

ASO Program Notes

Overture to *Candide*

Leonard Bernstein (1918 - 1990)

Leonard Bernstein, highly successful in so many musical endeavors, always told his friends that he wanted to write “the Great American Opera,” and many feel he came closest with *Candide*, which he described as “a comic operetta.” In 1759 Voltaire wrote a satire about the misadventures of the naive and pure-hearted Candide and his sweetheart, Cunégonde. In it, Voltaire takes a jab at the optimistic philosophy of his times, when his contemporary Gottfried Leibniz said that “all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds.” The story chronicles a host of man-made and natural disasters that make it difficult to believe that all is for the best. Bernstein and the much-admired playwright Lillian Hellman collaborated on a work that was based on the Voltaire story and made pointed reference to the artificially happy post-war attitude in America in 1956. It was clearly meant to be a political statement. Bernstein felt that Voltaire’s description of his own society with its snobbery, false morality and attacks on individuals was identical to the American society of the times, with the McCarthy witch-hunts being an example.

Bernstein and Hellman worked on the play for two years and it opened in 1956 on Broadway. But *Candide* failed, closing after 73 performances. The Overture, however, took on a life of its own and made steady gains as an orchestral work. Loved for its scintillating and crackling rhythms, it incorporates tunes from the show, including “The Best of All Possible Worlds”, “Battle Music”, “Oh Happy We” and “Glitter and Be Gay”, a memorable soprano piece. It was meant to reflect the fast-paced adventures in Voltaire’s work, its comedy and its tender moments.

Bernstein was very disappointed with the less-than-enthusiastic reception of *Candide*. He cared deeply about the work, of which he said, “There’s more of me in that piece than anything else I’ve done.” He kept tinkering with it over the years, and each time he revived it, the audiences were larger. In 1974, with a new libretto that emphasized humor and diluted the political and social themes, *Candide* was again introduced to Broadway, where it saw 741 performances. But in 1989, one year before his death, Bernstein sought to restore the integrity of his original work, and he gave *Candide* one more overhaul. A full-length recording of that final revision preserves Bernstein’s last thoughts on his favorite composition.

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