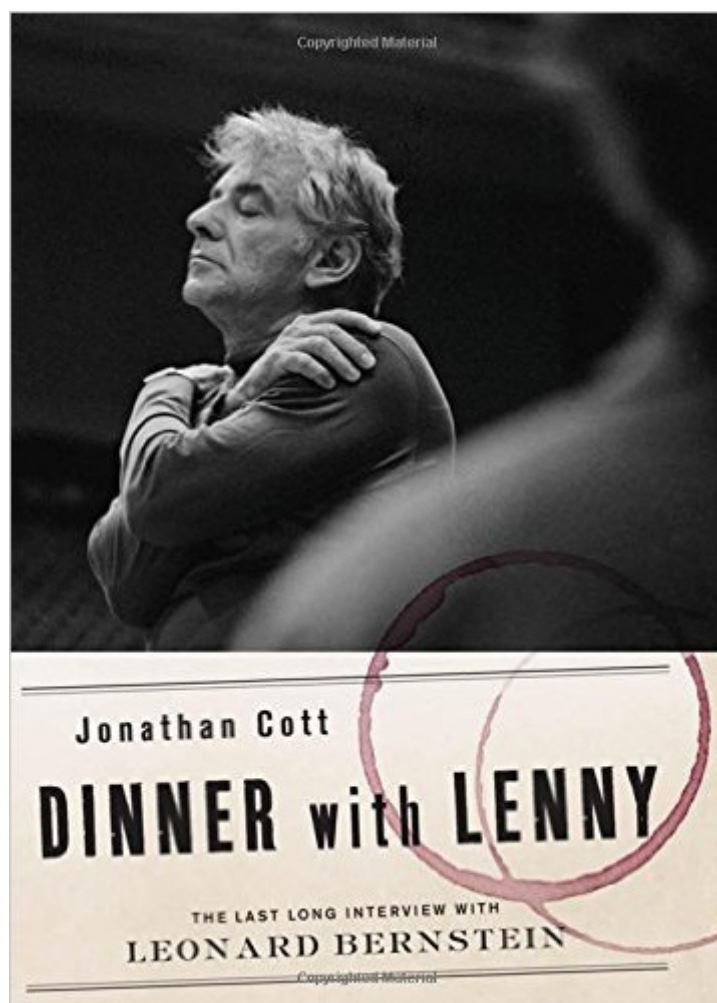


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Dinner With Lenny: The Last Long Interview With Leonard Bernstein



Synopsis

Leonard Bernstein was arguably the most highly esteemed, influential, and charismatic American classical music personality of the twentieth century. Conductor, composer, pianist, writer, educator, and human rights activist, Bernstein truly led a life of Byronic intensity--passionate, risk-taking, and convention-breaking. In November 1989, just a year before his death, Bernstein invited writer Jonathan Cott to his country home in Fairfield, Connecticut for what turned out to be his last major interview--an unprecedented and astonishingly frank twelve-hour conversation. Now, in *Dinner with Lenny*, Cott provides a complete account of this remarkable dialogue in which Bernstein discourses with disarming frankness, humor, and intensity on matters musical, pedagogical, political, psychological, spiritual, and the unabashedly personal. Bernstein comes alive again, with vodka glass in hand, singing, humming, and making pointed comments on a wide array of topics, from popular music ("the Beatles were the best songwriters since Gershwin"), to great composers ("Wagner was always in a psychotic frenzy. He was a madman, a megalomaniac"), and politics (lamenting "the brainlessness, the mindlessness, the carelessness, and the heedlessness of the Reagans of the world"). And of course, Bernstein talks of conducting, advising students "to look at the score and make it come alive as if they were the composer. If you can do that, you're a conductor and if you can't, you're not. If I don't become Brahms or Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky when I'm conducting their works, then it won't be a great performance." After *Rolling Stone* magazine published an abridged version of the conversation in 1990, the *Chicago Tribune* praised it as "an extraordinary interview" filled with "passion, wit, and acute analysis." Studs Terkel called the interview "astonishing and revelatory." Now, this full-length version provides the reader with a unique, you-are-there perspective on what it was like to converse with this gregarious, witty, candid, and inspiring American dynamo.

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Customer Reviews

In this Leonard Bernstein's last interview, he tells Jonathan Cott that there are some things he is not going to talk about: he does not have favorite orchestras, favorite composers, favorite symphonies, favorite kinds of food, favorite forms of sex. The rest of the world is fair game. Then in an interview that goes for several hours, he proceeds to talk about everything: his views on music-- composers, his recordings, performers-- the list is endless-- are just a small part of his domain. Politics, presidents, religion, you name it. This interview should be required reading for lovers of music as well as anyone who takes pleasure in seeing the mind of a genius at work. Here are some of my favorite of his comments/opinions. Richard Nixon was the greatest crook of all time. During the Reagan years, "we had eight lovely, passive, on-our-backs, status quo, don't make-waves years." The most exciting thing that has happened in Bernstein's lifetime is the fall of the Berlin Wall. "Unless you have an enemy, there's no way to live. We must have a war economy or we have no economy." "We must have active rather than passive listeners of music. Bernstein tells of the composer Virgil Thomson falling asleep and snoring audibly during a performance and then writing a review of-- what he didn't hear I suppose-- the next day. Finally in what has to be the most moving section of the interview Mr. Bernstein gives his views on life after death, saying that the "you-ness goes on. I will swear that Felicia [his deceased wife] is with me a lot. . . though not in her shape. I am frequently visited by a white moth or a white butterfly. . . And I know it's Felicia. I remember that when she died, her coffin was in our living room in East Hampton. . . and just a few of us were there. . . Everyone was absolutely silent. And then this white butterfly flew in from God knows where--it just appeared from under the coffin and flew around, alighting on everybody in the room--on each of the children, on the rabbi, on the priest, on her brother-in-law and two of her sisters, on me. . . and then it was gone. . . through there was nothing open." It is worth reading this interview for the above paragraph alone.

There are few who would dispute that Leonard Bernstein was one of the twentieth century's greatest composers and conductors. There are even fewer who would dispute his influence on modern classical music. Perhaps this gave him the right to a touch of the narcissistic persuasion, and certainly it is present here, in a delightful way. Jonathan Cott leaps at the opportunity to interview

this great icon. The interviewer fawns over his idol, and Bernstein does not disappoint. In this interview, he is everything from the free-love guru to the well-versed poet to the Zen master, and we are treated to his reflections over past performances as often as we are treated to his musings over philosophy and politics. A great part of the interview is devoted to Mahler (of course), and this is fitting since Bernstein was enamored of Mahler, even being buried with a copy of Mahler's 5th Symphony on his breast. Here Bernstein offers food for thought for even the most unschooled of listeners, and even as one who is no expert in Mahler, I found his reflections and interpretations compelling. (There is a compelling performance of Mahler's Fifth on Youtube, conducted by Leonard Bernstein.) Bernstein was nothing if not opinionated, and as a teacher, I especially found his educational philosophy appealing. Bernstein was interested in the democratization of classical music, making it accessible to all, and seemed to hold a special interest in educating the underprivileged. I have no doubt that, were Bernstein alive today, he would smile at the notion of inner-city youth invited to fill the empty seats of the Minnesota Orchestra Hall (conducted by Osmo Vänskä, renowned for his interpretations of Beethoven), or poor Midwesterners invited to experience a superb performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra (my own introduction to the world of classical music.) This book is but a brief taste of the richness of a great composer, but its brevity lends to its digestibility. Cott interviews Bernstein for twelve hours, and when he requests one more question at two-thirty in the morning, Bernstein responds with, "You're sure it's just one more?" Bernstein senses the end of the interview just as the reader senses the end of the book. Like a Christmas pudding, the book is best as a small portion. Thankfully, Cott realizes this, and the end result is a readable, enriching interview with one whose name will be remembered as a great conductor and composer. Long live the memory of Leonard Bernstein.

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