

Interview with Jonathan Sheffer
Music 194rs: Leonard Bernstein's Boston
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Professors Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Carol Oja
Minor editing by Elizabeth T. Craft

Alex Tan (AT):

My name's Alex Tan, and it is Tuesday, March 14. And I just wanted to introduce Mr. Sheffer:

Please welcome Mr. Jonathan Sheffer. He's a prolific composer and conductor in television and cinema, and orchestral and solo piano, and concerto works, musical theatre, opera, and song cycles.

Jonathan Sheffer (JS):

That's exhausting.

[Laughter]

AT:

I was trying to think of the best way to phrase it. His compositional pieces have been the focus of a 1999 Guggenheim Works in Progress series, and his opera, *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*, enjoyed critically acclaimed success as well. And it received the Richard Rodgers Production Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters [JS makes cheering gesture] and a reading – [AT imitates JS's cheering gesture] yes, of course – as part of the New York City Opera's Showcasing American Composers program.

Peter D'Elia (PD):

Mr. Sheffer began studying conducting after working for nearly a decade with Hollywood film scores, making his conducting debut with the San Diego Symphony in 1991. He also led the Seattle Symphony and introduced some unusual new works into his repertoire, many of which inspired his founding of the Eos Orchestra in New York in 1995. Eos became a laboratory to explore Mr. Sheffer's interests in questioning what constitutes a concert of "classical" music in the contemporary world. And he has since founded Red, an orchestra which continues to provide creative outlets for such experimentation and innovation. Mr. Sheffer has conducted at the New York City Opera, the Spoleto Festival in Italy, the American Ballet Theatre, and the Martha Graham Dance Company at the Edinburgh Festival, to name a few.

AT:

And Mr. Sheffer met and worked with Leonard Bernstein while he was giving the Norton Lectures at Harvard in the 1970s and conducted a version of *The Birds* with the Eos Orchestra. Also important, we wanted to thank you and express our appreciation for all your work on *Leonard Bernstein: The Harvard Years*, which has been and will continue to be such an instrumental part of our exploration of his life, working towards, of course, the festival in the fall. And so with that said, we're very anxious to have your insights and your experiences. And so thank you so much for joining us, and please welcome Mr. Jonathan Sheffer.

JS:

Thank you.

[Applause]

PD:

So, we'd like to start with maybe some of your experiences meeting Bernstein in the 1970s. So how did you first meet him, get to know him, and work with him?

JS:

I really didn't prepare anything today, so this is all just going to be memory and talking. Let's see, I knew his daughter Jamie, we were at Harvard together, and when he was coming here it caused us a great deal of excitement as you can imagine. The Norton Lectures were unusually public for that year and produced a huge series of video events and concerts and a lot of commotion on campus. His presence here caused a great deal of commotion as it did everywhere. I think I first met him here in this building. He gave a course which had no name, it was just sort of two hours every time he was in Boston to just be around Leonard Bernstein, and it was an opportunity for graduate students, undergraduates, we were all screened, I don't remember anything about who or why we were in that room together, but there were about twenty of us, and somehow we sat down the first day and he came in, and like every...like every experience with him there burned in my memory, I mean some people just have this impact on us and he was certainly such a person. I remember, describing his impact on people, I remember Maron Alsop who's a wonderful conductor who was a student of his at Tanglewood was interviewed once, and the interviewer asked her what was it like listening to him talk, and she said it was just like I'm talking to you right now but a lot more interesting. [Laughter] I thought that was a nice description of what it was like. So I met him in the classroom here and that class as I said provided some remarkable teaching...moments...insights that will stay with me forever. I don't know about all of you, those of you who went to Harvard College. There are moments, there are just days, when you remember what somebody said to you for the rest of your

life, and he has a disproportionate amount in my brain, and there are other professors I had here who influenced me on a given day that sort of changed my way of thinking, but given the little amount of time that he actually taught us I would say that his was way out of proportion to all the others.

Then when I moved to New York in 1975 I went to Juilliard for about a year and a half and then to the Aspen Music School and spent a lot of time with the family, as friends, which was a wonderful thing for me, obviously, because I don't think I really knew quite what I wanted to do, I'm not sure I've figured it out in fact but I know that while he was alive the idea of conducting, which is what I now do for a living seemed impossible. It was, it was just too, it was too awesome a presence to present yourself and say well I want to do that too, you know, I want to be a conductor too, and I give my hat off to anyone who had the courage to say that to him but it was only after his death in 1990 that I really began to think about conducting and I think that was part of the reason that I waited so long, frankly. I had another remarkable, I mean I could tell you many, many stories but I had a great opportunity in 1978, he went to Vienna to conduct and record the Beethoven Symphonies, and I was invited to go, and I went and sat with him and studied the scores and listened to those rehearsals and recordings and that was also a, just a very significant event in my life. Do you want short answers or long answers, I mean, I can go on the whole hour.

Carol Oja (CJO):

If I could ask a question that has to do with some of these special moments in the classroom with Bernstein: are there a couple that you could single out for us?

JS:

Yes, one that...I've told this story many times and it still is interesting I think. One is the creation of the *Dybbuk*, his ballet, which he wrote during the time when he was here at Harvard and he had written a two piano short score which was about to be given to Jerome Robbins and he was finishing it at the same time that he was here on one of his many trips – he only spent a few days at a time here in Boston and he would go off and conduct somewhere and come back. He came in with the score of *Dybbuk*, and he said who would like to play this with me at the piano, and of course, you know, everybody sort of sunk down in their seats and one brave soul went up and read through it and he was pretty polite given the difficulty of it and it was written in his hand and it was quite messy and that was, you know, that was like being present at the creation. It was very exciting for us; I subsequently did some work on the *Dybbuk*. I took, this is a piece that sort of got shunted to the side, and I know you've done work on ethnomusicology in this way. This is a prime piece of his. It's the, it's one of his few pieces that has a strictly Jewish subject, and it's of great interest for a lot of reasons, and I did in conjunction with this concert, this Eos concert that led to this book, I did a concert at the Lincoln Center Festival, I think it was in 1998, called "Literally: Bernstein," and I created a

new suite for the *Dybbuk* so things sort of came full circle for me. It was there the first time it was played, and then I was able to create a new suite that is in the catalog now. It's a very different kind of collection of the pieces.

My other memory of that class is much more telling, I think. He was conducting *Carmen* at the time at the Metropolitan Opera, which if any of you don't know that recording I really suggest you listen to it. It was the first modern production of *Carmen* that restored the spoken dialogue and took away the recitatives that had been added later. And it was a great, exciting occasion when Leonard Bernstein conducted the Metropolitan Opera, which was never. So, he was here and he was about to go into rehearsal for that. And he came in one day and he said, "I've been thinking about the flower song, I've been thinking about the flower song," and, you know, and he played a little bit at the piano and he said, "What can you tell me about this melody?" It was just utter silence. I mean, you know, what can you tell anyone about a melody? That it is beautiful? That it is composed of leap of a 6th resolving to a 3rd? You know, and counterpoints of the line is satisfying? That it moves in opposition to the bass? I mean, what can you say about a melody? But this is the kind of question that he asked, always, that confounded our intelligence, our ability to analyze, and he said what can you tell me about this melody that is unlike any melody I've ever written? And he played a little bit at the piano, and he pointed out as is absolutely true that this is a piece in which no line of music ever repeats. Which is probably not true in any other opera aria and it's probably not true in any folk song or ethnic music or anything with a verse and a chorus. It was an astounding revelation, he said, "This is a piece that starts from the first phrase and never repeats until the last note," and he said, "And why did Bizet do this? Because this is a person pouring out his heart, and he doesn't know what he's going to say next." Well, I mean, you never need to know anything else about opera, as far as I'm concerned, I mean this...and he probably just thought of that the night before while he was sitting at home. It's that kind of thought that can change your thinking forever, and it taught me to look beyond the obvious, I guess. The obvious is the way that we analyze and we labor in music theory. We were talking about music theory at lunch, I mean, silly me, I didn't know music theory had ideology, but if you get beyond music theory and you ask yourself, well why? Not just how, but why? That's where the interesting questions are and that's where the interesting answers are, and I think that's what he did as a musician. You know, from that one afternoon in a class at Harvard to his whole life in music.

AT:

It seems like he brought a lot of personal experiences to the class, and obviously was asking students to play with him. I'm wondering he, if you remember him engaging with a lot of the students on an individual level?

JS:

Well, yes, he was pretty available. He had rooms here at Eliot House, where he stayed when he was here. I remember some pretty banging parties in there, actually. As far as intellectual engagement, other than that classroom I wouldn't say that he sort of kept lengthy office hours. I mean it wasn't like people were bringing their thesis to him to discuss. It was much more just whenever you could catch him and talk about something of interest to both of you. I also, my third little Harvard particular remembrance of him had to do with *West Side Story* which was produced at the Loeb when I was here and it was the, I would say the highlight of my acting career, certainly the end of it. I was cast as Baby John in that production, and he came to the dress rehearsal, and he kept us afterwards for notes, which went, as I recall, until about 2 in the morning. It was amazing to me that he would be so interested in a student production, which, in retrospect, must have been just as bad as all the other student productions ever done, although we of course thought it was better. And in fact some well-meaning filmmaker made a documentary of this production of *West Side Story*, which was sent to me about ten years later and I watched it in complete horror. But the documentary was about how could Harvard students play gang members. That was the idea. You can imagine it was pretty ridiculous. But his dedication to that, he really came to that production of *West Side Story* as though it were the out of town tryout for the Broadway production. That amazed me in some way. I don't think you can explain why that is. He just had a particular passion for that piece, I guess you might say.

PD:

You talked a little bit about the effect he had on your life. Could you maybe say a few more things about the impact he had on your life?

JS:

Well, it's like a nun talking about Jesus. I mean, it's just, you know, it's pretty hard to describe. It's just kind of, I can't think of a time when he wasn't in my consciousness as what a musician was. Growing up in Connecticut and watching the Young People's Concerts, my mother came home from New York one day and said, "I saw Leonard Bernstein in the elevator at Saks." You know, I mean, this was somebody that loomed very large in the culture of my particular [corner?], my slice of the world. Suburban New York, white, Jewish, this was like, you know, God had sent one of his messengers down for us. And there was never a time when I wasn't aware of him and I was studying the piano and the violin, and it was always somehow directed toward the New York Philharmonic and the Young People's Concerts because those were, he was speaking directly to people of my age. I mean, now that I look at them, he was speaking way over our heads, but we didn't know that. I mean, he had a wonderful trick in the Young People's Concerts of saying, "Well, Shostakovich is not at all like Prokofiev, but you all know that."

And you'd see these seven-year-olds nodding their heads. [Laughter] And you know, it was just a trick he had of making us all feel smart, you know, and being quiet. He directed these questions, if you go back and watch these, and they're amazing, and they were put together by the kind of people that, you know, you see in this movie, *Good Night and Good Luck*, these TV producer types. And they sat around in groups smoking cigarettes trying to figure out what the script should be, and he went out there and sold this stuff to a country that really was still in the habit of having curiosity about that kind of culture which has of course completely disappeared in the intervening years.

So I think it was, you know, if we all look back on our lives, you probably don't have as much opportunity to have done that as some of us, but you think of the things you started out thinking about when you were very young and what drove you to those particular meanings, and I guess in a way it was sort of, it was bound to happen. I mean, here I was at Harvard, he came here, it was bound to happen. I was going to meet him, I was going to get to know him, and it was going to be, it had already been part of my life, so it was going to be much more so. It's funny though, when people, if you ever notice at funerals, people who give eulogies basically talk about themselves, you know. "Oh, I remember when I met this person and I was so sad, and she was so funny, I thought she was so funny," you know. So we're really talking about ourselves when we talk about someone else. To the extent that I can talk about him, it's probably better to talk about the work than the person, but the person for me looms very large, I gather for everyone here too.

PD:

Ok, well, we'll definitely go to the work then. So how did you first decide to put on this production of *The Birds*?

JS:

Well that goes back to the formation of Eos, which as you mentioned, I started Eos in 1995 in New York, for selfish reasons and for musical reasons, but I wanted to have, I have been conducting quite a bit outside of New York, and I never seem to be able to work in New York, so I thought, maybe I should try to stay home a little more. But more than that I was very concerned about what I just mentioned, the sort of lack of music in the culture of any of my friends. You know, none of them knew anything about this thing that I valued so highly, orchestral music, symphonic music, opera, and that distressed me, and I thought, well what can I do to make a connection to people who are otherwise fairly intelligent. Eos was really created in order to make concerts that would give music context and that would give it narrative. And that meant being theatrical, and being a little bit explanatory you might say. And so, the concerts were all about something, that's the most important thing to know, leading into this Bernstein project. It was never adventurous to me to play works that I wanted to conduct. I mean I always put

works on Eos programs and continue to do so in Cleveland with Red, where I now conduct, more or less, because I want to do the works. But I begin with an idea, and the idea can come from a work. But then the idea has to become an entertainment of a kind that really is about, if you're coming in tonight, and give me two hours, you're going to get something. You're going to have an experience that might have something to do with you. Or might touch something that you're interested in. It's not contemporary music alone, it's not classical music alone, it's not a ritual or a rite that you don't know when you're supposed to applaud and who is Brahms. Somehow I tried to answer questions with every concert. And so it led to very unusual kinds of programs.

As I said it was only natural that I would want to delve into Bernstein because I knew there was a lot of stuff that really hadn't been looked at. So these programs usually took about two years to develop, one year to kind of think about, and then one year to announce and find the soloists and mark it and you know do all that. So these are very slow-moving things and continue to be. This came about in two parts, one was the Lincoln Center Festival I did in 1998 I believe, let's see when that was, no that was in 1999. They did a big thing on Bernstein, and they did a sort of mini festival, and they asked me to create a program for that. And that was a program I did called "Literally: Bernstein" which had to do with Bernstein's kind of interest in the word and literature and that was where we did the *Dybbuk*, based on literary source; the *Serenade*, based on another literary source; and the *Songfest* which were settings of poems. And in that I sort of talked about, this was a guy who was really interested in poetry and literature. And this was more of a kind of a personality program. "Bernstein: The Harvard Years" was really about what was, you know, how did the phenomenon of Leonard Bernstein begin? What were its origins? And I felt that nobody had really covered this. I read biographies, and it was just, you know, a few pages on his growing up, a lot of biographical stuff but not a lot of Harvard stuff, it seemed to me there was a big gap there. So I dug in, and I went to Harry Kraut who was the executor, and of course his personal manager for many, many years, and I said, "Is there anything, anything at all that's never been played." And he happened to have on a shelf behind him the score of *The Birds* which I have a reproduction of here. I don't know if any of you have looked at it. And I said, "I'll do it," you know it was just, I didn't even open the music, I was just like, "I'll do it, I'll do it." "What is it?" "*The Birds*." "What's that?" You know. I mean that's the way I program usually, it was just like, I want to do that I don't care what it is. Sometimes they didn't work out that well, but sometimes they yielded sort of amazing things. And Harry said, "Well, we have this, and nobody's ever really known what to do with it." And so, I said, "Well, let me look at it," and I took it home and looked at it, and there's a reason nobody ever did anything with it, which is that the score has no words in it. And yet it's all settings of text. That's a problem. And so there were no other materials but this score. So this was a real, suddenly I was a musicologist and believe me I didn't have a degree in musicology. So I was like, well now what do we do with this? So I went to the Library of Congress and I spent some very interesting times there researching Gershwin and Copland and I was back to do some Bernstein work and

I, while I was there I couldn't help myself, I sort of got into some of the correspondence and read letters that my friends wrote to him, and it was just like, oh that's so interesting, you know. [Laughter] What!? [Laughter] You know. But then I learned that there really was nothing else. There was just like this score. There were no parts, there was nothing else. So that increased my determination to try to get *The Birds* on stage, which involved a classics professor from Harvard, two classics professors from, oh sorry, one from Vassar, two from Harvard, and lots of people sort of nosing around. And basically I had to sit down with a Greek text of *The Birds*, I don't read Greek, and with a transliteration and an English translation. So I had these three books in front of me, and I had to try to determine what these pieces of music were. You know, this is really ass-backwards research, but I had to try to learn what the music was for what text. Can you imagine, sung in Greek?

So this took quite a bit of, there was about six months of solid work on this by all these people. And the professors at Harvard fortunately had done a project on the production and so they were able to give me valuable information about the program, I saw the actual program, and that began to identify what some of the songs were, which was helpful. It didn't show the text, so we still didn't know what Greek was being sung or what it meant. I certainly didn't know what it meant. And eventually I was able to narrow it down amazingly to, well that seems to scan with that, and I would call up my friend at Vassar, "Can you say that to me in Greek, does that?" – "Mm-mm, yeah, that sounds right" – and we managed to put every note with every sound. I mean it was a remarkable process. Then it was transliterated so that it could be read by the singers, which is the song sheets that we produced. Which have, these, you know strange transliterations. Nobody had a good system for transliterating Greek, so we sort of made that up. And then [we] programmed it. And I put it with, if memory serves me, there was a piece by Edward Burlingame Hill who was Bernstein's professor, and he was a composer who had quite a few pieces played by the Boston Symphony, and I found a wonderful string symphony that he wrote. And we also did the Clarinet Sonata with Richard Stoltzman, which was orchestrated by Sid Ramin, who I gather was here and spoke to you. And then *The Birds*.

So my hope was to try to identify how somebody that, you know, started the piano at ten, and then never played an instrument, by the age of twenty, just became this person that was about to be launched onto the world. That to me is an interesting story. And the Harvard period became very interesting to me. And the more I read about it, really the less I understand because what's missing is the person, of course, you know, to convince us that such a journey is possible. But this was his first theatre music; it was the first thing he ever conducted. And he managed to, you know, he basically directed it. He wrote this music, taught it to these singers who were not singers. He had some very good players in his orchestra who all went on to quite distinguished careers in music. *Life* magazine, as you all probably know, photographed the production and ran the photos. Very mysterious. Aaron Copland came up for the performance, as did Paul Hindemith. I mean, it was sort

of remarkable. There were two performances, and that's the story of *The Birds*. I mean, to me, a remarkable achievement.

PD:

Do you know why he omitted the text from the score?

JS:

I think he was in such a hurry to finish that he couldn't be bothered. Greek was one of the few languages he didn't know. He did very well in Latin at Boston Latin and he had a very [good] working knowledge of German, French, and Italian. But although Greek was taught at Boston Latin, he did not learn it. So someone in the Classics Club apparently recited all the Greek to him, the scansion, so he would know how to set it. But I don't think he could read it anyway, I mean. This is just obviously a score that was written in a hurry, just before the performance. I mean it was all done rather hastily, I think.

PD:

So did you gain any sort of compositional insights about Bernstein's process?

JS:

Yeah, really interesting. We also did, he wrote a piano trio around this time, which is an unfinished work. Most people discredit it; I think it contains some really interesting stuff. That was performed before our concert in 1999, as a sort of pre-concert *hors d'oeuvre*, you might say. I think . . . you know, all of his music at this time, he hadn't really written anything yet, although he would soon, that had any kind of cogent form as a long work. But his interest in theatre was early, and it was intense. And his theatre music of course is what is most known to the world and what most people identify him with. So I think it gave me an insight into what he came to the job with, you might say, as a theater composer, what he had sort of managed to pick up. And of course the piece is full of everything. It's such a mixed bag. It sounds like things borrowed from, you know, what you might call Orientalism, Middle East. There was a performance by a famous sitar player in Cambridge about a month before the production, which he went to, and apparently it had a huge impact on him, and some of that worked its way into the music. There's certainly strains of cantillation from the Synagogue. There is vaudeville. There's blues. I mean it's everything that he would become identified with, which is this totally personal, eclectic, you know, no rules, nothing, just all this sort of Mahlerian kind of, all this stuff that goes into the meat grinder. It just was all, so many different kinds of music coming into his brain, and coming out in ways that were sometimes well knit together and sometimes not. But I mean it was clearly made up of many different, it was a stew of many, many ingredients.

And interestingly, I did a project, a lot of work on the music of Paul Bowles, who was also a very interesting composer, who Bernstein knew. And I had done a great deal of work on Paul Bowles's music a few years earlier. And although I've never been able to find the link at this time, in 1939, their music sounds so similar. It's kind of remarkable to me. I know that Bernstein met Bowles subsequently, but there's no way, that I've been able to discern, that he could have heard his music when he wrote *The Birds*. And yet when I played *The Birds* for the first time, I thought, "My God, this sounds exactly like Paul Bowles," which is just a kind of strange quirk of, you know, how they ended up at the same point from completely opposite places. Because Paul Bowles was much more known as a novelist—he wrote *The Sheltering Sky* many years later. But at the time, he was writing music in the thirties and forties, he had no training of any kind. Bernstein was *the* classically trained Broadway composer who ever lived. Paul Bowles, no training at all, and yet they somehow, at this point, kind of crossed paths musically. It's really just to me one of the great mysteries of American music. There is something native in American music of this time that's sort of a synthesis of, you know, coming off of this European style, and Broadway, and ethnic music, and somehow, they all met in some place, and then they all sort of dispersed later, but *The Birds*, more than any other piece of Bernstein's, really kind of digs into that. And it's something that he, I think, didn't really stay with so much, until he wrote, you know, *Jeremiah* has a bit, and then I think the *Dybbuk* really brings back that sort of ethnic strain.

PD:

You were about to mention similarities between *The Birds* and some of his later compositions.

JS:

Well, there is . . . there is stuff in *The Birds* that he put in later works, if not note for note, then very much in the style of. There's stuff that ended up in *On the Town*; there's stuff that ended up in the *Facsimile*. So, he was one who constantly raided himself. He always went back and sort of reused things that hadn't really worked or landed in their final form. It is student work in the sense of it's not kind of fully formed. It's still this kind of protean mind, still working out the whole notion of what it means to write theater music. I don't think he had quite arrived at it, although, with everything with him, it's just like a sponge. I mean, he wrote *On the Town* four years later. That's such a leap that it's sort of hard to conceive, to go from *The Birds* to *On the Town*. It's such a leap, a magnitude of, you know, 5,000. *On the Town* is such a perfect masterpiece of a musical. It's so amazing, and it brings with it all this stuff—all the Tin Pan Alley and all the Russian ballet, and everything comes together in this amazing New York symphony. It's pretty remarkable. It's nice having *The Birds* as a starting point just four years earlier. I mean, there's more progress there than most people make in their whole lives, in my opinion.

AT:

I was just wondering if you have gained any insights into “that leap,” because it is so remarkable to hear.

JS:

Well, you know . . . I guess I would say that for somebody who came from where he came from and went to Boston Latin School and, I think, came to Harvard and just was able to take advantage of everything and everyone that came his way, from philosophy professors, to conductors of the Boston Symphony, to, you know, a chance conversation would lead to a trip to New York to meet Aaron Copland, and somehow he was bringing all this stuff together in him, and just in his life. I don't know, a lot of his classmates said he already knew the stuff that they were studying. I quoted somewhere in here [looks through book] he, I looked at some of his notes from Harvard, because those are from the Library of Congress, and there's this wonderful quote in here I found. He was, I think it was a harmony class. [Looks through book] I found all of these weird things like poems he wrote when he was at Harvard, and his Italian grammar workbook, and stuff like that. And . . . a lecture course on musical history, I was just leafing through it, and he wrote in the margin, “Hollow, empty, stupid, dull, uninteresting.” [Laughter] Which sounds a lot like Hamlet to me, but - [laughter]. You know, I don't think he necessarily took his coursework—it may not have been the most important part of his study here. It was a person who just was, you know, in formation, and was on a fast track.

He left here, of course he went to Curtis, and lived in New York intermittently, and tried to get work as Lenny Amber, and, you know, he registered a name, which is a name he used to make piano reductions of things—“Amber” of course is English for “Bernstein.” I think it was really when he was at Curtis, when he was studying piano and learning from Fritz Reiner that he became this much more kind of mature musician. He describes himself and the lessons and the impact they had on him—that's well documented, I don't have a lot to add there. But somehow this thing in 1943 which was both the year of his debut at the New York Philharmonic and the writing of *On the Town*, it's kind of miraculous. It's hard to think of one person doing one of those things well, and for him to do them both in such close proximity really boggles the mind. But the writing of *On the Town* was, I think it was just kind of a gut check. They just got together and wrote it quickly, and the music just sort of poured out of him. So it's hard to know really, I mean I was talking to you about Aaron Copland, and I was very interested in the period in which Aaron Copland started writing film music in 1939 until *Appalachian Spring* in 1943. This to me, it's the same period interestingly. And Copland wrote his first film score for the World's Fair in 1939, which I also found at the Library of Congress, and the Brooklyn Philharmonic is actually doing it this week. It's really nice to kind of come across these things and put them back into circulation. Copland, from 1939 to 1943, he was already a mature composer. I don't suggest there was anything like

that going on. He certainly went from being the person that wrote *Billy the Kid* to writing *Appalachian Spring*, which is I think arguably his greatest piece. It's so sublimely perfect, you might say. It's on the level of Mozart. You look at the notes and you think, "How did you do that? How did you make three notes sound so interesting?" That's the level that *Appalachian Spring* is. It's a very high peak in his own life.

Things happen. Miracles happen. It was a time; it was a very special time. 1939 was one of the peak years of the American century, of the great century that you guys are too young to know anything about, frankly, and I just caught the end of. But there's no doubt that it sort of peaked during this time, and that, you know, a lot of the other stuff that came later was intermittently great. It was the greatest year of Hollywood. It was the greatest year of our culture in so many ways, and we've never really attained that level. The year, you know, the time of *Gone with the Wind*, and *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Citizen Cane*, and *Appalachian Spring*, and all of the works that are so monumental in our collective unconscious. There was a very special thing that happened right up to WWII and during WWII that has never really been the same. Now, I don't say, yes I say better, I don't like to make those kind of distinctions usually, but – we're just a lot different now, let's just put it that way.

PD:

Maybe we should go back to *The Birds* a little bit. What are some examples from the score that - ?

JS:

Should we listen? We might have sound, we don't have picture, right?

[Several seconds finding the right part of the recording.]

The problem is that chapters are not the beginnings of pieces. Alright . . . this is – it happens to start at the beginning of a song, so we'll listen to this – this is the serenade by the Hoopoe. Do you know the story of *The Birds*? Anybody, anybody? It's a comedy about the forming of a utopian society, and one writer about Bernstein wrote in this book that of course he would want to do this because it's about snatching power from the Gods, which I thought was a kind of interesting quote. The play is about these two Athenians who are pretty distressed about the state of the world, and they go to find a former leader who's turned into a bird. And somehow, leads to the establishment of Cloud Cuckoo Land, which is this utopian world in which the birds live. And things go rather badly of course, but it's a comedy. I think this is a really charming—this is the first time they meet the Hoopoe, who is the, I suppose one of the main characters, there are several. His serenade is directed at his wife, which has to do with the play, but he's basically singing to his wife, "Awake, my maid, shake off slumber. Let loose glorious song

from your divine mouth.” That’s really all you need to know from the text. But what’s funny about it is the cadenza in this is a whistling cadenza duet with a bassoon, and that really bears listening to.

[Several seconds of music playing. JS comments: “Me and My Shadow.” Playing continues. Laughter at end of cadenza.]

Kay Kaufman Shelemay (KKS):

Can I ask you a question – you talked about this rich year with all these influences of other movies and theatricals. What about local influences and interactions? What about Hasty Pudding?

JS:

Um, what about Hasty Pudding? What about it? Have you ever eaten it? You mean with Bernstein and Hasty Pudding?

KKS:

Interactions with Hasty Pudding. That sort of lewd theatrical that’s over the top.

JS:

Yeah, one critic of this concert, in fact the *New York Times* critic, said that the whole affair felt a bit clubby. It’s interesting that you mention that because there’s an aspect of this that feels a little, kind of, you know, undernourished as far as world experience goes, shall we say? It’s all about the ivory tower and it was about the humor of the college. And certainly the whole idea of putting on something in Greek is a very, it’s not for the general audience. Although apparently they chose this comedy because they thought they could sell it as a comedy to a wider audience, although it was in Greek. Hasty Pudding was of course alive and well then. Bernstein never crossed paths with them, as far as I know. Alan Jay Lerner, who was here slightly after him, of course, wrote the Hasty Pudding show. I wrote the Hasty Pudding show. It was something you did, you just did, that’s what people just did in those days. I don’t know why, it’s a great sort of pre-professional thing. And everybody that I worked on the Hasty Pudding show with went on to be studio executives and comedy writers, and it was people who were very focused on that, on wanting that kind of career.

Katherine Chen (KC):

There’s a point at which he had wanted to play piano for the Hasty Pudding but they wouldn’t let him because he was Jewish.

JS:

That's more than possible. Yeah. Well, I guess it wasn't a problem by my time. Do you want to hear more of *The Birds*? You know, anything. There's more. Questions?

AT:

Well, when you were speaking earlier about how it was kind of this protean exercise, and there were elements of his youth, I'm wondering if you can kind of elaborate a bit on that idea with reference to the music.

JS:

Yeah, I was just, maybe just one other . . . let's see if I can find it. I heard this – there's a, he wrote a crazy blues that comes later in it, let me see if I can find it. Yeah. [Finding and playing the music, while narrating] This is the sort of setting of Greek. These are the birds, the chorus of the birds. So, I would say Stravinsky plays a pretty strong influence here. [Stops music] Anything I choose is going to be a different influence, you know. That's sort of the way it is.

CJO:

That's Bernstein, isn't it?

JS:

Yes it is. [Finds music] Okay. So this is the "Jazz Poet." This is a really striking piece. If I can get to the beginning of it. Not very useful having tracking numbers that are in the middle of pieces. That sounds like the beginning. It's close enough.

So the poet is, this is one of these sort of variety acts that comes in a Greek comedy. They're full of people just coming on and singing like a thirties musical, frankly. And this is "The Poet," and he renamed it "The Jazz Poet," that was his big contribution, I think, to this moment. It's basically a song about – you know, poets in those days were asked to digress and to claim about the state of man, the virtue of the city, some kind of general topic. This poet is talking about Cloud Cuckoo Land, this utopia of the birds, and it's basically a song about how marvelous it's going to be when the birds have their own city. You wouldn't really expect this kind of music in a Greek play.

[Several seconds of listening] I mean, I think it's pretty funny. This guy singing in Greek, it's pretty . . . [Several more seconds of listening] Let's see if I can get some more . . .

Okay. You get the idea, right? The end is pretty funny. Let's see if I can get to the end. [Several more seconds of listening.] This is the stuff they put in *On the Town* coming up. [Several more seconds of listening.] Crazy. Okay, you get the idea.

KKS:

This is wonderful, thank you. Maybe other members of the class who have questions to follow up, Ryan, I know you're ready to jump in!

Ryan Bañagale (RB):

I just had a question regarding the use of whistling; it's very interesting. I'm curious if you can think of any other examples of Bernstein where he uses this?

JS:

I think that since it was a bird, it occurred to him obviously. The most identifiable thing in his music is probably the finger snap in *West Side Story*. And this was something he could have easily borrowed from, you know, all kind of new music being done at the time, using found music and found sources. He wasn't shy about putting that stuff in his music. I can't think of another whistling piece of his. There's a lot of humming in *Chichester Psalms* and *Mass*.

CJO:

A piece I think of is the Morton Gould "Tap Dance Concerto."

JS:

There's whistling?

CJO:

Not whistling, but just in terms of unorthodox sounds in a piece.

AT:

I think there's a lot of it in the *West Side Story* prologue too, just to sort of forward the action -

Drew Massey (DM):

I was just wondering in your preparation for *The Birds* if you came across anything at the Library of Congress or elsewhere about his production of the Aristophanes play, piece that he did in 1941. He was actually called back to do another -

JS:

I wasn't looking for it. There's thousands of boxes. There may be a box with a piece marked on it. I heard there was such a work. Frankly, I was only going to work on one of these. I mean, the amount of work needed to bring this to fruition was, it was like writing a book; it was just huge.

CO:

You did produce a book.

JS:

I did produce a book at the same time.

KKS:

Anyone else?

RB:

The process of editing this. How you went about, how did you deal with the lack of words? What were some of the other issues that you found being given the score that you had to interpret?

JS:

I used as much of it as I could; I didn't use all of the music. I was trying to make it a satisfying evening, so I wrote this English sort of narration to go with it, so people wouldn't be completely at sea. As always, I try to create a program, especially one made up of excerpts, that I think is going to be a sort of convincing program, so, that's all.

KKS:

I think we appreciate so deeply your visit, and thank you. I think you shed light on a whole domain of Bernstein creativity that we otherwise would not have known anything about. Thank you – for the book and for the talk.

JS:

You're welcome. My pleasure.

[Applause]