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## Leonard Bernstein and Washington, D.C.: Works, Politics, Performances

Edited by Daniel Abraham, Alicia Kopfstein-Penk, and Andrew H. Weaver.  
Eastman Studies in Music. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020.

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doi:10.1017/S1752196322000104

In recent years, we have witnessed a plethora of scholarship devoted to Leonard Bernstein, largely because of his recent centennial. Most of these books focus on his personal and/or professional life, and they are geared either for the academic or the general reader. However, a recent hardback takes a new approach by investigating Bernstein's political associations and manages to target both demographics successfully. *Leonard Bernstein and Washington, D.C.: Works, Politics, and Performances*, edited by Daniel Abraham, Alicia Kopfstein-Penk, and Andrew H. Weaver, examines his interactions with the capital city and its leaders, as well as the premieres or significant performances of his works that took place there. The only book devoted solely to Bernstein's politics is Barry Seldes, *The Political Life of an American Musician* (University of California Press, 2009), making *Leonard Bernstein and Washington, D.C.* a welcome addition to the Bernstein canon.

The book is organized into two sections. Part I describes Bernstein's associations with Washington insiders and needs no previous knowledge of Bernstein or his music. Part II investigates his individual pieces, but still requires little musical background. Each chapter is penned by a different author, many of whom are Bernstein scholars. By academic standards, the chapters are relatively brief and could be used as stand-alone readings for college courses, or simply appreciated by adults seeking to learn more about him.

As someone who is not especially interested in politics, I approached this book somewhat warily, but to my utter delight I found it to be quite engaging and informative. In particular, I enjoyed the diversity of topics, scholarly perspectives, and writing styles. I also appreciated that the book provides an index of Bernstein's works and a selected bibliography.

Part I, "Bernstein, Politics, and the White House," examines his multiple associations with Washington. Chapter 1, "Bernstein and Washington, D.C.," by Carol Oja, jumpstarts the book by discussing the high and low points of his life in that city. On one end of the extreme, the House Un-American Activities Committee investigated him and revoked his passport. On the other, Bernstein conducted numerous performances in D.C. and began a lifelong friendship with the Kennedy family. Oja further describes how his interest in civil rights and social justice was exemplified in his use of integrated casts and provocative performances.

I found chapter 2, "Leonard Bernstein and the White House," to be one of the most interesting. Written by editor Alicia Kopfstein-Penk, it details Bernstein's associations with nine U.S. presidents, ranking them by their interactions. As previously mentioned, Bernstein felt especially close to Kennedy, and to a lesser extent, Jimmy Carter and other Democrats. Kopfstein-Penk thus illuminates how Bernstein dedicated his third symphony to JFK and that he and his wife shared private dinners with the Kennedys. Bernstein also campaigned for Carter and maintained close ties with him, even

after the president left office. However, Bernstein had limited or lackluster relationships with Republican presidents, except for Eisenhower, who treated him like a rock star because of his television success and leadership of the New York Philharmonic. Kopfstein-Penk further underscores the extent to which the Nixon and Bush administrations were *not* fans. In fact, Nixon equated modern music and art with liberalism and placed Bernstein on his list of opponents. During the Bush administration, Bernstein declined to receive the National Medal of the Arts, which greatly annoyed the president.

Barry Seldes penned the next chapter, “Bernstein and McCarthyism,” which details the composer’s encounters with the House Un-American Activities Committee. According to Seldes, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover wanted to “seize and imprison Bernstein without trial in the event of a threat to the security of the United States” (67), in part because of his association with leftist causes that went back to his days at Harvard. Although Bernstein was not called on to testify for the HUAC, he was banned from several events. Ultimately, he had to sign a statement saying that he was not a Communist. He would later run into difficulties because of his support of the Black Panthers and a rumor that incorrectly suggested that his piece, *Mass*, was intended to embarrass Nixon.

Part I concludes with chapter 4, which discusses Bernstein’s tours with the New York Philharmonic and his role as cultural ambassador for Eisenhower. It details how his concerts in the Soviet Union helped to build connections with the United States, in part by performing American music. Other events, such as the Geneva Summit and the initiation of the Tchaikovsky Competition, showed his continued efforts to link the arts with diplomacy. Sarah Elaine Neill, the author of this chapter, astutely notes, “Art may not be able to win a war, but the lack of art can lose one” (100).

Chapter 5, “West Side Stories,” is adapted from Elizabeth Wells’s dissertation and subsequent book. Here she explains how *West Side Story* had one of its out-of-town tryouts in D.C., because it was an easy train ride from New York. It turns out that the public and critics enjoyed the performance, but the press thought it was too dark. The production even had a command performance at the White House, which provided the positive energy Bernstein needed after having so many negative experiences in Washington.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with one of Bernstein’s most controversial works, *Mass*, which, despite its message of peace, was read by many as politically volatile. Chapter 6, “Politics of Style—Listening for ‘Radical Chic’ in *Mass*,” therefore refers to Tom Wolfe’s provocative article in *New York Magazine*, which denigrated the Bernsteins for their association with the Black Panthers. Katherine Baber, this chapter’s author, argues, “The genesis of ‘radical chic,’ and of *Mass*, is thus a muddle of politics, sexuality, race and *style*” [emphasis hers] (128). Baber adds, “The composition of *Mass* can be read as an active performance of resistance to the status quo of Nixon’s America” (139). In the following chapter, Robert Lagueux asserts that although Father Daniel Berrigan, one of the inspirations for *Mass*, felt that the piece should be militant, Bernstein decided that it should only ask for peace. Bernstein thus enlisted *Godspell* composer Stephen Schwartz to help him complete the work.

Chapter 8, by Elissa Harbert, discusses *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, written for the nation’s bicentennial. This musical, which details the lives of several presidents, first ladies, and servants in the White House, acts as a play within a play, showcasing the actors who portray these characters. However, as Harbert explains, the musical only ran for seven performances. Critics blamed the book and lyrics written by Alan J. Lerner, finding the plot to be preachy and pretentious. Audiences also found the narrative confusing because the actors were required to play multiple roles. Both Lerner and Bernstein eventually withdrew the work from their respective catalogs, and it was never again performed during their lifetimes. Even the show’s later revivals and adaptations never found critical acclaim.

The year after *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* premiered, Bernstein’s *Songfest* debuted. As Paul Laird discusses in chapter 9, Bernstein left his wife Felicia for his lover Tom Cothran, who had helped him choose the texts for *Songfest*, several of which focus on homosexuality. Because this piece is unusually scored for six soloists and orchestra, it is not performed frequently today. Laird notes that some of the songs in this collection had their premieres at the Kennedy Center and experienced mixed reviews in the Washington newspapers, which is likely the reason for the piece’s inclusion in the book. The discussion of these two works continues in chapter 10, written by Lars Helgert, who provides very

detailed analyses, examining Bernstein's insertion of political messages into his compositions. For example, he shows how *Slava! A Political Overture* takes its themes almost entirely from 1600 *Pennsylvania Avenue*.

In the final chapter, Mari Yoshihara investigates Bernstein's complex opera, *A Quiet Place*, and its approach to gender, sexuality, and family. The Houston Grand Opera, La Scala, and the Kennedy Center teamed up to produce this provocative work. After poor reviews, Bernstein made numerous changes to it. Yoshihara notes that, despite some obvious biographical similarities to the composer's life, the piece is important for its psychological character development and its "political and moral message" about the importance of AIDS treatments when the disease was not yet well known (290).

Barry Seldes sums up the volume's essence by noting that Bernstein was ". . . a political man in the highest and best sense of that term, convinced of the need to exercise good democratic citizenship in a public sphere rife with contention and vulnerable to mean-spirited and demagogic power" (81). This book does a wonderful job situating both Bernstein and many of his works in the nation's capital. A few chapters, especially the last three, are more technical than others, and therefore will likely appeal more to scholars. Moreover, some of these have a rather tenuous connection to the book's setting beyond the fact that the pieces they discuss had premiered there. Although all the chapters were interesting and well-written, chapter 2's focus on Bernstein's associations with various presidents was especially engaging and chock-full of information. Both the academic community and general readers will hail *Leonard Bernstein and Washington DC* for its solid scholarship, clear writing, and focus on a subject who remains revered by the American populace more than thirty years after his death.

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## American Harmony: Inspired Choral Miniatures from New England, Appalachia, the Mid-Atlantic, the South, and the Midwest

Edited by Nym Cooke. Boston: David R. Godine, 2017.

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doi:10.1017/S1752196322000062

Nym Cooke's *American Harmony* is a welcome, if limited, contribution to the growing list of new collections of historical sacred vocal music featuring the four-shape notation system first introduced in *The Easy Instructor* (1801), and known today thanks to the continued popularity of *The Sacred Harp* (1844).<sup>1</sup> Long in the making, Cooke's collection is at once a tunebook, an anthological edition, and a reference resource; a source of historically significant and delightfully singable music from late eighteenth-century New England and beyond with detailed information on its composers and their

<sup>1</sup>Other recent shape-note compilations include: Myles Louis Dakan et al., eds., *The Shenandoah Harmony: A Collection of Shape-Note Tunes, Ancient and Modern, for Singing Groups Large or Small* (Boyce, VA: Shenandoah Harmony Publishing Company, 2012); Larry Gordon and Anthony G. Barrand, eds., *Northern Harmony: Plain Tunes, Fuging Tunes and Anthems from the Early and Contemporary New England Singing Traditions*, 5th edition (Marshfield, VT: Northern Harmony Publishing Company, 2012); Stephen A. Marini et al., eds., *The Norumbega Harmony: Historic and Contemporary Hymn Tunes and Anthems from the New England Singing School Tradition* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003). Cooke's anthology also joins recent editions of historical shape-note tunebooks still in use, including Johnny Lee and Karen Willard, eds., *The Sacred Harp: Revised Cooper Edition* (Samson, AL: Sacred Harp Book Company, 2012); John Hollingsworth et al., eds., *The Christian Harmony* (Bishop, GA: Christian Harmony Music Company, 2010).