

Notes on the Program

West Side Story

Leonard Bernstein

As early as 1948 choreographer/director Jerome Robbins approached Leonard Bernstein with what the composer called in his diary,

a noble idea, a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in slums at the coincidence of Easter–Passover celebrations. Feelings run high between Jews and Catholics ... Street brawls, double death — it all fits.

Seven years later, when a conducting engagement at the Hollywood Bowl took the then 36-year-old Bernstein to Los Angeles, a chance meeting at the Beverly Hills Hotel with playwright Arthur Laurents reignited the two artists' stalled plan to collaborate on a musical. The idea remained dormant until the day in 1955 when a Los Angeles newspaper headline about Latino gang problems inspired an exciting new path. With the hiring of 25-year-old composer Stephen Sondheim, who reluctantly signed on to provide lyrics only, the final pieces fell into place.

After two years of rewriting and struggles to raise financing, the Broadway opening of *West Side Story* elicited reactions that ranged from passionate raves to stunned walk-outs. The latter were sparked by the depiction of gang warfare and prejudice and its nearly unprecedented body count for a musical on the Great White Way. The show was largely snubbed at the Tony Awards in favor of a more accessible rival, *The Music Man*.

Nevertheless, audiences in New York and London (where the show was an instant smash) quickly caught up with the innovations of Robbins's explosive, character-driven

choreography, Laurents's ingenious transposition of Shakespeare, and Bernstein's thrilling score, with lyrics by Sondheim, that included "Tonight" and "Maria."

When Robbins and Robert Wise joined forces to co-direct the 1961 screen version for United Artists, starring box-office favorite Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer (*The Diary of Anne Frank*), the result was one of the decade's greatest commercial and critical triumphs. The film's co-stars, George Chakiris (Bernardo) and Rita Moreno (Anita), took home Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actor and Actress. Their victories were echoed by Oscars for Best Art Direction–Set Decoration, Color; Best Cinematography, Color; Best Costume Design, Color (winner Irene Sharaff had also worked on the Broadway production); Best Film Editing;

IN SHORT

Born: August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts

Died: October 14, 1990, in New York City

Work composed: The musical *West Side Story* was composed principally from the fall of 1955 through the summer of 1957.

World premiere: The musical was premiered on August 19, 1957, at the National Theater in Washington, D.C.; the film was premiered October 18, 1961, in New York City.

New York Philharmonic premiere and most recent performance: complete film with live score, performed September 7–8, 2011, David Newman, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 154 minutes

Best Music, Scoring of a Musical Picture; Best Sound; Best Director (for both Robbins and Wise, the first time this award was shared); and Best Picture. Jerome Robbins also received an honorary Academy Award “for his brilliant achievements in the art of choreography on film.” Location filming also lent an air of authenticity, as dance sequences were filmed along 68th Street, between Amsterdam and West End Avenue, where tenement buildings were soon to be demolished for the building of Lincoln Center (although the playground location was at 110th Street between Second and Third Avenues).

This presentation of *West Side Story*, the motion picture, is in a format that brings its own innovations. For the World Premiere

of the complete film with live score performance at the Hollywood Bowl in September 2011, MGM created a restored, high-definition print of the film that revealed details unseen since 1961. A new sound technology developed by Paris-based Audionamix and utilized by Chace Audio by Deluxe — one of the film industry’s top restoration companies — isolated vocal tracks from the feature, using new technology to separate elements within a monophonic sound track. In the case of *West Side Story*, Audionamix “taught” its technology to recognize and then remove orchestral elements on the sound track while retaining vocals, dialogue, and effects.

Although the original musical materials for the movie arrangements had been lost,

The Philharmonic Connection

Music from the score to *West Side Story* has a long history of performance by the New York Philharmonic. Leonard Bernstein (Music Director of the New York Philharmonic from 1958 to 1969 — having served as its Assistant Conductor from 1943 to 1944 — then named Laureate Conductor for life) revisited his score for *West Side Story* in the opening weeks of 1961 (the year that the film version was released) and extracted nine sections to assemble into what he called the Symphonic Dances.

The impetus was a gala fund-raising concert for the New York Philharmonic’s pension fund, to be held the evening before Valentine’s Day. The event was styled as an overt lovefest, to celebrate not only Bernstein’s involvement with the Orchestra up to that time, but also the fact that he had agreed that very month to a new contract that would ensure his presence for another seven years.

In the interest of efficiency, Bernstein’s colleagues Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal, who had just completed the orchestration for the film version of *West Side Story*, suggested appropriate sections of the score to Bernstein, who placed them not in the order in which they occur in the musical, but instead in a new, uninterrupted sequence derived from a strictly musical rationale. Two of the show’s most popular songs are found in the pages of the Symphonic Dances: “Somewhere” and (in the Cha-Cha section) “Maria.”

— **James M. Keller**, New York Philharmonic Program Annotator

Bernstein, prior to the opening of West Side Story, the musical, in 1957



more than a year of research by Eleonor M. Sandresky of The Leonard Bernstein Office brought to light a trove of important finds in private collections and library archives around the country. From materials discovered in the papers of orchestrator Sid Ramin, as well as in the archives of conductor / music supervisor Johnny Green, director Robert Wise, and producer Walter Mirisch,

Sandresky was able to assemble a mock-up short score (which pares down the full score to a few staves of notation) of the complete film. Garth Edwin Sunderland, senior music editor for the Bernstein Office, re-stored and adapted the orchestration for live performance. At the same time Sunderland oversaw the creation of a brand-new engraving of the entire film score, right down to

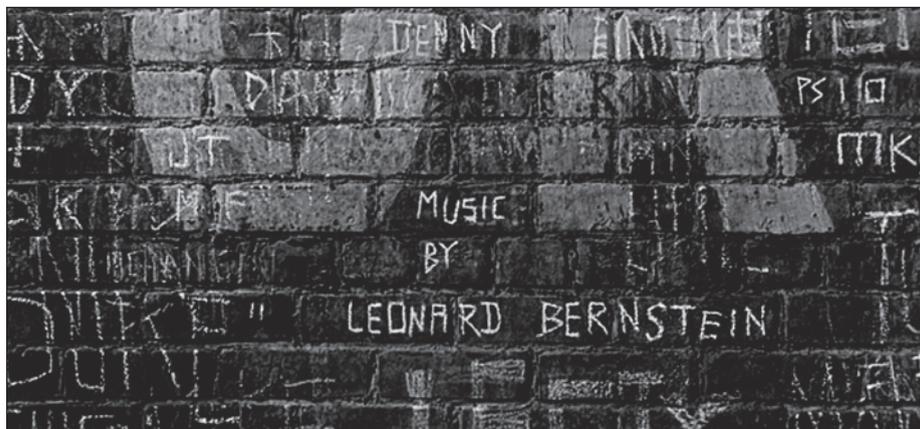
Sources and Inspirations

The music of *West Side Story* does not end with the final fadeout on the characters. Orchestral underscoring continues through the end credits, and audience members are encouraged to stay and experience this sequence, which is itself considered a classic work of cinematic art. The graffiti-like end credits were created by legendary graphic designer Saul Bass, whose work in Hollywood had previously included collaborations with Alfred Hitchcock on titles and graphics for *North by Northwest*, *Vertigo*, and *Psycho*. Bass also designed the overture graphics, in which changing color blocks play over a line drawing that dissolve into an aerial view of Manhattan, pulling the action to the Upper West Side.

In *Saul Bass: A Life in Film and Design*, author Pat Kirkham explained that the *West Side Story* end credits were shifted from the beginning to the end of the film to accommodate the lengthy list needed for acknowledgements of the Broadway production as well as the film:

They also gave viewers time to compose themselves after the tragic climax. Saul likened the effect to a decompression chamber: “The epilogue is a recapitulation of the environment within which the film’s story takes place. Thus all the walls and surfaces (which were part of the background of the story) are intimately explored. As the camera moves over these walls, fences, doors and signs, it discovers, among the graffiti on them, different credits.”

— The Editors



End titles echo the graffiti-marked walls of the *West Side Story* landscape

last-minute modifications made on the scoring stage in 1961.

The final result is a presentation of *West Side Story* unlike any in the history of this screen musical — held, appropriately, at a concert site that its composer called home for so many decades and that sits in the very New York City neighborhood that inspired its creation.

— *Steven Smith, Emmy-nominated documentary producer, journalist, and author of the biography A Heart at Fire's Center: The Life and Music of Bernard Herrmann.*

Instrumentation: three flutes (all doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, three

clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet) and bass clarinet, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone (doubling baritone saxophone), soprano saxophone (doubling baritone and bass saxophone), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, drum set, steel chimes, orchestra bells, vibraphone, xylophone, marimba, triangle, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, finger cymbals, cowbells, tam-tam, bongos, congas, timbales, pitched drums, snare drum, large bass drum, tambourine, maracas, guiro, wood block, temple blocks, castanets, claves, ratchet, slide whistle, piano (doubling celeste), harp, guitar (doubling electric guitar, Spanish guitar, and mandolin), and strings.

Angels and Muses

As the story goes, no one was more surprised by the sound of Maria's singing in the film adaptation of *West Side Story* than Natalie Wood. The actress had every intention of singing the part, and recorded songs during production. But unbeknownst to her, studio execs had another idea — hiring singer Marni Nixon to dub Maria's songs. Uncredited, Nixon had provided the singing voice for Deborah Kerr in *The King and I* (earning \$420 for her efforts) and *An Affair to Remember*, and would later do the same for Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*. Before becoming the best-known anonymous voice in the land, Nixon had established herself as a concert performer, and she appeared with the New York Philharmonic on almost 20 occasions, including a 1961 televised Young People's Concert and the 2007 production of *My Fair Lady* (as Mrs. Higgins). The New York Philharmonic will miss seeing this friend of the Orchestra, who died on July 25.

— The Editors

Nixon and two Andrés — Previn (left) and Kostelanetz — at the New York Philharmonic, ca. 1965

