

## CHAPTER ONE

# Young American

## *Bernstein at Harvard*

In 1982, at the age of sixty-four, Leonard Bernstein included in his collection of his writings, *Findings*, some essays from his younger days that prefigured significant elements of his later adult life and career. The first, “Father’s Books,” written in 1935 when he was seventeen, is about his father and the Talmud. Throughout his life, Bernstein was ever mindful that he was a Jew; he composed music on Jewish themes and in later years referred to himself as a “rabbi,” a teacher with a penchant to pass on scholarly learning, wisdom, and lore to orchestral musicians.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Bernstein came to adopt an Old Testament prophetic voice for much of his music, including his first symphony, *Jeremiah*, and his third, *Kaddish*. The second essay, “The Occult,” an assignment for a freshman composition class at Harvard that he wrote in 1938 when he was twenty years old, was about meeting Dimitri Mitropoulos, who inspired him to take up conducting. The third, his senior thesis of April 1939, was a virtual manifesto calling for an organic, vernacular, rhythmically based, distinctly American music, a music that he later championed from the podium and realized in his compositions for the Broadway stage and operatic and concert halls.<sup>2</sup>

### EARLY YEARS: PROPHETIC VOICE

Bernstein as an Old Testament prophet? Bernstein's father, Sam, was born in 1892 in an ultraorthodox Jewish shtetl in Russia. His hopes for a rabbinic career dashed when he was called up for compulsory service in the brutal czarist military, Sam fled to America in 1908, took a job eviscerating fish in New York's Fulton Fish Market, and after a number of years, wound up a highly successful beauty-supply businessman in Lawrence, Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup> Apparently Sam, denied a rabbinical vocation, was nevertheless a rabbi by avocation. His wife, Jenny (née Resnick), born in 1898 in Russia, arrived in America in 1905, and in 1912, at age fourteen, went to work in the Lawrence woolen mills.<sup>4</sup> Sam and Jenny married and set up a conservative Jewish home. Sam, by day a businessman, was at night, according to his son Burton, an "Old Testament figure," who presided over family life with a "commanding, omniscient presence."<sup>5</sup> He was a prophet at the dinner table, around which sat Louis, later renamed Leonard, born on August 25, 1918; Shirley, born in 1923; and Burton, born in 1932. Sam held forth on subjects running from Talmudic meditations and the history of the Jewish people from biblical times to their plight under Nazi power in Europe.<sup>6</sup> In Jewish homes in those days, the talk ran also to the condition of American Jewry and devotion to President Roosevelt, whom many Jews saw as a bulwark against foreign and domestic fascists such as Father Coughlin, whose broadcasts reached across the nation, and other anti-Semites.<sup>7</sup>

Sam's hopes that his firstborn would realize his own thwarted rabbinic plans were dashed when Sam's sister, Clara, gave the family a piano and thereby set Leonard's musical destiny in motion. Leonard not only became inseparable from the piano, but also showed precocity in and joy for musical performance from the start. Apparently Jenny encouraged Leonard's piano work, but not Sam, to whom Leonard's incessant piano playing sounded like percussive poundings and caused the paterfamilias to bellow in rage. The teenage Leonard apparently took his father's anger in stride. Leonard soon turned his musicality to advantage, recruiting

Shirley and other youngsters to take on roles in various musical theatricals that he directed from the piano and that his troupe performed before adult audiences at the lakeside resort where their families took their summer vacations.

Leonard cajoled Sam into paying for piano lessons, and he progressed rapidly from beginner to accomplished musician under the direction of a number of teachers, among them Helen Coates, who served as Bernstein's secretary from the 1940s into the 1970s. Bernstein attended concerts, became increasingly preoccupied with music, and upon graduation from the prestigious Boston Latin School in 1935, was accepted by Harvard as a music major. Sam had hoped that if Leonard were not to become a rabbi, he would at least take his place in the Bernstein business. But music? Music making was a craft held in low esteem by Eastern European Orthodox Jews whose religious tradition had no Bachs, no Telemanns, and indeed no instrumental music. The cantor sings a capella, and save for the blowing of the shofar, or ram's horn, on the high holy day of Yom Kippur, music has no place in the Orthodox synagogue.<sup>8</sup> Whatever place existed for instrumental music in Yiddish culture was for the lowly art of klezmer music, performed at weddings and bar mitzvahs by artists who were expected to eat their meals with the kitchen staff and then depart via the back door. Thus, to Sam, Leonard's choice of career seemed a step backward from the family's climb from its poor immigrant status—a blot on the family escutcheon. Leonard nevertheless got his way, and in September 1935, he entered Harvard Yard and moved from shtetl to cosmopolis.

#### BERNSTEIN AT HARVARD: MITROPOULOS

As Bernstein began his fall 1935 freshman semester, news from afar was sobering: Hitler's violation of the Versailles Treaty by rearming Germany was met by barely a whimper from France. Mussolini's fascism had gained the Catholic Church's imprimatur, and fascism also reigned in Austria, Portugal, and Rumania. In America, homegrown fascists, and for that

matter, many in the Republican Party, were ready to back General Douglas MacArthur for president.<sup>9</sup>

But if the young music major worried about this grave news, he also found excitement in college. Harvard seemed alive with a new music full of rhythmic volatility, a wide pallet of instrumental color, and a devil-may-care chromaticism that tended toward dissonance and even atonalism. In all these features, this music declared a radical break with nineteenth-century classical and romantic music. Moreover, heady debates arose within the two great camps of the new music: the French-Russian neo-classicists and the German atonalists. The former, of which Eric Satie, Maurice Ravel, and Igor Stravinsky were exemplars, promoted economy, simplicity, clarity, and a sense of irony and the burlesque; the latter, led by Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern, found in atonality and serialism a way around what they considered the rigidities of tonalism and saw these as the optimal way to give expression to social and political chaos and psychological breakdown. Nevertheless, whatever the battles between these contending groups, all the champions of the new music agreed that the traditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music had little to say about the twentieth-century machine-age metropolis and its cacophonic and kaleidoscopic effects upon the senses. Not that the new guard intended to dishonor older masters. Unlike avant-garde Italian futurist and Russian cubo-futurist poets who disdained the past, these new composers venerated their predecessors. However, they wanted a new music that would express present-day realities. And, especially exciting to these young American musicians was the increasing exploitation of jazz forms by Stravinsky, Ernst Krenek, Kurt Weill, and Darius Milhaud to represent contemporary emotional states—for example, a boulevardier's saunter; a primitive Dionysian savagery; a slatternly, sullen eroticism and seductive sensuality; a shiver of nightmarish terror; a sensation of dark brooding or leering irony, sarcasm, and cynicism; or a whirl of drunken intoxication, dizziness, or delirium. These states were far removed from the sense of security, affirmation, and triumph transmitted to concert-hall listeners by the centered tonality and

solid consonances and cadences of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century classical and romantic repertoires.

The new music had important venues at Harvard and in Boston. The American modernist Walter Piston sat on the Harvard music faculty, and across town, the Russian émigré Serge Koussevitzky regularly conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra in performances of French, Russian, and American modernist works. Although Bernstein would meet Koussevitzky in 1940, with enormous consequences for the young man's career, his first fateful meeting with a great musical mentor was with another champion of modernism, the conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos. In January 1937, Bernstein went to a Mitropoulos concert in Boston and was bewitched by the maestro's expressive conducting style. Through a stroke of luck, Bernstein was asked by a Harvard Greek society to play the piano at an affair honoring Mitropoulos, and he was able to wangle a private meeting with the conductor, at which he apparently impressed the older man. In February 1938, a year later, Bernstein memorialized this encounter with the fictionalized account of their meeting, "The Occult." The essay reaches an apogee of gastronomic-erotic sensuality as the maestro places an oyster from the end of his own fork into the mouth of his swooning young protégé. Meeting the young man in the aftermath of thunderous applause from a concert audience, the maestro exhorts his student to fulfill his destiny, his "mission"—to compose.<sup>10</sup> But something else happened to Bernstein when he watched what Mitropoulos's biographer calls the "choreographic ecstasies," "sheer physicality" and "sexual encounter with conductor and orchestra" of a Mitropoulos performance.<sup>11</sup> Bernstein discovered his other destiny—to conduct.

#### DAVID PRALL

From 1935 to 1939, his Harvard years, Bernstein's principal mentor was the aesthetics professor David Prall. Bernstein met Prall in 1936 and was initiated into Prall's circle of graduate students, which included the composer Arthur Berger, the painter Robert Motherwell, and the poet and essayist

Delmore Schwartz. Prall had an enormous influence upon these men, creative artists who felt alienated from Harvard's analytically oriented academic community. Academic life in those years was heavily biased toward the positivistic—toward facts verifiable by the canons of scientific method and toward criticism that revealed causes and analyzed structures. Even professors of aesthetics embraced positivism, dwelling not on the beautiful but on the *concept* of the beautiful and treating works with clinical detachment while devaluing the *experience* of the work. That young artists were left feeling insecure, frustrated, and inhibited is not surprising.

The quality that attracted them to Prall was his attack upon the officially ordained positivistic standards of beauty and study and his contrasting validation of experience and feeling. The field of aesthetics, he argued, was not a rarefied cerebral sanctum reserved for the specialist. Rather, people experience natural objects and humanly constructed works, including works of art, as "aesthetic surfaces." One's grasp of the significance of a work of art is enhanced to the degree that one works at understanding its sensuous qualities (a painting's hues, masses, shapes and forms; a musical work's melodies, motives, rhythms, and mix of timbres) and its spatial-temporal ones (in painting, the spatial relationship between hues on a canvas; in music, pitch relations as ordered by major or minor scales and chromatic patterns). For Prall, knowledge and feeling were not mutually exclusive. Instead, the listener or auditor gleans a kind of knowledge as he or she intuits and senses the "aesthetic surface" of a work of art.<sup>12</sup> Prall thus insisted that form, alone valued by the academic community, and feeling, so long devalued, both have value; they are two ways in which the work comes into being and is experienced. In putting forth this view, Prall essentially dignified feeling and legitimized innovation.

Prall also argued for studying an artwork in context. Years after his time at Harvard, Bernstein acknowledged Prall's additional demand that students study a work from a variety of disciplinary and philosophic viewpoints.<sup>13</sup> He may have also taken to heart Prall's seeming insistence, at least as stated in his 1936 *Aesthetic Analysis*, that tonal music is natural.<sup>14</sup> Prall also advanced the view that the artist has a social vocation

to produce artworks that enliven viewers and auditors with the spirit of their age; thus, the artwork joins creator and audience into a social and politically significant community.<sup>15</sup> Bernstein came to champion this view; indeed, it became a foundation of his outlook, finding expression in his composition, his repertoire, his aesthetic and social philosophy, and his political commitments.

### COPLAND AND AMERICAN MODERNISM

One day in 1936, Arthur Berger thought to introduce his bright young colleague to Aaron Copland's 1930 *Piano Variations*. A work of severe austerity, often jarring and discordant, with a somber if not brooding mood, and miles from the lyricism of a Liszt or a Brahms, the *Variations* had become the anthem of the young American modernists.<sup>16</sup> Bernstein was bowled over by the piece and immediately told Prall about it. Prall, who must have sensed from Leonard's euphoric response that the *Piano Variations* was indicative of the new spirit sweeping American music, insisted upon purchasing the sheet music for Bernstein and studying it with him. Bernstein quickly mastered the Copland piece and committed it to memory.

Then one evening in November 1937, Bernstein went to a concert in New York and found himself seated next to Copland, at which point the ever-gregarious Leonard struck up a conversation. Copland was taken by the young man's verve and invited Bernstein to a party at his studio. There, Bernstein bragged to the skeptical Copland and assembled guests, including Virgil Thomson and Paul Bowles, that he knew the *Piano Variations* by heart. Dared by Copland to play the piece, he did so, thereby announcing his arrival on the New York modernist musical scene.

Thus, at nineteen, a sophomore undergraduate, Bernstein was still at home within Sam's old Jewish world but otherwise in Prall's circle at Harvard and in Copland's circles of central figures in the New York art worlds.<sup>17</sup> Moving in Copland's circles not only took Bernstein from Boston to New York but also plunged him directly into the heady brew of modern art. Already, Copland was having an extraordinary influence upon the

new American music. Every young American musician knew Copland as a leader and organizer of American composers.

Copland, born in Brooklyn in 1900, was advocated a form of American music that fit within a larger endeavor to create a distinctly modernist American culture. The movement was already under way in the first decade of the century when the photographer Alfred Stieglitz exhibited works of Cézanne, Brancusi, and other French modernist painters and sculptors in his New York City gallery, and it received a huge forward jolt from the 1913 Armory Show. In 1915, the critic Van Wyck Brooks argued in *America's Coming of Age* that the time was ripe for Americans to create their own literature, to cast aside the Puritan legacy that had forced the individual to choose between mutually antagonistic cultures—"high-brow" versus "lowbrow," "theoretical" versus "practical."<sup>18</sup> For Brooks, this cultural bifurcation had alienated the inward-thinking individual from the public culture—which was dominated by the values of the businessman, scientist, and engineer—and the latter, in turn, suffered from philistinism because of the devaluation of elevated and heightened expressions of the inner life. No middle ground existed to link the individual to the living, palpitating "organic" life of his or her fellow citizens. Thus, the new moderns needed and wanted a new, unified, "organic" culture, forged from American roots and intent upon forming an American identity. Inspired by such exemplars as Walt Whitman, every "Young American"—member of a reformist upsurge in the mid-nineteenth century—could find his or her authentic voice and place within this new, vibrant American culture.

Whitman had pointed the way to inclusiveness through his vernacular poetics. He celebrated the exuberant individual and the collective to which the individual belonged, a pluralistic, democratic multitude making up a life-affirming, erotically charged democracy. A new, modern "Young America" could now search for what Brooks in 1918 called a "usable past"—experiences and modes of expression long forgotten or submerged under official discourse—to create this new national culture.<sup>19</sup>

In no way did this call seek to create an American provincialism. Over the next decades, the members of these modernist circles—including critics



Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank and Paul Rosenfeld, Eugene O'Neill, and Harold Clurman—understood this new cultural upsurge to be an exploration of American themes within the various international modernist artistic idioms. Many exciting new works, such as O'Neill's *Hairy Ape* (1922), Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), and Virgil Thomson's and Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927), used modernist techniques to give expression to powerfully vivid and moving aspects of contemporary life, not least to the alienating and tragic aspects neglected by the business optimism (epitomized in Sinclair Lewis's 1922 ironic novel, *Babbitt*) that dominated American public discourse.

Copland had early on enlisted in this modernist movement. He had gone to Paris in the early 1920s to study with the famed teacher Nadia Boulanger and had returned to compose music integrating the French and Russian modernist and American jazz idioms—best exemplified in his Piano Concerto of 1926. In quick order, members of the Brooks circle saw that they had in Copland an exemplary young American artist. In 1929, Rosenfeld saw in Copland a musician for the new age, for composing music which moved its listener to feel as one with “the stream of metallic, modern American things.”<sup>20</sup>

In the mid-1930s, advocates of the new American modernism began joining the Popular Front: the compact of liberals, progressives, socialists, and communists to oppose fascism.<sup>21</sup> By November 1936, Bernstein's second year at Harvard, the American Popular Front was gaining momentum as millions of workers entered the new industrial unions that were forming with the encouragement of the Roosevelt administration. This new climate had first appeared in 1933, when first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt and her associates began to document the hardships faced by countless Americans, many of whom had been living lives of quiet desperation for years if not decades before the Crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression. This work indicated that the Roosevelts meant to take action. Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes, one of Bernstein's heroes,<sup>22</sup> set in motion the Public Works Administration, and Roosevelt's associate Harry Hopkins established the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Works

Progress Administration, programs that aimed not only to reemploy millions but also to modernize American cities and suburbs. Thomas Hart Benton, commissioned by institutional and corporate sponsors and, by 1934, by the Federal Arts Project, painted murals on the interior walls of public buildings depicting the productivist outlook of labor as noble and dignified. Inspired by the new art, a new politics emerged whose constituents included workers and others principally urban and ethnic. Many of these participants were new voters who were newly naturalized or first-generation Americans, and great numbers of them took to picket lines, becoming politically conscious members of a mass movement and swelling the ranks of the Democratic Party.<sup>23</sup> They in turn inspired progressives such as John Dewey to push the New Deal administration into wholesale restructuring of the relationship between democratic government and the economy, calling for government to take a greater role in regulating the otherwise-unaccountable power of American industry and finance that had resulted in the Great Depression.<sup>24</sup>

The modernist impulse was transforming knowledge and expression across the cultural landscape. Social scientists and investigators within and outside government were collecting data to understand the structure of American life. Others were discovering and seeking to resurrect heretofore-neglected elements of the American cultural past to inject vitality into new culture. For example, Harvard historian Perry Miller was discovering the moral powers and lyricism within seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American Puritan culture. Others were discovering and recording the music of common folk. Martha Graham choreographed a socially critical modern dance that departed from conventional ballet not only in form but also in content, taking up cases of contemporary victimization of the weak by the strong.<sup>25</sup> John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930–36) used new forms of layout and typography, incorporated literary forms from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and used the montage effects developed in film to create a panoramic epic of America that saw crass commercial values insinuating themselves into every political and social corner of American life. The progressive sensibility was apparent in Maxwell Anderson's 1934 Broadway

smash-hit play *Winterset*, a verse tragedy dealing with the fictional son of Sacco or Vanzetti. A year later, the Group Theater's production of Clifford Odets's virtual union-organizing manifesto, *Waiting for Lefty*, played to full houses month after month.

Many people in these Broadway audiences were members of the new unions and of new left-wing organizations, such as the International Workers' Order, the Associated Workers Club, the American League against War and Fascism, and the American Music League. Were they interested in the new serious music? Certainly the composer Marc Blitzstein thought so in the spring of 1936, as Roosevelt geared up for the election in November. "A public is storming the gates," he wrote in *Modern Music*, "a great mass of people" about to "enter at last the field of serious music."<sup>26</sup> John Houseman wrote, "Fifty percent of our public came from organized theatre parties, mostly of the Left—prejudiced and semi-educated but young and generous and eager to participate in the excitement which the stage alone seemed to offer to him in those uncertain times. These were the audiences whose members had 'sat in' with the WPA workers earlier in the month."<sup>27</sup> The famous call "Strike!" at the end of Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* sought to inspire audience members to take action at their workplaces.

Copland himself had been moving in a radical-political direction. He argued that even *Piano Variations*, its apparent austerity and high modernist abstraction notwithstanding, sought to express the "tragic reality" not only "at the core of our existence" but also "of our own age and time."<sup>28</sup> His 1935 "Militant" (the first piece in his *Statements*) was a left-wing call to arms. In 1937, he contributed a May Day song to the far-left magazine *New Masses*. By 1938, in an attempt to compose music more accessible to the masses as well as to support the Popular Front, Copland moved into a popular-elegiac phase of his work, beginning with *Billy the Kid*, commissioned by Agnes de Mille, the first work of a line of nostalgia-filled prairie or, as he said, "cowboy," music.<sup>29</sup> (In fact, Copland's turn toward a popular-elegiac body of work had its origins in his 1936 *El Salón Mexico*. During a trip to Mexico, Copland had met the composer Carlos Chávez, who sought to integrate local folk themes into a modernist idiom.) Copland was hardly alone in this

struggle to create a specifically American idiom. Edward Burlingame Hill, one of Bernstein's Harvard professors and a composer of jazz and concert-hall works, "encouraged his students to investigate the indigenous music of this country—folk music, gospel—as possible sources material for truly American concert works."<sup>30</sup> Marc Blitzstein, Charles Ives, and Carl Ruggles were also giving voice to the turmoil and torments in daily American life. Roy Harris had been composing music expressive of the open prairie as well as of "urban *Weltschmerz*," as Copland characterized it.<sup>31</sup> Roger Sessions, despite his universalism, was explicitly calling for a new American opera that would reflect the present "period. . . so sharply defined by clear historical and social forces" and with "dramatic motives . . . sufficiently real and sufficiently important to both composer and public."<sup>32</sup>

In sum, by the late 1930s, the earlier appeal for a national art had metamorphosed into a call to American artists to forge a new, robust, politically expressive culture. Bernstein heeded that call, his career bent upon championing this new, civically responsible modernist American music.

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This chapter in Leonard Bernstein's apprenticeship took place as much in New York under Copland's tutelage and influence as at Harvard under that of Prall. In the fall of 1938, the first semester of his senior year, Bernstein was still working with Prall but was essentially commuting between Cambridge and New York. In the latter locale, he was a regular member of Copland's circles, socializing with Copland, Thomson, and Bowles, as well as attending get-togethers and parties of the Group Theater, where the talk ran from left-wing aesthetics and ensemble work to left-wing politics.<sup>33</sup> Then some six years old, the theater had been organized by Copland's close friend Harold Clurman and included Stella Adler, Elia Kazan, Clifford Odets, John Garfield, Morris Carnovsky, and others more or less committed to the organization's left-wing utopianism.<sup>34</sup> This effort, according to Waldo Frank in 1932 at the Group Theater's formation, aimed at "creating a new world,. . . [a] new humanity in the moral and spiritual and well as the economic sense."<sup>35</sup> Basic to the Group's aesthetic outlook

was Soviet director Konstantine Stanislavski's demand that the actors stop merely emoting and instead incorporate into their inner lives the violations and exploitations endured by their characters. The members of the Group assumed an intimate connection between art and left-wing Popular Front politics. Kazan, for example, had directed Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, starring Garfield, which had run on Broadway since 1934 and whose clarion call of "Strike!" was a clear push for action. Not all of Copland's highly politicized friends were pleased by his turn to the more populist folk idiom: *El Salón México* brought scorn from Odets but a proud defense by Bernstein.<sup>36</sup> The young man, Bernstein, despite his adoration for the abstract and nearly atonal *Piano Variations*, found himself quite the partisan of the new cross-cultural eclecticism of tonally centered lyricism and rhythms derived from jazz and Cuban, Mexican, and other Latino sources.

What Copland offered Bernstein through music, Prall offered through aesthetics. Prall attended to rhythm, not only seeing it as a series of systematic events in the flow of time but also reveling in its sensuality, as "bodily flexibility and nervous control of muscular movement. . . that we [can] apprehend. . . through our feet as well as our ears."<sup>37</sup> Bernstein, as we might assume from the subject of his senior thesis, must have been especially attracted to Prall's discussion of syncopation as a kind of drama, "a crossing or conflict in rhythm" felt in body as well as in the listening mind.<sup>38</sup> The modernist Prall did not hesitate to comment upon the "rigor and the technical finality of the most absolute jazz."<sup>39</sup> He even gave a philosophical imprimatur to dance and musical movement: "The significance of bodily motion and hence of rhythm is . . . emphatically indicated, for any natural outlook upon the world, by Spinoza."<sup>40</sup> Hence came Prall's Spinozistic aphorism: "To know our own bodies truly and adequately is to know God. To know their rhythms is to feel the pulse of Nature."<sup>41</sup>

Encouraged by Copland and Prall, Bernstein was becoming a modernist with a particularly gifted rhythmic sensibility.

Bernstein's actual debut in the modernist movement came by way of a review he published in the spring of 1938 in the chief journal of the modern movement, *Modern Music*. After attending a Boston Symphony Orchestra

performance of a suite from Prokofiev's ballet *Chout*, the brash young man wrote that the work "strains the word 'cleverness' to a snapping-point." He then added, in perhaps the first but certainly an early sign of his preoccupation with properly centered tonality, "One is thankful these days for a concert piece that has a finale one can whistle while leaving the hall." Writes this *chutzpahnik* of Prokofiev's First Piano Concerto, "Truthfully, it is not a good piece." Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*? Bernstein concluded that it contained some wonderful music, but the music was stretched too thin by the work's length. Walter Piston's First Symphony? Whereas Piston (Leonard's professor) "can always be depended upon for the best in workmanship," the Largo [seemed] unduly long and uninteresting," and "the work lacked emotional appeal."<sup>42</sup>

### SENIOR THESIS

In the spring 1939 semester, Bernstein worked on his senior thesis, "The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music," a summing up of the fundamental themes explored by Copland, Prall, and others in the new American modernist movement and a call for an "organic" music that would express "a new and vital American nationalism" to connect every American to another, regardless of region, race, ethnicity, class, or religion. Bernstein wrote that otherwise-variegated Americans were bound together by their rootedness in the vernacular traditions of New England Protestant psalm and Negro jazz. Although the former had found expression in the religious and folk music of the Anglo-Saxon North American diaspora, the latter had become widely dispersed and was now virtually ubiquitous, thereby forming the basis for a national music. In an earlier, first period, beginning with the Puritan hegemony and lasting into the nineteenth century, the New England Protestant hymn had metamorphosed into popular music and poetry. But Bernstein argued that the ubiquity of Negro music formed the basis for an American music. He noted that a national music starts as "material" and gradually takes on a "spiritual" cast, proceeding from a clearly recognizable folk heritage to an identity that is no longer "folk" but is nevertheless distinctly national. America had needed

a long gestation period to attain the first, “material” stage. In the second period, encompassing most of the nineteenth century, American composers wrote music imitative of then-prevalent European romanticism, producing a derivative body of work that led Bernstein to write, “America has never had a classical music.”<sup>43</sup> A third period, under way since the end of the nineteenth century, had received its impetus from the Czech composer Antonin Dvorak’s call to incorporate Native American themes into serious music. This idea died stillborn, Bernstein argued, because these themes had no relevance to the everyday life of most Americans. Only since the 1920s and 1930s had American music come of age and its jazz rhythms permeated musical culture from Tin Pan Alley to the dance hall and then to the Broadway theater, the concert hall, and the opera house.

The critically important aspect of the form then called “Negro” music was syncopation, formed either melodically by lengthening and shortening notes or rhythmically, by borrowing not only North American Negro rhythms but also Caribbean and Latin Negro sources, especially in the use of rumba rhythms. Bernstein noted that George Gershwin, Copland’s predecessor, used these musical forms to create his distinctive American music. But where Gershwin had incorporated syncopation into nineteenth-century romanticism, Copland had incorporated syncopation into a distinctly modernist idiom, as Bernstein illustrated with examples from Copland’s *Piano Concerto* and *Piano Variations*. Contemporary American music, such as that composed by Copland and Sessions, thus contained elements of the original Negro “scale” and rhythms in its driving substructures but was no longer necessarily identifiable as jazz. To be sure, he wrote, the New England strains lived on in the music of, among others, Roy Harris, but the dominant form lay in the syncopation that forms the spiritual, distinctly recognizable form of American music.

#### BERNSTEIN AND BLITZSTEIN

While he was writing his thesis, Bernstein found a work of music that appealed to his musical and political passions: Marc Blitzstein’s radical *The Cradle Will Rock*, written in 1937.

Blitzstein had found inspiration in Weill and Brecht's biting dadalike, satirical style to create a work that was as much a vernacular music-hall revue as an opera.<sup>44</sup> Like Copland, Blitzstein was a serious musical modernist who had trained under the French neoclassicist Nadia Boulanger. Blitzstein joined the Communist Party, and in 1935, he set out to compose socially critical music for the American working-class audience, which, he was convinced, was coming into self-consciousness. Blitzstein needed to find an authentic voice in which to address and inspire this new industrial urban multiethnic and newly immigrant working-class audience, which would find little in common with traditional American country folk music. Nor did he want to use the traditional Broadway-Hollywood forms. He found a good model in the works of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. In *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), *Happy End* (1929), and *Mahagonny* (1930), Weill set Brecht's raucous and vulgar urban vernacular librettos within an array of popular musical forms, including so-called kitchen songs, folk songs, dance-hall tunes, marches, and biting and sarcastic cabaret music. In so doing, he attacked the German equivalents of Broadway and Hollywood theatrical conventions—those which produced sweet and pretty entertainments affirming the given political orthodoxy and seeking to evade social reality.

Blitzstein followed Brecht and Weill in making his own idioms with which to skewer corporate elites, showing how they colluded with state and military authorities to protect their interests and how they prostituted the clergy, newspaper editors and reporters, and artists into disseminating ideological smokescreens to hide the harassment, beatings, and even murder of labor organizers. Audience members, awakened to the fact that their victimization was not inevitable but was the result of the unchecked power of political and cultural elites, could now organize themselves into a unified mass movement and take action to transform their world.

Not only was *Cradle* a radical work for its disclosure of the collusion between business, the news media, and the pulpit; its premiere in New York turned out to be a radicalizing event for many of its performers and audience members. Hours before the opening performance, the Federal Theater Project authorities, unnerved by attacks from congressional conservatives, demanded that producer Orson Welles cancel the production.



Welles refused, director John Houseman found another hall, and because the musicians could not play in that hall, Blitzstein performed the orchestral parts from a score reduced from orchestral to piano performance.<sup>45</sup>

In a gesture of identification with Blitzstein, Bernstein decided to put on a production of *Cradle* with himself performing the piano reduction. Then, in an unexpected parallel to the New York premiere, the Cambridge authorities banned *Cradle* as obscene. Bernstein moved the production to the Harvard campus, where the Cambridge edict did not apply.<sup>46</sup> This congruence between Blitzstein's premiere in New York and Bernstein's production in Cambridge was extraordinary.

By the time Bernstein graduated from Harvard, Mitropoulos was heralding him as a budding conductor and Copland viewed him as a musician of prodigious gifts and genius and as a rising presence in American musical life, most certainly as a pianistic interpreter of American modernism.

Thus, in four years, Bernstein had become a cosmopolitan modernist, an intimate of two celebrated musicians, and a propagandist for the new American music. Had he a presentiment in that spring of 1939 that he would take the mantle of creative artist upon his own shoulders?

. . .

No doubt the newly minted Harvard graduate and his family greeted this milestone with great joy and happiness. But in the underworld of political denunciation, a much darker monument to Bernstein's Harvard years was forming. Bernstein did not know that his efforts with Blitzstein's *Cradle Will Rock* had almost made him the object of a Cambridge police investigation into "Reds" at Harvard.<sup>47</sup> Nor was he aware that an informant had reported to the FBI that he was the director of the local communist John Reed Society.<sup>48</sup> The denunciation went into a newly created FBI dossier on Bernstein, its entry noting that the informant "stated that [blacked out] and Leonard Bernstein wer [*sic*] the real leaders of the group and that the group sponsors speakers on Russia and Marxism."<sup>49</sup>