

About the Music

by Andy & Beth Buelow

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

***West Side Story* Symphonic Dances *On the Waterfront*, Symphonic Suite *West Side Story* Concert Suite No. 2**

Art never stopped a war and never got anybody a job. That was never its function. Art cannot change events. But it can change people. It can affect people so that they are changed... because people are changed by art—enriched, ennobled, encouraged—they then act in a way that may affect the course of events—by the way they vote, they behave, the way they think.

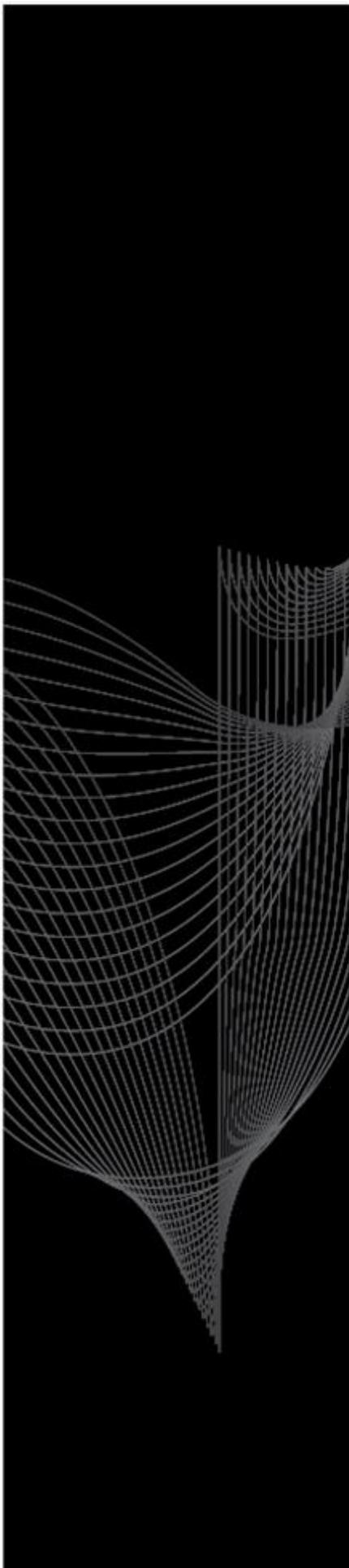
Leonard Bernstein

The global celebration titled “Leonard Bernstein at 100” officially began on August 25, 2017 and continues for exactly one full year; Symphony Tacoma’s season opening concert featuring Bernstein’s music is among the earliest events worldwide—and first in the South Sound. Composer, conductor, educator, pianist, cultural ambassador—Leonard Bernstein filled all these roles and more with aplomb. Igor Stravinsky admiringly termed him “a department store of music.”

Born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Leonard Bernstein grew up during a time when Western music was exploding with different sounds and styles. Still recovering from the 1913 premiere of *Rite of Spring*, the classical world was set reeling again just six years later when—in a seeming complete about-face—Stravinsky launched into his sparse, crisp Neoclassical period with *L’Histoire du Soldat*. Meanwhile, Schoenberg’s Second Viennese School was busy advancing its new Twelve-Tone system, a controversial method that did away with all vestiges of tonality. Bartok was incorporating percussiveness, rhythmic irregularity, and Eastern European folk music into his compositions. Varese was introducing a highly experimental musical aesthetic he termed “organized sound.” Electronic music was heard for the first time with the introduction of the theremin. Escaping from its Ragtime cradle, Jazz was radiating from the hottest clubs of New Orleans, St. Louis, and Chicago, influencing composers from Copland to Milhaud, Ravel to Shostakovich. Radio and vinyl records made listening in the privacy of your home, whenever you liked, widespread for the first time.

It must have been a heady mix for a budding young musician!

Bernstein attended Harvard University and the Curtis Institute of Music, studying with Walter Piston and Fritz Reiner, among others. In 1940, he attended the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s newly created summer institute, Tanglewood, under the tutelage of famed conductor Serge Koussevitzky (whose assistant he



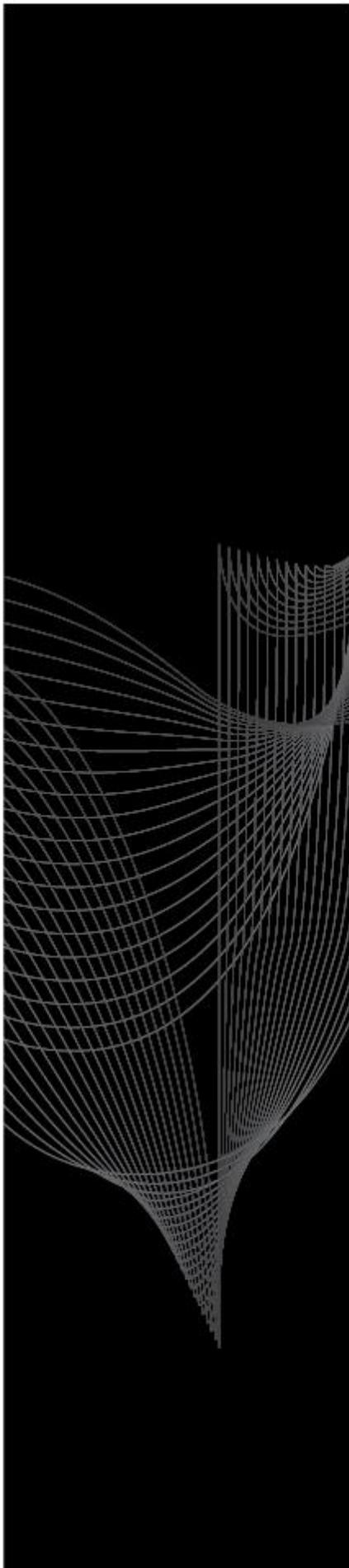
later became). He received his first permanent conducting job in 1943, serving as Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic. On November 14, 1943, he was called upon to substitute (on a scant several hours' notice, with no rehearsal, and after a night out partying) for an ailing Bruno Walter at Carnegie Hall. The concert included Richard Strauss' *Don Quixote*, Wagner's Prelude to *Die Meistersinger*, and works by Schumann and Rosza. Broadcast nationally on radio, the concert caused an instant sensation and made Bernstein a celebrity almost overnight.

As Music Director of the New York Philharmonic from 1958 to 1969, he led more concerts with the orchestra than any previous conductor. His famed *Young People's Concerts* were broadcast on national television for fourteen seasons, well beyond his tenure as Music Director. He was an advocate of American music, particularly championing the works of Aaron Copland. (A gifted pianist in his own right, Bernstein became especially known for his performances of Copland's Piano Variations.) He is best remembered, however, for his fresh, sparkling interpretations of Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms, Sibelius and Schumann—and his championship of Mahler led to a resurgence of interest in that nearly-forgotten composer. For an entire generation, Bernstein came to exemplify and symbolize a new, distinctly American classical maestro: young, handsome, charismatic, approachable, debonair, passionate, and compassionate. (Though he had his critics: Oscar Levant famously quipped "he uses music as an accompaniment to his conducting.")

His fame as conductor tended to overshadow that of composer, but in works spanning chamber music, symphonies, opera, film and Broadway, Bernstein revealed himself as a gifted composer who gathered, absorbed and synthesized the sounds of his age—from Neoclassicism to jazz—and made them his own. According to conductor John Mauceri, he projected a message "of understanding and hope employing both complex and simple forms and styles—yet always sounding like 'Bernstein.'"

A famous quote is characteristic of Bernstein's philosophy: "Let this be our response to violence: Let us make music more beautifully, more eloquently and more devotedly than ever before."

Bernstein's first and last foray into the hoary world of film composition was his 1954 score for *On the Waterfront*, starring Marlon Brando in a tale of a longshoreman's struggle against corrupt union bosses. The experience was such as to sour him for life against motion picture soundtrack scoring—where the music is "the least important part," as Bernstein revealed to *The New York Times*. "I repeated this little maxim to myself like a good Coué disciple, as I found myself pleading for a beloved G-flat." The resulting score was well-received, however, netting the film one of its 12 Oscar nominations. Bernstein rescued the music a year later by reworking it into the suite being presented during tonight's concert.



As for *West Side Story*, few works for the theatre are today more beloved—but it did not start out that way. Multiple producers turned down the show, dismissing it as dark, depressing, and an “impossible project.” Bernstein’s music was deemed difficult and rangy, requiring the singers to master challenging melodic leaps (among them the famous tritone interval in “Maria”). Columbia Records initially declined to record a cast album, fearing that the music lacked commercial appeal. However, the original Broadway run proved a success. The *New York Daily News* called it “fascinatingly tricky and melodically beguiling,” noting that “it marks the progression of an admirable composer.”

West Side Story is set in 1950s New York City, with the Montagues being replaced by the Anglo Jets, and the Capulets by the rival Puerto Rican Sharks. On June 12, 2002, the American Film Institute (AFI) named *West Side Story* as the third greatest love story of all time. The movie adaptation was nominated for eleven Academy Awards in 1961; it went on to win ten of them, a record surpassed only by two other films: *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Titanic* (1997).

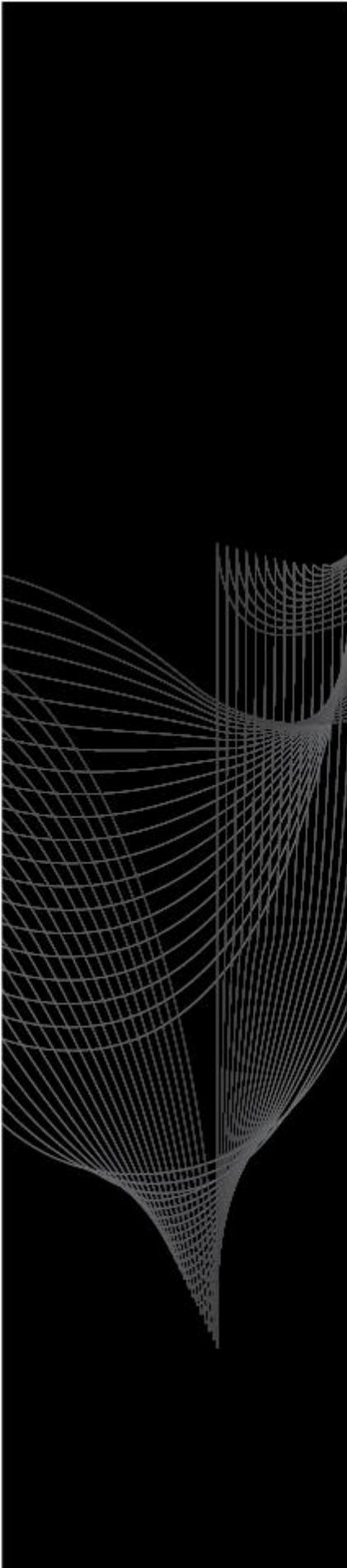
The magical partnership of Bernstein and lyricist Stephen Sondheim resulted in energetic, emotional music paired with clever, memorable lyrics. Bernstein and Sondheim also worked together on *Candide*; in fact, the music for “One Hand, One Heart” was originally earmarked for *Candide*, with a whole other set of lyrics.

The genesis of *West Side Story* can be traced back to the following log entry made by Bernstein on January 6, 1949:

“Jerry R. [Jerome Robbins] called today with a noble idea: a modern version of ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ set in slums at the coincidence of Easter-Passover celebrations. Feelings running high between Jews and Catholics. Former: Capulets, latter: Montagues. Juliet is Jewish. Friar Lawrence is a neighborhood druggist. Street brawls, double death -- it all fits. But it’s all much less important than the bigger idea of making a musical that tells a tragic story in musical comedy terms, using only musical comedy techniques, never falling into the “operatic” trap. Can it succeed? It hasn’t yet in our country. I’m excited. If it can work – it’s a first. Jerry suggests Arthur Laurents for the book. I don’t know him, but I do know ‘Home of the Brave’ at which I cried like a baby. He sounds just right.”

The story was originally based on religious conflicts and was to be called “East Side Story.” Over time, it became apparent that this premise was not generating the necessary creative spark. The evolution of the story into taking place in the Upper West Side of New York and focusing on racial tensions proved to be the catalyst that got the project off the ground.

Bernstein arranged the set of Symphonic Dances in 1961. The work derives its name not simply because it is set for symphony orchestra, but because the structure of the score – with its use of thematic statement, development and resolution – is reminiscent of



the symphonic form. The Concert Suite No. 2, introduced posthumously in 1992, includes “I Feel Pretty,” “The Jet Song,” “America” and “Tonight.”

West Side Story rapidly entered mainstream culture and remains there to this day. Bernstein’s music has been covered by jazz musicians like Buddy Rich, Oscar Peterson, Stan Kenton and Chick Corea; and rock and pop artists such as Little Richard, The Nice, Alice Cooper, Selena, Trisha Yearwood, and Salt-n-Pepa, among many more.