

Leonard Bernstein, Oral History Interview – 7/21/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Leonard Bernstein
Interviewer: Nelson Aldrich
Date of Interview: July 21, 1965
Location: New York City, N.Y.
Length: 12 pages

Biographical Note

Bernstein, a composer and music director of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra from 1957 to 1969, discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) inauguration, public and private dinners he attended at the White House, and humorous anecdotes about his interactions with JFK and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, among other issues.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed January 6, 1969, copyright of these materials has been passed to the United States Government upon the death of the donor. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Leonard Bernstein, recorded interview by Nelson Aldrich, July 21, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Leonard Bernstein

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

In accordance with the provisions of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 as amended (63 Stat. 377) and regulations issued thereunder, I, Leonard Bernstein, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and a transcript of a personal statement approved by me on *JAN 3, 1969* and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this document is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.
2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.
3. A revision of the above stipulation governing access to the aforesaid document may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States or his designee if it appears desirable to revise the conditions herein stipulated.
4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.
5. The donor retains to himself during his lifetime all literary property rights in the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument. After the death of the donor, the aforesaid literary property rights will pass to the United States of America.

Signed

Leonard Bernstein

Date

JAN. 3, 1969

Accepted

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

Date

Jan. 6, 1969

Understanding Regarding the Use of the
Oral History Interview Conducted by the

John F. Kennedy Library
with Leonard Bernstein

1. The interview transcript may be made available, on an unrestricted basis, to anyone applying to use the resources of the John F. Kennedy Library. (This includes journalists and students as well as professional historians, political scientists and other scholars.)

No
LB 2. ~~Copies of the interview transcript (or portions thereof) may be made and given, upon request, to all researchers.~~

3. Copies of the interview transcript may not be deposited for research use in other institutions, such as university libraries, public libraries and other presidential libraries, without my written permission.

4. The interview transcript may not be published (i.e. reproduced or printed for sale to the general public) in whole or in substantial part without my written permission until 25 years from the date of the interview.

No
LB 5. ~~Researchers may publish brief quotations from the interview transcript (but not the tape) and may paraphrase or cite the text without my permission.~~

Signed: Leonard Bernstein
Leonard Bernstein

Date: May 6, 1971

Leonard Bernstein

Table of Contents

| <u>Page</u> | <u>Topic</u> |
|-------------|---|
| 1 | John F. Kennedy (JFK) in the Senate |
| 2 | JFK's personality |
| 4 | JFK's inauguration |
| 6 | 1961 state dinner for Pablo Casals |
| 7 | A private dinner at the White House |
| 8 | Bernstein's involvement in the National Cultural Center |
| 9 | 1962 White House dinner for Igor Stravinsky |
| 11 | Television appearance with Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy |

Oral History Interview

with

Leonard Bernstein
Composer and Music Director of N.Y. Philharmonic

July 21, 1965
New York, New York

By Nelson Aldrich

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ALDRICH: Mr. Bernstein, when was the first time you met President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

BERNSTEIN: I met him the first time as a Senator, in what I imagine was '54, when I was in Washington for reasons that I have now forgotten, but which probably had to do with McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] if the date is right. I was invited to have lunch with the Senator and his wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] at the Senate and to watch the Senate in action. I date this back to McCarthy because the big excitement of that day at the Senate was that McCarthy was about to make a speech of some importance, and I was all excited about visiting the Senate, which I had not attended before, and watching all that happened. As it turned out, McCarthy didn't show and no speech was made, but I had a very good time anyway.

ALDRICH: Did Senator Kennedy give you any indication of how he felt about McCarthy?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, yes, I had the feeling that, contrary to some apparent evidence and a great deal of talk about his sympathies with McCarthy (or his

lack of antipathy, let's say, or his lack of doing anything about it) for which he was severely criticized, his feelings lay wholly in antipathy to McCarthy. He was revolted. Of

[-1-]

course, this was rather late in the McCarthy era, wasn't it, in 1954? When were the Army-McCarthy hearings, that would have been the Spring, I think of that year?

ALDRICH: The summer, and he was censured in that year too, in 1954.

BERNSTEIN: This was, I think, during the summer. I wish I could remember the exact circumstances or why I was there because then I'd be able to date it more accurately. Anyway, it was in the Senate lunchroom that I first met him, and we had a marvelous lunch. I was very much taken with this man, as was everybody I know who ever met him, and very much with Mrs. Kennedy as well.

ALDRICH: Can you isolate now some quality of personality that had nothing to do with the man you later knew as President?

BERNSTEIN: No, I can't, as a matter of fact, my first impressions remained my last impressions, though of course the last impressions were much richer and more detailed. The first impressions were very much the way I, when I came to know him better, finally wound up thinking about him.

ALDRICH: What were your first impressions?

BERNSTEIN: A remarkable combination of informality and stateliness—that's not precisely the word—casualness and majesty. It's very hard to come by—that combination; I don't know many people who have it. Utter informality, great readiness to laughter, very quick perception, immediate understanding of anything you say, even if it's veiled or is only suggested, not actually stated, and yet an ability to juggle various matters in his mind simultaneously, which is a thing I've always envied. I don't think I can do it myself although I am always reading about how I can and how I'm versatile and that sort of thing. But, this is a remarkable faculty to have.

I think the thing that impressed me the most about him, and increasingly as time went on, was the reverence he had for thought itself or for the functions of the human mind in whatever form, whether as pure thinking—philosophical thinking, that is—or political thinking or creative functions of any sort, including art and literature, even things he understood very little about, and I think music was one of them. He never pretended to understand music or know anything about it; he never apologized for not knowing about it. He never put himself down as so many people do to me, you know, dozens of times a day—i.e., “Well, you know, I don't really know anything about music, but I sure enjoy your television concerts.” There was never any of that attitude—self-excusing or apologetic.

On the other hand, he never put his foot into it; he never pretended to know anything he didn't know. It's a remarkable thing. It's very hard to describe because people who don't know anything about a given discipline usually say so that they are on some kind of natural footing with you—"Let this be understood from the beginning, I don't know anything about music and now we can talk." Or a more pretentious person will say something to give me the idea that he knows something about music, and more often than not he will put his foot into

[-2-]

it. He'll say some pompous remark about Beethoven [Ludwig van Beethoven] or Stockhausen [Karlheinz Stockhausen] or whatever it happens to be—or about the acoustics in Philharmonic Hall. (That became a very good gambit at one point, a way of showing that you were "in the swim" and knew all about what was going on in musical life.) Those people usually give themselves away very easily as phonies, but neither of these attitudes was present in the President. And I think that was because of this reverence, this awe, which he felt for the functions of the mind, and which was immediately apparent to any artist or any thinker that I know that has ever spent any time with him. He somehow made you feel that you were important, which is an extraordinary thing for a politician (and I use the word advisedly) to make anybody feel.

ALDRICH: He has often been described as a person of insatiable curiosity about how other men live and make their living. Did he ask you any pointed questions about either composition or conducting?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, yes. He was very curious, of course, but his questions were always relevant to what we were talking about. He didn't suddenly ask left field questions as so many people do. Like, "Do you compose standing up or sitting down or at the piano or at the desk?" The answer to which is "I compose lying down," which I suppose most people do. It was always relevant and always had a point and always showed some understanding of the nature of the creative act. I don't know how he got that because he really didn't know anything about it and he had no real experience in it of his own, but I think it came of this love of knowledge and this great reverence for the artistic act which made him terribly curious and made this curiosity tend in directions that were sensible, that made sense to the artist he was talking to, or to the thinker. I don't know anyone who's ever met him who didn't feel that. It's a mystery. I can't explain it.

ALDRICH: But you said he made you feel important.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, not as a person but as an artist. The feeling of importance was that it mattered to the country, through him as its representative, what you did.

ALDRICH: That, of course, was later when he became President.

BERNSTEIN: But I sensed that also in the early meetings.

ALDRICH: Had you known him at Harvard?

BERNSTEIN: No, no we had never met at Harvard. We were a year apart in classes and from the point of view of class in another sense I suppose we were more than a year apart—we were miles apart. I'm not speaking so much of real social distinctions as superficial ones. I imagine that the people he saw at Harvard were not the people I saw—it's that simple.

ALDRICH: After this first meeting in 1954, when did you meet him again?

[-3-]

BERNSTEIN: I saw him in New York. Actually, I asked him to do a favor for me, which I've also forgotten. I don't know what it was. I was asking Felicia [Felicia Montalgre] only the other day if she could remember either. But I know he was in our apartment on 57th Street. I not only don't remember what the favor was; I don't remember whether he was able to do it or not. But I remember his being there and our being utterly charmed with him. He couldn't have been nicer.

ALDRICH: Was Mrs. Kennedy there then?

BERNSTEIN: No, he was there alone that time. I wish I could remember the facts of that meeting, but I can't. And then I didn't see him again until he was President.

ALDRICH: You weren't involved in any way with the campaign in 1960?

BERNSTEIN: Not actively, no. That is, I didn't go out on the street corners and make speeches. But I did everything I could in a quiet way. I didn't do anything public. I guess the first time I saw him was at his Inauguration which would be January, 1961. It was a fearful evening; there was a blizzard in Washington.

ALDRICH: Tell me about some of the arrangements that were made. I know you conducted the National Symphony Orchestra there.

BERNSTEIN: I conducted a *Fanfare* that I had written for the occasion, and I conducted the *Hallelujah Chorus* with a choir and orchestra. This was at the Armory, this big celebration. It was a mad house because we had been rehearsing there all day—Bette Davis, Laurence Olivier, etc., millions of people—and this blizzard began to fall in the afternoon and nobody could get back to his hotel, to say nothing of getting back again to the Armory. But we tried and were stuck in Bette Davis' car. There were about six of us all being asphyxiated in this limousine which couldn't move. Cars had run out of gas and were blocking the street, and this blizzard kept falling. We never got

to the hotel but stopped off near where we were stalled in somebody's apartment. Somebody in our car knew somebody who lived nearby, and we went up there to use the phone. We called the White House to come and rescue and get us back to the Armory so we could perform, but all their cars were out picking up other people who had been stranded.

Finally, we got the police cars to come and they drove us there on the sidewalks because you couldn't go through the streets as the streets were all blocked with cars. Oh, it was *ghastly*; we drove between trees on the sidewalk in this insane police car back to the Armory, unwashed, unchanged, "un-blacktied," and everybody was in kind of a special blizzard festival mood. It made the occasion more exciting actually than it might have been. It was gay the way a city becomes festive when a blizzard falls on it and everybody feels helpless anyway and perfect strangers embrace and everybody becomes friends and sings and jumps in the snow. It was also rather nerve wracking in addition to being festive because of the tension and not knowing whether we could get back to the Armory or whether we were going to be stranded forever in the middle of Washington.

[-4 -]

It was amazing that anybody goy there at all. It all began two or three hours later than it was supposed to. But it went off beautifully and I saw the President afterwards at a party that was given at some hotel. In fact, I made the inexcusable blunder of "cutting in" as he was dancing with a friend of mine with whom I wished to dance, and since people were cutting in all over the floor, I thought nothing of doing likewise except that I had forgotten that I was cutting in on the *President*. He did look pale for a moment, but he got over it and it didn't injure our relationship. He was very sweet about it.

ALDRICH: He didn't make any quip?

BERNSTEIN: No, but the girl was furious. She made lots of quips. That was fun, that evening, I must say.

ALDRICH: Did you attend the Inauguration itself?

BERNSTEIN: We watched it on television in our hotel room because Felicia was feeling ill. I'm very sorry actually that we didn't make it because the details of it, the thing that caught fire, you know...

ALDRICH: The lectern.

BERNSTEIN: ...Robert Frost, the freezing weather, and the President hatless and coatless in the freezing weather are all things that I cherish as memories in television, but they must have been more impressive in the flesh and I'm sorry, actually, that we didn't attend.

But this reminds me of the other Armory occasion in which I participated as Master of Ceremonies. That was the closed circuit television show given for the benefit of the National Cultural Center.

ALDRICH: That was November 29, 1962.

BERNSTEIN: Yes. It was a long, long evening, and I had been given the thankless task of being the “Emcee” and introducing acts which just wouldn't stop and everybody, as usual, took twice as long as they were supposed to and I had the job after each one of waking the audience up again and putting them in the mood for something else. That was, very, very difficult, but I was rewarded in a perfectly marvelous way that night because the President, as he was leaving, stepped aside for a moment to say, “You're one man I would never run against for political office.” Something like that. It was a tremendous compliment, about the most tremendous compliment I've ever gotten, and I think he meant it that way. I was deeply touched, I was always deeply touched.

It's a funny thing: he could say, “Pass the salt,” and I was deeply touched. It's that quality he had which I am still hard-put to define, and haven't found defined in all the millions of words that have been said about him, all the analytical books, reportage, (and God knows there has probably been more journalistic reporting about this man than about anybody in history—more analysis, more carping, more praising, more reverence). But I have never found that quality defined, the thing that made him precious, beyond calculation.

[-5 -]

ALDRICH: And these are qualities of mind and personality which you discovered before he became President? In other words they had nothing or little to do with the trappings of power?

BERNSTEIN: Nothing. They existed rather in spite of it I would say. Being at the White House on the occasion of the Casals [Pablo Casals] dinner in November 1961 when there were many artists about, I couldn't help comparing it with the last time I had been at the White House, which had been in the reign of Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] when I had played with about thirty members of my orchestra parts of a Mozart piano concerto and an abbreviated version of the *Rhapsody in Blue*. I can't remember what the occasion was. I think the President of Colombia was there. It was a State Dinner, anyway, and I was the entertainment after dinner. To compare that dinner with the Casals dinner is to compare night and day. In the case of the Eisenhower dinner: well, for one thing you couldn't smoke, that was number one on my mind. You couldn't smoke at the dinner table, you couldn't smoke before dinner and you couldn't smoke after dinner. I am an inveterate smoker, and I had to perform afterwards, and I got more and more nervous. There were no drinks served before dinner either. The guest line formed by protocol, not by alphabet. Everything was different then, it was very stiff and not even very pleasant. Dinner was at a huge horseshoe shaped table at which seventy-five or so people were seated so that nobody could ever really talk to anybody.

ALDRICH: Again, the table was arranged by protocol?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, and the food was bad, and the wine was bad, and you couldn't smoke. By the time I got to play, I was a wreck, and by the time I finished playing, I was more of a wreck. (I tell you all this not because you are interested in the Eisenhower regime, but because the contrast is just extraordinary.)

They came downstairs to greet the members of the orchestra and thank them. The orchestra had been given ice-cream and coffee in that room and everybody stood around with nothing much to say. And suddenly the President said, "I like that last thing you played, I like music with a theme," at which point there was a horrified silence. Trying to save it, I said, (I shouldn't have said anything, but you couldn't not say anything, I mean the silence was so heavy and tense) and to break it I said, "You mean the *Rhapsody in Blue*," and why he would have liked that better than Mozart which stands to reason. I said, "You mean you like music with a beat, with a rhythmic pulse?" He said, "No, I like music with a theme." And so I just gave that one up. I decided not to press it any further because it would be provoking him, but then he charged back to the fray with a line that will forever be engraved in my mind, saying, "I like music with a theme, not all them arias and barcaroles." And, that's accurate, I have witnesses, I have lots of philharmonic members, my wife. I didn't ask him what he meant by those terms either. But there's an example of what I was talking about before. If you don't know anything about music you have two choices, you can say so or you can try to pretend that you do. Then Mrs. Eisenhower [Mamie Doud Eisenhower], (I think this can all probably be deleted from the tape), in the silence that followed that, which was deafening. Mrs. Eisenhower said, "I don't know how to apologize for the acoustics in the East Room. We've tried and tried, we've

[-6 -]

lowered the ceiling, we've raised it, etc. and they still don't seem to be very good." And the President turned on her with what seemed like great anger and said, "I don't see what's so wrong about the acoustics in the East Room." At that point everybody was digging their toes into the floor, not knowing where to look and it all broke up soon after that.

Compare that to the Casals dinner at the White House in November 1961 at which you were served very good drinks first; where there were ashtrays everywhere just inviting you to poison yourself with cigarettes; where the line is formed alphabetically; and where, when you do line up, you are in a less querulous mood than otherwise because you have a drink and a cigarette; where, when the moment comes for you to greet the President and the First Lady, two ravishing people appear in the doorway who couldn't be more charming if they tried, who make you feel utterly welcome, even with a huge gathering. (There were at least as many people at this as there had been at the Eisenhower's.) You are then brought in to dinner. Dinner turns out to be not at a horseshoe table but many little tables, seating about ten people apiece, fires roaring in all the fireplaces, and these tables are laid out in three adjacent rooms so that it's almost like having dinner with friends. The food is marvelous, the wines are delicious, there are cigarettes on the table, people are laughing, *laughing out loud*, telling stories, jokes, enjoying themselves, glad to be there.

I'll never forget the end of that evening when there was dancing. The Marine Band was playing waltzes or something, and Roy Harris and Walter Piston and people like that were kicking up their heels in the White House, a little high, just so delighted to be there, so

glad that they had been asked, feeling that they had finally been recognized as honored artists of the Republic. You know, I've never seen so many happy artists in my life. It was a joy to watch it. And the feeling of hospitality, of warmth, of welcome, the taste with which everything was done. The goodness of everything; it was just good. The guests were so interesting, and most of all the President and Mrs. Kennedy. It was like a different world, utterly like a different planet. I couldn't believe that this was the same White House that I had attended a year or so before and performed in.

ALDRICH: Did you ever dine with the President on a more intimate occasion?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, I remember the day after the Casals dinner, when there was a meeting of the hundred Trustees of the National Cultural Center. We were just about to leave towards the end of the afternoon when we got a very secret little message: would we come, if we were still in Washington, to dinner that night. And, of course, we changed everything, and it turned out there were just six of us. There were the Bradens, Tom [Thomas Braden] and Joan Braden, and us and the President and Mrs. Kennedy.

ALDRICH: Who are Tom and Joan Braden?

BERNSTEIN: Joan Braden is a charming lady with seven children, I believe, from California and Tom Braden is the publisher of the Oceanside California Newspaper or whatever it is. He is a very liberal newspaper publisher, had been very active in the campaign and Joan had grown very close to Jackie and they were both pregnant, as a matter of fact, during the campaign, and these two pregnant ladies traveled together through all these trailers and they had become very close. Joan, I think, had handled

[-7-]

a good part of Jackie's part of the campaign, and they had grown very fond of each other. I found them charming.

So there were just the six of us in the upstairs dining room. It's a marvelous little room. You dine on Abraham Lincoln's china, with Madison's [James Madison] spoons, and it's just very moving, and the furniture is very beautiful. Everything in it is Presidential and old. We had a perfectly marvelous dinner. After dinner we were all in great high spirits, and we were sitting around the drawing room just chatting about anything, and I believe some of us were sitting on the floor. At least I was. It was that informal. It became the sort of place that you were most happy to be in the world. If you are happy to be in your own house, that is how you felt there and it was all so familiar and familial at the same time. It reminded me very much of my family, my relations with my brother and sister when we were children.

The phone would suddenly ring and it would be Eunice [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] calling the President just to see what everybody was doing, and then he suddenly passed the phone to me. I had never met Mrs. Shriver and he said, "You talk to her, I can't talk to her anymore." And I suddenly found myself talking to her. We had a twenty-minute chat, and

she said: "Oh, come on, what are you all doing? You have all the fun, and I'm never asked when it's fun. What did you have for dinner? What are you doing now?" It was all kind of so sweet and intimate and brother sister like that I fell right into because it felt so familiar. It had the quality of an evening of fun at home, you know, an improvised party. But I kept asking Mrs. Kennedy, taking her aside, saying, "It's getting very late, shouldn't we go?" (The President usually leaves at ten, or right after dinner at nine, or he can leave during the middle of dinner; that's that great Presidential prerogative, you know, being able to leave a room without saying goodnight, or excuse me, or saying where you are going. In fact, once or twice during dinner, he had to leave for one reason or another.)

But here he was and it was past midnight and he showed no signs of going anywhere. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Kennedy said, "Don't worry about it. If he wants to stay up, let him stay up, he hasn't done this in ages." And he was up till two. We weren't doing anything except talking and laughing, and I couldn't tell you *one* thing we talked about the whole night, it was just so delicious an evening. That happens very rarely, where everybody is so happy sitting right there that you don't ever want it to end. It was really divine, and I suppose the quality about it that made it so specially touching was the suddenness, the unexpectedness, the improvised quality of the evening. We were so delighted to have been picked, you know, of all the people in Washington then, to have been asked to stay on and have dinner privately. It was really like having won a great election of some sort, or being touched by a hand from beyond, chosen for that wonderful moment. It meant a lot to me, that evening, and to Felicia, too, because it wasn't about anything, we weren't there to talk business and there was nothing that I had to get off my chest or that anybody had to get off his chest.

ALDRICH: To go back to the official connection you had with the President in relation to the National Cultural Center, how did that come about and what were your feelings on the subject?

BERNSTEIN: Well, I was simply appointed, as I believe were 99 other people, which was a great honor and not one that you questioned. We all went down

[-8 -]

to Washington for the Casal's dinner and were sworn in the next day. Nobody knew exactly why or what we were supposed to do. We all knew that there was an important thing to be done. And the meeting, the swearing in meeting, was rather vague, as I remember, except for one moment when the President appeared, on a very busy morning, to greet us. He made two or three remarks that made the whole thing worthwhile. Otherwise it all seemed very vague, but he somehow was able to say in a few words why it was so important. I remember that he made reference to the great capitals of European countries, like Paris, London, Berlin, Warsaw, Moscow, Rome and how these had always been, simultaneously, the cultural capitals of their countries as well, whereas Washington was the great exception in the whole world. The one capital that was not at all the cultural capital. That impressed me very much, I hadn't thought of it before in just those terms and it made me more determined than ever to participate.

ALDRICH: The next step was the fund-raising national hook-up?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, and a lot of money was raised. It was a tedious evening in many ways as I told you before, but again I was filled with admiration for the President and Mrs. Kennedy who sat there throughout the evening. It was a very busy and difficult time for him, and he sat there right through it, right to the bitter end, because if he had left, a great deal of the point would have gone out of the evening. It was the one thing that was keeping everybody there watching those endless sections of “Long-Day's Journey Into Night” and listening to Korean nine-year-old-cellists, or whatever; but they made it possible by sticking it out to the end. He knew how important it was. Extraordinary.

ALDRICH: Did you have any follow up in the National Cultural Center?

BERNSTEIN: I don't really know what's happening at the moment. I have since been the recipient of another Presidential appointment which is to the National Arts Council that seems to be going forward very well. We're working very hard and I hope in a week or so, as a matter of fact, that the money will be legislated. We're expecting that appropriation and then a great deal can be done. At the moment, there isn't very much happening on the Cultural Center Front. I mean it's going forward and plans for the building are going forward. But I haven't been kept abreast. I've been dropped or else nothing's happening. I haven't heard anything about it recently.

ALDRICH: What subsequent meetings did you have with the President or Mrs. Kennedy?

BERNSTEIN: Well, there was that famous Stravinsky [Igor Fedorovich Stravinsky] dinner in January 1962, which Mrs. Kennedy and I were talking about only the other night and which she remembers in much more vivid detail than I do. She has the most incredible memory—she remembers what everybody was wearing, who sat next to whom. I mean—how many of these dinners she must have presided over and attended. But she remembers infinitely more than I do.

[-9 -]

ALDRICH: Who else was there?

BERNSTEIN: As I recall, there was an editors' convention of some sort at that time in Washington, and certain newspaper people were there—Marshall Field, Jr. [Marshall Field, IV], was there—and it seemed an odd mixture. Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] told me that it was a combined dinner. Small as it was, it was a combination of two events, both of which had to take place, and there was only one evening available.

At first I was very worried about this because I wondered who was going to talk to Stravinsky, but luckily Goddard Lieberson and his wife [Vera Zorina] were there, as well as Nicholas Nabokov, which made it very pleasant and charming because they are all very close to Stravinsky. And of course, there was Stravinsky's own entourage: Robert Craft and his wife—I mean Stravinsky's wife [Vera Sudeikin-Stravinsky]. There were very few people, only a dozen, or so. But the President did manage to keep there two things in the air, one of his extraordinary qualities, so that there was a great deal of journalistic talk and a great deal of musical talk and somehow they managed to merge. It was quite a wonderful dinner.

I remember one thing very well about coming in. I had a television program that was being shown at 8 P.M. and dinner was called at 8 P.M., and I had to see the first few minutes of this program. It was awful of me, but I came in, and I asked Mrs. Kennedy if there was a television set I could run to because I had to see how the first few minutes of it went. She said there was one in Caroline's [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] room. So I sat with Caroline and Mrs. Shaw [Maud Shaw], who was then the nurse, watching this thing, and I remember every well Caroline sitting, as I thought, hypnotized by this program and just thrilled with every moment and every note. We were sitting there on Miss Shaw's bed holding hands watching this performance for *Schelomo* by Bloch [Ernest Bloch], which is hardly a piece for a little child. I thought she was all wrapped up in it, and suddenly she looked up at me with this marvelous clear face and said, "I have my own horse." I thought now *that does it* for me, you know, that really brought one so down to earth that I was grateful to her for it because I realized that I was being horrid for watching my own show on television and not being with the guests. So at that moment I turned off the set and rejoined the others.

When I came into the room there was a line greeting Stravinsky, and when he came to me, he kissed me on both cheeks in the Russian fashion, and I kissed him on both cheeks. There was all this Russian kissing going on when I suddenly heard a voice from the other corner of the room saying, "Hey, how about me?" And it was the President. That's the sort of thing I mean: it's so endearing and so insanely unpresidential, and at the same time never losing dignity or that quality. I can't think of the word, but stateliness is the only thing I can think of, majestic presence. But not just presence because Sammy Davis Jr. has presence, too, and so has Sandy Koufax. But the President's was a kind of dignity which doesn't usually emerge from that much casualness and friendliness.

ALDRICH: Do you remember the toast that evening?

BERNSTEIN: No, I don't think I do. Oh, there were many toasts. When there's a Russian in the room, there are many toasts and a great deal of wine was drunk. At one point toward the end I could see that poor frail old Stravinsky was getting sleepier and sleepier, especially when the conversation would veer toward the journalistic

[-10-]

side of things, and finally he almost fell asleep at the table and had to be taken home. He was very sick at the time; he had a blood condition and was very frail. But he was delighted with

the evening, even though he sort of passed out at the end of it. We will delete that. It's not fit for Stravinsky.

ALDRICH: Did the President go to the opening of the Philharmonic Hall?

BERNSTEIN: No, Mrs. Kennedy did. That was the awful telecast occasion which I was made to remember with iron rods by the press for months afterwards.

She had come backstage at the intermission. It was a very difficult evening, and I had a wildly difficult program to do, and I was half out of my mind. There in the middle of everything were all these television people saying, "Now she is going to come back, and you have to be here. She is coming to see you at intermission, and you'll be on camera." I said that I wouldn't be so good because I would be soaking wet and not very presentable. They said, "Well, that's all part of the atmosphere." So she did come back, and everything she said was off-mike; you know she talks very softly anyway, especially in public, but she wasn't actually registering, in fact, they turned it down for her so only my answers were heard, which seemed irrelevant and brutish because she said, for example, "What do you do now? Do you take a bath? You're soaking wet." I said, "Yes, I sweat a lot when I'm conducting." That was heard, "I sweat a lot when I conduct!" Then she said, "I'll bet you are five or ten pounds lighter than you were before the concert." And my answer was relevant to that, but again it stuck out. I've forgotten what it was—probably "I gain it all back with one vodka"—but it sounded as if I were saying all sorts of unmannerly things to her.

But the worst thing was that I *kissed* her. This wasn't so much kissing Jackie as a friend as it was kissing somebody who comes backstage to see you after a concert. This is a Green Room tradition. It goes back, I suppose, to my years with Koussevitzky [Serge Koussevitzky], and since Russians are always kissing one another in Green Rooms, when people come back to congratulate you it's almost automatic. You kiss almost everybody that you know who comes to see you in the Green Room, and there she was standing in the Green Room and I kissed her. Well, I never heard the end of it from the press, and I hear that there was some consternation also in the White House especially because I was so wet. I mean, that sweaty, awful conductor kissing this gorgeous creature, coast to coast on television, was just not permissible. And I'm still living it down. Horrible. But it doesn't seem to have affected our relationship.

ALDRICH: Mr. Bernstein, can you generalize at all about your feelings and the feelings of the artistic community during the years Kennedy was President?

BERNSTEIN: The best generalization I can make is that we never really knew how different life was then until it was over. The murder in Dallas was, for me, the worst experience of my life. A personal experience. And I think the artistic community, the whole American community for that matter. But for thinking people and working artists, I had the feeling that at that moment everybody became aware of how excited and happy they had been. There had been a good deal of talk about it

during the Administration when he was alive. The excitement of how different the White House was,

[-11-]

the things I told you that were very obvious to us, and the new steps that were being taken with the Cultural Center and the rest. But I don't think we all realized to what extent we were involved in it and to what an extent America had a new image and a new promise for the artist until he was killed. Then it dawned on us like a very bleak dawn. And I must say it's never been the same since.

I didn't go to this Day of the Arts that was at the White House last month. Well for one thing, I was busy, but for another it sounded terribly boring in prospect. But mainly, because I just couldn't. I couldn't be at that place. It just seems too soon after the event. It still seems too soon and it's almost two years, but I can't get over it. I don't think anybody can. It would have been too painful to be there. Quite apart from _____. Or any of that.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-12-]

Leonard Bernstein Oral History Transcript
Name List

B

Beethoven, Ludwig van, 3
Bloch, Ernest, 10
Braden, Joan, 7
Braden, Thomas, 7

C

Casals, Pablo, 6, 7, 9
Craft, Robert, 10

D

Davis, Bette, 4
David, Sammy, Jr., 10

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 6, 7
Eisenhower, Mamie Doud, 6

F

Field, Marshall, IV, 10
Frost, Robert, 5

H

Harris, Roy, 7

K

Kennedy, Caroline Bouvier, 10
Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11
Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
Koufax, Sandy, 10
Koussevitzky, Serge, 11

L

Lieberson, Goddard
Lincoln, Abraham, 8

M

Madison, James, 8
McCarthy, Joseph R., 1, 2
Montealgre, Felicia, 4, 5, 6, 8

N

Nabakov, Nicholas, 10

O

Olivier, Laurence, 4

P

Piston, Walter, 7

S

Salinger, Pierre E.G., 10
Shaw, Maud, 10
Shriver, Eunice Kennedy, 8
Stockhausen, Karlheinz, 3
Stravinsky, Igor Fedorovich, 9, 10, 11
Sudeikin-Stravinsky, Vera, 10

Z

Zorina, Vera, 10