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 Coté, 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 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, courteous, generous, sometimes reckless, and abundantly talented man who left an indelible imprint on the IU School of Music.
The GREAT ONE ARRIVES

The driver pulled up to the house on Lake Monroe where Henry Upper wanted eagerly to welcome the legend. Upper, then associate dean of the music school, would never forget the moment when the truck pulled open and he caught a glimpse of its contents. “I almost jumped back and gaped,” 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 the New York Philharmonic’s Bruno Walter conductor literally overnight after substituting for the New York Philharmonic’s Bruno Walter conductor literally overnight after substituting for the New York Philharmonic’s Bruno Walter conductor literally overnight after substituting for the New York Philharmonic’s Bruno Walter. The singers could take the manuscripts, learn them overnight, sing them. Kant called Webb to ask if he might like to do it that way.”

The paraphrase was sung to the tune of “A Hungarian omelet? You start by stealing the line, “Do you know the recipe for a Hungarian omelet?” Bernstein reportedly suggested they play a folk-music duet, which Bernstein quickly composed, apparently oblivious to the fact that he had overpowered his fellow musician. “Bernstein goes off the Deep End to play the piano and that’s when people are reluctant to publicly say they saw him polish off a bottle or say he was aggravatingly tardy to meetings, quite likely a consequence of hard partying the night before. Or they’ll say he was unpropitious, especially at parties where he often confounded his welcome. Or that he made passes at people who were of his generation or younger. Bernstein was charming, although a little inebriated. Another faculty member vividly remembers attending a party at the Webb home when Bernstein launched into a raucous dirge he wrote about the dawn. 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 Bernstein’s Hungarian joke, but Starker says he took it offensively. “A Budapest-born, violinist, he had so many enormously talented ones that one pulled away from the others, so that if he felt his work was inadequate, was always taking a secondary role, and he didn’t want it to. He felt this block on his creativity, mostly taking a secondary role, and he didn’t want it to be 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 quiet town. There is no Page Six gossip column and the mainstream media seems loathe to pursue scandal. “Just to be in his presence, just to have him walk into a room—a room with 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’ll 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 mad 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 attending a party at the Webb home when Bernstein launched into a raucous dirge he wrote about the dawn. 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 Bernstein’s Hungarian joke, but Starker says he took it offensively. “A Budapest-born, violinist, he had so many enormously talented ones that one pulled away from the others, so that if he felt his work was inadequate, was always taking a secondary role, and he didn’t want it to be 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.”

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—a room with 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’ll 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 mad 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.”

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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, astounded, and sometimes amused by the composer, even if he wasn’t there to witness all the antics 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 waiters 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.’” Later during the meal, 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. “He took the cork from the wine, proceeds to see his cowboy boots dangling over the back of the piano, inches away from a painting on the wall. I could tell 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 as challenging your beliefs. He was a Kennedy liberal and he was very concerned about me being a Republican. He challenged you to defend your positions and for the most part respected you for doing it. I see his genius ‘very sparsely, having been in the presence of someone who undeservedly was one.’”

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 Anas & Barracots. The 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 Uppal. “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 unexpired.”

A party in 1960 at Bernstein’s Dakota apartment turned into an all-night “bull session” between Barenreiter, Malcolm Webb, and a few of Indiana’s visiting college friends, during which one of the guests took some notes. Bernstein later reread these notes, along with this letter. It reads: “Dear Miss, golden Malcolm—I was The Shards of the Great Debate I promised you. They vastly bring back extraordinary and affective memories of a song until your ballad that was sung me back to my own college days. Can’t keep it to myself. Love it all the great Webbs, and to you —— Larry, Indianapolis.”
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 1970, 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 70th anniversary of Bernstein's first concert there.

"He wanted it performed 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."

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 two thousand people...can you imagine?"

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 Broadway stars 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 steel 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 admired. That's an area that we do, as property is a kind of symbolic seal of our particular relationship with him."

In a statement announcing the donation, Bernstein's son Alexander remarked, "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: "Plants 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 work was so intense it was literally killing him," says Malcolm Webb. "If Bernstein was happy working at IU, it's 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 we're quite happy.

As for the fact that Bernstein seemed 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."

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"To have our school endorsed by Leonard Bernstein, you can’t do better than that."

—Charles Webb

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

—Sylvia McNair

TAKING IU TO NEW HEIGHTS

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
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