

Quad City Symphony Orchestra

# PROGRAM NOTES

## Masterworks III: Celebrating Bernstein's Centennial

By Jacob Bancks  
Associate Professor of Music  
Augustana College

### LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990) Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town*

**Instrumentation:** Flute (doubling piccolo), oboe (doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (first doubling e-flat clarinet, second doubling alto saxophone, and third doubling bass clarinet), 2 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion, piano, strings.

**Premiere:** February 3, 1946. Civic Auditorium, San Francisco, CA. The San Francisco Symphony, the composer conducting.

**QCSO Performance History:** The QCSO's sole prior performance of music from *On the Town* was with Kim Allen Kluge conducting in 1995.

As is nearly always the case with great music, the works of Leonard Bernstein were products not of a single man, but of the artistic milieu or "art world" that fostered them. In Bernstein's case, that world encompassed many close collaborators and friends, including a remarkable number of big name American artists: composers like Mark Blitzstein and Aaron Copland; jazz musicians like Dave Brubeck; and musical theatre luminaries like Jerome Robbins and Stephen Sondheim.

Among this latter group were two of Bernstein's oldest friends, the comedy duo of Betty Comden and Adolph Green. The three knew each other before any of them was famous, performing together in a Greenwich Village cabaret during the 1930s. That fast-

paced environment proved extremely formative for all three, who would each eventually make lasting contributions to American musical theatre.

Their first formal collaboration on a Broadway musical was *On the Town* of 1944, with music by Bernstein and book and lyrics by Comden and Green. Premiered during the last days of World War II, it told the story of three sailors on 24 hours leave in New York City, and the women they eventually fall in love with. *On the Town* made the move to film in 1949, starring Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra. Unfortunately, in a ruling we might find disputable, the film's producers deemed Bernstein's music too complex and inaccessible, and most of it was replaced for the film version.

Though offended enough to boycott the film, Bernstein remained close to the comedy duo, collaborating with them again in 1953 on *Wonderful Town*. Comden and Green went on to write book and lyrics for many musicals, including *Singin' in the Rain* and the Mary Martin version of *Peter Pan*. Their last collaboration was *The Will Rogers Follies* of 1991, and both outlived Bernstein by more than a decade. In addition to Broadway revivals of the entire show in 1971, 1998, and 2014, Bernstein's suite of dance music from *On the Town* has become a staple of the orchestral pops repertoire.

Things to Listen for in  
the Three Dance Episodes  
from *On the Town*

**First Episode: The Great Lover Displays Himself**

♫ Throughout this work, watch the trumpets and trombones navigate their wide variety of mutes. As with strings, brass mutes are not simply to make the instrument softer, but to radically alter their timbre ("tone-color").

♫ In keeping with the showtune style, notice that one of the percussion parts is written entirely for trap set.

**Second Episode: Lonely Town (Pas de Deux)**

♫ The Pas de Deux is, of course, a dance for two; perhaps fittingly, the beginning and end of this episode are marked by dark, mellow clarinet and bass clarinet duets in parallel motion.

♫ Bernstein's sweeping and emotive music depicting the loneliness of the city at night might owe something to his friend Aaron Copland's work *Quiet City* from a few years prior, especially in the poignant English horn solos that draw the episode to a close.

**Third Episode: Times Square, 1944**

♫ Bernstein clearly evokes the swing style of Benny Goodman at this episode's opening; the two men worked together multiple times, and Bernstein composed a well-known work, *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs*, for Goodman.

♫ The free-wheeling form of this episode is not unlike the "street-scenes" of some classical ballets, where frequent changes of texture and tempo depict the dizzying effect of whirling crowds.

LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990)  
*Serenade after Plato's Symposium*

**Instrumentation:** Solo violin, percussion, harp, and strings.

**Premiere:** September 11, 1954. La Fenice, Venice, Isaac Stern, violin, the composer conducting.

**QCSO Performance History:** The QCSO's sole prior performance of Bernstein's *Serenade* was with David Loebel (guest) conducting in 2008, with Phillipe Quint, violin.

Though his early successes were in musical theatre, Bernstein saw himself as a classical composer-conductor in the tradition of Gustav Mahler. A line connecting the two is apt for a number of reasons: they both served as music director for the New York Philharmonic, and Bernstein is credited with reviving and sustaining American interest in Mahler's symphonies. Unfortunately, compared to Mahler, Bernstein had less success balancing performing and composition, writing relatively few major concert works, most before he turned 40.

Had Bernstein found more time and will to compose concert works, he might have given us more pieces like the *Serenade after Plato's Symposium*. Written when the composer was just 36 years old, the work has the marks of a "serious" concert piece, and largely employs musical sounds more native to Tanglewood (the crucible of conducting and composition in western Massachusetts where Bernstein spent his summers) than to Broadway or Hollywood. Most importantly, in a program note, Bernstein makes an unconvincing attempt to describe the piece as independent of extra-musical associations, declaring, "There is no literal program for this *Serenade*."

And in almost the same breath, he goes on to describe the work's literal program: a famous banquet of ancient Greek philosophers offering lengthy speeches on the topic of love, as transcribed by Plato. "The music, like the dialogue, is a series of related statements in praise of love." Try as he might to write a work with "no literal program", to Bernstein art imitated life; purely abstract, absolute music eluded him.

As we repeatedly see in Bernstein's music, the contributions of other artists are essential to the constitution of this work. Most obviously, the piece was commissioned by the great conductor-benefactor Serge Koussevitzky, a fixture at Tanglewood and a close mentor to the much younger Bernstein. Koussevitzky long served as music director of the Boston Symphony, and had a part in commissioning many of the notable orchestral works of the first half of the twentieth century (including Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which we heard this season on Masterworks I). But aside from the commission, the work also benefitted from the oversight of none other than Isaac Stern, the virtuoso violinist for whom the work was commissioned, and who played the premiere. In a somewhat unusual gesture, Bernstein had Stern's bowings, fingerings, and other performance suggestions actually printed in the score.

#### Things to Listen for in Bernstein's *Serenade*

##### **First movement: "Phaedrus; Pausanias" (Lento; Allegro)**

Bernstein's description: *Phaedrus opens the symposium with a lyrical oration in praise of Eros, the god of love. (Fugato, begun by the solo violin.) Pausanias*

*continues by describing the duality of lover and beloved. This is expressed in a classical sonata-allegro, based on the material of the opening fugato.*

♫ Bernstein describes this passage as "Fugato", meaning "like a fugue, but not strictly." Actually, as fugato passages go, this one is on the strict side! The melody ("subject") introduced by the solo violin is taken up by each section in turn in various keys. Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, another Koussevitzky beneficiary, opened his 1937 work *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* with a very similar fugue.

♫ Unlike the near-constant rhythmic support they provide in his Broadway music, in this work Bernstein uses the percussion instruments primarily to delineate the formal sections of the work. When the percussion enter, you can usually expect the end or beginning of a phrase or section.

♫ In the quicker music following the fugue, Bernstein constantly changes the meter, or number of beats per bar (and sometimes the length of those beats). As a rising star conductor, one can imagine he would have relished the chance to show off his rhythmic virtuosity with Isaac Stern watching!

##### **Second movement: "Aristophanes" (Allegretto)**

Bernstein's description: *Aristophanes does not play the role of clown in this dialogue, but instead that of the bedtime story-teller, invoking the fairy-tale mythology of love.*

♫ All of the string instruments are muted at the opening of this movement. In electronic music terms, a mute is a "low pass filter"; the higher overtones that give string instruments their sparkle

are blocked; the mellower, lower overtones remain.

♪ Notice the difference in color as the soloist removes her mute and the rest of the strings keep theirs on.

♪ Like the percussion in the first movement, the harp is used here in a very sparse manner, completely unlike its typical scoring in Bernstein's show music.

♪ After a more resonant middle section, the string mutes return at the movement's end. Remember that mutes are not just to make the sound softer, but to alter its color; notice especially the intense timbre of the muted strings during loud passages.

### **Third movement: "Erixymathus" (Presto)**

Bernstein's description: *The physician speaks of bodily harmony as a scientific model for the workings of love-patterns. This is an extremely short fugato scherzo, born of a blend of mystery and humor.*

♪ As instrumental doublings go, the xylophone and the timpani don't often play the same melody, but here they finally get their chance! Notice throughout the movement how the functions of these two instruments evolve, both together and separately.

♪ As Bernstein mentions, here we have a "fugato" passage similar to the first movement, but this time blazingly fast. One of the melodic transformations common to fugues is augmentation, where the subject is drawn out in longer durations. For an example of this, listen to the long notes which show up first in the solo violin; these notes actually comprise a slowed-down version of the fugue subject.

### **Fourth movement: "Agathon" (Adagio)**

Bernstein's description: *Perhaps the most moving speech of the dialogue, Agathon's panegyric embraces all aspects of love's powers, charms and functions. This movement is a simple three-part song.*

♪ Notice the beautiful, highly multifaceted texture: below the legato solo violin, Bernstein places pulsing repeated chords, oscillating thirds, low pizzicato with timpani, and little melodies that imitate each other.

♪ Though this is clearly not a traditional concerto, Bernstein does give the soloist a cadenza, underlined with tremolo string chords, an effect similar to rapid but quiet shivering in the cold.

### **Fifth movement: "Socrates; Alcibiades" (Molto tenuto; Allegro molto vivace)**

Bernstein's description: *Socrates describes his visit to the seer Diotima, quoting her speech on the demonology of love. This is a slow introduction of greater weight than any of the preceding movements; and serves as a highly developed reprise of the middle section of the Agathon movement, thus suggesting a hidden sonata-form. The famous interruption by Alcibiades and his band of drunken revelers ushers in the Allegro, which is an extended Rondo ranging in spirit from agitation through jig-like dance music to joyful celebration. If there is a hint of jazz in the celebration, I hope it will not be taken as anachronistic Greek party-music, but rather the natural expression of a contemporary American composer imbued with the spirit of that timeless dinner party.*

♪ The tense and severe introduction is relieved by a poignant moment between solo violin and solo cello.

♪ Bernstein himself designates this movement as a Rondo; quite simply,

rondos are movements where a prominent melody (let's call it "A") returns many times, alternating with other subordinate melodies ("B," "C," and even "D") which may or may not be repeated themselves. Following a rondo is simple: when a passage begins, try to recognize whether you are hearing something new, or something returning from earlier in the movement.

♫ Here, Bernstein finally brings out the jazzy style we love him most for. To that end, this movement includes the piece's fullest and most typical use of percussion and harp, including an idiomatic harp glissando.

## LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990)

### Sonata for Clarinet and Piano

Orchestrated by SID RAMIN (b. 1919)

**Instrumentation:** solo clarinet, percussion, piano, and strings.

**Premiere (orchestral version):** July 23, 1994. Eniwa Shimin Kaikan, Hokkaido, Japan. Richard Stoltzman, clarinet, Pacific Music Festival Orchestra, Yutaka Sado, cond.

**QCSO Premiere.**

The least famous but perhaps the most important of Bernstein's collaborators may have been the orchestrator Sid Ramin. With few composition credits of his own (his most notable original work seems to be the theme to *Candid Camera*), Ramin was an extremely gifted orchestrator, and a hidden hand in many well-known musicals, including *West Side Story*. It may strike some lovers of classical music as strange that a composer would outsource so essential a task as orchestration, but this was the standard arrangement on Broadway and even sometimes in crossover music, as in Gershwin's

*Rhapsody in Blue*. According to Ramin, he and Bernstein orchestrated the Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* together; though the first page of the score credits the work only to Bernstein, he dedicated it to Ramin.

Theirs turned out to be a collaboration that continued even beyond the grave. After Bernstein's death, clarinetist Richard Stoltzman asked Ramin to revisit Bernstein's first published composition, the Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, written in 1942, when the composer was only 24. Unlike his expansive and flashy orchestrations for *West Side Story*, Ramin's transcription of the Sonata is sparse and minimalist. It was premiered by Stoltzman at the Pacific Music Festival in Japan, a festival which Bernstein himself founded in 1990.

### Things to Listen for in Bernstein's Clarinet Sonata

#### First Movement (Grazioso)

♫ This early chamber piece is written in a tonal but sparse and contrapuntal style generally popular in mid-century American chamber music, including in the works of Walter Piston and Aaron Copland. Compared to the other works on this program, the sonata is rather subdued throughout.

♫ Though orchestral versions of piano music are extremely common (remember *Pictures at an Exhibition*), it is quite rare for the resulting orchestration to also include a piano part. In this sense Ramin's orchestration is rather unusual; especially since much of the original piano part remains in the orchestral piano part as well.

### Second Movement (Andantino—Vivace e leggiero)

- ♪ After a slow introduction, the second movement is set predominantly in 5/8 meter. Each bar has two beats, but the second beat is longer than the first.
- ♪ Having sat out the first movement, the percussion moves to prominence in the second. The part begins on wood-based instruments (xylophone, wood block) before moving to metal (glockenspiel, triangle) and finally skin (timpani). Like in the first movement, Ramin excludes the percussion from the more lyrical middle section.

## LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990) Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

**Instrumentation:** Piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, e-flat clarinet, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano/celesta, and strings.

**Premiere:** February 13, 1961, Carnegie Hall, New York. New York Philharmonic, Lukas Foss conducting.

**QCSO Performance History:** 1971 and 1990 (James Dixon, conductor); 1995 (Kim Allen Kluge, conductor); 2013 (Mark Russell Smith, conductor).

Had you visited the suburbs of Vienna at the end of the eighteenth century, you might have attended a *Singspiel* performance at the Theater auf der Wieden. In contrast to the elite genres of *opera seria* and *opera buffa*, *Singspiel* was a more popular form of musical theatre, sung in German (rather than aristocratic Italian) with spoken dialogue (rather than formal sung *recitative*). In effect, *Singspiele* were the mass-appeal Broadway musicals of their time; entertaining and

popular, but not generally the kind of genre where a “great” composer aimed to make a profound artistic contribution.

That was, at least, until Mozart came along. As he had done already for *opera seria* and *opera buffa*, Mozart took the pre-existing genre of *Singspiel* and completely transcended it, preserving its charming, populist qualities while imbuing it with previously-unimaginable depth and profundity. Anybody familiar with *Singspiel* attending a performance of Mozart’s last opera, *Die Zauberflöte* (“The Magic Flute”), would have recognized this immediately, which is perhaps why the work’s initial production ran for hundreds of performances, well past the composer’s untimely death.

In his own place and time, Leonard Bernstein aimed similarly to transcend the American Broadway musical. Like Mozart’s earlier *Singspiele*, Bernstein’s first musicals *On the Town* and *Wonderful Town* were excellent but generally conventional examples of the genre. His operetta *Candide* of 1956 was indeed a distinctive and unique work, but his first truly transcendent theatrical work came a year later. *West Side Story*, Bernstein’s incomparable adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, premiered in 1957 to enormous critical and popular acclaim.

Called *East Side Story* in its earliest stages, Bernstein and his collaborators originally sketched the Montagues as Irish Catholics and Capulets as Jews on the Lower East Side. But around that time, gang turf wars in major American cities became a hot topic (think of *Rebel Without a Cause*, released in 1955), so Tony promptly became Polish-Irish, Maria became Puerto Rican, and the story was moved to the Upper West Side

neighborhood of Lincoln Square, near where Lincoln Center stands today.

The concert-suite *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story* was released in 1961, four years after the premiere of stage musical and immediately on the heels of the much-lauded film version. (Illustrating how the musical had taken the nation by storm, even the Tri-City Symphony performed the suite in 1961). As Bernstein's orchestrator Sid Ramin pointed out, the concert version provides the luxury of a very large orchestra, forces well beyond what would typically occupy a Broadway pit.

### Things to Listen for in Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

#### Prologue (*Allegro moderato*)

- ♩ The piece's opening gesture features the whole orchestra in unison: a quick upward perfect fourth to a long note, then a quick upward leap of a "tritone" (a jazzy, almost sinister interval slightly larger than a perfect fourth). Many of the musical's important melodies feature prominent tritones, including the first interval of the ultra-famous show-stopper "Maria".
- ♩ To substitute for the ballet-dancing gangsters that would otherwise be on-stage, all available orchestra members are asked to snap their fingers in time.

#### Somewhere (*Adagio*)

- ♩ The first statement of the musical's most heart-wrenching song is entrusted to none other than the solo viola, doubled by harp harmonics.

#### Scherzo (*Vivace e leggiero*)

- ♩ This brief passage is a coquettish development of melodic motives from "Somewhere".

#### Mambo (*Meno Presto*)

- ♩ Notice the intense, percussive energy of the very fast string melodies. Bernstein amplifies this urgency doubling these figures in the piano.
- ♩ As in *On the Town*, watch the brass for their wide variety of mute changes.

#### Cha-cha (*Andantino con grazia*)

- ♩ In a manner similar to that used in the earlier scherzo section, Bernstein transforms various motives from the song "Maria" to accompany the star-crossed lovers' first dance together.

#### Meeting Scene (*Meno mosso*)

- ♩ For this intimate, almost otherworldly dramatic moment, Bernstein uses solo strings combined with vibraphone.

#### Cool Fugue (*Allegretto*)

- ♩ In case you haven't noticed, Bernstein liked fugues. Here he transforms motives from the cynical song sung to gang members by Tony's friend Riff.
- ♩ The sting of the muted trumpets can be particularly felt during its long notes; this, as in the *Serenade*, is an "augmentation" of the fugue subject.

#### Rumble (*Molto allegro*)

- ♩ All that teenage angst boils over into actual rumble between rival gangs.
- ♩ The dramatic action ends with heart-breaking, extremely low flute solo.

#### Finale (*Adagio*)

- ♩ Listen to the long, low repeated notes in the bass near the end; this is called a "pedal tone", and here it provides a quiet but ominous shadow under the suite's (and the musical's) somber conclusion. This note moves up a whole step in the final bars; the two notes together comprise a very long, drawn-out version of the song's last two notes.