**Concert 3 January 30, 2016**

“Three Dance Variations”from *Fancy Free*—Leonard Bernstein

Almost twenty years after Leonard Bernstein’s death, the critics are still arguing over the meaning and impact of his legacy. What is clear, however, is that the world rarely enjoys the genius of someone who excels supremely in so many artistic endeavors. Pianist, conductor, television personality, teacher, mentor, social gadfly, and composer of both popular musical theatre and “serious works,” Bernstein wore all hats with avidity. And he enjoyed stunning success in most. He had a passion about everything that he essayed, whether conducting the Mahler that he loved so well, or helping audiences “peel” apart the mysteries of music in his many teaching roles. He knew so much, and could do so much, that he genuinely thought that he could do it all. His leadership of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and other orchestras is legendary, but everyone knows there were some concerts that, frankly, got away from him in his self-indulgence. He worked assiduously as a composer of “serious” music, but those works—from youthful successes to his late efforts--have enjoyed mixed success. But, all that says is that simply he was human. Other than his epochal conducting, there is one field in which he garnered almost universal acclaim, and that is musical theatre. When all is said and done, he possessed a talent and a facility for the stage that was as deep as it was prolific. He simply understood the genre and its demands.

He plunged in early, writing for student productions at Harvard, and working with a cabaret group (that included Judy Holiday) while a student at the Curtis Institute.   
When he was twenty-six, his ballet *Fancy Free* was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera and *On the Town* opened on Broadway. *Wonderful Town*, *Peter Pan*, *Facsimile*, *Candide*, and, of course, *West Side Story*, followed in succession. But, the music that Bernstein provided for *Fancy Free* was the beginning. The ballet is by the giant of choreography, Jerome Robbins, and went on to be reincarnated that same year (1944) as the Broadway musical *On the Town.* The Broadway show was subsequently made into a film in 1949, but most of Bernstein’s music was thrown out by Hollywood as too “complex and operatic.” Those who have seen the show in any of its versions will easily remember the simple premise of the plot: three sailors on liberty in New York City, looking for female companionship, engage in a series of ritual dances of courtship, competing for the affections of the girls. But, throughout the dilemma remains: three sailors—two girls. They dance in vain, are left in the lurch, and begin to try the whole thing all over, as the ballet ends.

The “Three Dance Variations” occur toward the end of the ballet, when the three sailors and two women try to decide who will be the “odd man out.” It is decided that a “dance off” will eliminate the unlucky sailor who loses the contest. The first sailor dances a galop, the second, a waltz, and the third, a *danzón*. A galop is a standard nineteenth-century ballroom dance, written by everyone from Johann Strauss II to Shostakovich. It’s a fast affair, and traditionally often includes a cornet solo. Bernstein has cleverly invoked the dancehall atmosphere, with a solo trumpet, and later trombones, playing rustic solos in a popular style. It’s all over in a frenetic minute and a half. The waltz is a melancholy little affair that is a study in Bernstein’s signature penchant for displacing downbeats and mixing time signatures till everyone (only in the audience, it is hoped) is thoroughly confused. In the middle the contrasting section sounds for all the world like Bernstein is channeling Kurt Weill’s best 1920s cabaret style. It all ends softly as it literally dissipates into wistful silence. The last dance, a Cuban *danzón* would seem to be a reflection of the mad affection that composers and audiences alike had for all music Cuban during the 1930s and 40s. Aaron Copland, whom Bernstein adored, distinguished himself in this regard, and, in fact, two years earlier, in 1942, Bernstein and Copland premièred Copland’s own *Danzón Cubano* for two pianos. So, two years later, here is another *danzón,* an elegant dance, with a mysterious bass line in the strings and piano, punctuated by spare percussion enhancements. There are plenty of solos for everyone, as the stylized dance builds to a climax, with Ravel’s *Bolero* looking over the composer’s shoulder. It ends as it began, softly, spare, and mysterious.

The three sailors can’t decide who won, so they resort to a typical sailor’s solution: they fight. Naturally, the women are horrified and hurried depart, leaving the sailors to start their odyssey all over again.

*Peter and the Wolf—*Sergei Prokofiev

Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich are the two composers who stood above the rest of those who labored during the years of the Soviet Union. Unlike, Shostakovich, however, Prokofiev enjoyed part of his career living and composing in the West, returning to the USSR in 1936 voluntarily. Like his compatriot, he must be counted as one of the great composers of the twentieth century, although unlike Shostakovich, his direct influence on composers outside of the Soviet sphere was minimal. He was a virtuoso pianist, but who also composed from the beginning, graduating from the St. Petersburg Conservatory shortly before World War I. His musical style was based in the Russian romantic tradition, but he established early on a personal idiom that was characterized by pungent dissonance, soaring lyrical melodies, a facile manipulation of motoric rhythms, and kaleidoscopic harmonic changes. Part and parcel of his musical personality was an acerbic appreciation of satire, parody, and even the grotesque.

Although he travelled widely early on, all the while he returned to the Soviet Union from time to time for extensive concertizing; his works were performed frequently there, and he always kept his Soviet passport. He was never a political naïf regarding the life of artists under that political system, and it must be surmised that his eventual removal to the USSR was made with “eyes wide open.” His musical language had been gradually moving to a simpler, more accessible style—a necessary condition for artists who wished to serve a collectivist state and appeal to the masses. So, when he and his family arrived in Russia in 1936, he adapted readily to political requirements by composing works that addressed the necessary content of “socialist realism.” This primarily meant patriotic subjects, in a traditional musical style, that served political ends. One aspect of the artistic demands of “socialist realism” with which Prokofiev evidently was in full accord was the emphasis placed upon music for children. Of course, totalitarian states have always worked through children’s education as they build control of society, but on the surface, what’s wrong with writing entertaining, charming works for children? Nothing, Prokofiev evidently thought, and upon his return to the Soviet Union in 1936 a series of compositions for Soviet youth ensued, including *Peter and the Wolf.*  Commentators have long seen the work as an allegory for the Soviet Republics’ uniting together to face the coming Nazi onslaught, as well as Peter, the good Soviet “Young Pioneer,” taking the lead from the old fogies of the adults of the past to push into a future dominated by youthful initiative. All true, perhaps, but one doesn’t have think of these things to enjoy this engaging little masterpiece that helps children to appreciate the riches of the voices of the orchestra.

The work’s genesis stems from a commission by the Central Children’s Theatre in Moscow for a symphonic work for its audience. Originally, Prokofiev was presented with the story cast into rhymed couplets, but dissatisfied with this, the composer wrote his own narrative, and set it to music in only four days. The première was not an especial success, being sparsely attended and not attracting much attention. That eventually changed, of course, and *Peter and the Wolf* went on to become perhaps Prokofiev’s most famous work.

The cast of characters is represented by music of great appeal and charm, and appropriately suited to each of them: Peter by the winsome sound of the whole string section; the Bird by the flute (of course!); the Cat so slyly by the low register of the clarinet; Grandpa by the bassoon; the funny Duck by the oboe; the Wolf by the sinister trio of brassy, threatening French horns; and finally the percussion section provides the gunshots of the Hunters. The narration makes the brief story perfectly clear, and the totally popular style of the attractive music suits the characters delightfully—what more could one ask? Children and adults have always responded with warmth to this charming work. The only tragic note lies in the pitiful honking of the duck trapped in the stomach of the Wolf at the end.

Prokofiev went on to great success in the Soviet Union. Never really playing his political cards, he managed to survive the incredibly difficult times during the 1940s by adroit artistic gamesmanship with the harshly repressive Stalinist state. He never joined the Communist Party, and made few public statements. He struggled to survive, maintain his artistic integrity and continue composing in an authentically personal style. But, alas, the difficulties of the extreme, repressive measures beginning in 1948 ultimately got the best of him. His death on 5 March 1953 ironically garnered little recognition—Joseph Stalin’s demise on the same date preëmpted the stage.

*Dreamtime Ancestors*—Christopher Theofanides

Theofanides is an award-winning young composer, whose compositions currently enjoy wide popularity with orchestras around the world, including the New York Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the London Symphony. In addition, he has written extensive for both ballet and opera. Born and educated in Texas, as well as at Yale University and the Eastman School of Music, he is currently on the faculty of the former school. He has also taught at the Juilliard School and the Peabody Conservatory.

His musical style can aptly be deemed “euphonious,” that is, well sounding. It exemplifies a rich imagination, a complete mastery of orchestration, and an innate sensitivity to musical composition as a partner to the human affective mind. Only a cursory look at some of the titles of his works reveals his informing interest in evoking memories, feelings, moods, and literature: *Peace, Love, Light YOUMEONE*; *Rainbow Body*; *Vision and Miracles*; *This dream strange and moving*; *Siddhartha*; *I wander the world in a dream of my own making*; and others. Theofanides speaks directly to this aspect of his work: “Writing a piece of music is like creating a dream that you want to have.  The feeling that pervades the work is one of a sense of mystery, and this sentiment is primarily conveyed through the harmonies and orchestration.” And those harmonies –as well as his rhythms, scales and the melodies they yield—are firmly grounded in certain familiar musical styles of successful composers of the last century. Not for him the detached, mathematical abstractions so prevalent in much of the approaches to musical composition during the twentieth century—especially during the period right after World War II. Rather, Theofanides is concerned with evocative and amenable musical textures, accessible melodies, and harmonies that range from smoothly consonant to pungently dissonant, yet used calculatedly. It may be useful to think of aspects of the musical styles of such disparate composers as Hovhaness, Walton, Holst, or even Mahler. All of whom were masters of using every musical resource in the service of extra-musical thoughts in attractive and stimulating ways. Which brings us to *Dreamtime Ancestors*.

It is a recent composition, commissioned by a consortium of over fifty orchestras, and will be given its various regional premières during 2016. Inspired by the creation myths of Australian aborigines that stem from so-called “dreamtimes,” it is a musical response to the notion that during these dreamtimes, we are bound to all of our “dreamtime ancestors,”---past, present, and future. Cast in three relatively short movements, this evocative composition prefaces each movement with an aboriginal poem that informs the mood of the music. Throughout the work there is generally a sense of constant, mysterious motion, as sensuous lines constantly wind in and around each other in a kind of polyphonic weft. Interest is generated by a parade of seemingly new motives, but often related or derived from each other. Even though there often seems to be a repetitiveness to the rhythms and ideas, they nevertheless build and grow in a nuanced constant variation. Layers of colors, rhythms, and sonorities are literally “stacked” on upon the other. From time to time interjections of points of sound jump in, as the kaleidoscope of events surges ahead. All in all, it seems as if a parade of compositional techniques from all ages of musical history has been mustered to create a floating evocation of the dreams of the ambiguous past. From the past the new is thus created.

*Firebird Suite—*Igor Stravinsky

It would be difficult, indeed, to posit a composer whose artistic achievement and influence on the direction of music during the twentieth century exceeded that of Igor Stravinsky. Moving through a series of explorations of different styles of composition, his works consistently exhibited a remarkable seriousness of purpose, solid musical integrity, and benchmark imagination. What is more, his genius made its mark early—there are almost no compositions that we can label “journeyman” or “youthful apprentice works.” Born into a musical, middleclass family, he studied law and music theory and composition (on the side) simultaneously. By his mid-twenties he had begun to concentrate on music, rather than law, and had composed only a few works that were heard publicly. But, that led to his historic encounter with Sergei Diaghilev.

The cutting edge of the ballet world for most of the early twentieth century was clearly the Ballets Russes of Diaghilev in Paris and Monte Carlo. Under the artistic leadership of Diaghilev, this company was responsible for the creation of artistic works whose influence continues unabated today. Diaghilev was peerless in his ability to select and recruit the *crème de la crème* of the European artistic community in his productions. Just a of few of the veritable who’s who of artists include dancers, Pavlova, Nijinsky, Fokine, and Balanchine; the choreographer, Petipa; conductors, Pierre Monteux and Ernest Ansermet, designers, Picasso, Bakst, Braque, Coco Chanel, Matisse, Miró, Dalí—well, you get the idea. Which makes it all the more remarkable that, for the first season of ballet (he had started out a few years earlier with art exhibitions and opera) Diaghilev chose the relatively unknown Igor Stravinsky. In 1909 Diaghilev had attended a concert in St. Petersburg, where two of the young composer’s few works were performed. Thoroughly impressed, Diaghilev commissioned Stravinsky to provide music for the 1910 ballet season in Paris.

The young Stravinsky had been a protégé of the famous Rimsky-Korsakov, master teacher, composer of operas, and one of the most adroit orchestrators in musical history. The latter is key to understanding much of the musical style of Stravinsky’s three ballets, for Rimsky-Korsakov’s sparkling evocation of Russian picturesque images through challenging and imaginative scoring for the orchestra leads directly from the older composer to his student. The dazzling orchestral color of both master and student was quintessential Russian and perfect for the exotic Russian story that Diaghilev had in mind for his inaugural season.

The story, assembled by the designer, Alexandre Benois and the choreographer, Michel Fokine, was an amalgam of several different Russian folktales and themes, but the most prominent elements were the mythical Firebird and the evil magician Kashchei. The myth of the Firebird, whose feathers flow with iridescent luminosity, varies considerably in details in the various cultures in which the story occurs. It has magical powers; sometimes it serves good, other times not. The magician Kashchei, on the other hand, is irredeemably evil, can only be killed by possessing his soul, which improbably, is hidden inside a needle in an egg, which is in a duck, which is in a rabbit in an iron chest buried under a green oak tree on an island. Whew! All of these exotic elements are woven into a more or less new story for the ballet, and Stravinsky was more than prepared to provide the impressively evocative music. The première was in Paris in June of 1910 and was an instant success. The music, the choreography, the dancing, the sets, and the costumes were uniformly praised, and our hero, Igor, was on his way. Few great composers have started out with such acclaim. It did not take long for Stravinsky to extract from the score to the ballet a suite for concert performance. Later, others emerged, and they have gone on to become evergreen concert favorites.

Our story is archetypical; a beautiful princess is kidnapped by an evil villain, and is rescued by a brave prince with help of the magical Firebird. The ballet opens in Kashchei the Immortal’s magical realm; Prince Ivan enters and soon spots the luminous Firebird. He observes thirteen captured princesses, who are dancing a round dance, and, of course, immediately falls in love with one of them. The evil Kashchei rebuffs the Prince’s request for his chosen one’s release, and a fracas ensues, with Kashchei’s grotesque minions in the attack on the Prince. The Firebird intervenes, casts a spell over Kashchei’s followers, and they are compelled to dance frenetically. They ultimately collapse into sleep to a lullaby, but soon Kashchei awakens and another dance ensues. The Firebird tells the Prince how to slay Kashchei by destroying the giant egg in which his soul resides. He does so; the whole evil kingdom, Kashchei, and his magic all disappear. The sun breaks forth, and a general celebratory apotheosis triumphs.

Stravinsky, in 1911, 1919, and 1945, extracted three somewhat different suites, respectively, from the score of the whole ballet. That of 1919 is most commonly performed. There are five major excerpts, beginning with the eerie low strings that depict Kashchei’s evil, magical realm. The Firebird soon appears, after a flashy paroxysm in the strings. Virtuoso figurations in the woodwinds and harp *glissandi* paint the dancing Firebird and his glowing feathers, ending the first section. A solo flute leads to the round dance of the Princesses, with elegant solos in the woodwinds and strings. It’s all appropriately composed of simple melodies and harmonies, far from the chromatic complexities of Kashchei and his magic. The third section is the famous “Infernal Dance,” wherein snarling brass, with angular, jagged motifs, punctuate the whole orchestra’s pounding, insistent rhythms—which constantly confuse with their metric displacements. It all accelerates to a total, dramatic collapse. The ensorcelled evil ones then sleep to the lullaby of the “Berceuse,” opening with the famous languid bassoon solo. A lush, romantic texture gradually ends with sinking string tremolos that lead to the inevitable Finale. The solo horn dramatically intones an evocation of the arrival of the sun and the triumph of good over evil. The whole orchestra takes up its tune, accompanied by slow, rising scales, and finally pounding brass chords lead to the grand peroration. The ending is immortal, of course, and the world now was put on notice of the spectacular début and genius of the young Russian. As Debussy is reputed to have wryly remarked, “Well, you’ve got to start somewhere.”

--Wm. E. Runyan

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