



Leonard Bernstein's Autograph

by Jeff Shapiro

First week of September, 1971. I was struggling with back-to-school tension, excited yet scared about starting sixth grade. I liked school, but it made me nervous. Piano lessons on Thursday afternoons were different. They counted as fun. I'd been playing since I was six. Nothing matched music's way of making life bearable.

Nerdy me.

Before the summer, I had begun with difficulty to read my way through the first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Four sharps in the key signature took a lot of deciphering,

plus scary clusters of accidentals in every measure. With lessons about to resume, I was impatient to learn the piece well enough to actually play the thing.

But this story is about my grandmother, not me. Nine months later, Nana would die from the brain tumor she had been fighting for two years. Still, social person that she was, she never lost her desire to kibitz with the other Jewish grandparents in her apartment building. Imperial Towers, right on Route 9 in Newton, Massachusetts. Not just kibitz; we're talking full-blown, major-league kvelling, when expressions of pride in the achievements of children and grandchildren came to sound more like competitive gloating.

"My Isaac got promoted to vice president of his firm," said a father to other fathers at the pinochle table to the side of the lobby. "Guess they know smarts when they see it."

"Rochelle, my daughter's youngest, graduated Radcliffe *magna cum laude* before the summer," said a grandmother to a klatch of grandmothers sunbathing by the

swimming pool in the 80-degree temperatures that lingered into early September. "She just started at BU Med. Wants to be a gynecologist, like her mother."

No parent, though, could top Mrs. Bernstein. Ever. No matter what others might boast about, Jennie Bernstein outgunned them all. "The day after tomorrow, I'm going to Washington," said Mrs. Bernstein while riding in the elevator with my grandmother. "They commissioned my Lenny to write a Mass to inaugurate the Kennedy Center down there. Lenny and the Kennedys go way back, you know. He composed music for the gala when Jack became president, and he conducted at Bobby's funeral in '68. So of course Jackie Kennedy — or I should say Jackie Onassis nowadays — asked Lenny to come up with something special to open the new Center for the Performing Arts. Premiere's on Wednesday. I can't wait to see it."

"You must be very proud," said Nana, impressed but undaunted. "My grandson's a musician, too. You should hear him play piano when he comes over. I'm sure he'd love to have a program from your son's concert in Washington. Autographed, please."

That's how it happened.

