

The Literary Bernstein

“It is certainly not an intimate revelation ... to say that Lenny loved words every bit as much as he loved notes,” wrote Leonard Bernstein’s brother Burton. His love for words, word games and crossword puzzles naturally carried over to his love for literature. Some of his most memorable compositions are inspired by great literature and poetry. Voltaire’s *Candide* and Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* are obvious examples. And yet literature inspired many other compositions. *Serenade for Violin, Percussion and Strings* is a compositional treatment of Plato’s *Symposium*, *Symphony No. 2: The Age of Anxiety* is inspired by the W. H. Auden poem of the same name. The monumental orchestral song cycle *Songfest* unites American poetry with Bernstein’s uniquely American music, and Bernstein’s last song cycle *Arias and Barcarolles* includes Bernstein’s own literary words set to his music. Thanks to Bernstein’s craftsmanship and unerring dramatic instincts, these texts come vibrantly alive in his settings.

Songfest (1977)

41

30th Anniversary: 2007

A Cycle of American Poems for Six Singers (S, M, A, T, Bar, B) and Orchestra

3(III=picc).2.corA.2.EIcl.bcl.2.dbn-4.3.3.1-timp.perc(5)-harp-pft(=cel/elec pft)-elec.bass-strings

FP: October 1977 Kennedy Center, Washington, DC

Clamma Dale (S), Rosalind Elias, (M), Nancy Williams, (M), Neil Rosenshein, (T); John Reardon, (B), Donald Gramm, (Bbar); National Symphony Orchestra conducted by Leonard Bernstein

Reduced Orchestration by Charlie Harmon, Sid Ramin, and George Steel (1996)

2(II=picc).2(II=corA).2(1=Ebcl,II=bcl).2-2.2.2.0-timp.perc(2)

FP: 9 Oct 1996 Kaufmann Concert Hall, 92nd St Y, NYC Janus Ensemble conducted by Michael Barrett

This masterly cycle for six singers and orchestra draws from the writings of Walt Whitman, Julia de Burgos, Langston Hughes, June Jordan, Gertrude Stein, e.e. cummings, and others, touching in typical fashion on love, social issues, the joys and trials of daily life, and the creative impulse itself. While the integral cycle makes a superb addition to any program, the movements can be excerpted according to your available vocal forces:

Soprano: *A Julia de Burgos*

Mezzo-soprano: *Music I Heard with You*

Alto: *What My Lips Have Kissed*

Tenor: *Zizi’s Lament*

Baritone: *The Penny Candy Store...*

Bass: *To What You Said*

Soprano and bass: *Storyette H. M.*

Mezzo-soprano and baritone: *I, Too Sing America; Okay “Negroes”*

II *Songfest* has been paired with:

William Schuman *Academic Festival Overture* and Barber *Cello Concerto* (Philharmonia Orchestra/Slatkin, with *Songfest* as second half)

Schumann *Symphony No. 2* (New York Philharmonic/Bernstein, with *Songfest* as second half)

 Recommended recording:

National Symphony Orchestra/Bernstein – DG 4698292

 M-051-90890-5 Vocal score

Candide (Suite for Orchestra) (1998)

18'

Eight musical numbers from *Candide* for large orchestra, arranged by Charlie Harmon

2.picc.2.corA.2.bcl.2.dbn—4.3.3.1—timp.perc(3/4)—harp—strings

FP: 14 January 1999 The Ordway Theatre, St. Paul, Minnesota Minnesota Orchestra conducted by Eiji Oue

Not only did Bernstein base his comic operetta *Candide* on Voltaire's great novel, but he enlisted a veritable "Who's Who" of American authors to work on the libretto, including Richard Wilbur, Lillian Hellman and Dorothy Parker. The work's overture is a well-known favorite, of course, but this *Suite for Orchestra* enables audiences to discover some of the work's lesser-known music in a program-friendly instrumental version lasting eighteen minutes. The selections include *You Were Dead You Know*, *Paris Waltz*, *Bon Voyage*, *Drowning Music/The King's Barcarolle*, *Ballad of Eldorado*, *I Am Easily Assimilated*, *The Best of All Possible Worlds*, and the touching finale, *Make Our Garden Grow*. The operetta itself is available for concert performance in both a full-length version lasting 110 minutes, and a vocal suite (50 minutes).



Recommended recording:

Minnesota Orchestra/Eiji Oue – Reference Recordings RR-87HDCD

Serenade after Plato's "Symposium" (1954)

30'

For solo violin, strings, harp, and percussion

Solo violin; timp.perc(5)—harp—strings

FP: 9 September 1954 Teatro La Fenice, Venice Isaac Stern, violin; Israel Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Leonard Bernstein

Based on Plato's dialogue *Symposium*, *Serenade* is one of Bernstein's most elegantly fashioned orchestral works. Though it features a prominent role for the solo violin, lyricism generally wins out over virtuoso display. In Plato's *Symposium* – the title literally means "drinking party" – some of Athens's greatest minds gather to offer their thoughts on the true nature of love. As *Serenade's* five movements unfold, Bernstein follows the structure of Plato's drama, capturing the emotional essence of each speaker's argument, as well as the dynamics of their interlocking friendships. Plato's participants come to realize that true love is a desire for self-immortalization and for perpetual possession of the Good and Beautiful – an insight that elicits some of Bernstein's most exquisite music.



Serenade has been paired with:

Bernstein *Overture to "Candide"* and Tchaikovski *Symphony No. 6 "Pathétique"* (New York Philharmonic/Bernstein)



Recommended recording:

Gidon Kremer, violin; Israel Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Leonard Bernstein
DG: 2531196 p 4235832 GH: 4479572



M-051-21136-4 Study score; M-051-35105-3 Violin and piano

Arias and Barcarolles (1988, 1993)

31'

20th Anniversary: 2008

Version 1 for mezzo-soprano, baritone, string orchestra version and percussion (two players) (1988)
Arranged by Bright Sheng

FP: 22 September 1988 Tilles Center, Long Island University, NY Susan Graham, mezzo-soprano; Kurt Ollman, baritone; New York Chamber Orchestra conducted by Gerard Schwarz

Version 2 for mezzo-soprano, baritone, and chamber orchestra (1993)
Orchestrated by Bruce Coughlin

1(=picc).1(=corA).1(=Ebcl,asax).1—2.1.0.0—perc(2)—strings(8.8.6.6.3 or 1.1.1.1.1)

FP: 26 September 1993 Barbican, London Frederica von Stade, mezzo-soprano; Thomas Hampson, baritone; London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas

Arias and Barcarolles began life as a song cycle for piano four-hands and four singers (SABB), but shortly afterwards, the composer reduced the vocal forces to two singers, mezzo-soprano and baritone. It is “literary” in a very personal sense: Bernstein wrote most of the texts for these eight songs himself. Its title stems from an encounter he had with President Eisenhower: following a 1960 White House concert in which Bernstein conducted Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, the President remarked, “I liked that last piece you played. I like music with a theme, not all them [sic] arias and barcarolles.” *Arias and Barcarolles* is a work of reminiscences, touching on birth, infancy, the mystery of creativity in conflict with mundane affairs, inconclusive liaisons, married life, and death. The final song, a wordless *Nachspiel*, is, in Jack Gottlieb’s words, “a simple Schubertian waltz,” It serves as a poignant ending to this, Bernstein’s last major work.

 Recommended recordings:

Orchestral version: Frederica von Stade, mezzo-soprano; Thomas Hampson, baritone; London Symphony Orchestra/Tilson Thomas – Deutsche Grammophon 439926-2

Piano version: Judy Kaye, mezzo-soprano; William Sharp, baritone; Michael Barrett and Steven Blier, piano – Koch International Classics 7000

 M-051-96600-4 Vocal score

Symphony No. 2 “The Age of Anxiety” (1949, 1965)

36'

For piano and orchestra

2.picc.2.corA.2.bcl.2.dbn—4.3.3.1—timp.perc(4)—cel—2harps(IIad lib)—pianino—strings

FP: 8 April 1949 Symphony Hall, Boston Leonard Bernstein, piano; Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Serge Koussevitzky

Like *Serenade*, Bernstein’s *Symphony No. 2 “The Age of Anxiety”* is a concertante work, and closely follows the action of a philosophically oriented literary source – in this case, W. H. Auden’s poem/dialogue of the same title. In Auden’s poem, four lonely people meet in a bar and try, through alcohol, to establish some kind of connection: ostensibly with each other, but ultimately with God. Says Bernstein, “The piano provides an almost autobiographical protagonist, set against an orchestral mirror in which he sees himself, analytical, in the modern ambience.” Bernstein’s intense personal identification with this poem, and with its characters’ dilemmas, gives this work its powerful emotional pull.

II *Symphony No. 2 "The Age of Anxiety"* has been paired with:
 Beethoven "*Egmont*" Overture and Brahms *Symphony No. 1* (New York Philharmonic/Bernstein)

 Recommended recording:

Lukas Foss, piano; Israel Philharmonic Orchestra/Bernstein – DG: 2530969; 2709077 p 4159642 GH; 4452452 GC2

 M-051-09465-3 Full score-

Two Love Songs (Rilke)

4:30

Orchestrated by Sid Ramin

2.0.2.0—timp.perc—harp—strings

In 1949, Bernstein set a pair of texts by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, the first of which, *Extinguish My Eyes*, was introduced that same year by mezzo-soprano Jennie Tourel at Town Hall in New York. Rilke's text begins, "Extinguish my eyes, I'll go on seeing you/Seal my ears, I'll go on hearing you." It wasn't until 1963 that she premiered the second song, *When My Soul Touches Yours*, which opens with the tender lines, "When my soul touches yours a great chord sings/How can I tune it then to other things?" Subsequently, Sid Ramin, who helped to orchestrate many of Bernstein's most famous works, created this instrumental arrangement.

The Literary Bernstein: Further Programming

- Present pre-concert readings of texts by Auden, Rilke, Voltaire, etc.
- Hold panel discussions on:
 - Leonard Bernstein as Author – many of his essays are gathered in *Findings*, *The Joy of Music*, and *The Infinite Variety of Music*
 - The World According to Leonard Bernstein (philosophical outlook)
 - Leonard Bernstein at Harvard (early years, formative influences)
 - Candide* : Bernstein vs. Voltaire
- Additional resources are available at www.leonardbernstein.com/research.html

The two previous issues of *Bernstein Bound* – **Leonard Bernstein's America** and **Programming West Side Story for Orchestra** – are available on request. Coming up next: **Bernstein and Dance!**

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