

Notes on the Program

By Steven Blier

Today is an auspicious double anniversary: the New York Festival of Song is thirty years old, and NYFOS's Founding Advisor Leonard Bernstein is...well, nearly one hundred. He'll officially round off his century mark on August 25, 2018. But centennial celebrations are planned over the span of two full concert seasons, and NYFOS wanted to get in at the very beginning. It seemed appropriate to kick off our Pearl Anniversary by honoring one of our most important mentors.

Most American music-lovers know Bernstein's legacy so well that it is easy to forget how unusual his achievements are. Besides spearheading the Mahler revival, collaborating with Maria Callas and Luchino Visconti on a landmark production of *La sonnambula* at La Scala, and composing a majestic oeuvre of orchestral and choral works, he created something no other superstar conductor had done before (or since): a canon of Broadway shows that have achieved the status of classics. In the early 1940s, Bernstein was in the habit of hanging out with a group of cabaret performers called *The Revuers*. The freshness and intelligence of their sketches delighted Bernstein. The members of the troupe weren't big stars at the time, but they soon would be: Judy Holliday (later the Oscar-winning star of *Born Yesterday* and *Bells Are Ringing*); and Betty Comden and Adolph Green (whose Broadway and Hollywood résumés would eventually boast *Singin' in the Rain*, *On the Twentieth Century*, and *The Will Rogers Follies*). When Bernstein teamed up with choreographer Jerome Robbins and director George Abbott to create a musical inspired by *Fancy Free*, Bernstein's 1944 ballet suite with Robbins, the director George Abbott was pushing for John Latouche to write the lyrics for the new show. But Bernstein proposed his friends Comden and Green as both lyricists and lead actors. He got his way, and the result—a smash hit called *On the Town*—launched Bernstein's career on Broadway.

He was 26 years old. Just months before, he had made a legendary debut with the New York Philharmonic on a few hours'

notice, substituting for Bruno Walter who had taken ill. Bernstein's first symphony, the *Jeremiah*, had received a premiere in Pittsburgh, and *Fancy Free* opened just a few months after that. Bernstein was in a fever of creative energy, and it culminated with the exuberantly melodious *On the Town*. His daring was all the more remarkable because the boundaries between classical and popular music were far stricter at that time than they are now. Musicians who could conduct Schumann's *Overture to Manfred* were not supposed to write musical comedies. One of Bernstein's great contributions was to break down the barrier between so-called "high" and "low" culture. He gave respect to the full range of America's musical languages. Who can forget his fulsome enthusiasm on television for Janis Ian, the teenaged composer of "Society's Child"? He gave her hit song the same reverence he would have accorded to Berg's *Wozzeck*. I saw that TV show in 1966. And 22 years later, NYFOS was born. The two facts are not unrelated.

Peter Pan, *Wonderful Town*, *Candide*, *West Side Story*, and *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* followed—as well as his sprawling, self-examining *Mass* which opened the Kennedy Center in 1971. On the operatic stage, his 1952 one-acter *Trouble in Tahiti*—a portrait of a failing marriage—was a solid and enduring success. Later on it was folded into its late-period sequel, *A Quiet Place* (1983), where its musical accessibility alleviated some of the gnarly new opera's gloom.

Bernstein's theater music has become so ubiquitous, and the revivals of his shows have received so many accolades, that it is sobering to remember how many of them had rocky beginnings. *On the Town* was a hit, and *Wonderful Town* was successful enough to earn its star Rosalind Russell a *Time Magazine* cover. But *Candide* was not well received in its initial Broadway run, though its original cast album became a cult classic and kept the music alive for a wide audience of record-listeners. It finally achieved ubiquitous popularity in the theater after two complete overhauls: first in New

Notes on the Program

York under Hal Prince's direction, and later at Scottish Opera in a version by John Mauceri and John Wells—the edition most opera companies now use. Even *West Side Story*, Bernstein's best-known piece, had its opening night naysayers, while the anti-war, countercultural *Mass* was controversial from Day One. It was a left-wing piece about the modern crisis of faith, with a strong anti-war message. No wonder it alienated some in Washington—Richard Nixon stayed home the night of the premiere.

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue was the maestro's most debilitating failure, lasting only seven performances on Broadway. It left him embittered and angry, and he refused permission for an original cast recording. Fortunately, someone snuck a microphone into the theater and captured one of *1600's* few airings. (That tape lurks in the murky corners of the internet today.) A dark period ensued, and you can feel Bernstein's sadness and his quest for new ways to express himself in his final theater piece, *A Quiet Place*. Alas, its premiere puzzled many of its listeners—where was the Bernstein warmth, the Bernstein heart? Like *Candide* and *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, it only began to gain traction in reconstructed versions and finally found success in New York City Opera's 2010 production.

After offering the public the very high-class candy of *On the Town* and *Wonderful Town*, Bernstein began to reach just past the Broadway audience's comfort level—even *West Side Story* was considered too dark for its time. He was unashamed of his left-wing politics, and always saw his music as a way of grappling with societal issues. It's easy to see in retrospect why many of his theater works had rough births, and needed reworking by some intrepid producers before they could enter the mainstream. Nowadays we can revel in the sheer audacity of Bernstein's vision, his jagged rhythms, his uninhibited emotional force, and his eternal Talmudic questioning of the world around him. Lenny is hot because he is unafraid. And Lenny is cool for the very same reason.

Today we delve into the songs Bernstein wrote for both the theater and the concert stage—an embarrassment of riches. We thought it was foolish not to offer some of the most famous tunes—classics like "Something's Coming" and "You Were Dead, You Know." But we were also drawn to some of the worthy pieces that got dropped during out-of-town tryouts—"Ain't Got No Tears Left" and "The Story of My Life." And for our appearance here at the Kennedy Center, we also wanted to program a few of the best pieces from *1600*, whose overambitious, tottering dramatic structure sank a fine score. The lion's share of the songs finally found new life as a concert piece called *The White House Cantata*.

You would think that Bernstein's collaborations with Jennie Tourel, Christa Ludwig, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau would have inspired him to write an abundance of his own art songs. But his interest in piano-and-voice works seems to have died out fairly early in his career. A couple of Rilke settings, the charming *La Bonne Cuisine*, and the kids' cycle *I Hate Music* were all written in the 40s, and that was the extent of his published art songs until his very last work, *Arias and Barcarolles*.

A's and B's, as it has come to be known, proved to be hugely important to the early success of New York Festival of Song. Our connection to the legendary maestro started with Michael Barrett, who studied under Bernstein before becoming his assistant conductor. Through their close friendship we got wind of an interesting possibility: the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center had commissioned a piece from Bernstein—*Arias and Barcarolles*, it was called—but after receiving it they dragged their heels about putting it in their season. After a while it became clear that CMSLC was jettisoning the work altogether, and *Arias and Barcarolles* was looking for a home. Michael already knew the piece—he'd played early drafts of it with Bernstein. We inquired if we could give the American premiere (it had received a preview performance in Tel Aviv). We received permission,

Notes on the Program

and it opened our second season on a double bill with Brahms' *Liebeslieder Waltzes*.

I admit that I was initially puzzled by *A's and B's*. For one thing, it was written in so many different styles, from Broadway bounce to 12-tone anomie. It seemed like a compendium of almost every genre Bernstein had tackled in his 40-plus years as a composer. And the texts, mostly by Bernstein himself, appeared to be intensely autobiographical and self-referential. Working on *A's and B's* was like entering a maze, and I was frequently lost. Eventually we began to see our way through its many enigmas, and we came to treasure every note, every riddle.

Our premiere was a howling success, the music press turned out in droves to write about it, and NYFOS was suddenly in the spotlight. Our subsequent recording of the work won us a Grammy Award for Best Recording of a New Work. Truth to tell, the path to that Grammy was anything but smooth. Four record companies turned down the project, not always very politely, before Koch International chose it to launch their new label. When Plácido Domingo announced our triumph on national television, I had a powerful, guilt-inducing wave of *Schadenfreude* as I thought back on all the record companies who had rejected *A's and B's*.

Today we offer three of its key moments: the prelude, an enigmatic declaration of love sung emotionlessly over a turbulent, slashing accompaniment; "Love Song," in which a feuding couple sing obliquely about their troubled marriage using the metaphor of a song; and "Greeting," a Copland-esque piece the composer first sketched when his son Alexander was born in the early 1950s.

For my taste, *Songfest* is Bernstein's greatest vocal work. Like *Arias and Barcarolles*, every movement is in a different style, a dazzling tribute to America's wide cultural embrace. If the true subject of *A's and B's* is family conflict (and sometimes family strength), *Songfest* is about the pride, the struggle, and the creativity of artists, expatriates, and outsiders. *A's and B's* is hermetic,

meta, and imploded; *Songfest* is exuberant, confrontational, and brash.

We'll give you about half of *Songfest*, and you'll certainly get a sense of its supersaturated, Technicolor panorama. Bernstein sets e. e. cummings' "if you can't eat you got to" as a cool-jazz vocal sextet, alternating a samba beat with sections of American blues. "I, Too, Sing America/Okay Negroes" turns up the temperature as Bernstein contrasts two classic African-American activists from two different eras: the sincere, patient Langston Hughes in 1926, and the scathing, militant June Jordan in 1974. Langston Hughes sings in the measured voice of oratorio, while June Jordan cuts in with the slashing accents of be-bop. The interleaving of these two poems is a masterstroke on Bernstein's part, evoking the history of black activism more succinctly than any textbook. The passionate feminism of Julia de Burgos' manifesto, "A Julia de Burgos," gets an equally forceful setting: constantly shifting, driving rhythms, perhaps more Spanish than Puerto Rican, with intense echoes of the West Side Story dances

Bernstein rarely wrote about his sexuality. Nominally bisexual and the father of three extraordinary children, he entertained a long series of male lovers throughout his life. In *Songfest* he wrote his first gay manifesto, "To What You Said." It seemed that Bernstein was finally ready to come out of his none-too-well guarded closet. He found an obscure Walt Whitman text, a piece of prose found among the poet's papers after his death. The idea of embracing gay pride, especially in a work as official and high-profile as this, was a big step in 1977. Recycling a gorgeous tune from his failed musical *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, Bernstein created a noble hymn to gay people—fierce, uncompromising, loving—and broadcast it to the nation.

Bernstein balances the Whitman setting with a poem by Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), the very first American woman to achieve recognition as a poet. Setting her canonic hymn to marriage as a trio for three female voices, he evokes the quartet that

Notes on the Program

ends Act II, scene i of Britten's *Peter Grimes*. Bernstein puts his singers' breath control and intonation to the test as he closely intertwines the three voices against a spare orchestration.

The grand, declamatory "To the Poem" begins *Songfest*, but serves to end our concert. Its broad melody and bursts of percussion are a grand fanfare for the many great and small, unruly, irreplaceable acts of creativity that make up the tapestry of American culture. How brave of Bernstein to start his American bicentennial work with these words by Frank O'Hara:

*Let us do something grand
Just this once Something
Small and important and
Un-American Some fine thing*

We're presenting this "fine thing" in an arrangement by John Musto for two pianos and two percussion players. Musto whipped this version up for a performance at a summer art song program in Los Angeles, coincidentally also named *Songfest*. Without question, Bernstein's original orchestration is a thing of beauty. But it can swamp the lyrics, and the composer was aware of this issue. At one performance he prefaced each song with a reading of the poem (done by his three kids) so that the audience could

absorb the texts. With the leaner texture of two pianos, *Songfest's* extraordinary "libretto" can finally find equal footing with the musical settings.

Arias and Barcarolles was Bernstein's last contribution to the repertoire of vocal music, and it changed my life—and Michael Barrett's life—forever. But Lenny had been a primary force in our lives since our childhoods, starting with his indispensable *Young People's Concerts*, which I saw both on television and live at what was then known as Philharmonic Hall. Bernstein's shower of gifts continued with the impressive array of his original cast albums—I was practically weaned on *Wonderful Town*—and LPs of him conducting everything from the overture to *Zampa*, to Mahler's *Knaben Wunderhorn*, to Verdi's *Falstaff*, to the sexiest, slyest *Rhapsody in Blue* I've ever heard. I admit that I was always a bit threatened by Lenny's gyrations on the podium—should anyone be doing those things in public?—but I secretly aspired to his total lack of inhibition. He embodied the highest potential of human life force, and did so with a kind of flamboyance and extravagance that took our breath away. Whatever the flaws of this extraordinary man, Bernstein was a beacon for all American musicians—indeed, for all Americans, period.