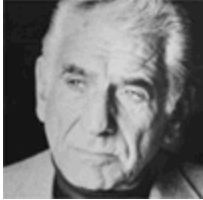


Leonard Bernstein



Leonard Bernstein Photo © Susech Batah, Bc

An introduction to the music of Bernstein by Edward Seckerson

There's a passage in the 'Sanctus' of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* - a song about the writing of a song. The Celebrant plucks tentatively at his guitar. He finds an E - a 'Mi.' But 'Mi alone is only mi.' He adds a second note, a G (Sol), and it's the right note, it's 'mi with sol.' And suddenly 'a song is beginning, is beginning to grow, take wing, and rise up singing.' It's the very essence of Bernstein - Bernstein on wings of song, a melody created in the singing of it, a melody with aspiration and reach. In Ivesian terms you might call it a Universal song, just as you might call *Mass* Bernstein's universal opus. History may yet recognize it as his most significant (and shamefully underrated) piece. It came upon us as the hopes and new-found innocence of the 1960's was beginning to fade. It was Bernstein's search for lost faith, his rallying call to human kind; it was a grand, theatrical reassertion of his belief in the power of music to transcend religious, social, and cultural barriers, to heal and to reunite. It was his creed - as musician, as human being.

And it rejoiced in a mad, jubilant eclecticism which was beyond mimicry, beyond parody, but rather strove to redefine myriad musical experiences in his own terms. A composer's music is rooted in experience, and Bernstein experienced, needed to experience it all - Jazz, Broadway, Classicism, Expressionism, popular song, Jewish chant, Gospel, Latin, Rock, Swing, you name it. But perhaps eclectic is the wrong word. Perhaps evolutionary is better. Everything comes of something else, everything is in some sense derivative - Bernstein truly believed that. And he was able to take hold of the concept and absorb it into his own compositional procedures. A work like *Serenade* for violin, strings, harp, and percussion is entirely self-perpetuating, one idea begetting another in a kind of melodic chain-reaction. That something as beautiful and long-breathed as its slow movement could have metamorphosed so naturally from one impatient fragment of its angular scherzo is all part of the miracle; or - on a more mundane level - the sleight of hand.

Bernstein revelled in the gamesmanship of composition. But at close of play, it was always the spirit that moved. Beyond the numerology of his ballet *Dybbuk*, beyond even the hard-edged indeterminacy of a score like *Jubilee Games*, he needed to reach out, to touch people. Out of formality came informality, out of complexity, clarity, out of dissonance, consonance. He enjoyed lending soul to

serialism, pulling a torch song out of a tone-row. There was a musical method in every miracle. Consider the Coplandesque tune in the third movement of his *Kaddish* (*Symphony No. 3*) - a butterfly emerging from the 12-tone chrysalis of the first movement; consider the all-pervasive augmented fourth - the tritone - in *West Side Story*: a melodic colour at once distinctive and unifying. Consider *Age of Anxiety* (*Symphony No. 2*) where a set of variations becomes the metaphor for a dream odyssey, a voyage of the soul, where a jazzy piano-led 'Masque' is its dénouement. Pure theatre.

But then Bernstein was always, in a sense, 'on stage.' His way with words was perhaps the most finely tuned of all his gifts. *Songfest* is a songsmith's masterwork: *Songfest* sings America. Even in dance, Bernstein somehow caught the American vernacular. The Bernstein orchestral sound was born in the dance music: the nighthawk clarinets, the brass in high registers, the waves of pulsating percussion. The New York City of *On the Town* and *Fancy Free* struts and swaggers and bustles and broods. In *West Side Story*, the same streets gyrate to a very different beat. But Tony's 'Something's Coming' had wider implications for Bernstein. He dreamed that out of the American musical would grow a kind of American opera. With *Candide* he flirtatiously paid homage to European operetta (not so much pastiche as celebration); with the opera *A Quiet Place* he took the first giant step toward a future unknown.

Was he a nagging optimist or extremely hopeful pessimist? If there is one common factor uniting all of Bernstein's major work, it is a sense of catharsis, of reconciliation and new beginnings emerging from the confusion, disillusionment and tragedy of our times. In 'Some Other Time' from *On the Town*, a sigh of regret is written into the melodic line: 'Where has the time all gone to? Haven't done half the things we want to...' That shall be Lenny's epitaph.

Edward Seckerson, 1994

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