

On Bradley Cooper's "Maestro": Glamor, Amnesia and Bisexual Angst

Sunday 26 May 2024, by [DRUCKER Peter](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2024).

"Maestro"

Directed by Bradley Cooper

Starring Carey Mulligan and Bradley Cooper

Netflix

Contents

- [Missing Politics](#)
- [Sex Has a History](#)
- ["Discretion"](#)
- [Gay Liberation](#)

BRADLEY COOPER'S *MAESTRO* is a labor of love. Cooper spent years studying Leonard Bernstein's life and looks and interviewing his family and friends, to the point of identifying with the character he plays. Once the movie was done, he confessed weeping in an interview, he missed Bernstein. [1]

As someone who as a child saw Bernstein conduct Young People's Concerts at the New York Philharmonic and later at Tanglewood in Massachusetts, I found Cooper's evocation of Bernstein uncanny. Bernstein's emotional intensity and podium theatrics, so unlike the buttoned-down style of many classical musicians who preceded him, are captured strikingly.

As a gay man whose life overlapped with Bernstein's, I couldn't help being captivated — at first — by the movie's frank and central portrayal of the man's bisexuality. Not that the fact is a revelation. But putting it front and center in a movie for a mass audience - an Oscar contender — about an icon of high culture is still no everyday occurrence. In this sense Cooper deserves credit for enlarging the space a bit more for sympathetic pictures of LGBTIQ life.

Missing Politics

As a left-wing queer activist I was less enthused, but neither surprised nor disapproving. I knew beforehand that *Maestro* wouldn't show Bernstein's politics, either in his early Communist-sympathizer days nor his later contribution to defending the Black Panthers. This is an understandable choice on Cooper's part.

A movie has much less time to tell a story than an article, let alone a book. It is necessarily selective. Cooper's choice is to focus on Bernstein's music and his personal life, especially his marriage with Felicia Montealegre Cohn Bernstein.

For Bernstein himself, music and his personal life mattered more than politics, so this choice of focus (besides being good box office) is understandable and legitimate.

Cooper's neglect of history, however, does sow some confusion even about Bernstein's creative work. The movie for example reverses the chronology of *West Side Story* and *Candide*, showing a production of *Candide* only after *West Side Story*, which came later.

Whatever the reasons, this obscures the fact that *Candide* was in the last analysis a Cold War-era dismissal of the possibility of human or societal perfectibility, while *West Side Story*, toward the end of the 1950s, was a civil rights-era indictment of racism. Perhaps this is nitpicking.

In *Maestro's* narrative of its protagonists' personal life, the fact that (as critics have noted) Carey Mulligan gives a luminous performance as Montealegre, outshining Cooper's own, is a big plus. Mulligan is moving as an intelligent, sensitive woman beguiled and hurt by the bisexual man she loves — but the movie ignores her own activism for civil rights and liberties and against the Vietnam War. [2]

The film barely touches on Montealegre's distinguished acting career. And it erases some of her relational history, such as the relationship she had with another actor after her first engagement with Bernstein was broken off.

Sex Has a History

The problem is that personal life, too, as the women's movement declared half a century ago, is political. And as historians of gender and sexuality have explored over the decades, it has a history. By consistently ignoring that history, *Maestro* does no justice to Montealegre and Bernstein's relationship.

Even leaving aside the CP and the Panthers, politics cannot be erased from Bernstein and Montealegre's story. Becoming a star conductor required Bernstein to trim his sails personally as well as politically.

On one level, to end the CBS blacklist that was in effect from 1951 to 1956, and to get back the passport that the State Department took away from him in 1953, he had to write a denunciation of the Soviet Union, turning his back on the anti-Cold War and fellow-traveling stance that he displayed as late as 1949 at the Waldorf Peace Conference. [3]

At another level, to be a marketable star in the mass culture, he had to be married. And he knew it. He played on it for example in the way he sold himself in an application to the Boston Symphony in 1949 as a good family man. [4]

Here too, he was turning his back on his own past. The movie gives only a brief glimpse of the warm life Bernstein shared in the 1940s with other left-wing, gay musicians — Aaron Copland, Marc Blitzstein, Virgil Thomson, Ned Rorem — who made up what was called "the Homintern." Given that these were central figures in U.S. musical history, the fact that *Maestro* hardly gives any of them speaking parts is barely defensible.

The movie's account of Bernstein's decision to marry Montealegre reflects none of this. The implication is that since she was the great love of his life, marriage was natural and inevitable.

Besides flattening her relational history, the film never acknowledges that a bisexual like Bernstein might have legitimate reasons for reluctance to sign up to this institution and all the baggage it entails.

Maestro makes clear that Montealegre knew Bernstein was bisexual (or homosexual, as she put it in a letter to him) before she married him. "I know what you are," she says. Saying this spares

Bernstein an awkward revelation that he clearly shrinks from — and allows her to assume that she knows everything she needs to know without the trouble of asking him anything or listening to him.

“Discretion”

The movie also makes clear that the marriage for Bernstein involved a definite expectation of “discretion” — a polite way of saying he would be closeted, to the point of lying to his daughter Jamie (against his own inclination and at Montealegre’s insistence) about his attraction to men.

Marriage also meant that his central emotional commitment was to Montealegre. These are expectations that bisexuals and other queers have been rebelling against for decades.

A prevalent stereotype about bisexuals has been that they go to their different-sex partners for love and to their same-sex partners only for sex. Rejecting this stereotype has been crucial to bisexuals’ efforts to live with dignity.

More recently, radical queers have in championing polyamory rejected the assumption that people in multiple relationships need to treat one relationship as primary and the others as lesser. This, however, is an assumption that suffuses *Maestro*. Bernstein’s male lovers, while handsome and smart, are treated as ciphers compared to Montealegre.

Is this criticism anachronistic, imposing latter-day queer correctness on Bernstein’s very different times? Bernstein’s own contemporary queer circle suggests otherwise. Marc Blitzstein, for example, who was close to Bernstein for many years after Bernstein was the pianist for a 1939 production of his *The Cradle Will Rock*, stayed unashamedly gay while Bernstein became more closeted.

Blitzstein also remained resolutely left-wing (for example snubbing Jerome Robbins, Bernstein’s close collaborator on *West Side Story*, after Robbins was a friendly witness before HUAC). [5] These options were available in the New York theater world even at the height of McCarthyism (even if Stalinist anti-LGBTIQ attitudes left no real room for queer radicalism, as Harry Hay tacitly acknowledged in 1951 when he left the CP to found the Mattachine Society [6]).

Making Blitzstein’s choices would have closed off Bernstein’s stellar career as a conductor. But were Bernstein’s sacrifices worth it? As *Maestro* shows, Bernstein himself bemoaned the time and energy his conducting took away from his work as a serious composer of classical music.

For that matter, Bernstein’s musical achievements by no means received the unanimous praise the movie suggests — he got his share of pans, and other leading composers of the time like Pierre Boulez, at the height of the dominance of Schoenbergian serialism, looked down at Bernstein’s championing of Mahler and what they saw as his own old-fashioned compositions.

Gay Liberation

Over the years, Bernstein rethought the choices in his personal life he had made in the 1950s. Here again, politics and history are crucial to understanding why.

By the late 1960s, lesbian/gay liberation was opening up possibilities that had seemed nonexistent in the Cold War years. By exploring these possibilities, Bernstein inevitably put his marital arrangements with Montealegre in question and placed a major strain on their relationship.

Cooper’s film shows little understanding of these dynamics. It does acknowledge them in passing, in a scene where Bernstein, during a lecture, insists on a creative artist’s right to meet his own emotional needs, commenting that more people were asserting these rights at the time. But the way

Cooper films the scene subtly undermines Bernstein's message.

The conductor, in tight jeans and a sporty bandana, is shown from behind, denying viewers any chance to see his face and the long-suppressed feelings that his words express.

The film's focus is on Montealegre's movingly expressed pain. Skilled as Mulligan's performance is, it benefits from traditional cultural expectations: that a woman is bound to suffer, nobly if not silently, when the man she loves sows his wild oats.

The thought that Montealegre might herself have other sexual or emotional options is implicitly dismissed when one man she is attracted to turns out to be gay himself — "I seem to go for a certain type," she comments wryly.

There is never any suggestion in the film that Bernstein's male lovers might themselves have had deep feelings, or might have suffered when Bernstein put Montealegre first. Yet reviewers have pointed out that Bernstein's gay relationships were often far from casual. He had a close, primary relationship with his lover Tom Cothran — which he left when he went back to live with Montealegre after her cancer diagnosis in 1976.

After Montealegre died in 1978 — and Cothran died of AIDS [7] — Bernstein went on to spend most of the rest of his life in loving relationships with men. There is no space for this reality in Cooper's movie.

I imagine that Cooper would protest that his portrayal of Bernstein is a loving one, to the point of identification. Many *Maestro* fans, including queer fans, charmed by Cooper's fine performance and Bernstein's glamor, would probably indignantly reject any suggestion that the movie puts Bernstein's sexuality down.

To my mind, this only shows how deeply heteronormative condescension is still embedded even in purportedly tolerant and affectionate depictions of queers. *Maestro* may have taken us a step forward, but we still have a long way to go.

Peter Drucker

P.S.

- Against the Current No. 230, May/June 2024:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc230/glamor-amnesia-and-bisexual-angst/>
-

Footnotes

[1] Eve Buckland, 'Bradley Cooper WEEPS over 'missing' Leonard Bernstein,' Daily Mail Online, 26 Feb. 2024,
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-13128455/Bradley-Cooper-cries-missing-Maestros-Leonard-Bernstein.html>.

[2] Zachary Woolfe, "'Maestro' Won't Let Leonard Bernstein Fail," New York Times, Dec. 22, 2023.

[3] Joe A. Wilkins, "Bernstein at the Waldorf," Verso blog, 4 March 2024, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/bernstein-at-the-waldorf>.

back to text

[4] I discussed this episode in my review of Barry Seldes's biography Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician: "Leonard Bernstein's Tragedy," *Against the Current* 144, Jan.-Feb. 2010, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/bernstein-at-the-waldorf>.

[5] Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989, pp. 177-78, 343.

[6] John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 69; Stuart Timmons, *The Trouble with Harry Hay: Founder of the Modern Gay Movement*, Boston: Alyson Publications, 1990, pp. 159-61.

[7] Jennie Livingstone, "The False Note in Bradley Cooper's 'Maestro,'" *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 2024.