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Leonard Bernstein's Jewish Boston: An Introductory Note

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Leonard Bernstein (1918–90)—the now-legendary composer and conductor—had deep roots among Eastern European Jewish immigrants in Boston. This volume of essays explores aspects of that personal and sociocultural experience as revealed through an intensive team-research seminar at Harvard University during the spring semester of 2006. Titled "Before *West Side Story:* Leonard Bernstein's Boston," the course positioned Bernstein within interlocking local networks, primarily during the 1930s and early 1940s. Its aim was not to prepare a standard biographical narrative, but rather to interrogate the synergy between an individual and supportive communities, whether religious, ethnic, educational, or musical. Carol J. Oja and Kay Kaufman Shelemay designed and team-taught the seminar, guiding a group of nineteen graduate and undergraduate students in both fieldwork and archival research, and they timed it to precede "Leonard Bernstein: Boston to Broadway," a major international festival and conference about Bernstein, which took place at Harvard in October 2006. By drawing on complementary methodologies and capitalizing on the multiple layers of activity made possible by such a large group of researchers, the students covered an extraordinary amount of turf in a short time, and they did so in innovative ways. As their work unfolded, intriguing insights emerged about the powerful, ongoing role played by Boston's Jewish immigrant community in shaping the identity and character of a man who was to become one of America's most illustrious musicians.

Organized into research teams, the students spread out around Boston and pursued diverse threads among Bernstein's Boston experiences. They conducted interviews with his classmates, colleagues, and friends, and they delved into archival resources at a range of institutions, including Congregation Mishkan Tefila, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Harvard University, the New England Conservatory, the City of Boston, the New York Philharmonic, and the Library of Congress, which houses the extensive Leonard Bernstein Collection. In the process they unearthed a wealth of exciting materials that both inform the articles in this volume and suggest fruitful areas for ongoing research. They contributed some of these materials to an illustrated program book for the Bernstein Festival as well as to an exhibit titled "Boston's Bernstein" in Harvard's Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library. As with the seminar, the exhibit grew out of a team effort, with Sarah Adams as staff curator and Ryan Bañagale as student assistant. It depended greatly on an amiable collaboration among library staff, faculty, and students, as well as on the cooperation of archivists around Boston. All of the data gathered during the course have been archived in the Harvard Music Library.

The articles here run a gamut of topics and domains connected with Bernstein's early experiences. The opening essay by Oja and Shelemay, which discusses the

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intersections of ethnography and archival research as well as pedagogy and research, explores the importance of delving into local traditions, and it suggests ways in which the Bernstein project might serve as a model for other scholars to examine musical cultures in their own backyard. The article pays close attention to ways in which one can teach research techniques through team projects, and it includes as an appendix an imaginative paper based on original research by Scott Kominers, who was a freshman mathematics concentrator when he took the seminar.

An early session of the seminar was spent with Jonathan Sarna, a noted scholar of Jews in America, who is on the history faculty at Brandeis University. Sarna subsequently delivered a paper at the Bernstein Festival, and we are delighted that he has allowed us to publish it in this volume. He shapes a rich context for the saga of immigration that encompassed the Bernstein family, showing how they fit into overall patterns within Boston's Jewish community. Sarna views that community as distinctive from Jewish populations in most urban areas in the United States, largely because it was dominated by Jews of Eastern European descent (rather than German). They, in turn, were affected by Boston's large Irish population. As Sarna observed during his interview with our class, "Had Bernstein grown up in Cincinnati, the story would have been completely different."

Graduate students in the seminar have contributed articles that grew out of team research. Ryan Bañagale investigates the roots of Bernstein's deep connection to the music of George Gershwin; during the seminar he uncovered a previously unknown arrangement of *Rhapsody in Blue* made by Bernstein during the summer of Gershwin's death. Drew Massey discusses Bernstein's involvement in theater productions sponsored by the Harvard Student Union, challenging long-held assumptions about the composer's politics. Sheryl Kaskowitz presents perspectives on Bernstein's visiting professorship at Brandeis University in the early 1950s; she shows how this affiliation served as a transgenerational link between the composer and his immigrant father. Finally, Shira Brettman, who was then a senior, contributes a short film exploring Bernstein's teenage theatrical productions during the 1930s in Sharon, Massachusetts. Brettman located a cluster of now-eighty-somethings who worked with Bernstein on those productions and were eager to be interviewed. Her film, *Bernstein's Sharon,* is available at http://stream.fas.harvard.edu/ramgen/permanent/bernsteinproject/bernstein_sharon.rm. This project has been exceptionally rewarding from start to finish. Studying these historic aspects of "community" seemed to send off ripple effects, building gratifying relationships both on campus and with communities around us. Many members of those groups pitched in with gusto, and we are immensely grateful to them for sharing memories and offering professional expertise.

Throughout this special issue of JSAM, unpublished writings by Leonard Bernstein and excerpts from his compositions are reproduced with the kind permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc. For streaming video of class interviews, together with transcripts, see <http://my.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=Bernstein>

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