Concert 1 September 29, 2018

Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town*—Leonard Bernstein

Almost three decades 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 in his many teaching roles, helping audiences "peel" apart the mysteries of music. 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 exhuberance. He worked assiduously as a composer of "serious" music, but those works—from youthful successes to his late efforts--have enjoyed only mixed success. All that says is simply that 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 understood the genre and its demands well.

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 subsequently was made into a film in 1949; however, 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, all the while romping through the remarkably diverse cityscape of the "Big Apple."

Bernstein extracted the three subject dances from the musical, and the concert piece was given its première by the San Francisco Symphony early in 1946. Taken together, the three dances are a marvelous period piece of New York urban musical culture circa 1944. The young Bernstein, totally smitten with the energy of his adopted city—especially the swing, blues, and bebop jazz of the time—put it all into the show. Stir into this a completely obvious and conscious adoption of the musical style of the young Bernstein's musical idol and mentor, Aaron Copland, and you have accounted for most of what you hear. All cities constantly change, and there's not a lot of the present New York City of today in *On the Town*—of course. Jazz has changed and not many composers write like Copland, today, but it's all well done, and infectiously appealing. Upon the occasion of its revival in 1971, The drama critic of the New York Times snarkily wrote: "The music . . . has worn less well, too many of the nostalgic ballads sound like sub-Puccini filtered through Glenn Miller." But, never mind. It's New York! It's Leonard Bernstein! And memorably, it's "New York, New York, it's a helluva town!"

The first dance, "The Great Lover," is the Act I scene with our hero, the sailor, Gabey, early in the day (the whole show is set in a single day) asleep on a subway car, after having seen a poster of the beauty queen of the rails, "Miss Turnstile," and dreaming of wooing her. The punchy, dissonant accents over a jazzy, frantic tempo perfectly depict the sleepy sailor valiantly trying to get forty winks on the lurching, noisy New York subway. A variety of short, melodic "licks" punctuate the relentless tempo. Some are jazzy, and some are just plain banal—all reflective of the kaleidoscopic thoughts of the sailor. And, of course, throughout, the familiar metrical displacements and accents of Copland inform the young composer's score. Each of the dances is dedicated to someone from the production, and the first dance is dedicated to none other than the ballerina, Sono Osata, who was the real "Miss Turnstiles."

The second dance, "Lonely Town," is a short little *pas de deux* between a worldly sailor and a young high-school girl encountered in Central Park. While surely occurring in the daytime, it has an almost nocturnal, melancholic mood. In Bernstein's words: it's "both tender and sinister" as the sailor woos her, and then callously casts her off. It adroitly evokes the almost desperate, hopelessness under the circumstances, of the two souls having anything but a fleeting relationship. It is dedicated to one of the immortals of American musical theatre, Betty Comden, who wrote the show, along with Bernstein, and her long-term professional partner, Adolf Green. And—while Bernstein wrote the great tune in the dance--any informed music lover who was unfamiliar with the show, would understandably think it was composed by Aaron Copland, so perfect is the evocation of the latter's musical style.

The last dance is dedicated to the great Nancy Walker, a member of the original cast—you know her from a thousand appearances on fifties and sixties TV, not to mention her familiar performance as the waitress in the Bounty paper towel commercials. It's called "Times Square Ballet," and a better depiction of that mad, tourist-crammed, light show cannot be imagined. Our sailors meet to embark on a night on the town, go to the famous Roseland Dance Palace, and, well—do what sailors do. Opening with a jazzy, solo clarinet, the dance quickly segues to the evergreen, "New York, New York," and after a slow down and a rhythmic change to swing time, a solo saxophone contributes its own transformation of the famous tune. Anything goes in the city, and apparently anything goes in the music, too, so, we hear a rather stylized rendition of what seems to be a chicken-clucking fiddle tune, in the best vaudeville style. A growling trumpet leads to what appears to be the aftermath of a bit too much to drink, followed by a crashing, rhythmically-layered conclusion, in the best Bernstein style. Not a bad way to start a fantastic career.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major, op. 102—Dmitri Shostakovich

Delving into a major artist's mind, seeking to relate the art that we see and hear with the contradictions and complexities inherent in us all is clearly problematic. And Shostakovich is a particularly knotty case in point. He left a maddeningly ambiguous record of his inner thoughts. On the one hand, he was capable of writing the most satirical compositions that scathingly excoriated the excesses and flaws of Western capitalist democracies. But, of course, he is equally admired for profound music of darkness and passion that laments the fundamental tragedies of universal human experience.

His musical education was broad and firm, and in the early years of Communism he was free to pursue his artistic interests. But, he was generally supportive of the Communist regime, and saw no reason to think otherwise. But, as the world knows, during the late twenties and early thirties, life in the Soviet Union evolved into something much more sinister and challenging. As Stalin gradually clamped down on every aspect of everyday life, the arts became progressively a tool for social and political indoctrination. Art was impressed into the service of the state as propaganda, taking in this case the form of what is known as "Socialist Realism." Simply put, artists were to glorify the reality of the revolution and its benefit to Soviet citizens. Shostakovich left us many works that seem to indicate that he toed the line set by the Communist Party's expectations for artists to celebrate the repression—but most of his *oeuvre* is clearly not subservient to these twisted ideals. It is one of the composer's personal triumphs that he was so slyly able to craft compositions that were authentic, but not so subversive as to endanger his life. He survived Stalin, ultimately, and enjoyed his final victory before his own death. So, today we are left with an artistic legacy of remarkable—and occasionally enigmatic--variety.

The second piano concerto is devoid of most of the dark side of the composer, as well as his famous sarcastic moments. Rather, it is generally a light, cheerful work, composed in 1957 in the somewhat happier times after Stalin's death. Written for his son, Maxim, upon the occasion of his graduation from the Moscow Conservatory, it has long been an audience favorite, although the composer tried to modestly—and probably with tongue in cheek—slightly deprecate its putative lack of seriousness.

In the first movement, after a few bars in the solo woodwinds, the piano comes right in with one of the main themes of the work—you'll hear it frequently in many guises. It's a simple little tune that implies the mixolydian mode--sounds like a normal major scale, but with a "blue" note near the top. (This, along with the 7/8 time signature in the last movement, implies to me that the composer was perhaps thinking a bit of Bulgarian folk elements.) Shortly, there is a segue into one of Shostakovich's famous marches, followed by a more subdued closing theme in the minor mode. The first section gradually gently ends, but a loud, abrupt interruption by the orchestra takes us to a busy, bustling examination by both the soloist and the orchestra of the various themes--juxtaposed in creative ways. A smashing, virtuoso climax with the orchestra singing out the main theme over scrambling piano figurations ends suddenly. The soloist continues alone frenetically in a solo passage that functions as a kind of cadenza that leads into a pseudo-fugue (Shostakovich was a master of these). But, it soon ends, as the orchestra re-enters and sings out the main themes as they are prominently woven together. Meanwhile the pianist is furiously beavering away with highly animated figurations, all of which leads to a Shostakovich-like triumphal ending—exiting, good fun.

The second movement may come as somewhat of a surprise for many—given that much of the composer's music pushed deeply into the anguish of twentieth-century musical style—not to speak of Shostakovich's mastery of sarcasm. But here, is a deep immersion in a sincere evocation of musical romanticism. Without a scintilla of self-consciousness, Shostakovich crafts a movement of eloquent beauty whose origins lie in the slow movements of concertos by Mozart and Beethoven. If contrasts to the bustle of bookend movements are expected in slow movements of concertos, then here they are consummate. The waning moments lead without pause into the wakeup of the energetic last movement. The piano plunges right in, with a bright, chirping tune that swiftly turns into one of the composer's famous *galops,* careening precipitously along at breakneck speed. Idea after idea parades before us, as Shostakovich—

typically—seems never to run out of textures, rhythms, and motifs. The “Bulgarian” 7/8 time signature seems to fit right in easily, and lends a kind of thumping syncopation. It doesn’t take long, and couldn’t, before this scintillating horserace drives to a brilliant conclusion. It’s easy to understand why this concerto never fails to please—testimony to the composer’s innate talent for variety and surprise, all in a “light” piece, oh so craftily conceived.

Symphony No. 3 in E^b, op. 97 “Rhenish”—Robert Schumann

Schumann composed in almost all of the common genres, and notwithstanding his success in the larger forms, did perhaps his most respected work in song and piano literature. Known—at least during his lifetime—almost as much for his distinguished career as music critic and essayist, even today his analyses and commentaries lend valuable insights into the music of his milieu and times. He was a formidable pianist—his wife, Clara, even more so—and his contributions to the piano stand with those of Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms in artistic significance.

Schumann was a Romantic to the core, yet, withal, he had great respect for clarity, balance, and formal integrity so characteristic of the music of Classicism. It must be admitted, however, that to some degree his deep passions and emotional self-indulgences can be seen as aspects of a personality that ultimately broke down in the psychoses and pathologies that led to his early death in an institution. He was happy early on, however, and the years of his early marriage brought forth masterworks in spates, as his mind focused extraordinarily in narrow directions. Up to the time of his marriage to Clara he had composed exclusively music for the piano, a great corpus of work that is one of the century’s important contributions to the literature for the instrument. But the joy and exuberance upon his marriage in1840 led to a remarkable outpouring of songs—some 125 in that year alone.

Nevertheless, Schumann made important contributions to chamber and symphonic music, and his four symphonies are respected contributions to orchestral literature. He turned his talents to the genre—at Clara’s enthusiastic encouragement--the very next year after the remarkable production of *Lieder* in 1840. His first two symphonies—No. 1 in B^b “Spring” and No. 4 in D minor (it’s complicated—don’t ask) were the result, and the first is an especially exuberant celebration of the joy and optimism of that period—not at all prescient of the dark and tragic end to his life. The third work did not appear until about five years later—all three composed while he and Clara were living in Leipzig. In 1850 they removed to Düsseldorf, a short distance down the Rhine from Cologne, where he took over leadership of important musical posts, to considerable acclaim and popularity. He had been there less than a month, when he visited the magnificent, imposing cathedral of Cologne—the putative inspiration for Symphony No. 3 in E^b, composed in November and early December, later that fall. More specifically, a subsequent visit in early November, the time of the elevation of the Archbishop of Cologne to cardinal, inspired the ecclesiastical solemnity of the fourth movement of the symphony. That movement is an added movement before the last movement, giving five movements in all—not that unusual, given Beethoven’s example in his sixth symphony, as well as Berlioz’ *Symphonie fantastique.*

The first movement is an energetic, effusive celebration of the Rhine River and the cathedral with a leaping, syncopated main theme that propels the whole movement. The horns, especially, inform the atmosphere with a heroic quality so associated with the works of Richard

Strauss some forty years later. The gentle, undulating main section of the second movement is clearly an evocation of the flowing river. This is the traditional "dance" or *scherzo* movement of most symphonies, but here, takes the character of a gentle German *Ländler*. Schumann, being Schumann, can't resist later taking the mood to a more forceful atmosphere, replete with the "heroic" horns, but it all ends peacefully. The third movement provides a serene interlude that reminds us of the nuance and subtle beauty of so many of Schumann's *Lieder*. Harmonic richness and melodic invention beguile us, as the parade of winsome melodies pass before us. In a creative touch of unification, Schumann makes constant use of a little four-note chromatic ascending scale that connects the melodic passages and ties it all together--that idea getting the last word.

The interpolated fourth movement is perhaps the signature movement of the symphony, inspired by the Archbishop's elevation. Schumann marked it as "in the character of a procession for a solemn ceremony." That it is, and it begins with a chorale-like passage in the trombones and horns that majestically ascends into the sonic stratosphere—trombones, of course, evoking their long association with the church. The floating "solemn" harmonies are borne by the lower instruments that provide the "processional steps." The soaring main theme pervades throughout, with sections treated contrapuntally in the best ecclesiastic tradition. The Rhine River may be the central metaphor of the symphony, but the majestic Cologne cathedral is the spiritual focus, here.

The last movement is a spirited romp, with two dancing themes that cascade towards the conclusion. A stately pronouncement from the brass section briefly interrupts the dash to the end, and Schumann's cheerful trip up the Rhine to Cologne joyfully concludes. The sad dementia that ultimately ended his life is thankfully little in evidence in this, one of his happiest times.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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