

# blog riley rock culture approximately

« [CHAINSAW SYNTAX](#) | [Main](#) | [LITERAL IS THE NEW SURREAL](#) »

January 26, 2005

## ELITISM FOR DUMMIES

Can classical music ever reclaim the populist influence of Leonard Bernstein?



**Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts** (Kultur

Video, 9 DVDs)

**The Joy of Music** (Amadeus Press)

**Leonard Bernstein: An American Life** (WFMT Radio Network, produced by Steve Rowlands for CultureWorks Ltd.)

Leonard Bernstein's absence looms over classical music and its current dilemma: superstar conductors and dwindling receipts, "crossover" CDs and spiraling sales, and the ongoing burnout between academic composers and listeners. When Bernstein began his YOUNG PEOPLES CONCERTS in early 1958, classical culture was different in ways he changed irrevocably: the concert tradition was "high culture" filtered through Europeans like Toscanini, targeted at an educated elite, and orchestras were the province of elderly white men.

How quaint that all feels today, looking at Kultur Video's reissue of 25 (of 52 total) Bernstein *Young Peoples Concerts* spread across 9 DVDs. This set eavesdrops on a different space and time for classical music, and measures how things were more complicated than they seemed. To screen these programs now returns you to an era when live, black-and-white television was the high altar of techno-cultural achievement (Edward R. Murrow's interviews, the *Playhouse 90* telecasts, the Kenney-Nixon debates). The concerts began a few months after *West Side Story* hit Broadway; they concluded thirteen years later, in 1972, with a program on Beethoven's

## ABOUT...

**blog riley**

*rock culture approximately*

by **Tim Riley**  
NPR Critic  
Author, Speaker, Pianist

[Bibliography \(pdf\)](#)

[BEATLE AUTHOR SPEAKS](#)

[Wilmington Library](#)  
[Wilmington, MA](#)  
[February 27, 7pm](#)



[Riley Rock Index](#)  
Music's Metaportal

## FEATURE PODCAST:



[RECORDING THE BEATLES](#)  
[by Kehew and Ryan](#)  
[Abbey Road Reunion:](#)  
[Techies Tell All \(mp3\)](#)  
[podcast riley](#)  
[\[rss, iTunes\]](#)

*Fidelio*. (Bernstein died in 1990 at the age of 72.)

This enormously influential series, in the vaults until now, portrays Bernstein at his best: as a passionate conductor and teacher, unlocking ideas embedded in the most complex orchestral scores. At the time, he was a self-conscious emblem of his century's merger between high art and pop culture. When he greeted his first television audience, he was not just a newfangled maestro who wrote Broadway show tunes but an evangelist who ushered Americans like Roy Harris, Virgil Thompson, and William Schuman into the repertoire; an omnivorous listener who made compelling cases for then-obscure material, like the songs and symphonies of Gustav Mahler, Vaughn Williams' Fourth Symphony, or Shostakovich's darkly comic Ninth. Everything Bernstein lays out in these programs became the new norm for "classicism," only we keep acting like it never happened. So what became of Bernstein's extravagant promises?

***"Bernstein's view of western music as a larger continuum, an interactive tapestry between highfalutin and popular, academic and everyday, is among his greatest legacies..."***

How radical it must have been to watch these programs in Eisenhower living rooms and hear Bernstein refer to jazz and rock'n'roll as cousins to Mozart. Six years before the Beatles crashed the party, Bernstein's analogies were current and down-to-earth; he drew inspired connections between classical scores and rock songs. Later on, the triumph of the Beatles only fueled his ideas: to his ears, "And I Love Her" became a lyrical 3-part sonata form; and "Norwegian Wood" traced the Mixolydian mode. Bernstein's view of western music as a larger continuum, an interactive tapestry between highfalutin and popular, academic and everyday, is among his greatest legacies. (And he's enjoying a resurgence: Amadeus press has just published a new edition of *The Joy of Music*, and the *Young People's Concerts* book is due next year. *Leonard Bernstein: An American Life*, a candid 11-hour audio biography narrated by Susan Sarandon, was broadcast last fall to over 700 public radio stations.)

There's more to Bernstein than these concerts can show: he was an eccentric, uneven conductor who pined for respect as a "legitimate" composer, in both popular *and* concert idioms; a classical figure who behaved like a rock star, and steered the stuffy classical world off into the

[NPR, clips, books](#)

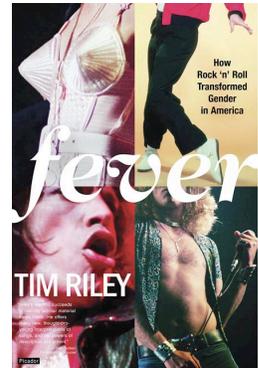
[blog riley rss](#)

[email feed](#)

#### BIO

Tim Riley ([trileyATartsjournal.com](http://trileyATartsjournal.com)) is the music commentator for NPR's [HERE AND NOW](#). [more](#)

#### BOOKS



FEVER (Picador, 2005) surveys rock's gender styles through key figures like Elvis Presley, Tina Turner, Girl Groups, Smokey Robinson, Pete Townshend, Rosanne Cash, Joni Mitchell, Chrissie Hynde, Bonnie Raitt, Bruce Springsteen, rock couples from Sonny and Cher to Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love, and many others.

Radio Interviews:

[On Point \(NPR\) 7/8/05](#)

[Marketplace 6/9/05](#)

[Wisconsin Public Radio](#)

[8/10/04](#)

[Here and Now \(NPR\)](#)

[9/13/04](#)

[On Point \(NPR\) 9/13/04](#)



tell me why  
The Beatles: album  
by album, song by song,  
the sixties and after

"Things insight to the act we've known for all these years."—New York Times

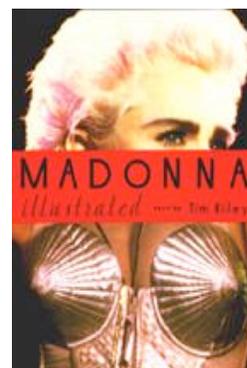
tabloids. Toscanini was his European father figure, who, at age 87 in 1954, concluded a 17-year run conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra. His reign turned post-war America into a new center not just for European musicians but for European concert music itself. America responded by hailing him the "greatest conductor of all time." In cultural terms, [Toscanini played John Wayne to Leonard Bernstein's Elvis Presley](#).

Bernstein's rebellion was about substance as well as style: Toscanini was dictatorial, a white-haired ball of intimidation who had less jazz in him than Vice-President Richard Nixon. A few more narrow-minded, Euro-centric brutes like him, Bernstein reasoned, and classical music would fossilize. So he got CBS to mount its own symphonic series, whereby New York's first American-born conductor would charm audiences into music's New Frontier -- ahead of John F. Kennedy. Whirling between piano and podium to illustrate his points, Bernstein turned in bravura performances, even if his persona upstaged his insights. Only a showman could make Haydn slow movements breath with such relevance. Along the way, he tore down every elitist assumption he could think of, beginning with the idea that the classical music need be somber (an entire lecture on "Humor in Music"), or exists in a sacred vacuum, detached from popular styles ("The Latin-American Spirit"). He even brought a young Gunther Schuller out to conduct "Journey Into Jazz," with text by critic Nat Hentoff, a kind of swinging *Peter and the Wolf*.

His ideas both enlightened audiences and nourished the New York Philharmonic's playing. Alongside the transition from black and white to color, the series covered the orchestra's move from old world Carnegie Hall ("Home of the world's greatest musical events...") to the open square of the newly built Lincoln Center ("Home of the world's greatest musical events..."). The virtuoso players, from legendary concertmaster John Corigliano (father of the composer) and principle flutist Julius Baker, take thrilling risks on their instruments, and they sound much jauntier than they look. As Bernstein preached a new populism, the orchestra responded with a vitality that favored feel over polish. Nowadays, major orchestras lock down smooth, shopworn surfaces as a matter of habit into the standard repertoire.

***"They sound much jauntier than they look..."***

So why does so much classical music sound sterile -- even fossilized, if you believe some [critics](#)? Many reasons, but mostly because the stars aligned



[more](#)

[Archive](#) 434 entries and counting

**Contact**  
[triley@artsjournal.com](mailto:triley@artsjournal.com)

[Syndicate this site](#)

[XML](#)

## SEARCH

Search this site:

## LISTS RILEY

**lists to live for...**

Best of [2005](#), [2004](#), [2004 CLASSICAL](#), [2004 LIST LINKS](#), [2003](#), [2002](#), [2001](#), [1990s](#), [Cover Albums](#), etc

[more](#)

**Other lists**

behind Bernstein's charisma. Like Kennedy, his timing was genius. Where liberal arts music departments and public libraries will cherish this set, these *Young Peoples Concerts* have a mixed heritage. Instead of writing the great popular tunes of his time, Bernstein stepped down from the New York Philharmonic early, in 1967, to compose. First came the unspeakable *Mass*, which fed off the era's worst hippie clichés. Even though he roared back with the Harvard *Norton Lectures*, his high-low sensibility was reviled by both sides. American culture continued to cherish its movies and rock music like art, but Bernstein himself seemed to lose his nerve. So he spent a lot of his late career obsessed with his legacy: Beethoven, Brahms and Mahler cycles with the Vienna Philharmonic, a vanity recording of *West Side Story* as grand opera (with José Carreras and Kiri Te Kanawa), and a devolving personal life reflected in his face as a withering degeneracy. Where Bernstein's opening act was all populism and plurality, his second act slowed to vainglorious pomposity.

In another sense, Bernstein's popularity merely echoed Toscanini's cult of personality. If his audience outreach is the model on which all conductors must now market themselves, most of them forget Bernstein's key principles -- humor, showmanship, expansiveness -- before they lift their batons. The exceptions prove the rule: Michael Tilson Thomas, a Bernstein protégé, who leads the adventurous San Francisco Symphony; or Robert Spano, who's shaking up Atlanta (the new Cleveland!). Many more of Bernstein's students, like John Mauceri, work far more in Europe than at home. While it's tempting to dub Bernstein's era as "the good old days," that presumes too much of one man's authority and too little of all the women and minorities performing in today's orchestras. There are no more large-scale, unifying TV "networks," but there are best-selling movie scores like Howard Shore's *Lord of the Rings*, which expose millions of moviegoers to fantastic orchestral dreamworlds. Perhaps Bernstein's vision will reach even more ears now that this series is finally available to any classroom with a DVD player, and anyone interested in taking the best music appreciation class ever. (Tim Riley)

BERNSTEIN LINKS:

[Leonard Bernstein Society](#)

[YPC Scripts](#)

[Leonard Bernstein Collection](#) (Library of Congress)

[Sony discography](#)

Past years, [cover albums](#), [tributes](#), [hands I've shook](#), [concerts](#), [Rock Snobs](#), [top 90s acts](#), [quilty pleasures](#) misc...

[more](#)

## ME ELSEWHERE

---

### millennium pop

[Elitism for Dummies](#)

Bernstein's YPC DVDs

[BBC MEETS THE BEATLES](#)

Defining Covers

[Drive My Car](#)

Beatles 2000 Keynote

[more](#)

### WBUR's Arts pages

WBUR Arts Pages:

[MOVIE NATION](#) (1/15/05)

[BOB DYLAN'S CHRONICLES](#)

(11/15/04)

[more](#)

### NPR's Here & Now

[True Love Ways](#) (2/14/05)

[RA]

[2004 As Meathook](#) (1/04/05)

[RA]

[more](#)

## BLOGROLL

---

[blog ecosystem](#)

[Blogdex \(MIT\)](#)

[Blogcritics](#)

[blogspotting \(MSNBC\)](#)

[Daypop Weblogs](#)

[Eatonweb portal](#)

[Eric Idle's Greedy Bastard](#)

[Tour](#)

[Kate Sullivan's Rockblog](#)

[Kickbacks](#)

[Land of a Thousand Dances](#)

[News From Me](#)

[Random Blogspot](#)

[Rock Critic Daily](#)

[Steve Rubio's Online Life](#)

[schmusic](#)

[TMFTML](#)

[Stylus magazine blogs](#)

[Talk About Music](#)

[Truth Laid Bare links](#)

[Weblogs Awards](#)

[Deutsche Grammophon discography](#)  
[Leonard Bernstein: An American Life](#)  
[iTunes: Bernstein](#)

ALTERNATE HEADS:

The New Hi-Lo Frontier  
 Democracy's Baton  
 Roll Over Toscanini  
 Pulping the Classics  
 Leader of the Pack  
 High-Minded Populism  
 Will You Still Listen Tomorrow?  
 Blue Suede Tuxedos

---

Posted by mclennan at January 26, 2005 9:51 AM

**Tell A Friend**

Email this entry to:

Your email address:

Message (optional):

[Useful Noise](#)  
[Weblogs central \(MSNBC\)](#)  
[Weblogs.com](#)

**CLICKS**

[ABC News Political Notes](#)  
[Arts Journal](#)  
[Arts & Letters Daily](#)  
[Assignment Editor](#)  
[The Atlantic](#)  
[Boston Review](#)  
[The Center for Public Integrity](#)  
[Changing Links](#)  
[Creators Syndicate](#)  
[Common Dreams](#)  
[Cool Sites](#)  
[CounterPunch](#)  
[Cyber Journalist.net](#)  
[Drudge Retort \[sic\]](#)  
[e-thepeople.net](#)  
[Fast'n'Bulbous](#)  
[First of the Month](#)  
[First Read](#)  
[Gizmodo](#)  
[Hermenaut](#)  
[LA Examiner](#)  
[London Review of Books](#)  
[McSweeneys.net](#)  
[Media Transparency](#)  
[Metacritic](#)  
[Metafilter](#)  
[McSweeney's](#)  
[memepool \[music\]](#)  
[The Morning News](#)  
[New York Observer Arts](#)  
[Reason](#)  
[Public Radio Fan](#)  
[Robot Wisdom](#)  
[Rockcritics.com](#)  
[Rock & Rap Confidential](#)  
[Rockmine](#)  
[Rock's Back Pages](#)  
[Rotten Tomatos](#)  
[Rough Music Guide](#)  
[slashdot.org](#)  
[tekka.net](#)  
[TLS](#)  
[Trouser Press \[random\]](#)  
[Tom Paine](#)  
[TV Tattle](#)  
[USC OJR Editors' Picks](#)  
[WBUR Arts pages](#)  
[WSJ Personal Technology](#)  
[Z mag](#)

**NABOBS**

[Robert Christgau \[linkers\]](#)  
[Keith Harris \[linkers\]](#)  
[Tom Hull \[linkers\]](#)  
[Greil Marcus \[linkers\]](#)  
[Dock Miles](#)  
[Tim Page](#)

[Ron Rosenbaum](#) [[linkers](#)]  
[Harry Shearer](#) [[linkers](#)]  
[David Thomson](#)  
[Michael Wolff](#) [[linkers](#)]

"[This](#) is for all you [shoppers](#) out there..."

## **AJ BLOGS**

---

[AJBlogCentral](#) | [rss](#)

### **culture**

#### **About Last Night**

Terry Teachout on the arts in New York City

#### **Artful Manager**

Andrew Taylor on the business of arts & culture

#### **blog riley**

rock culture approximately

#### **CultureGulf**

Rebuilding Gulf Culture after Katrina

#### **diacritical**

Douglas McLennan's blog

#### **Flyover**

Art from the American Outback

#### **Quick Study**

Scott McLemee on books, ideas & trash-culture ephemera

#### **Straight Up |**

Jan Herman - arts, media & culture with 'tude

### **dance**

#### **Foot in Mouth**

Apollinaire Scherr talks about dance

#### **Seeing Things**

Tobi Tobias on dance et al...

### **media**

#### **Out There**

Jeff Weinstein's Cultural Mixology

#### **Serious Popcorn**

Martha Bayles on Film...

### **music**

#### **The Future of Classical Music?**

Greg Sandow performs a book-in-progress

#### **Jazz Beyond Jazz**

Howard Mandel's freelance Urban Improvisation

#### **ListenGood**

Focus on New Orleans. Jazz and Other Sounds

#### **On the Record**

Exploring Orchestras w/ Henry

Fogel  
[PostClassic](#)  
 Kyle Gann on music after the fact  
[Rifftides](#)  
 Doug Ramsey on Jazz and other matters...  
[Sandow](#)  
 Greg Sandow on the future of Classical Music  
[Slipped Disc](#)  
 Norman Lebrecht on Shifting Sound Worlds

[publishing](#)  
[book/daddy](#)  
 Jerome Weeks on Books

[visual](#)  
[Aesthetic Grounds](#)  
 Public Art, Public Space  
[Artopia](#)  
 John Perreault's art diary  
[CultureGrrl](#)  
 Lee Rosenbaum's Cultural Commentary  
[Modern Art Notes](#)  
 Tyler Green's modern & contemporary art blog

---

### **Special AJ Blogs**

[Engaging Art - a public conversation](#)  
 June 14-20, 2007  
[best of times? worst of times?](#)  
 which is it for classical music?  
 July 23-26, 2006  
[Critical Edge](#)  
 critics in a critical age  
 May 14-17, 2006  
[The Center of the Dance World?](#)  
 an online public conversation  
 December 12-16, 2005  
[Critical Conversation II](#)  
 classical music critics on the future of music  
 July 18-22, 2005  
[Midori in Asia](#)  
 conversations from the road  
 June 22-July 3, 2005  
[A better case for the Arts?](#)  
 a public conversation  
 March 7-11, 2005  
[Critical Conversation](#)  
 classical music critics on the future of music  
 July 28-August 7, 2004  
[RoadTrip](#)  
 Sam Bergman on tour with the Minnesota Orchestra  
 February 9-16, 2004

