

Berrigan musical sabotage 'plot' an FBI false alarm

WASHINGTON—The FBI failed to make good the late J. Edgar Hoover's startling charge that the Berrigan bunch had plotted to kidnap presidential adviser Henry Kissinger.

It now develops that the FBI turned in

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still another false alarm about a Berrigan "plot" to commit musical sabotage.

The G-men solemnly warned the White House that Father Dan Berrigan was conspiring with renowned conductor Leonard Bernstein to embarrass the Nixon Administration. The alleged scheme was to dupe high officials, possibly even the President himself, into applauding an antiwar oratorio at the Kennedy Center.

Delivered to Haldeman

The FBI warning, delivered to presidential assistant H. R. Haldeman on July 12, 1971, caused some backstage scurrying to make sure that Bernstein's production didn't contain a hidden antiwar message in Latin.

The confidential FBI message, citing a "valuable confidential source," advised that "Leonard Bernstein, noted conductor, has been commissioned by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., to compose music for the dedication of the Kennedy Center.

"Bernstein has composed a 'mass oratorium' and reportedly visited Daniel Berrigan at the Federal Correctional Institution (FCI), Danbury, Conn., within the past three weeks and persuaded him to compose words for his music."

Bernstein's mass "will follow an antiwar theme, will be in Latin and sung by a choir at the dedication ceremony," confided the FBI.

"Important government officials, perhaps even the President, are expected to attend this ceremony, and it is anticipated

they will applaud the composition without recognizing the true meaning of the words.

Embarrassing applause

"The source advised that the newspapers would be given the story the following day that the President and other high-ranking government officials applauded an anti-government song.

"The source advised that Daniel Berrigan had not completed composing the words, which when finished will have to be smuggled out of the FCI at Danbury."

Aghast, White House aides contacted Roger Stevens, head of the Kennedy Center, and asked whether he had heard about the bizarre Berrigan-Bernstein plot. "They didn't want to be embarrassed," Stevens told my associate, Joseph Spear.

'A wild rumor'

Stevens immediately got hold of Bernstein who denied the whole thing. The FBI report, he said, was "a wild rumor."

Nevertheless, to relieve White House anxiety, Nixon aide William Safire was invited to come to a rehearsal. Another presidential assistant, Leonard Garment, attended a dress rehearsal at the invitation of Bernstein himself.

Bernstein's mass was staged in September and was received with rave reviews. It contained only one line that could be interpreted as antiwar—"Dona Nobis Pacem" or "give us peace." President Nixon, in any case, did not attend.

Known friendship

The FBI's suspicions probably were aroused, according to Bernstein's manager, Harry Kraut, by Bernstein's known friendship with Daniel Berrigan. They had even discussed the possibility of collaborating on a future production, said Kraut.