

Bernstein - A Star and his Stripes

As conductor William Eddins once said in a Symphony Australia program booklet: ‘This was always the big rap against Leonard Bernstein. I still hear composers go, “Oh he wasted so much energy on Broadway”, and I look at them, I’m like: “You are nothing. You are less than nothing. You are a musical amoeba compared to Leonard Bernstein. They’re still going to be doing *West Side Story* 300 years from now, long after you are a footnote to a footnote, so get over your bad self’.

From reading Humphrey Burton’s biography – as comprehensive as it is - you possibly can’t even come close to half an understanding of the man. Don’t believe me? See below.

Not only was he chief conductor and then laureate for life of the New York Philharmonic; he helped establish the Israel Philharmonic, the Sapporo Music Festival in Japan, and Europe’s Schleswig-Holstein Festival, replicating there the mentoring work he’d done with young people at Tanglewood. Some of Australia’s favourite musicians were beneficiaries of Bernstein’s musical beneficence – De Waart, Stenz, Alsop, Mendelow... He championed American composers, and on his first State Department tour conducted (in the same program) William Schuman’s *American Overture*, Barber’s *Second Essay*, Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, Roy Harris’ Third Symphony and Copland’s *El salón México*. The relationship with Copland is important. They were like a duumvirate of American music, jointly responsible for creating an American orchestral sound, with ‘Lenny’s’ popular instincts creating a snappier edge. They first met when Bernstein turned up at a party at Aaron Copland’s apartment, and boasted that he could play Copland’s Piano Variations. ‘Play it’, said Copland. ‘It’ll ruin your party,’ said Bernstein. ‘Not this party,’ said Copland. And Bernstein played. Later Bernstein prepared the piano reduction of Copland’s *El salón Mexico*, and conducted Copland’s work around the world. He gave the European premiere of Copland’s Symphony No.3, and reported back: ‘Too long, said some. Too eclectic, said Shostakovich (he should talk!). It lacks a real Adagio, said Kubelick. Not up my street, said Wee Willie Walton. And everyone found Chaikovsky’s Fifth in it, which only proves their insanity...’

Towards the end of his career, Bernstein leaned towards Europe. He created a legendary *Fidelio*, *Rosenkavalier* and *Falstaff*, enjoyed a close relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic, and was the first conductor to record the complete symphonies of Mahler, but he continued to create spectacular landmarks on the American musical scene. His performance of Haydn’s *Mass in Time of War* at the height of Vietnam drew 15,000 people to Washington’s National Cathedral, massively snubbing Richard Nixon’s inauguration night.

Bernstein was an icon of American life. When Felicia Bernstein threw a cocktail party to raise funds for Black Panthers illegally detained, Tom Wolfe chipped out a place in social history for Bernstein and his wife when he described them in *New York* magazine as ‘radical chic’. He hung out with presidents (‘Come and see us anytime,’ Jimmy Carter wrote on his place card at a White House dinner). Bernstein the giant wanted to make giant contributions to the symphonic repertoire. Yet how often does anyone listen to *Kaddish*, *Jeremiah*, *Facsimile* or *A Quiet Place*, Concerto for Orchestra, *Songfest* or *Arias and Barcarolles*? Is there a problem with his music?

Towards the end of Bernstein’s life, when he was struggling with projects of great import (at one stage he wanted to write a Holocaust opera), Tom Cothran wisely wrote him:

It’s clear to one and all, and should be clear to you as well, that you should be writing first-class quick musical comedy that borrows from everywhere (including Wagner, if you want) but that throws out the heavy plush...Your way is to play one thing against another, and when you are to glide along just above the edge of irony, the result is good. You get so serious. It’s the *knell*.

Bernstein didn’t need this advice in those pieces inspired by New York, *West Side Story*, *Fancy Free* or *On the Town*. But he had so much energy, and so much to say. He’d saddle himself with the need to ‘be significant’. In Symphony No.3 *Kaddish* (1963), a human being, the narrator, calls God to account, consoles Him, disillusions Him and then invites Him to a more mature relationship. We

probably wouldn't mind the tortuousness if we didn't hear any words, as in the psychological ballet *Facsimile*, or if the words were in Hebrew as in *Jeremiah* (Symphony No.1), but in Bernstein's English you wonder if the Job-like railing is from someone with no more cause for complaint than a suburban mortgagee. Perhaps Bernstein could have heeded the advice sometimes given to playwrights: let the characters drive the work and the subtext take care of itself.

'Bernstein's music is "conductor's music",' say those who try to find a reason why the serious pieces 'don't work'. He'd pull an appropriate trick out of the ragbag of conductor's repertoire whenever he needed to convey depth, say the detractors. A conductor who specialised in Mahler would have no shortage of these. But eclecticism is not really the problem. *Mass*, once described as 'the greatest mélange of styles since the ladies' magazine recipe for steak fried in peanut butter and marshmallow sauce' is one of his most successful pieces (performed somewhere in the world each month). It works because it knows what it is: a musical. Commissioned by Jacqueline Onassis for the opening of the Kennedy Center in 1971, *Mass* is a hippy-era comment on faith, complete with *Godspell*-type characters (the librettist was Stephen Schwartz), within the context of the Latin mass, but if you're not offended, it's catchy and coheres. Its eclecticism is part of a time-honoured American tradition.

Another work that started life as a musical, *Candide* (1954), tells the story of a young man who struggles through life to maintain his mentor's philosophy that 'all is best in this best of all possible worlds'. The overture will always be an effective concert opener, but Bernstein and the original co-writer, Lillian Hellman, wanted *Candide* to carry a critique of Eisenhower's USA, a land of House Committee investigations into Un-American Activities. *Candide*, it seems, ended up between stools, not quite musical, not quite opera. Three writers and six lyricists later, and it seems no-one was any closer to a definitive form. The 'final version' of 1989 put back more music, but did it fix the frame? Had no-one sat down at the start and worked out what sort of piece it should be? Perhaps not, since the music had apparently just gushed out of Bernstein.

As a child visiting relatives in Connecticut and listening to Uncle Harry Levy's phonograph, Bernstein made no distinction between the 'Suicidio' aria from *La gioconda* and Barney Rose's *Barney Google* ('with the Goo-Goo-Googly Eyes'). As an adult he would've given 'my balls to have written four bars of [*Così fan tutte*]'. Sure Bernstein had serious concerns: psychoanalysis and the condition of Modern Man, the crisis of faith in a violent century, his Judaism and patriotism. He could certainly 'do' uplifting, as when Marlon Brando walks up the gangway, bleeding but triumphant, at the end of *On the Waterfront*.

But was he better off when these things crept out of his unconscious. Bernstein was proudly patriotic when it was patriotic to be proudly liberal, but his Bicentennial gift to the nation, *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, written with no less a collaborator than *Camelot*'s Alan Jay Lerner, was a flop. 'School pageant,' said one critic. 'Only two titans could have had a failure like this,' said *West Side Story* collaborator Jerome Robbins. *Songfest* (1977), on the other hand, the other bicentennial gift, is sadly little known, a moving tribute to Bernstein's favourite American poets while aiming to be no more than a song cycle.

Left to his unconscious Bernstein's music could throw up interesting conjunctions of pet themes. Voltaire closes *Candide* with a throwaway line: "There is a chain of events in this best of all possible worlds..." "That's true enough," said Candide, "but we must go and work in the garden." Bernstein turns this ending into a virtual anthem, 'Make my Garden Grow'. But if you compare it with 'To Burn with Pride' from *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, the family resemblance of musical phrases at key points of the two texts reveal interesting parallels:

Candide

You've been a fool
And so have I...

We're neither pure nor wise nor good...

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

To burn with pride
And not with shame...

Not hide my head when the flag goes by...

And make our garden grow.

I love this land. It will prevail.

And then there is an additional poignancy when you hear the opening chords of 'To Burn with Pride' opening Bernstein's setting of Whitman's poem 'To What you Said...' in *Songfest*, arguably his only, tentative, public declaration of homosexuality.

American music adds important strands to our orchestral repertoire, orchestral expressions of feelings that are common to many people in this day and age, when we have passed by the 'dark-brown Angst of Vienna' (in Steve Reich's words). As only an American could, Leonard Bernstein bridged the divide between pop and classical. But he could provide perfect examples of those other American qualities – sentimentality of a 'Barber's *Adagio*' kind, pep, power, big 'lump in the throat' pride. Brando's walk up the gangway occupies similar emotional territory to the pioneers crossing the prairie in Copland's *Billy the Kid*. Bernstein should never have gotten hung up over whether his European mentors would have approved.

Did Bernstein ever do as well as he hoped? Perhaps when he least expected it. In 1981, writing *A Quiet Place*, which he hoped would be the great American opera (as if *West Side Story* didn't count), he incorporated the operetta *Trouble in Tahiti*, written in 1954. Does *A Quiet Place*'s further exploration of a dysfunctional family add anything to the operetta it swallows? *Trouble in Tahiti* is a sad portrayal of a stale suburban marriage. It is the closest Bernstein got, I dare say, to a Mozartean balance between lightness and depth. There is of course arty conceit: a trio of singers designated as a 'Greek Chorus', but they sing in the style of those Mitch Miller voices that used to advertise Pepsodent and Kemdex on black-and-white TVs in the Eisenhower era, creating a sitcom-like surface that suppresses self-indulgence.

Bernstein was truly a big American. Not everything he wrote hit the mark, but much of what's best in Bernstein is the best of American music, and it doesn't have to be 'serious' to be great.

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