

Maestro: A hopelessly one-sided portrait of Leonard Bernstein

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The title of the new movie—*Maestro*—suggests a film biography of one of the most remarkable international musical figures of the 20th century, Leonard Bernstein.

That does not prove to be the case, however. The filmmakers—director Bradley Cooper (who plays Bernstein) and co-producers Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg, with Jamie Bernstein and her two siblings in consultative roles—have instead chosen to offer us a portrait of Bernstein’s marriage to actress Felicia Montealegre.

The musical career of the famous composer and conductor, the man whom world-renowned pianist Arthur Rubinstein once described as “the greatest pianist among conductors, the greatest conductor among composers, the greatest composer among pianists” is mostly ignored, except in so far as it serves as a backdrop to his complicated and often troubled personal life.

Exploring every aspect of Bernstein’s life, including his marriage, is certainly legitimate, but what *Maestro* has done is unacceptably one-sided—and therefore misleading. A younger generation seeking to learn more about this figure who played such a prominent role in the classical music world for almost 50 years before his death in 1990 will instead come away primarily with a picture of Bernstein as a damaged genius who inflicted much pain on his long-suffering wife and family.

The film opens with Bernstein (portrayed effectively by Cooper at various stages of the composer-conductor’s life) as an old man, nearing the end of his life, and somewhat ruefully recalling the major experiences he has passed through. It proceeds to deal with his life chronologically, beginning with the famous telephone call in late 1943 informing him that Bruno Walter is too ill to conduct at Carnegie Hall that very evening, and that Bernstein, the assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic at that time, must take his place.

The phone call awakens Bernstein, whom we find in bed next to his male lover at the time. This quickly establishes the film’s central theme: how Bernstein’s homosexuality affects his family.

The young wunderkind of the classical music world, who has rocketed to fame after his debut at Carnegie Hall at the age of 25, soon meets actress Felicia Montealegre (Carey Mulligan). Montealegre, born in Costa Rica and educated in Chile, is at the beginning of a stage and television career. Lenny and Felicia fall in love and decide to marry, while Montealegre assures Bernstein she is well aware he is gay (she “knows all about you”), but “let’s give it a whirl.”

Much of this history is telescoped, at times in a somewhat confused fashion. Montealegre and Bernstein first met in 1946 but did not marry until 1951. *Maestro* provides only minimal detail about Bernstein’s career, just enough to demonstrate he is absolutely passionate about music, and that his musical life is flourishing. There

is a brief scene with Serge Koussevitsky—the famous Russian-born conductor of the Boston Symphony and the primary mentor of the young Bernstein—urging him to stay away from Broadway and to change his name to “Berns,” for the purpose of smoothing his path to national prominence.

We see rehearsals for the Bernstein-Jerome Robbins ballet, “Fancy Free.” The famous overture to the 1956 operetta *Candide* is heard in the background. This all flies by rather quickly, always with the principal emphasis on Bernstein’s celebrity marriage.

A famous 1955 interview of Bernstein and his wife is recreated, part of Edward R. Murrow’s “Person to Person” television series. The Bernsteins are presented in their luxurious home, discussing their busy lives, which by then include two children (the third would not arrive until 1962). Other scenes show the opulence of their lives at the famous Dakota apartment building in Manhattan as well as in suburban Connecticut. Accompanying this is the steadily accumulating crisis between husband and wife, tension that occasionally erupts in bitter arguments. Even though Felicia has indicated she understands Bernstein’s needs, she objects to his indiscretions. In one climactic scene, she explodes, telling Bernstein he is incapable of loving himself, and warning that he should beware of “dying as a lonely old queen.”

Bernstein leaves Felicia for a younger lover, and then returns when she is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Felicia’s death in 1978 is correctly depicted as a shattering blow to the aging composer, but the film then fairly quickly jumps ahead a decade, to Bernstein’s final years.

As noted above, the actual music in Bernstein’s life is only the passive setting in *Maestro* for his marriage. The main extended musical moment is a five or six-minute excerpt from a Bernstein performance of the famous Resurrection Symphony of Gustav Mahler—the great Viennese composer of the early 20th century with whom Bernstein is most closely associated. There is little indication of the scale of Bernstein’s career as a conductor, which took him to every famous orchestra and classical musical venue in the world during the 20 years after he resigned his post as conductor of the New York Philharmonic (1958-69) and is included in 121 CDs and 36 DVDs.

While there are brief references to some of the compositions for which Bernstein was most famous (*Candide*, *West Side Story*), there are many other, less well-known works that are not mentioned at all. The only other major piece of Bernstein’s featured somewhat prominently is his *Mass*, for the opening of the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. in 1971. This is revealing. The “spirituality” and vague multiculturalism of *Mass* reflected a particular stage of

Bernstein's odyssey and are part of the outlook undoubtedly shared by his daughter Jamie Bernstein, a prominent consultant on the movie, and by the filmmakers more generally.

It is not only the musical excerpts that are missing, work that could have shown how the composer determinedly strove to bridge the divide between popular and classical music. Also omitted from the movie is Bernstein's role as a champion of musical tonality, at a time, in the post-World War II period, when it was shunned in many circles in favor of atonality and Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone school of composition.

Nor is there any reference, astonishingly, to Bernstein's legacy as an educator, including above all his famous "Young People's Concerts" and other television work that brought classical music to millions, popularizing the form without in any way lowering the level of discussion.

Bernstein's career cannot be understood, as he himself would insist, apart from the complex history of the 20th century. Yet there is nothing in this film about the composer's fervent liberalism, his sympathy for socialism and, in his youth, for the Soviet Union. There is nothing about McCarthyism, the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s that forced the young conductor, in order to renew his passport, to submit a humiliating legal affidavit confessing to political naivete and certifying his patriotism. In relation to a later period, *Maestro* includes no references to the Vietnam War and to the Bernsteins' attempts to raise funds for the legal defense of the Black Panthers, efforts that provoked the wrath of the *New York Times* and other official voices.

Those who admire Bradley Cooper's *Maestro* might acknowledge all of these missing musical and historical elements, but would insist those aspects don't belong, because this film is about their personal lives, and above all about Felicia Montealegre.

While Cooper's performance as Bernstein has met with general critical approval, some have insisted that it is Carey Mulligan who is the true star of the movie. Her performance is indeed a good one, but the praise fits in with the overarching premise of *Maestro*. It has been conceived as a tribute to Montealegre above all, a tribute that is considered overdue.

The focus on the "inner lives" of Lenny and Felicia is consistent with the outlook of identity politics that permeates cultural and political life today, including and perhaps most strongly in Hollywood. The movie is an attempt to give Felicia Montealegre her due for putting up with Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein is not denounced; he is depicted instead as a somewhat tragic figure.

The logic of identity politics finds somewhat ridiculous expression in the criticism in some quarters of the prosthetic nose used by Cooper to more closely resemble Bernstein. There is nothing offensive in this device, and it is fairly effective in *Maestro*, but it has been called an example of "Jew-face," with the reactionary suggestion that only Jews may play Jewish characters.

Although Jamie Bernstein, as noted, had only a consultative role on the film, she has spoken in some detail about her cooperation and collaboration with filmmaker Cooper, and indeed the character of Jamie (Maya Hawke) is quite prominent in the movie itself. It would not be a stretch to say that *Maestro*, while not inaccurate, is in large part based on the recollections of Jamie, who was 26 when her mother died.

Another theme of the movie, alluded to but not spelled out, is its concern with the price supposedly paid for "not being true to oneself." One can easily imagine many of those involved in *Maestro*, gay and

otherwise, shaking their heads and tsk-tsking over Bernstein's "irresponsible" behavior. This attitude, so typical of the ahistorical advocates of identity politics, ignores that fact that homosexuality was criminalized in much of the United States during the period depicted in the movie, and that an openly gay "lifestyle" would have precluded a public musical career for Bernstein for the first two or three decades of that career—in other words we would not have had the Bernstein we have come to know.

The crisis of the Bernsteins' marriage, if it were to be seriously examined alongside his musical fame, could only be understood in the context of the social and cultural changes taking place during that period. Bernstein was increasingly adrift, creatively as well as personally. The two sides of his life were not unrelated. The conditions which had inspired him in the 1940s, 50s and 60s gave way to a different and far less hospitable political climate in the 1970s and 80s, and this found expression especially in his difficulties as a composer. He tried to hold on to his liberalism, while facing old age and, no doubt, guilt feelings over his marriage.

As the WSWS argued in August 2018, "When all the twists and turns of Bernstein's remarkable 50-year career are taken into account, however, it is clear that his legacy, 100 years after his birth and 75 years after he first found fame, shines brightly."

We continued: "His pianism and pedagogy, his principled defense of musical tonality and the thousands of performances he led as conductor around the world speak for themselves. His legacy as a composer must be appreciated and understood in light of the conditions and obstacles he faced." The film that successfully grasps and represents these complexities remains to be made.

A handful of Leonard Bernstein's many memorable performances, Young People's Concerts and lectures:

Glenn Gould and Leonard Bernstein: Bach's Keyboard Concerto No. 1 (I) in D minor (BWV 1052)

Leonard Bernstein in Salza – Shostakovich's Symphony No. 1

Leonard Bernstein - Young People's Concerts: What Does Music Mean?

George Gershwin - Rhapsody in Blue - Leonard Bernstein, New York Philharmonic (1976)

Candide Overture: Leonard Bernstein conducting

Mahler rehearsals with Leonard Bernstein

Beethoven - 5th Piano Concerto "Emperor" (Krystian Zimerman, Leonard Bernstein, Vienna Philharmonic)

The Unanswered Question 1973 Leonard Bernstein Norton Lecture

Brahms Symphonies 3 and 4 with Leonard Bernstein and the Vienna Philharmonic



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