

## “Leonard Bernstein: Maestro as Teacher”

There is a look in a young child’s face when he or she truly feels a beat of music or a chord resonates deeply within. There is a time in every young person’s life when he or she turns to music when words no longer seem able to communicate the complexity of feelings inside. These children are today’s children, they are we as children, and they are children in our towns and in every country in the world. Music speaks to us all because it is a language without boundaries of generation or geography.

Leonard Bernstein believed in the universality of music as a means of communicating. Music is “the way it makes you feel when you hear it...it names the feelings for us, only in notes, not in words.” In his first Young People’s Concert he demonstrates the emotional power of music when he plays one note on the piano, followed by another. He asks us to take note of how it makes us feel and how that feeling changes when he combines it with a different note. Through this he eloquently demonstrates the resonance of emotion found in music and that it is universally true for all.

For 15 consecutive seasons (1958-1972), Leonard Bernstein wrote and conducted The Young People’s Concerts, an unbelievably popular series of concerts and lectures on music performed by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He wrote that, “The Young People’s Concerts are among the favorite and most highly prized activities of my life...There is a lurking didactic streak in me that turns every program I make into a discourse, whether I utter a word or not; my performing impulse has always been to share my feelings, or knowledge, or speculations about music...And from this point of view, the Young People’s Concerts are a dream come true.”

These concerts were so wildly popular in their day, that parents would put their children’s names down for seats to the concert waiting list the day they were born. Many of the concerts have been recently re-released on DVD. When viewed by my children I was interested to see if Bernstein would connect to this new generation. His colloquialisms of the past date the script, but his high energy kept the children’s interest long enough for them to observe something else. One child turned up the volume to hear that the microphone in Bernstein’s tie had inadvertently picked up him humming along to Beethoven as he was conducting—and admittedly a little off key. For some reason, the children loved this. His joy in the music enthused his every pore; his love of the music was captivating. This new generation is able to share Bernstein’s passion for music because it was genuine, not patronizing.

Bernstein represented a movement which dispelled the notion music could only be enjoyed after advanced study. However, he did want you to listen and to involve yourself in the music. Beginning in 1954, he wrote and hosted a series of innovative music appreciation television programs beginning with the Omnibus series. The first opened with Bernstein walking on a huge score of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony that covered the floor of the television studio. Through his vast knowledge and common man connection, he was able to communicate complex ideas simply and eloquently.

During the early period as conductor of the New York Philharmonic, from the 1958 season through the 1964 season, Bernstein began an experiment in audience communication. The Thursday Previews were informal concerts where Bernstein would interact with the audience to enlighten and inform them about the music that would be played. He would comment on pieces before the orchestra played, illustrating passages on the piano. At other times he would bring a new composer to talk about a piece to be played. This educative use of the concert hall became the precursor of the “Pre-concert Talk” given in concert halls across the world today.

The revisiting of Leonard Bernstein as educator through the re-issue of the Young People’s Concerts gives an opportunity for reflection about the role of musical education of our children in general. In his latter years, Bernstein said that he had carefully considered how to use his remaining time that was left to him, whether to conduct, to compose or to teach; he said he chose to educate. When we teach children to make music we teach them to express themselves in a non-verbal emotional language that is unavailable to them elsewhere and invaluable to their development.