memory to the end of his life.

Leonard Bernstein was blessed with many talents, but his success was also a testament to a fine education. His excellent training in liberal arts helped him develop a broad outlook and the ability to compare music to other disciplines. His study of Latin, French, German, Italian, and Hebrew made him conversant in numerous languages and able to rehearse with orchestras in several countries (he also learned Spanish when he married

<sup>26</sup> Burton, 81.    <sup>27</sup> Burton, 81.

Felicia Montealegre Cohn). His musical study with Helen Coates, Heinrich Gebhard, the faculties at Harvard and Curtis, and Serge Koussevitzky, and informal compositional study with Copland, helped hone his natural musicality, fine ear, and musical taste, allowing his notable success as a conductor, composer, and pianist. However, it is significant that Bernstein never formally studied composition. As an adult, Bernstein was often called a natural teacher – a trait surely influenced by his fine education, which ranged in his own approach from undisciplined and capricious to brilliant and dedicated.