

## LEONARD BERNSTEIN *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*

BORN: August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts

DIED: October 14, 1990, in New York City

WORK COMPOSED: 1955-57, *Symphonic Dances* assembled in 1961 and dedicated "To Sid Ramin, in friendship"

WORLD PREMIERE: The musical was premiered on August 19, 1957, at the National Theatre in Washington, DC; the *Symphonic Dances* were first performed on February 13, 1961, with Lukas Foss conducting the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall, in a pension fund gala concert titled "A Valentine for Leonard Bernstein".

"The radioactive fallout from *West Side Story* must still be descending on Broadway this morning." So reads the first sentence of the opening-night review by Walter Kerr for the *New York Herald Tribune*. "Jerome Robbins has put together, and then blasted apart, the most savage, restless, electrifying dance patterns we've been exposed to in a dozen seasons .... the show rides with a catastrophic roar over the spider-web fire-escapes, the shadowed trestles, and the plain dirt battlegrounds of a big city feud... Mr. Bernstein has permitted himself a few moments of graceful, lingering melody: in a yearning "Maria", in the hushed falling line of "Tonight", in the wistful declaration of "I Have a Love". But for the most part he has served the needs of the onstage threshing machine ... When hero Larry Kert is stomping out the visionary insistence of "Something's Coming" both music and tumultuous story are given their due."

Two of Bernstein's crowning achievements in dramatic music come from the late 1950s: *Candide* (1956) and *West Side Story* (1957). Unbelievably, he worked on the scores simultaneously and the shows opened nine months apart. This also meant that ideas migrated between the projects. For example, music for the songs "One Hand, One Heart" and "Gee, Officer Krupke!" first appeared in the *Candide* score. Bernstein had also written the score for the 1954 movie *On the Waterfront* and he combined the disturbing urban life with various styles of jazz, Latin rhythms and alluring lyricism to build his score for *West Side Story*. Inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it's almost hard to believe now that originally the story was to be of a Jew and a Catholic falling in love during the time of Easter and Passover. That was later switched to ethnic gang warfare and was to be called *Gangway* (seriously!). When it opened on Broadway in 1957 *West Side Story* changed the shape of American musical theater forever. When the immensely popular film premiered in 1961, winning ten Academy Awards, *West Side Story* turned into a monument of American culture. It simply cannot be overstated how profound the impact Leonard Bernstein made on music in this country and around the world.

Shortly after completing the orchestration for the film version, Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal prepared this suite under Bernstein's supervision (they proposed a list of numbers and Bernstein determined the running order). As is the norm even today, a lot of the orchestration and writing of the music is done more by staff arrangers than by the composers. For the film *West Side Story*, and this was a time of the huge epic films such as *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*, any size orchestra could be used.

The New York Philharmonic performed a special "Valentine" concert for Bernstein on February 13, 1961, to honor their music director with a program of his own music (they had announced the previous week that his contract had been extended for another seven years). Bernstein sat in the first tier box at Carnegie Hall watching his good friend Aaron Copland conduct the opening number of the concert, the Overture to *Candide*. Then Lukas Foss, Bernstein's life-long friend from his Curtis Institute days, took the podium and conducted the premiere of the *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*. The *New York World Telegram* reported that the "work revealed what new strength and vitality Mr. Bernstein had brought to Broadway" and to the concert halls.

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### History:

The two previous DSSO Masterworks Series performances of this work were on February 26, 2000 (Yong-yan Hu conducting) and on October 16, 2004 (with Markand Thakar).

### Instrumentation:

Three flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet and E-flat clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, alto saxophone, timpani, percussion (vibraphone, timbales, congas, bass drum, tomtom, drum set, cymbals, tambourine, woodblock, triangle, tamtam, xylophone, glockenspiel, chimes, tenor drum, pitched drums, snare drums, finger cymbals, maracas, cowbells, police whistle, bongos, suspended cymbal, guiro), harp, celesta, piano and strings.