

## Audiovisual Review

*Maestro*, directed by Bradley Cooper, 2023.

Felicia Montealegre Cohn was a beloved mother and successful actress who will be remembered by history and her family and friends as a kind and graceful woman. No doubt her most famous role was not on the stage but as the wife of Leonard Bernstein and the mother of his three children. This film, *Maestro*, is more than anything the story of this woman and the difficulties of marriage to and relationship with a superstar genius who also happened to be gay during a closeted era. It is told with warmth, frankness, and dignity, and is a moving story of a love that lasted over their decades-long marriage, their marital breakup, and their last period of time together before her tragic death of cancer. This is not primarily, however, as the title might suggest, a biopic about Leonard Bernstein. Even the first film credit goes to the stunning actress Carey Mulligan, not to Bradley Cooper, who produced, directed, and starred as Leonard Bernstein in this fine film. Indeed, the last frames of the film are the young Felicia from the beginning of their relationship.

The general conceit of telling the story mostly through Felicia's eyes and experience is both sensitive in a woke era and narratively quite effective. Focusing on her experience of Bernstein's rehearsal and performance allows us to see into him in a more intimate way. Their sometimes difficult relationship and marriage is a very wise manner in which to take the life and activities of this very active man and make it into a compelling story. However, we lose a little bit of Lenny along the way. He is shown snorting cocaine with his new partner at a party; she gets a scene with friends and family after their separation in a restaurant. We see a bit of his anguish over the breakup and his coming out in a phone call with his daughter. But the focus is more on Felicia's experience.

The scope of the film is very effective; it starts with the morning Bernstein was called to take over conducting for an ill Bruno Walter, the spectacular catapult to his real career and fame. Moving from a darkened bedroom, Bernstein opens the curtains, revealing his partner in bed, and running out through his apartment, a moment that reminded the viewer of the

opening of *On The Town*. In a stunning scene he emerges in the balcony of the theater and we are immediately in Bernstein's milieu. The film ends after Felicia's death, as Bernstein sits at the piano and reminisces about his life with her. "Any questions?", the iconic last words of *Candide*, are also the last words of the film, bringing so many parts of the composer's life together at once, beautifully.

The influence of the Bernstein family on the film cannot be overstated. Giving Cooper access to Bernstein's materials and obviously sharing a lot of themselves in the process, the story encompasses not just his marriage but Bernstein's family life. Jamie Bernstein, in her own right a performer, composer, and author (her stunning *Famous Father Girl* is a brilliant memoir of "growing up Bernstein") feature prominently in the film.<sup>1</sup> At a party, she announces that she has been given a job. She comforts her mother after the breakup. She is the one to whom Bernstein spoke about rumors of his gay private life. Given some of the illustrious music stars who are portrayed in the film, this family intimacy brings us closer to the private life of Bernstein and his music-making.

Although some people might want more music in this film, I find that I would like just a little more Bernstein. It would be nice to see him on television, in rehearsal, in performance, and talking about his music and the music of others. In a candid interview with John Gruen (not identified by name), more or less reenacted part way through the film, Bernstein talks about his love of people, his tendency toward depression, and his thoughts about art and the world. This is the real thing; this is what most people will come to the film to see. But it almost seems slotted in. The other thing that people will come to see is the music, and apart from a dream ballet sequence in the beginning, the rehearsal of a chorus from *Candide*, and a Mahler Second Symphony performance, we see less of this than we might expect in a film on a composer-conductor. Bernstein's music plays throughout the film as backdrop to the scenes, but the uninitiated will not necessarily recognize the works that are played, even though they underscore the action on screen.

This leads to my first real critique of the film, which is that a lot of what is happening will be mysterious and not fully understood by anyone but Bernstein scholars and historians. The fact that we had such a large swath (the longest musical scene in the film) of Mahler in a famous performance was heartening but risks leaving most audiences a little in the dark. Everyone who knows the basic facts about Bernstein would know his relationship with Mahler's music. Anyone for whom this is their introduction to Bernstein (anyone under the age of 50, I would say) may be puzzled. Characters like Copland, Koussevitsky, Comden and Green, and Jerome Robbins are all featured with great historical accuracy and look the part, but if you didn't already know who these people were and understood their significance to Bernstein, then you would not appreciate how well they have been portrayed. It is almost as

---

1. Jamie Bernstein, *Famous Father Girl: A Memoir of Growing Up Bernstein* (New York: Harper, 2018).

though Cooper got just a little too much into the material to the point where he forgot that no one else knows these things except him and the Bernstein family.

However, let's get to the music. There is a lot of underscoring of Bernstein's compositions throughout the film, but the major conducting moments are a dream-sequence ballet of *On the Town* (which has Bernstein/Cooper dancing in it), a choral rehearsal of "Make Our Garden Grow" from *Candide*, the Mahler I referenced earlier, and selections from *Mass* (showing Bernstein composing at the keyboard). As a snapshot of Bernstein's output, much of this music is somewhat dissonant, which may surprise those who expected more Broadway.

I watched the film on Netflix with subtitles (the theatrical release was not available where I live) and every one of Bernstein's scores was identified in the subtitles. This very much enhanced my enjoyment of the film (especially since they were cleverly linked to the action not the time period in which they were being shown), but if you didn't know these were Bernstein's works, or what works they were, you would not have an appreciation either for Bernstein's compositions or for Cooper's (and his musical director's) choices in placing them. Those who knew the composer strictly from *West Side Story* (and most average viewers would), may be disappointed that very little of that score made it into the film, and that we never get to see it being performed nor experience its importance for his artistic life story. This may reflect his own wishes that he not be remembered only for the famous musical, and perhaps the family's wishes that works like *Mass* (the score is actually shown) are his real artistic legacy. Kudos do go to the family, who obviously had a lot of input into how their parents were portrayed: it is clear that they want Bernstein to be remembered as a serious classical artist, not just a composer of show tunes.

In short, I see *Maestro* as too much of an insider portrayal, yet I also feel that the insider perspective lends the film great artistic integrity. I do not know how many researchers Cooper may have engaged in this process, but the attention to historical detail is astonishing. With a few exceptions when he plays fast and loose with the facts in order to tell a more compelling story, I have never seen a biopic that has given this much care to the historical record. Right down to exact words that Felicia said to Bernstein in an argument and words she spoke when she was near to death, and numerous details about costuming, music, scenery, and dance, the care Cooper took to get this right is truly a testament to his work as an actor and director.

Apart from the small public controversy over the prosthetic nose, Cooper portrays Bernstein to an almost eerie degree. The look, the gestures, and especially the voice and visage of the older Bernstein is so accurate that the viewer forgets this is not actually Bernstein himself. His conducting lessons with Canadian Yannick Nézet-Séguin certainly

paid off, and he absolutely nails Bernstein's florid conducting style which makes those moments in the film completely believable. The acting is sensational. Cooper is able to do, without speaking, incredibly nuanced scenes like the one where he silently walks down the street with his former partner and a delicate conversation with his daughter Jamie about rumors of his sexual exploits at Tanglewood. If this performance doesn't deserve an Oscar, I don't know what would.

Sexuality was a big part of Bernstein's life, and he had many partners (some more serious than others) and dalliances before and during his marriage and after Felicia's death of course. This aspect is handled delicately and sensitively, and the arc that Cooper has decided to pursue is one leading up to his relationship with Tom Cothran, which was serious enough that it precipitated the breakdown of the marriage in real life. A scene depicting famous remarks about living the rest of his life as he wanted or needed shows Cothran standing in the wings both figuratively and literally. Most people don't realize how closeted gays had to be in the 1950s. Jerome Robbins informed on his colleagues during the McCarthy era explicitly because he was threatened with being outed, which would have had serious consequences to his career. Similarly, Bernstein married at a crucial point in his career and life to continue the impression that he was straight, as well as for his genuine love of Felicia, of course. The politics of this were quite complex. Arthur Laurents and Jerome Robbins, to name two of Bernstein's friends and colleagues, slept with both women and men (Laurents had a long relationship with the dancer Nora Kaye, for example), and although they became more exclusively gay in their later years, after Stonewall, it seemed that everybody was sleeping with everybody during this time period. Cooper seemed to understand or appreciate this dynamic, because even though Felicia knew Bernstein was a gay man when they married, he doesn't make this film either pro-gay or anti-gay. The only thing that seems a little off is that Felicia seems more upset by his sexuality only in the later years, when she herself had an important extra-marital affair (and perhaps others) that is never referred to or documented in the film. A more equal approach to the interplay in the relationship might have made this an even more interesting love story. As it is, Felicia is painted as the long-suffering wife of a sexually very active gay man.

At the time of this writing, the film has garnered Oscar nominations, including best film and best leading actors for Cooper and Mulligan. If it wins best film or best actor awards, more people are likely to see the film than those who already have. This is good for Bernstein. In the end, those of us who love and remember Bernstein want his legacy and his humanity to live on for another generation of listeners. Thirty years ago, every person on the street knew his fame and face. He was indeed a household name. In recent years, I have noticed that he has fallen out of this general renown. Given that he was possibly the most

important musical figure in the twentieth century, I find this disappointing and concerning. Those who are invested in Bernstein fervently hoped that this film would bring him alive to a new generation and remind the older generation why they loved him so. This is a lot to ask for one biopic that attempts to condense his illustrious life into two hours of storytelling. Although there might not be another Bernstein film in our time (and I doubt very much that there will), this is what we have, and for what Cooper has done in loving memory and tribute to Lenny I think I, and all of us, will be eternally grateful.

Elizabeth A. Wells, Mt. Allison University

[ewells@mta.ca](mailto:ewells@mta.ca)