

ASO Program Notes

Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

Leonard Bernstein (1918 - 1990)

Leonard Bernstein was well trained, having studied composition at Harvard, piano at Curtis and conducting at Tanglewood. A catalogue of his work shows an incredible diversity and a huge volume of accomplishment. The germ of the concept that was to become *West Side Story* began in 1949 as a journal entry in which Bernstein recorded the idea of “a modern version of Romeo and Juliet set in the slums.” A few years later, in 1955, he again wrote about being “fired again by the Romeo notion, only now I think it is going to be two teenage gangs, one the warring Puerto Ricans, the other self-styled ‘Americans’”. He went ahead this time, and *West Side Story* premiered in 1957 to criticism from those who found it too harshly realistic for a musical. Some said it was the great American opera that composers had been trying to write for decades. Bernstein, however, said it was not an opera but a bona fide Broadway musical, because of its reliance upon dance as well as song to tell the story. *West Side Story* the musical ran for 772 performances on Broadway, toured nationally, then returned to New York for 253 more performances. It then became a highly successful film in 1961.

In 1961 Bernstein decided to revisit the score of *West Side Story* and assemble nine sections into the *Symphonic Dances*. He rearranged the numbers in a new, uninterrupted sequence strictly from a musical rationale, aiming for a pleasing listening experience. The suite has all the tension of the musical story, including the chaotic pace and energy of urban life in the 1950s.

The Prologue depicts the violent rivalry between two New York City street gangs, the Jets and the Sharks. A dream sequence imagines the two gangs joined in friendship “somewhere” outside the city where there is space, air and sun (Scherzo). At a dance in the high school gym the two gangs compete (Mambo). It is here that Tony and Maria meet, dance together (Cha-Cha) and speak for the first time (Meeting Scene). The Jets become nervous but try to keep things under control (Cool - Fugue), but violence breaks out in a gang battle (Rumble) and rival gang leaders are killed. The Finale recalls Maria’s “I Have A Love”, laments the death of the two gang leaders and returns to the vision of “somewhere”.

More than 60 years after its inception, *West Side Story* remains an essential part of the history of American theater, and the *Symphonic Dances*, Bernstein’s beautifully crafted reflection of his famous musical, helped establish him as one of America’s great composers.

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