



Dinner with Lenny: The Last Long Interview with Leonard Bernstein

By Jonathan Cott



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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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Editorial Review

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A Look Inside *Dinner with Lenny* [Click Images to Enlarge]



Leonard Bernstein, c. late 1940s (Courtesy of the New York Philharmonic Archives)



Leonard Bernstein with Igor Stravinsky while filming their television program “The Creative Performer”, 1960 (Courtesy of the New York Philharmonic Archives)



Leonard Bernstein with his wife Felicia Montealegre, departing for a tour of Europe and the Near East, 1959
(Courtesy of the New York Philharmonic Archives)



Wearing a favorite sweatshirt while rehearsing with the New York Philharmonic (Courtesy of the New York Philharmonic Archives)



On the set of the television program "Omnibus," November 14, 1954, lecturing on Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (Photo by Gordon Parks/Collection/Getty Images)



Exiting the National Theater in Washington, D.C. during an out-of-town tryout for West Side Story, 1957
(Photo by Robert H. Phillips)

From [Booklist](#)

Conductor, pianist, composer, writer, lecturer, celebrity, and above all, enthusiastic, irrepressible teacher, Leonard Bernstein (1918–90) was the presiding genius of classical music in America during the twentieth century. Baby boomers raptly learned about classical music from the 14 years' worth of televised New York Philharmonic Young Peoples' Concerts he hosted, and to read the long version of Cott's 1989 *Rolling Stone* interview is to be excited with Bernstein all over again. Early and late in the 12-hour dialogue, Bernstein calls Cott's attention to passages in Sibelius and Mahler, respectively (the latter of whom Bernstein boosted to his present lofty perch in the orchestral repertoire), and the magic takes hold—the magic of music, for although Bernstein is charismatic, that is never in the cause of Bernstein. Music and the love that informs it and animates its performance are the great themes of this talk that scarcely touches anything nonmusical. Conferring added delight is the marvelous Yiddishkeit Bernstein manifests talking to just one fan rather than a concert hall full of them. --Ray Olson

Review

"Unlike almost any other classical performer of recent times, Leonard Bernstein adamantly, and sometimes controversially, refused to compartmentalize and separate his emotional, intellectual, political, erotic and spiritual longings from the musical experience,' Jonathan Cott writes in *Dinner With Lenny: The Last Long Interview with Leonard Bernstein*. Mr. Cott, a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*, then delivers exactly what his title promises, though dinner turns out to be an understatement. It is like referring to a chef's tasting menu as fast food."--Sam Roberts, *The New York Times*

"Perhaps the most memorable tale in this altogether readable book is offered by Cott. After hearing Bernstein conduct Beethoven's Ninth at Carnegie Hall with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1979, the author and a friend walked down to Studio 54, the late-night place to be in those days. Out on the packed dance floor, Cott was bumped from behind. When he turned to see who had crashed into him, it was, yes, Bernstein, 'wildly dancing--bare-chested under a black leather jacket.' No question about it, Lenny was determined to live large. And if you want to know what happened with Alma at the Hotel Pierre, you'll have to read the book."
--Jonathan Rosenberg, *The Christian Science Monitor*

"If Leonard Bernstein tested the limits of pressing the conductor's own personality into the score, he was, as a musician with a world conscience, Toscanini's successor. The political, free-associating liberated spirit comes through lyrically in Jonathan Cott's *Dinner With Lenny: The Last Long Interview With Leonard Bernstein*." --Peter Dobrin, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

"*Dinner with Lenny* is surprisingly captivating...there is something charming about the dialogue between the two men that makes the reader want to keep reading."

--Amanda Mark, *New York Journal of Books*

"Jonathan Cott has an extraordinary gift for getting interesting people, especially musicians, to energetically, informatively and entertainingly speak about their personal insights into music and many other matters, near and far. Read this book and see for yourself."

--Steve Reich, composer

"Jonathan Cott captures the ebullience; the enormous brilliance; and the life affirming joy that exuded from Leonard Bernstein. I could feel myself once again at the table with Bernstein, where topics, puns and postulates blazed!"--Marin Alsop, Music Director, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and Chief Conductor, São Paulo Symphony Orchestra

Users Review

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Catherine Williams:

Reading a e-book can be one of a lot of pastime that everyone in the world loves. Do you like reading book and so. There are a lot of reasons why people enjoyed. First reading a reserve will give you a lot of new info. When you read a publication you will get new information due to the fact book is one of several ways to share the information as well as their idea. Second, looking at a book will make anyone more imaginative. When you reading a book especially fictional works book the author will bring that you imagine the story how the characters do it anything. Third, you can share your knowledge to others. When you read this *Dinner with Lenny: The Last Long Interview with Leonard Bernstein*, you are able to tells your family, friends along with soon about yours reserve. Your knowledge can inspire different ones, make them reading a publication.

Janet Roldan:

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Virginia Johnson:

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