

The History in This Program

It is fitting that music by Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland should share tonight's program: the two are broadly considered to be among America's greatest composers, and they were also close friends.

Bernstein first discovered Copland's music as an undergraduate at Harvard, where he became obsessed with the "prophetic, clangorous" Piano Variations. He played it often at parties, where it would clear a room instantly — with one exception. Bernstein met Copland himself on November 14, 1937, at dancer Anna Sokolow's New York solo debut. It was the composer's 37th birthday and at a post-performance party for him, Bernstein expressed enthusiasm for the Variations. Copland asked him to play it, but Bernstein demurred. "It'll ruin your party," he said. "Not *this* party," Copland promised. Indeed, the 20-year-old Bernstein transfixed everyone with a performance of the Variations from memory — and a lifelong friendship was born.

At the New York Philharmonic Bernstein championed Copland works, conducting more performances of his mentor's music than any other Music Director before or since. It was because of that advocacy that, when Copland was awarded Honorary Membership of the New York Philharmonic in 1970, he could be recognized as the composer "whose music has been represented on the Society's programs more than that of any American composer during its history" — a distinction he still holds today. Of the seven composers commissioned to create new pieces for the inaugural season of Philharmonic (now David Geffen) Hall, Copland's contribution, *Connotations*, was selected to be played on Opening Night, September 23, 1962. Bernstein would go on to devote an unprecedented three Young People's Concerts to Copland, including tributes for his 60th and 70th birthdays. The legacy continued even after Bernstein's death, when the Philharmonic dedicated three full weeks in 1999 to *Completely Copland*, a salute as part of his centennial year celebrations.

When Copland received a Kennedy Center Honor in 1979, Bernstein spoke at the ceremony, paying tribute to Copland's dedication to fostering young talent. "That is the mark of a great man: time for *people*," Bernstein said. "I know, because I was one of them."

— The Archives

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Bernstein and Copland pore over the score of Connotations during a rehearsal in September 1962.



Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

Leonard Bernstein

As early as 1949, Leonard Bernstein and his friends Jerome Robbins (the choreographer) and Arthur Laurents (the librettist) batted around the idea of creating a musical retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* set amid the tensions of rival social groups in modern New York City. The project took a long time to find its eventual form. An early version tentatively titled *East Side Story*, involving the doomed love affair between a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy on the city's Lower East Side, was altered to reflect the more up-to-date social issue of gang conflict.

Much of the composition was carried out more or less concurrently with Bernstein's work on his operetta *Candide*. It was while working on these projects, in November 1956, that Bernstein was named Joint Principal Conductor of the New York Philharmonic. The appointment not only revived a relationship with the Orchestra that had been dormant for the preceding few years, but also placed him in a position to succeed Dimitri Mitropoulos as the Orchestra's Music Director, an eventuality that would take place in September 1958.

As the production of *West Side Story* moved into the home stretch it was beset with several crises. Cheryl Crawford, the producer, got cold feet about what she termed "a show full of hatefulness and ugliness," but her partner Roger Stevens jumped in to ensure that the project would continue. The young Stephen Sondheim, who had been brought on as lyricist, snagged the interest of his friend Harold Prince to be involved as a producer. Robbins then announced that he would rather spend his time directing than choreographing the show, thereby jeopardizing Prince's participation. In the end, Robbins was persuaded to stay on as choreographer and was granted an unusually long

rehearsal period as an inducement.

On August 19, 1957, *West Side Story* opened in a tryout in Washington, D.C., with a host of government luminaries in attendance. It proved a firm hit when it reached Broadway, running for 772 performances, just short of two years. After that it embarked on a national tour and eventually made its way back to New York in 1960 for another 253 performances, followed by release of the feature film in 1961. "The radioactive fallout from *West Side Story* must still be descending on Broadway this morning," wrote Walter Kerr, critic of *The Herald Tribune*, in the wake of the opening in New York, and one might argue that his assumption remains true six decades later. *West Side Story* stands as an essential, influential chapter in the history of American theater, and its engrossing tale of young love against a background of

IN SHORT

Born: August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts

Died: October 14, 1990, in New York City

Work composed: the musical *West Side Story*, principally 1955–57; Bernstein assembled portions of the score into the *Symphonic Dances* in early 1961, overseeing the orchestration carried out by Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal; dedicated "To Sid Ramin, in friendship"

World premiere: the musical, August 19, 1957, at the National Theatre in Washington, D.C.; *Symphonic Dances*, February 13, 1961, by the New York Philharmonic, Lukas Foss, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 21, 2017, at Bravo! Vail, in Colorado, Bramwell Tovey, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 24 minutes

spectacularly choreographed gang warfare has found a place at the core of American culture.

In the opening weeks of 1961, Bernstein revisited his score for *West Side Story* and extracted nine sections to assemble into what he called the Symphonic Dances. The impetus was a gala benefit 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 love fest, celebrating not only Bernstein's involvement with the Orchestra up to that time but also 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 of *West Side Story* for its film version, 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 most popular of the musical's songs are found in the pages of the Symphonic Dances: "Somewhere" and

The Work at a Glance

The late Jack Gottlieb, who for many years served as Bernstein's amanuensis, provided this summary of the sections of the Symphonic Dances and how they relate to the action in *West Side Story*:

Prologue: The growing rivalry between two teenage gangs, the Jets and the Sharks.

"Somewhere": In a visionary dance sequence, the two gangs are united in friendship.

Scherzo: In the same dream, they break through the city walls, and suddenly find themselves in a world of space, air, and sun.

Mambo: Reality again; competitive dance between the gangs.

Cha-Cha: The star-crossed lovers see each other for the first time and dance together.

Meeting Scene: Music accompanies their first spoken words.

"Cool" Fugue: An elaborate dance sequence in which the Jets practice controlling their hostility towards the Sharks.

Rumble: Climactic gang battle during which the two gang leaders are killed.

Finale: Love music developing into a processional, which recalls, in tragic reality, the vision of "Somewhere."



Richard Beymer, as Tony, and Natalie Wood, as Maria, in the 1961 film version of *West Side Story*

“Maria” (in the Cha-Cha section), though not the also-beloved “America,” “One Hand, One Heart,” “I Feel Pretty,” or “Tonight.”

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons and

contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bongos, cymbals, tenor drum, bass drum, xylophone, drum set, cow bell, timbales, congas, police whistle, vibraphone, chime, wood block, triangle, gong, orchestra bells, guiro, maracas, finger cymbals, tambourine, harp, piano, celeste, and strings.

A Valentine for Lenny

The World Premiere of the Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* took place at a special Valentine concert for Leonard Bernstein on February 13, 1961. The New York Philharmonic pulled out all the stops to honor its then Music Director with a program of his own music. Bernstein sat in the first tier box for the concert at Carnegie Hall while his good friend Aaron Copland led the opening work — the Overture to *Candide*. Lukas Foss then took over the podium, conducting the World Premiere of the Symphonic Dances — with its “Mambo!” shout-out by the musicians.

The *New York World Telegram* reported that the “work revealed what new strength and vitality Mr. Bernstein had brought to Broadway,” as well as to the symphonic concert hall. It was a time of momentous expectations: the previous week the Orchestra had announced that Bernstein’s contract would be extended for another seven years, filming for the movie version of *West Side Story* was underway, and the Symphonic Dances was a hit.



The Philharmonic has again honored its legendary Music Director in the 2017–18 season with *Bernstein’s Philharmonic: A Centennial Festival* last fall, focusing on his symphonic works, and a New Year’s Eve *Bernstein on Broadway* concert. It’s all part of worldwide festivities leading up to the 100th anniversary of his birth, on August 25, 1918.

On February 25 the Orchestra is presenting *Insights at the Atrium: “Bernstein’s Mahler Marathon: The Sony Recordings,”* a 13-hour exploration through his recordings of Mahler’s complete symphonies, marked score, writings, and video clips. The free event takes place at the David Rubinstein Atrium.

— The Editors

Bernstein, ca. 1958