



Photo: Jack Mitchell

Composer Profile: Leonard Bernstein (1918 – 1990)
Programme Notes: West Side Story Choral Selection
Chichester Psalms

Leonard Bernstein was an American composer, conductor, author, music lecturer, educator, humanitarian and pianist.

He is considered to be one of the most important figures in the history of American classical music, and one of the most important conductors of his time; being the first American conductor to receive international acclaim; the first American to conduct at La Scala, and to lead a major US symphony orchestra.

As a composer he redefined the sound of Americana, with his orchestral works such as *Candide* and *Mass*.

His musical *West Side Story* is still performed around the world, with notable productions on Broadway and in the West End and inspiring 2 films released in the 20th & 21st centuries.

He is credited with bringing the music of Gustav Mahler into the mainstream, recording all of his symphonies twice.

And was also the first composer to become a television and radio star.

Born in Massachusetts, he was the son of Jewish parents who immigrated from Rivne, a city now located in western Ukraine.

His grandmother insisted that his first name be Louis, but his parents always called him Leonard. Bernstein legally changed his name to Leonard when he was 18, shortly after his grandmother's death. To his friends and many others, Bernstein was simply known as "Lenny".

In Bernstein's early youth, his only exposure to music was the household radio and music at his synagogue on Friday nights.

When he was ten years old, his aunt deposited her upright piano at her brother's house and Bernstein began teaching himself piano and music theory, and was soon clamouring for lessons.

In summers, the Bernstein family would go to their vacation home where young Leonard conscripted all the neighbourhood children to put on shows ranging from Bizet's 'Carmen', to Gilbert & Sullivan's 'The Pirates of Penzance'. And he would often play entire operas or Beethoven symphonies with his younger siblings.

Bernstein's father was initially opposed to young Leonard's interest in music and attempted to discourage his son's interest by refusing to pay for his piano lessons. However, he took to giving lessons to young people in his neighbourhood (one of his students, Sid Ramin, became Bernstein's most frequent orchestrator and lifelong beloved friend). Eventually, his father supported his music education and took him to concerts as a teenager.

In 1932, he attended his first orchestral concert, hearing Ravel's *Boléro*, which made a tremendous impression on him, alongside George Gershwin.

In March the same year he played his first public piano performance at the New England Conservatory, and two years later, he made his solo debut with orchestra; with the Boston Public School Orchestra.

In 1935, Bernstein enrolled at Harvard College, where he studied music, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts cum laude in 1939, and went on to study at the Curtis Institute of Music, in Philadelphia; one of the world's top conservatoires.

He moved to New York City, supporting himself by coaching singers, teaching piano, and playing the piano for dance classes in Carnegie Hall, transcribing jazz and pop music, and publishing his work under the pseudonym "Lenny Amber". (*Bernstein* means "amber" in German).

In Nov 1943 Bernstein made his New York Philharmonic conducting debut, having recently been appointed assistant conductor. The Carnegie Hall concert was broadcast nationally on radio and received critical acclaim, and soon orchestras worldwide sought him out as a guest conductor.

Bernstein's asthma kept him from serving in the military during World War II. But in 1945, he was appointed Music Director of the New York City Symphony Orchestra, and immediately after the war he started to take up conducting appointments all over the world.

In 1946, he conducted in London, and at the International Music Festival in Prague. In 1947 he conducted in Tel Aviv, beginning a relationship with Israel that lasted until his death. In 1953, Bernstein was the first American to conduct opera at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan: Cherubini's "Medea" with Maria Callas.

In 1951, Bernstein married the Chilean actress and pianist, Felicia Montealegre, and together they had three children, Jamie, Alexander, and Nina.

From 1958 to 1969, as principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Bernstein gave nearly 1000 concerts, leading more concerts with the orchestra than any previous conductor, and made innumerable recordings (c.400 in total), many of which remain definitive.

Bernstein sought to make music both intelligible and enjoyable to all. Through his educational efforts, including several books and the creation of two major international music festivals, Bernstein influenced several generations of young musicians.

Throughout the 1960s he had many of his written articles published, each being widely translated.

And, in the early 1970s gave a series of lectures at Harvard, which were subsequently published and televised.

Between 1958 and 1972 he devised and presented a remarkable series of 53 televised Young People's Concerts which introduced a generation of Americans to the 'classics' - and picked up four Emmy awards.

Bernstein was a leading advocate of American composers, particularly Aaron Copland. Although he was never a formal student of Copland's, Bernstein would regularly seek his advice, often citing him as his "only real composition teacher". The pair remained close friends for life.

While Bernstein's conducting repertoire encompassed the standard literature, he may be best remembered for his performances and recordings of Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, Sibelius and Mahler.

Particularly notable were his performances of the Mahler symphonies with the New York Philharmonic in the 1960s, sparking a renewed interest in the works of Mahler.

As a composer Bernstein wrote in many genres; including symphonic and orchestral music, ballet, film, theatre music, choral works, opera, chamber and ensemble music, and various vocal and instrumental solos and duets.

Bernstein rejoiced in opportunities to teach young musicians. His masterclasses in Boston were famous. He was instrumental in founding the Los Angeles Philharmonic Institute in 1982, created the world class Schleswig Holstein training orchestra, and founded various festivals, including the first international festival of its kind in Asia; the Pacific Music Festival in Japan.

Bernstein received numerous honours and accolades throughout the United States and Europe not only for music and music education, but for his life-long support of humanitarian causes and civil rights. World peace was a particular concern of Bernstein, supporting Amnesty International from its inception.

He protested against the Vietnam War, advocated nuclear disarmament, raised money for HIV/AIDS research and awareness, and engaged in multiple international initiatives for human rights.

Throughout his career he won 11 Emmy Awards, 2 Tony Awards, 16 Grammy Awards including a Lifetime Achievement Award, as well as numerous Academy Award nominations.

In 1990, at the age of 72, Bernstein announced that he would retire from conducting. Five days later he died at home of a heart attack, brought on by Mesothelioma, a relatively rare type of cancer at the time. A long-term smoker, Bernstein had emphysema from his mid-50s.

His wife had died 12 years earlier, of lung cancer, and the composer was buried next to her in Brooklyn New York.

According to his biographer, Bernstein was buried with a pocket score of Mahler's Fifth Symphony, a piece of amber, a lucky penny, a copy of Alice in Wonderland and a baton.

Bernstein's most well-known pieces include the spectacular West Side Story, Candide and the Chichester Psalms.

Candide

In the three years leading up to Bernstein's appointment as music director of the New York Philharmonic, Bernstein was simultaneously working on the scores for two Broadway shows. The first of the two was the operetta-style musical *Candide*.

Lillian Hellman originally brought Bernstein her idea of adapting Voltaire's novella.

Candide opened on Broadway in December 1956. Anxious about the parallels Hellman had deliberately drawn between Voltaire's story and the ongoing hearings conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, the collaborators were persuaded to cut their most incendiary sections prior to opening night.

While the production was a box office disaster, running for only two months for a total of 73 performances, the cast album became a cult classic, which kept Bernstein's score alive. There have been several revivals, with modifications to improve the book.

One of the elements of the music that have remained best known and performed over the decades are the Overture, which quickly became one of the most frequently performed orchestral compositions by a 20th century American composer.

West Side Story

Bernstein wrote *West Side Story* simultaneously with *Candide*. He collaborated with director and choreographer Jerome Robbins, book writer Arthur Laurents, and lyricist Stephen Sondheim.

The story is an updated retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, set in the mid-1950s in the slums of New York City's Upper West Side.

The Romeo character, Tony, is affiliated with the Jets gang, who are of white Northern European descent. The Juliet character is Maria, who is connected to the Sharks gang, recently arrived immigrants from Puerto Rico.

The original Broadway production opened on in September 1957, and ran for 732 performances.

Bernstein's score for *West Side Story* blends "jazz, Latin rhythms, symphonic sweep and musical-comedy conventions in ground-breaking ways for Broadway".

It was orchestrated by Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal following detailed instructions from Bernstein.

The dark theme, sophisticated music, extended dance scenes, and focus on social problems marked a turning point in musical theatre.

In 1960, Bernstein prepared a suite of orchestral music from the show, titled *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*, which continues to be popular with orchestras worldwide.

The 1961 film adaptation won ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture and a ground-breaking Best Supporting Actress award for Puerto Rican-born Rita Moreno playing the role of Anita.

The 2021 film by Steve Spielberg won one Oscar and was nominated for 7 Academy Awards.

West Side Story helped bridge the gap between classical and popular music. Bernstein himself said his main motivation for composing was "to communicate" and that all his pieces, including his symphonies and concert works, "could in some sense be thought of as 'theatre' pieces".

Chichester Psalms

In December 1963, the Very Reverend Walter Hussey, Dean of the Cathedral of Chichester in Sussex, England, wrote to Bernstein, requesting a piece for the Cathedral's 1965 music festival:

"The Chichester Organist and Choirmaster, John Birch, and I, are very anxious to have written some piece of music which the combined choirs could sing at the Festival to be held in Chichester in August, 1965, and we wondered if you would be willing to write something for us. I do realize how enormously busy you are, but if you could manage to do this we should be tremendously honoured and grateful. The sort of thing that we had in mind was perhaps, say, a setting of the Psalm 2, or some part of it, either unaccompanied or accompanied by orchestra or organ, or both. I only mention this to give you some idea as to what was in our minds."

The festival united the cathedral choruses of Chichester, Winchester and Salisbury.

Dr Hussey was a noted champion of the arts, having commissioned works by visual artists, poets, and composers. Among these are: an altarpiece painted by Graham Sutherland, stained glass windows by Marc Chagall, a sculpture depicting the Madonna and child by Henry Moore, a litany and anthem by W.H. Auden, and the cantata Rejoice in the Lamb by Benjamin Britten.

Despite Dr Hussey's initial wish for the setting of Psalm 2, Bernstein responded with a "suite of Psalms, or selected verses from Psalms," under the working title, Psalms of Youth.

Hussey was hoping that Bernstein would feel unrestrained for composing in a more popular vein despite the sacred nature of the assignment. Hussey wrote, *"Many of us would be very delighted if there was a hint of West Side Story about the music."*

Chichester Psalms juxtaposes vocal part writing most commonly associated with Church music (including homophony and imitation), with the Judaic liturgical tradition.

Bernstein made his own selection from the psalms, and decided to retain the original Hebrew for an ecumenical message, focused on the "brotherhood of Man".

Bernstein specifically called for the text to be sung in Hebrew (there is not even an English translation in the score), using the melodic and rhythmic contours of the Hebrew language to dictate mood and melodic character.

By combining the Hebrew with Christian choral tradition, Bernstein was implicitly issuing a plea for peace in Israel during a turbulent time in the young country's history.

Each of the three movements of *Chichester Psalms* contains one complete Psalm plus excerpts from another paired Psalm.

Musically, Bernstein achieved Dr Hussey's wish for the music to remain true to the composer's own personal style. The piece is jazzy and contemporary, yet accessible.

In a letter to Hussey, Bernstein characterized it as *"popular in feeling,"* with *"an old-fashioned sweetness along with its more violent moments."*

Chichester Psalms is one of Bernstein's most overtly Jewish works.

Significant in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, the number seven appears in the guise of the interval of a seventh maintained between tenors and basses in the difficult ten-bar introduction, along with seventh leaps in the alto and soprano melody.

Also, the rhythm throughout the following first movement is seven beats to the bar.

It was apparent, from the time of its sold-out world premiere at Philharmonic Hall in July 1965 conducted by the composer himself, that Bernstein had created a magically unique blend of Biblical Hebrew verse and Christian choral tradition; a musical depiction of the composer's hope for brotherhood and peace.

Chichester Psalms was recorded in 1986 conducted by Rickard Hickox, and with Bernstein's approval, the solo part was sung by Aled Jones, then a treble.

A 2003 recording was performed by Thomas Kelly (treble) and the Bournemouth Symphony Chorus and Orchestra, conducted by Marin Alsop, a former pupil of Bernstein.

In Nov 2018, as the finale of the *Bernstein in Chichester* celebrations to mark the centenary of Bernstein's birth, the choirs of Chichester Cathedral, Winchester Cathedral and Salisbury Cathedral joined forces again to sing the full work in Chichester Cathedral.

They were accompanied by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and conducted again by Marin Alsop.

Introduction:

- Psalm 108 (verse 2 in the King James Version; verse 3 in Hebrew)

Awake, psaltery and harp:

I will rouse the dawn!

The introduction (presented in the score as part of movement one) begins gathering energy. Word painting is used in that the dissonant sevenths present in every chord sound like clanging bells, indicating that we are being told to awaken in a deep and profound way.

First movement:

- Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all ye lands.

Serve the Lord with gladness.

Come before His presence with singing.

Know that the Lord, He is God.

He made us, and we are his.

We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

Come unto His gates with thanksgiving,

And into His court with praise.

Be thankful unto Him and bless His name.

the Lord is good, His mercy everlasting

And His truth endureth to all generations.

The first movement is in a joyous meter, sung in a festive fashion, as is implored in the first verse of the psalm. Its last words, "Ki tov Adonai," recall the main theme in the introduction.

Second movement:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,

He leadeth me beside the still waters,

He restoreth my soul,

*He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness,
For His name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk
Through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
For Thou art with me.
Thy rod and Thy staff
They comfort me.*

*Why do the nations rage,
And the people imagine a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
And the rulers take counsel together
Against the Lord and against His anointed.
Saying, let us break their bands asunder,
And cast away their cords from us.
He that sitteth in the heavens
Shall laugh, and the Lord
Shall have them in derision!*

*Thou preparest a table before me
In the presence of my enemies,
Thou anointest my head with oil,
My cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy
Shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever.*

The second movement begins with the Psalm of David with a tranquil melody. This is abruptly interrupted by the orchestra and the low, rumbling sounds (again word painting) of the men's voices singing Psalm 2 (also notably featured in Handel's *Messiah*). This is gradually overpowered by the soprano voices with David serenely reaffirming the second portion of Psalm 23. However, the last measures of the movement contain notes which recall the interrupting section, symbolising mankind's unending struggle with conflict and faith.

The men's theme was adapted from material cut from *West Side Story*.

Third movement:

- Psalm 131

*Lord, Lord,
My heart is not haughty,
Nor mine eyes lofty,
Neither do I exercise myself
In great matters or in things
Too wonderful for me to understand.
Surely I have calmed
And quieted myself,
As a child that is weaned of his mother,
My soul is even as a weaned child.*

*Let Israel hope in the Lord
From henceforth and forever.*

The third movement begins with a conflicted and busy instrumental prelude which recapitulates the chords and melody from the introduction, then suddenly it breaks into the gentle chorale set in a rolling meter, which recalls desert palms swaying in the breeze.

Finale:

- Psalm 133, vs. 1

*Behold how good,
And how pleasant it is,
For brethren to dwell
Together in unity.*

The finale comes in from the third movement without interruption. The principal motifs from the introduction return here to unify the work and create a sense of returning to the beginning, but here the motifs are sung pianississimo and greatly extended in length. Particularly luminous harmonies eventually give way to a unison note on the last syllable of the text—another example of word painting, since the final Hebrew word, *Yaḥad*, means "together" or, more precisely, "as one". This same note is that on which the choir then sings the Amen.