

# BERNSTEIN INK BLOOMINGTON

By **DEBRA** KENT

**The year was 1981 and Leonard Bernstein had writer's block.**

He was working on a new opera and needed to focus, far from the demands of celebrity life. He could have sequestered himself anywhere in the world but the man generally acknowledged as the most important musical figure of the 20th century came to Bloomington, to a condo tucked into the wintry woods overlooking Lake Monroe.

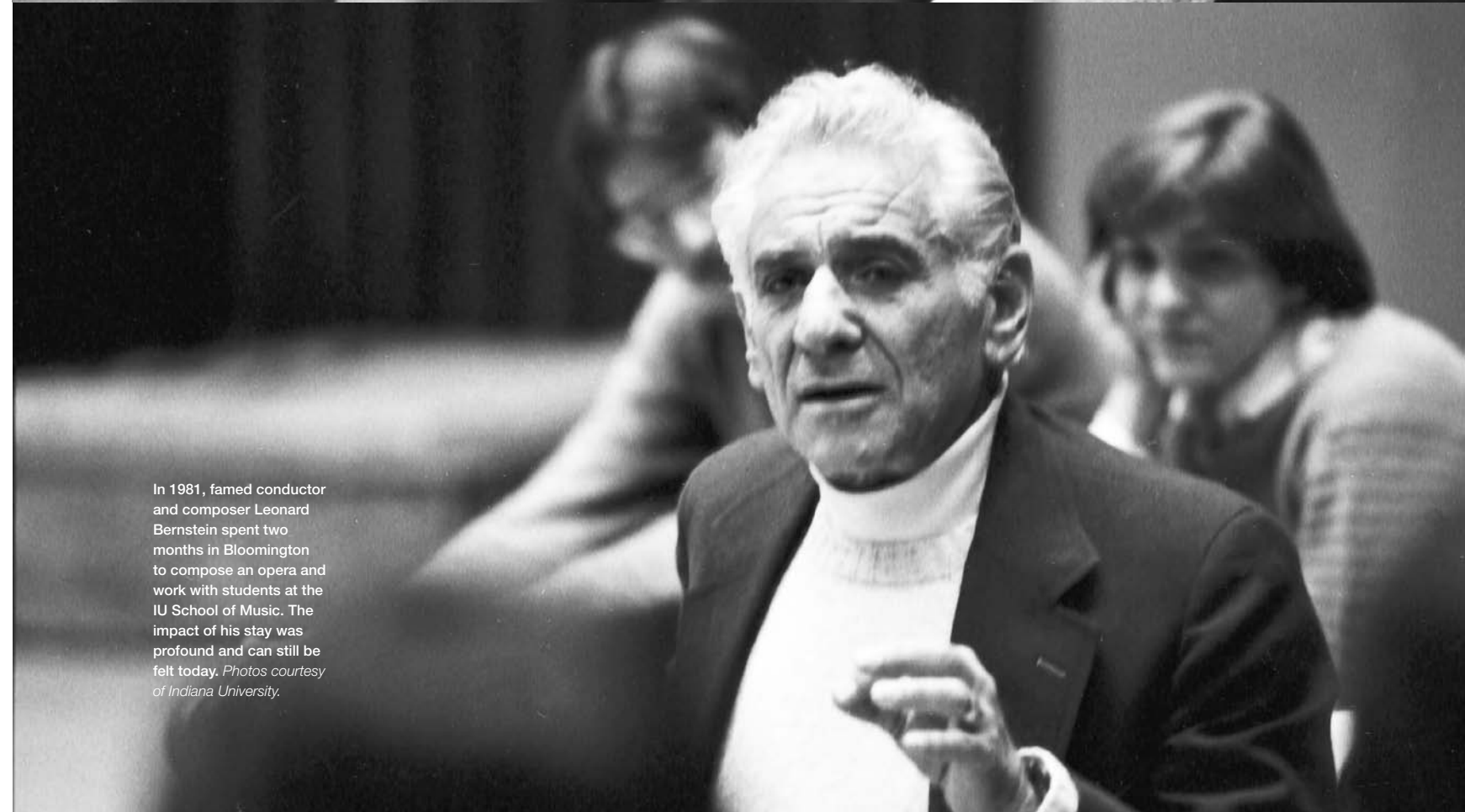
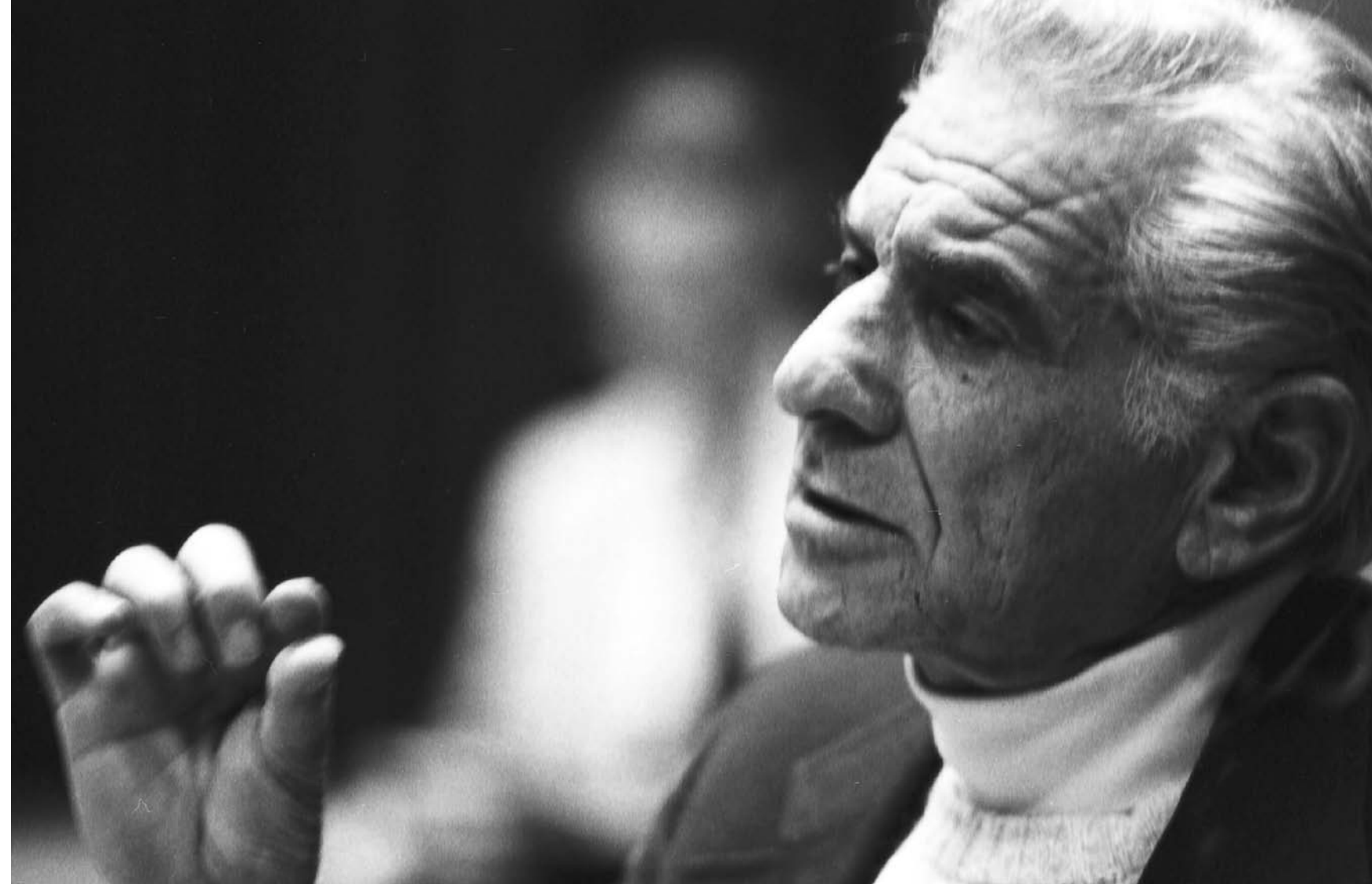
One imagines that Bernstein approached his retreat with some combination of humility and determination, for it had been a difficult few years. In 1976, the musical he wrote with Alan Jay Lerner was a spectacular flop; *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* closed only a week after it opened on Broadway. (In Philadelphia, a theater patron had kicked through a glass door to escape the performance.) Around this time, Bernstein separated from his wife Felicia and took up with a young man, Tom Cothran, with whom he had fallen in love and hired as a traveling secretary and researcher. In 1978, Felicia—still his best friend—lost a four-year struggle with cancer; near the end Bernstein moved back into their apartment in New York's famed Dakota. This period of Bernstein's life was also marked by a profound awareness of his own mortality; on the eve of his 60th birthday, he said, "I don't mind that I'm aged, that my hair is white, that there are lines in my face. What I mind is the terrible sense that there isn't much time."

Born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1918, Leonard Bernstein—conductor, composer, pianist, author, and educator—was famously conflicted. He was the first American conductor to achieve international acclaim but was determined to be recognized as an equally great classical composer. He drew the ire of purists who thought his commercial efforts—the iconic *West Side Story* foremost among them—were unbecoming of a New York Philharmonic conductor. Moreover, he was torn between his vision of a traditional family life and the wish to live openly as a gay man. Bernstein's professional appetites were insatiable: He wanted to do it all and he did. "I want to conduct. I want to play the piano. I want to write for Hollywood. I want to write symphonic music. I want to keep on trying to be, in the full sense of that wonderful word, a musician. I also want to teach. I want to write books and poetry. And I think I can still do justice to them all," he wrote.

All this is well known about Bernstein, the subject of more than a dozen biographies,

countless articles, and more than a few gossip columns. Less publicized, however, was Bernstein's special relationship to Bloomington's IU School of Music, a 30-year partnership that brought immeasurable benefit to the school, even to this day with the recent donation to IU of the contents of Bernstein's Fairfield, Connecticut office. However, Bernstein's attention to IU was more than largesse; it was also a sign of genuine appreciation for the quality of the school, the talent of its students, his friendship with Dean Charles Webb, and the serenity of Bloomington itself.

It should be noted that some of those asked to comment for this story demurred or flatly declined to be interviewed, while others preferred to talk off the record. What emerges, both from the interviews and from the silences, is a portrait of a hard-drinking, chain-smoking, ambitious, astonishingly eclectic, warm, exuberant, generous, sometimes reckless, and abundantly talented man who left an indelible imprint on the IU School of Music.



In 1981, famed conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein spent two months in Bloomington to compose an opera and work with students at the IU School of Music. The impact of his stay was profound and can still be felt today. Photos courtesy of Indiana University.



‘Just to be in his presence, just to have him walk into a room—there was a kind of electrical energy that made you sit up and be at your best. . .’  
—Henry Upper



Bernstein with students at the IU School of Music. Photo courtesy of Indiana University.

## THE GREAT ONE ARRIVES

The driver pulled up to the house on Lake Monroe where Henry Upper waited eagerly to welcome the legend. Upper, then associate dean of the music school, will never forget the moment when the trunk popped open and he caught a glimpse of its contents. “I almost jumped back and gasped,” he recalls. The rear of the car was packed with a startling number of framed family photographs. “You see, this is what Bernstein did when he traveled. He wanted to surround himself with family. He set the pictures all over the condo so that every place he turned he would see a family member. That tells you quite a bit about the warmth and complexity of this man.”

Bernstein, who catapulted to fame as a conductor literally overnight after substituting for the New York Philharmonic’s Bruno Walter in 1943, had come to Bloomington to focus on composing *A Quiet Place*, a three-act opera and psychological drama about an American family. Upper speculates that Bernstein may have had difficulty completing his work because “he had so many enormous talents that one pulled away from the other and he felt that composing, maybe because it doesn’t have an immediate public demand like performance, was always taking a secondary role, and he didn’t want it to. He felt this block on his creativity, mostly

due to the interruptions of urban life in Vienna and New York. And I suppose he thought, ‘I’ll find a quiet area to work and that will be Bloomington, Indiana.’”

Observes Grammy award-winning soprano and IU professor Sylvia McNair, a student here during Bernstein’s stay, “At that point in Lenny’s career, his staff had their work cut out for them to keep him on task. One of the benefits of coming to Bloomington for a hiatus was eliminating some of the distractions.”

But Bloomington offered more than a retreat. It was also the place Bernstein felt had the finest music students in America. “He had decided that he wanted to compose at least the major part of this work in a place where he could have access to singers,” explains Charles Webb, the venerated former dean of IU’s School of Music. “The singers could take the manuscripts, learn them overnight, sing them for him the next day, and discuss what they liked, didn’t like, how it all fit together. It was a novel way of composing. Most people wouldn’t do it that way.”

When Bernstein’s General Manager Harry Kraut called Webb to ask if he might like to have the maestro in Bloomington—at no cost to IU, Webb takes care to underscore—the response was an enthusiastic “Yes!” The composer arrived with a personal chef and a librettist, Stephen Wadsworth.

## BRINGING OUT THE BEST

Bernstein spent only two months in Bloomington, but his stay had a profound and enduring impact on the school. “Just to be in his presence, just to have him walk into a room—there was a kind of electrical energy that made you sit up and be at your best, whatever you were doing at that moment,” Upper remembers. “He’d come in to town after he’d written a portion of the opera and get some of our students to sing through the things that he’d just written. The kids were sight-reading the manuscript and he was loving it. There was something about his physical presence that made him *not* formidable. The students were very relaxed with him, and he was totally relaxed with each one of them.” Bernstein so enjoyed working with the students and the students so enjoyed working with him that even treacherous road conditions could not keep him away. “At one point his car slid off the road coming into Bloomington, but none of that bothered him. He simply loved working with the students.”

On occasion, he also loved kissing them. At the opening-night cast party for Mozart’s *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, McNair remembers stepping into the room and being greeted by Bernstein with something more than a handshake. “Maestro Bernstein was sitting in a chair very near the front door,” recalls McNair, who



sang the opera’s lead role of Konstanze. “And when I walked through the door, he said, ‘OH MY GOD, you don’t even know how good you are,’ and then he put his hand behind my neck, pulled my head down, and French kissed me.” McNair, who describes herself then as a “twenty-five-year-old, easily impressed graduate student,” says, “To be kissed by Leonard Bernstein is a pretty shocking thing. I wasn’t even sure he’d show up at the party, and within thirty seconds of walking through the door he was French kissing me.”

## LARGER THAN LIFE

Generally speaking, Bloomington is a genteel town. There is no *Page Six* gossip column and the mainstream media seem loathe to pursue scandal; muckraking is an activity left to hushed, private conversations. There is good reason a Bloomingtonian will check the booth behind him/her in a restaurant before leaning in to share a bit of gossip; if six degrees are the measure of separation in some places, in B-town it is probably closer to one or two.

So it should come as no surprise that some people are reluctant to publicly share their memories of Bernstein’s time in Bloomington. Off the record, they will say he was aggravatingly tardy to meetings, quite likely a consequence of hard partying the night before. Or they’ll say they saw him polish off a bottle or two of wine by himself, which made him behave with impropriety, especially at parties where he often outlasted his welcome. Or that he made passes at young men and women alike. Some who anticipated the great Bernstein’s visit

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admitted to being disappointed, embarrassed by his antics, and disillusioned.

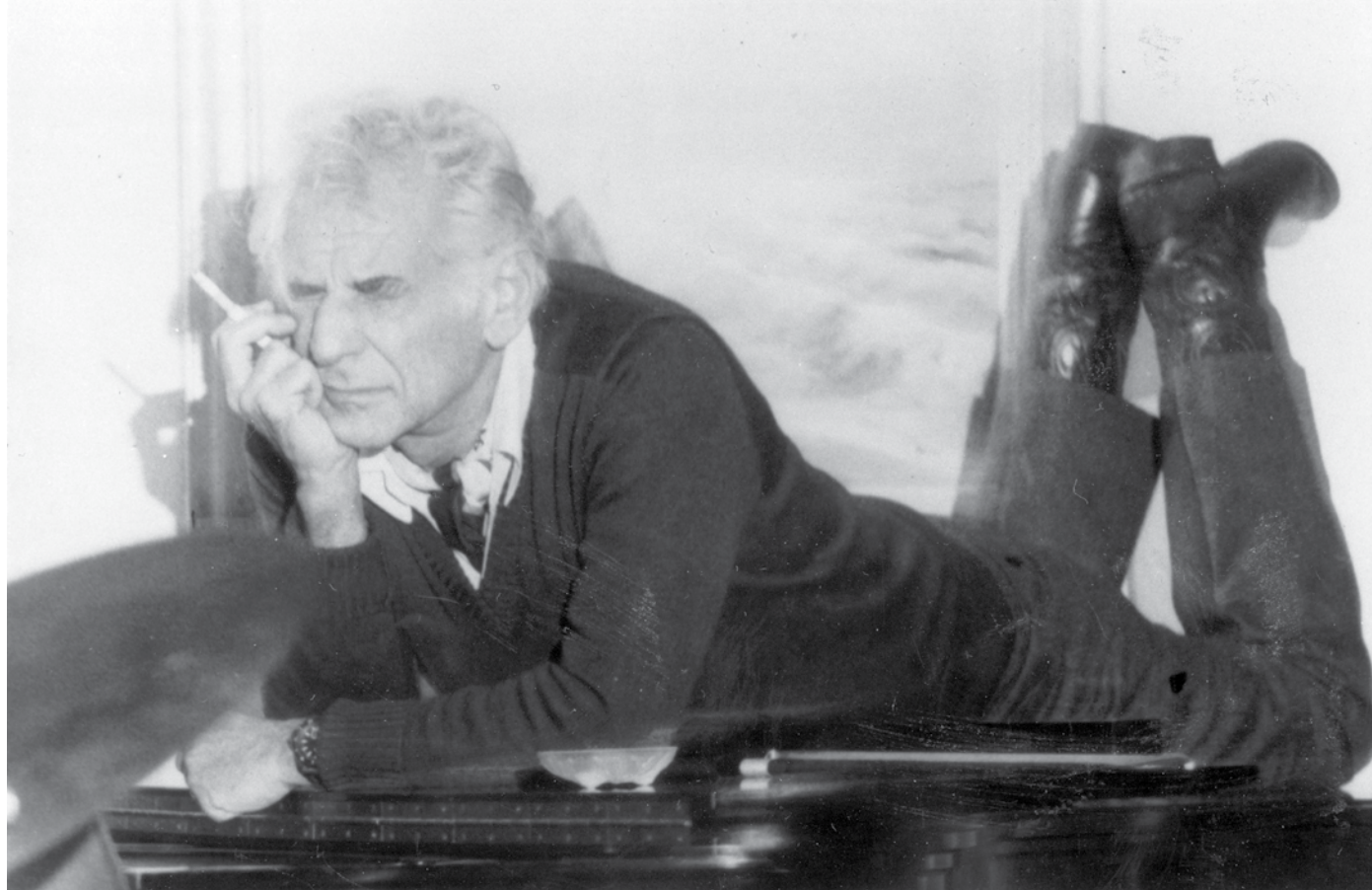
One professor, who had attended a party for Hungarian conductor Arpad Joo hosted by the great cellist and IU music professor Janos Starker, remembers Bernstein toasting his host with the line, “Do you know the recipe for a Hungarian omelet? You start by stealing three eggs.” At some point in the evening, Bernstein reportedly suggested they play a folk-music duet, which Bernstein quickly commandeered, apparently oblivious to the fact that he had overpowered his fellow musician. “Bernstein goes off rhapsodizing on the piano and there’s Janos, quietly putting his instrument away.” This professor was put off by Bernstein’s Hungarian joke, but Starker says he took no offense. “A sense of humor isn’t laughing at others’ expense, but being able to laugh at yourself.” Of that night, Starker recalls that Bernstein was charming, although a little inebriated.

Another faculty member vividly remembers attending a party at the Webb home when Bernstein launched into a racy ditty he wrote about the dean. The parody was sung to the tune of “A Bicycle Built for Two,” and its scatological lyrics—unprintable here but imagine something a seventh grader would find hilarious—have been immortalized in Joan Peyser’s catty *Bernstein: A Biography*. McNair puts Bernstein’s behavior in broader context: “He was living large, and he wasn’t living within traditional boundaries as they’d be defined in the Midwest. He didn’t play by other people’s rules. He lived by his own set of rules.”

(top left) Grammy-winning soprano and IU Professor Sylvia McNair today. Photo by Steve Raymer (right) Bernstein in the classroom at IU. Photos courtesy of Indiana University.







**‘Mr. Bernstein  
climbed up on the  
piano and lay there  
with his chin in his  
hands, eyes closed.’**

**—Malcolm Webb**

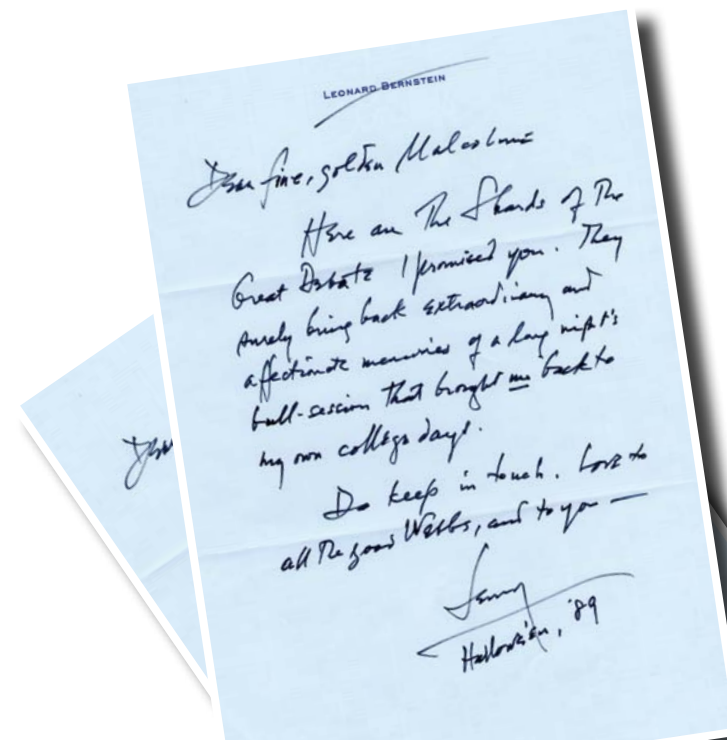
Then there was the time Bernstein listened to two of Charles Webb’s sons and their friends perform jazz in the family living room after a party. “My mother was a gracious hostess and she was accustomed to a fairly sedate crowd of music professors, but when Mr. Bernstein showed up, the liquor flowed more freely than it normally did in our Methodist home,” Malcolm Webb recalls. “Mr. Bernstein climbed up on the piano and lay there with his chin in his hands, eyes closed. And you could see his cowboy boots dangling over the back of the piano, inches away from a painting on the wall. I could see that Mom was worried he was going to put his foot through the painting. At one point he said to my brother Mark, ‘No, you asshole, you missed a beat,’ and he reached over the piano and played it

the way he thought it should have been played. And he played it the right way—upside down!” Then Mark continued to play, grinned, and intentionally missed another beat.

“Even as a fourteen-year-old, I felt that being around Mr. Bernstein was fun,” Webb says. “That was partly because of the language that was normally verboten in our home, but also because he was constantly challenging you to use your intellect.” One time, Charles, the youngest Webb boy, sat at the dinner table listening to the music of Earth, Wind & Fire on his Sony Walkman. Bernstein wanted to know what the boy was listening to. “Charlie said, ‘Oh, it’s just rock music.’ And Mr. B. said, ‘Perhaps it’s just rock music, but is it *good* rock music?’ Understand that we were raised in a household where ‘good rock music’ was a contradiction in terms. That simple question was horizon-opening. To start thinking of rock music in terms of quality was a new concept for me. It totally changed the way I looked at music.”

A conversation with Leonard Bernstein, says Malcolm Webb, “made you feel exhilarated and exhausted. He loved a good verbal sparring. I didn’t know enough about the world to keep up, but I got interested and tried to learn fast. Sometimes he was very direct in challenging your beliefs. He was a Kennedy liberal and he was very concerned about me being a Republican. He challenged you to defend your position and for the most part respected you for doing it. I use the term ‘genius’ very sparingly, having been in the presence of someone who undeniably was one.”

A party in 1989 at Bernstein’s Dakota apartment turned into an all-night “bull session” between Bernstein, Malcolm Webb, and a few of Webb’s visiting college friends, during which one of the friends took some notes. Bernstein later returned those notes, along with this letter. It reads: “Dear fine, golden Malcolm: Here are The Shards of the Great Debate I promised you. They surely bring back extraordinary and affectionate memories of a long night’s bull-session that brought me back to my own college days. Do keep in touch. Love to all the good Webbs, and to you — Lenny, Hallowe’en ’89.”



(top) Bernstein listening to jazz performed in the home of Charles and Kenda Webb, his cowboy boots “inches away from a painting.” Photo by Malcolm Webb

(bottom) Malcolm Webb in his office today, next to pictures he took of Bernstein in the study of his New York apartment in the Dakota. The son of the dean of IU’s School of Music, Charles Webb, young Malcolm loved hanging out with the “genius” Bernstein. Photo by Shannon Zahnle

There are also many fond remembrances of the maestro. Malcolm Webb, one of the dean’s four sons, was a high school freshman when Bernstein came to Bloomington, and he recalls being fascinated, awestruck, and sometimes amused by the composer, even if he wasn’t there to witness all the frolics firsthand. One evening, the maestro and his entourage were out for dinner with music-school faculty at the Public House, now Chapman’s Restaurant & Bar. “My mother told me that when the waitress came back with the wine, Mr. Bernstein did the most elaborate wine ceremony ever seen in Bloomington. He swirls the wine, sniffs it, tastes it, and says, ‘This is the first of several bottles we shall be sending back this evening.’ Then he bursts out laughing and tells her the wine will be just fine.” Later during the meal, “He takes the cork from the wine, proceeds to char it in the candle flame, lets it cool, and goes around to each guest at the table and draws moustaches and goatees on their faces. One person got a Salvador Dali. When my mother used to tell this story, she’d say that the waitress earned every penny of her tip that night.”



The immortal Webbs in the early 1980s: (l-r) Malcolm, Charles III, Mark, mother Kenda (who died in 2001), father Charles, and Kent. Courtesy photo.

## The Webbs: A Family Immortalized

As the father of three children of his own, perhaps Leonard Bernstein felt nostalgic for his family, or maybe he was simply enchanted by the delightful Webb clan: Charles, his wife Kenda, and their four sons Mark, Malcolm, Kent, and Charles.

Whatever the reason, Bernstein was inspired to compose “Mr. and Mrs. Webb Say Goodnight,” for his 1989 *Arias and Barcarolles*. The 8-minute, 32-second vignette is a playful rendering of bedtime in the Webb household and a tribute to married love.

“It’s an incredible, very clever setting of text about Charles and Kenda trying to calm down their kids before bedtime,” observes Henry Upper. “The whole work was written very late in Bernstein’s life and turned out to be one of his best-known and most-performed works. In a way, he totally immortalized the Webb family. And I believe that his idea of Indiana University and the Webbs could not be uncoupled.”



‘To have our school endorsed by Leonard Bernstein, you can’t do better than that.’  
—Charles Webb

## TAKING IU TO NEW HEIGHTS

Bernstein’s relationship with Indiana University had actually begun several years before he made his way to the secluded lake house that winter. In the summer of 1976, the composer’s manager called Dean Webb about the possibility of having IU music students perform *Trouble in Tahiti* in a multi-city tour in Israel as part of a festival marking the 30th anniversary of Bernstein’s first concert there. “He wanted it produced by people who were much closer in age to the actual characters in the opera than professional opera singers would be,” recalls Charles Webb. “They wanted us to produce it first in Bloomington so they could send a team of people to observe it and approve its going to Israel [and, if approved] we would take our singers, orchestra, sets, and costumes.” The school produced it, Bernstein’s team approved it, and in 1977 IU performed the opera in Israel.

In 1988, seven years after his two-month stay here, Bernstein presented another major opportunity to IU. When the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts planned its celebration of the conductor’s 70th birthday, organizers asked Bernstein which piece he’d like performed. He requested *MASS: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers*, originally commissioned by Jacqueline Kennedy and performed for the first time in 1971 for the opening of The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. “MASS was a huge production involving roughly 250 performers, including singers, an orchestra, a jazz band, dancers, and a children’s choir,” Webb recounts. “Tanglewood didn’t have enough people to produce it, so Bernstein said, ‘Why don’t you call Indiana University and see if they can do it?’ Once again, I got a call from Harry Kraut, who asked if we’d be interested in taking *MASS* to Tanglewood. The Boston Symphony would be paying all the costs. So we did it.”



Bernstein in his Connecticut studio in the 1980s. Last year his family donated the contents of this room to IU’s Jacobs School of Music, so that the “two places in which he was happiest working” could be brought together. Photo by Joe McNally

The moment of triumph for the Bloomington entourage came immediately following the show. “We have video footage of Leonard Bernstein standing onstage, saying that this was the most wonderful performance he had ever seen,” says Webb. “It’s quite something to receive that accolade from the person generally acknowledged as the most important musician of the twentieth century.”

Recalls Henry Upper, “It was probably the most astounding thing that ever happened in our association with him. After the performance, which immediately caused a burst of applause and standing ovation, Bernstein came to the stage, quieted the audience, and said, ‘I’ve never heard a better performance of this piece, and it’s likely I just never heard a better performance.’ When Bernstein says something like that onstage, speaking to over twelve thousand people...can you imagine?”

The following year brought yet another opportunity for IU with the grand reopening of France’s Bastille Opera in 1989, coinciding with the 200th anniversary of Bastille Day. Explains Charles Webb, “France was in crisis because the general manager of the opera had been let go, half the singers had left, and the opera house wasn’t ready. There was no rigging.” The story goes that French President Francois Mitterrand called Bernstein, asking for help. “And Bernstein had a novel idea, which he always did. He said, ‘Forget the professionals for the moment—they’ll be back when the house is ready. Since you can’t do opera, why don’t you open the house with an emphasis on

the five best student orchestras in the world.’ IU was included among the five, and that was *only* because Bernstein made the recommendation. Very few of our students had been to Paris. Some of them hadn’t been out of Indiana. It was quite a big thing.”

The following year, Bernstein announced his retirement due to health problems; the heavy cigarette smoking had exacted its toll. Bernstein suffered from pulmonary infections, emphysema, and a pleural tumor. Five days after his announcement, the maestro died.

But the connection to Indiana University continued. In 1999, Bernstein’s professional management company called IU about mounting a two-week festival with *MASS* as its centerpiece. The festival included performances from the smallest Bernstein works to his chamber music, along with films, panel discussions, and a presentation of honorary doctorates to librettists Betty Comden and Adolph Green.

And as recently as March 2009, the Bernstein family donated the contents of his composing studio in Connecticut to the Jacobs School of Music, including a stool believed to have been used by Johannes Brahms. “A composer’s studio is very precious to him, and this studio is Leonard Bernstein from beginning to end,” observes Upper. “His Connecticut room was his place to write. It’s filled with his memorabilia and it’s the one he really adored. That we can have that office in perpetuity is a kind of symbolic seal of our particular relationship with him.” In a statement announcing the donation, Bernstein’s son Alexander remarked,

‘He was living large, and he wasn’t living within traditional boundaries as they’d be defined in the Midwest.’  
—Sylvia McNair

“On one of his first trips to Bloomington, he said, ‘I have to report that I’ve fallen in love with the school.’ My sisters, Jamie and Nina, join me in celebrating the continuation of this relationship by literally bringing together two places in which he was happiest working. We cannot imagine a more fitting home for this exciting new presentation of Leonard Bernstein’s working life.” Plans are underway to showcase the office in the music school’s new building, scheduled for groundbreaking next spring.

“Harry Kraut said that coming to IU [for those two months in 1981] saved Leonard Bernstein’s life, that his creative block was so intense it was literally killing him,” says Malcolm Webb.

If Bernstein was happiest working at IU, it is also safe to say that IU was ecstatic to have him in Bloomington. Notes Upper, “In a very big way, more than any other single entity, Leonard Bernstein and his organization were probably responsible for many of our national and international connections. These connections brought the School of Music to new heights. And he brought out the best in our school.”

Says Charles Webb, “To have our school endorsed by Leonard Bernstein, you can’t do better than that. It was an association we didn’t ask for, or push for, but one he gave to us freely.”

As for the fact that Bernstein seems to have offended almost as often as he charmed during his stay in Bloomington, McNair explains it this way: “He was a brilliant man. And genius just doesn’t come in uncomplicated packages.” ✨



The maestro in action. Photo by Paul de Heuck, courtesy of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.



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