Music, Business, and Peace Summit  
Indiana University, Bloomington IN  

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Introduction by Aida Huseynova:
I’m very honored to introduce our next speaker, Alexander Bernstein. Alexander Bernstein is Leonard Bernstein’s second child, and we are very honored to have a member of this wonderful family with us today. He is president of Artful Learning Incorporated, and the founding chairman of the Leonard Bernstein Center for Learning. For five years he taught at the Packer-Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, New York. He has studied acting, performed professionally, and worked as a production associate at the ABC News, Documentary Unit. Bernstein holds a Master’s degree in English education from New York University, and a Bachelor’s degree from Harvard University. We welcome Alexander Bernstein.

Alexander Bernstein:
Thank you so much. I just want to say, first of all, how much my father would be so excited and fascinated. This conference has just been absolutely interesting and illuminating, and I’m a little fearful, alright. You’re such smart people. I’m not in academia and I’m not a musician. I have a business, I own a business with my sister, which we oversee but hire people who know much more about it than we do. I’ve done my share of work for peace over the years, but would hardly call myself an activist. But I am Leonard Bernstein’s son, so I knew him well and know his music pretty well, and I’m so very honored to be part of this meeting. I think to begin with, we should keep in mind the difference between making music for peace and being a celebrated musician being active for peace. As far as making music for peace, you know my father in 1972 did a counter-inauguration for a concert against Nixon’s concert. He did Haydn’s Mass in a Time of War at the Washington cathedral. He of course conducted Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Berlin when the Wall came down, things like that. As an advocate, he worked tirelessly of course during the Vietnam War, and on his 65th birthday he devoted all his activities to nuclear disarmament.

So we have that distinction. But they do sometimes converge and it’s important to be clear about the distinction. I’ll be quoting mostly from him, and I’ll welcome questions from Connie and all of you any time you want to interrupt, and of course afterwards. And I hope later on we can talk about artful learning, his educational legacy that’s living on now in schools across the country and I think is very germane to our topic today, as far as empathy is concerned. Let’s start with something from one of his Young People’s Concerts with the New York Philharmonic. It was called What Does Music Mean? He said:

“You see, no matter how many times people tell you stories about what music means, forget them. Stories are not what the music means at all. Music is never about anything.
Music just is. Music is notes, beautiful notes and sounds, put together in such a way that we get pleasure out of listening to them. And that’s all there is to it.”

He does go on later in the program to talk about music having meaning in terms of feelings. But his compositions that were in any way anti-war had text. More often than not, written by his collaborators or sometimes from the Bible. Here is Psalm no. 2, verses one through four, from his Chichester Psalms:

“Why do the nations rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His anointed. Saying, let us break their bonds asunder. He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh, and the Lord shall have them in derision!”

And then at the end of the piece it’s Psalm 133, verse one, “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.” In his MASS: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers, he and Stephen Schwartz write during the Agnus Dei section “Give us peace now and we don’t mean later, don’t forget you were once our creator.” Leonard Bernstein had a life-long argument, if you will, with God. Not only in MASS, but in his first and third symphonies, he is struggling with the impossible idea that God allows war. Period. In his more secular moments, his incredulosity of humanity’s propensity to violence is shown most popularly in West Side Story of course, but here is a song he wrote with Betty Comden and Adolph Green. It was sung by Barbra Streisand at an anti-war rally in 1969. It’s a gorgeous, gorgeous song. It’s called So Pretty.

We were learning in our school today
All about a country far away
Full of lovely temples painted gold,
Modern cities, jungles ages old.
And the people are so pretty there,
Shining smiles and shiny eyes and hair.
And I had to ask my teacher why
War was making all those people die.
They’re so pretty, so pretty.
Then my teacher said and took my hand,
“They must die for peace you understand.”
But they’re so pretty, so pretty.
I don’t understand.

Yet, he wasn’t a pacifist, at least early in his life. He bravely and joyfully performed in Israel during the 1947 war, drawing such a crowd that it became an actual diversion, the attacking army thinking there was a troop deployment there. He was a devoted Roosevelt Democrat, unable to serve in World War II because of his asthma, but of course behind it all the way. After Hiroshima (apart from his efforts in Israel), a different story. I remember well my father’s sheer disbelief that people who could wage war like that. And he would slam the table: “It just has to stop!” And as if by force of will, in every concert he conducted, whether for peace or not, I think
he was trying to connect with people that idea of…of empathy, I suppose. Here’s a part of a speech he gave at the commencement exercises at Johns Hopkins in 1980:

“Every artist copes with reality by means of his fantasy. Fantasy, better known as imagination, is his greatest treasure, his basic equipment for life. And since his work is his life, his fantasy is constantly in play. He dreams life. What do we do with our minds when they boggle? We quickly put them to strenuous imaginative work. Mind-boggling time is the perfect moment for fantasy to take over. It’s the only way to resolve a stalemate. And so I ask you again, are you ready to dare to free your minds from the constraints we, your elders, have imposed on you? Will you accept, as artists do, that the life of the spirit precedes and controls the life of exterior action? That the richer and more creative the life of the spirit, the healthier and more productive our society must necessarily be? If you are ready to accept that, and I’m not saying that it’s easy to do, then I must ask you if you are ready to admit the ensuing corollaries, starting bravely with the toughest one of all: that war is obsolete.”

Again, by force of will. After JFK’s assassination, he said what has come to be repeated all too often, I’ve noticed:

“We musicians, like everyone else, are numb with sorrow at this murder, and with rage at the senselessness of the crime. But this sorrow and rage will not enflame us to seek retribution. Rather, they will enflame our art. Our music will never again be quite the same. This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before. And with each note we will honor the spirit of John Kennedy, commemorate his courage, and reaffirm his faith in the triumph of the mind.”

My father deeply believed that art and reason, art and rationality, were inextricably connected. Maybe the baby of the two is empathy—it just occurred to me. One could not exist without the other. That’s hard to argue if you allow for ambiguity to be the most human of human traits. Here’s a quote from an interview he did with John Bruin in Vogue magazine, September 1st, 1971:

“If I weren’t convinced that there were a way to solve all this – the world’s problems – I would simply jump out of the window and wouldn’t worry about it anymore. But I am convinced that somehow, miraculously, through the rediscovery of man’s rational power, any, maybe through the appearance of leadership, we’ll be able to make it. That is why I am really writing MASS. It’s the only way I can contribute to what I hope is rationality in these times.”

And finally I quote from an essay, “This I Believe.” It started in the fifties, this is January of ’54:

“I believe in the potential of people. I cannot rest passively with those who give up in the name of ‘human nature.’ Human nature is only animal nature if it is obliged to remain static. Human nature must, by definition, include among its elements the element of metamorphosis. Without growth, there is no godhead. If we are to believe that Man can never achieve a society without wars, then we are condemned to wars forever. This is,
again, the easy way. But the laborious, loving way, the way of dignity and divinity, presupposes a belief in people and in their capacity to change, grown, communicate, and love.”

Thank you.

Connie Cook Glen:
Thank you so much, Alexander, for those comments. Your father, and by extension your family, have been heroes of mine for a very long time, and I’m so inspired by the comments that you read. I think I told you, I read these to my students, and I have students who come away and say “Oh, I had no idea!” and they’re really personally affected, especially by the “This I Believe” essay and “In Memoriam J. F. K.,” – both of those are so powerful. But I also talk to them about artful learning, and while we’re here today I want to be sure to introduce you to Brenda Brenner. Brenda is the director of the violin program at Fairview Elementary, which is the school in Bloomington that has put in place artful learning. So if you can just meet, that would be useful. And then I wonder if you would like to talk about that, or perhaps the two of you talk about it.

My first question is, as you see your father’s remarkable legacy in action, are there ways you would like to see it broadened, expanded, and continued? I already know the answer is yes. But perhaps there’s something specific to talk about with artful learning or education and maybe Brenda has a question too.

Alexander Bernstein:
I think as far as today’s topics are concerned, Brenda, jump in if you like, but I see artful learning, which connects all the disciplines that kids K-12 are learning, connecting everything through the arts and processes of the arts creates a situation where they’re always looking at something in the context of a different discipline. And there’s a lot of collaborative effort among the teachers as well as the students, which is marvelous. It’s not prescriptive in any way, it’s not a curriculum that the teachers are given. But it’s just thrilling and gratifying and marvelous to hear students able to explain what they’re learning and why they’re learning it and what is has to do with something they’re learning in another classroom. And it’s so engaging, and obviously the test scores and everything are fine, but it just goes beyond that. And you know, we don’t have data on empathy or on courage or on all of the six points, but every time I visit a school, I see a school of kids pulling for one another and not fighting and not trying to be a lot better than their classmates. They’re always pulling for one another and working together, for the most part, and it’s extraordinary to see. Brenda, would you like to talk a moment?

Brenda Brenner:
Well first I want to say thank you to you and artful learning, because I’m living it right now. Next year is the beginning of our tenth year, and it is an extraordinary program. I can say honestly that I see that the arts have become a sinew in that community, to bring, as you say, the teachers and the students, and particularly the students who maybe aren’t as successful academically. It is so moving to see children who you know are struggling and who are in the office before my class and then they come and play violin for half an hour with me, and there’s no behavioral problems. They’re amazing and I mean we don’t need data. I have it, you know, and...
Alexander Bernstein:
There are so many ways in, and you know you’re always going to have a third of a class just nail it no matter how it’s taught, and a few are just going to mosey along and then…but there’s a billion ways that, you know, each kid learns differently. And so if you have vastly different ways “in,” it makes all the difference in the world.

Brenda Brenner:
I think the other important thing is that, by bringing the Jacobs school students – I have 32 that work with me over there – into that community, they learn as much or more than the students at Fairview school, or the teachers, just because they’re getting out of our little bubble of Jacobs and moving into the broader community and seeing how music and the arts can draw people together, can draw cultures together in a way that is so powerful.

Carolyn Calloway-Thomas:
Are you collecting data?

Brenda Brenner:
Yes. A lot of stuff, a lot.

Carolyn Calloway-Thomas:
What a wonderful opportunity! When is your research coming out?

Brenda Brenner:
We have five years’ worth of videos, of interviews, and of test scores, I do the WISC-IV for cognitive tests, so I think within the next year I’ll have something to report.

Alexander Bernstein:
And we have data also from our other schools, of course. And the scores, what’s wonderful is the attendance goes ways up, involvement is strong, stronger, you know…It’s all great.

Carolyn Calloway-Thomas:
And how about students in rural areas? To what extent is the project reaching them?

Alexander Bernstein:
That’s a great question. We have some schools in rural areas…I guess. You can’t really say it is rural, necessarily, but it is farm country. Bloomington, Minnesota, you know it’s a suburb, but there are lots of kids that come from farms around there. It’s hard to say, but that’s a great question.

Connie Cook Glen:
I know your sister has worked with El Sistema and I don’t know if you have as well, but it is a great combinatorial approach there and I love it that the artful learning that they do in Fairview is not just the violin, it’s dance. [To Brenda Brenner] you can elaborate on this.

Brenda Brenner:
They do all sorts of music, they do drumming, they do keyboard, they do a show choir kind of thing now, so it’s very expanded in the last two years and it’s truly amazing to see what these kids are able to do.

**Connie Cook Glen:**
We are very aware in southern Indiana that we have eleven counties to the south of us that are a mess and are part of the opioid addiction crisis. And we’d love to see some expansion into that area, and the university I think is trying to come up with something moving in that direction. We’ve had some pretty big crises in southern Indiana and it’d be great to see that program moving out of Bloomington into lesser-served areas. Underserved areas I guess is the way that should be described. Yes, go ahead Tayloe.

**Tayloe Harding:**
I just wanted to say, Alexander, how wonderful it was for you to share those thoughts with us. Not only how they impact us all and our society and our purpose, but how they influenced and impacted you, it was just so moving to see that, so thank you so much. I wanted to ask you one thing and that is, you mentioned this 1971 speech where he talked about jumping out the window and it ends with “that’s why I’m writing *Mass.*” Can you tell me what that’s from?

**Alexander Bernstein:**
That’s from an interview with John Bruin, but I don’t have…oh yes here it is, it was in *Vogue* magazine, September 1st, 1971.

**Tayloe Harding:**
Wow. Thank you so much. I want to refer to that over and over and over again.

**Connie Cook Glen:**
It’s a terrific quote, I wrote it down too.

**Carolyn Calloway-Thomas:**
I loved the *So Pretty* quote from your father. And I was also struck by the line “must die for peace,” it’s so metaphysical. Could you say something else about that? That took me by surprise.

**Alexander Bernstein:**
Well first of all, he worked on that with his long-time collaborators Betty Comden and Adolph Green, so he doesn’t get all the credit for that song. But it’s just a wonderful line, ironic and, you know, that was the line. You have to destroy the village in order to save it.

**Aida Huseynova:**
If I could say something about this huge spectrum of influence that your father had across the world. I come from a country that was a part of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan, and I have to say that your father has been my hero too. So Connie said this, but it’s natural for Connie, right? To have Leonard Bernstein as her hero. I come from very far away and *West Side Story* is the piece of music, and actually the film, that we grew up with. It was in every movie theatre and we went to watch it many times. So my question is if your father was aware of his being so popular in the Soviet Union? And then, when I taught at the *Baku* music academy, I advised the master
students. And when thinking of the topic, I also suggested that we write, with the student, that we choose *West Side Story* and the call for peace. And well, this student who apparently grew up in, well I think it was the 1990s when I did that, and it resonated, and she was also so much into this music and into the topic, the subject that I suggested, because Azerbaijan was at that time at war with a neighboring country. So the call for peace also resonated in her mind although in a very different way. So what I’m trying to say is that this piece of music has such universal values that are depicted through this great music and great story. So again this question of what is the secret of being so popular in the Soviet Union—did your father share any thoughts with you?

**Alexander Bernstein:**
No I don’t...maybe because his father came from there. But he actually went there to conduct in the fifties. This was a mere year or two after they had taken away his passport, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and then all of the sudden he is sent with the New York Philharmonic to conduct in Moscow and in Leningrad. And he conducted Shostakovich’s 7th, I think, and it was an incredible success and one of the highlights of his life I think. And he got to meet Pasternak, I remember that was his…he and my mom were both so excited. But that was a great moment of cross-cultural peace. And as far as *West Side Story* is concerned, we’re hoping, and have been for a couple of years now, that there will be a new movie version coming out. Very exciting and it would be really fun to have everybody arguing over which one is better.

**Connie Cook Glen:**
Will this one use Spanish?

**Alexander Bernstein:**
No it’ll be the original…no, it’s being rewritten actually.

**Connie Cook Glen:**
Because I know the latest Broadway production used Spanish for the Puerto Ricans’ lines.

**Alexander Bernstein**
Yeah, it used a lot of Spanish for the Puerto Ricans’ lines. And it was not particularly successful in the way it was done. I mean, it worked fine I suppose, but they kept using less and less Spanish as the audiences dwindled because people just didn’t understand it and there was just no way to do supertitles or anything like that.

**Connie Cook Glen:**
Is Sondheim being involved in this in any way?

**Alexander Bernstein:**
Absolutely, yes.

**???:**
If you can have supertitles in an opera, why not *West Side Story*?

**Connie Cook Glen:**
I think it’s because there was Spanish and English so intermixed, I can imagine that…

**Alexander Bernstein:**
Yes, and especially because most of it was in a dialogue. In opera you can do it because they’re singing it and it takes longer.

**Tim Fort:**
Well we’re just on about twelve.

**Connie Cook Glen:**
We are, I just have one more quote I want to read from that “This I Believe” that you didn’t read, because I think it really applies to all of us, and it’s: “We must learn to know ourselves better through art.” I’m wondering if that’s maybe another one of those paradigms that we can set out there and say okay, we don’t have universality and understanding in the context of music, but we do have universality in learning to know ourselves better.

**Alexander Bernstein:**
Absolutely, and the essence of art is asking questions that don’t necessarily have answers but lead to other questions. And you know, the humility of that, that we don’t have the answers, is important.

**Connie Cook Glen:**
Yes, yes. Well on that note, the humility of us not having the answers – I love that – we are moving to just a summarizing discussion for the morning with Ruth Stone and Alain Barker.

Thank you so much, Alexander, for your presence here today and for sharing your perceptions about your father and his inspiring words and actions. We so appreciate you being with us today.

**Reference to Interview with Leonard Bernstein:**
Interview with John Bruin, *Vogue* magazine, September 1st, 1971.

**References to essays and speech by Leonard Bernstein:**

“John’s Hopkins Commencement Speech,” May 30th 1980


[https://leonardbernstein.com/lectures/television-scripts/young-peoples-concerts/what-does-music-mean][Script on Yellow Pad]