

2017-2018 Season
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Program Notes

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda



Nir Kabaretti, MUSIC AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
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Selections from *Candide* (1956)
Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Lillian Hellman conceived a theater piece based on Voltaire's *Candide* as early as 1950, but it was not until 1956 that the project materialized. She originally intended the work to be a play with incidental music, which she asked Leonard Bernstein to compose, but his enthusiasm for the subject was so great that the venture swelled into a full-blown comic operetta; Tyrone Guthrie was enlisted as director and Richard Wilbur wrote most of the song lyrics. *Candide* was first seen in a pre-Broadway tryout at Boston's Colonial Theatre on October 29, 1956 (just days after Bernstein's appointment as co-music director of the New York Philharmonic had been announced for the following season), and opened at the Martin Beck Theatre in New York on December 1st.

The Overture, largely drawn from the show, captures perfectly the wit, brilliance and slapstick tumult of the operetta. In *I Am Easily Assimilated*, one of the story's serving ladies tells them her unusual life story in a tango. *Make Our Garden Grow*, the show's hopeful finale, is one of Broadway's most stirring anthems.

***Quiet City* for Strings, Trumpet and English Horn (1940)**
Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Copland wrote his incidental music in 1940 for Irwin Shaw's experimental play *Quiet City*, which explored the "night thoughts of many different kinds of people in a great city." The principal character was a jazz trumpeter, the spokesman for the author, whose music was intended to "arouse the conscience of his fellow players and of the audience." The play was withdrawn after only two performances, but friends urged Copland to arrange his music into an independent orchestral piece. The composer explained that he "borrowed the name, the trumpet, and some of the themes from the original play" to create a tone-picture "evocative of the nostalgia and inner distress of a society profoundly aware of its own insecurity." The trumpet wailing in the night, the husky sound of the English horn, the brooding string harmonies — all create a nostalgic but world-weary mood that is the musical counterpart of the novels of Raymond Chandler and the paintings of Edward Hopper. Wrote one critic after the premiere, "[*Quiet City* sings of] silent streets, the slogging gait of a dispossessed man, and some of the feeling of mournful beauty that comes from loneliness."

Piano Concerto (World Premiere)
Robin Frost (born in 1930)

Mr. Frost provided his own program notes for this piece.

The seed for my Piano Concerto was planted many years ago when I was asked to write music for a short film that included scenes set around a swimming pool. I sketched a theme featuring alto saxophone backed by an ensemble of guitar, bass, piano and drums and titled it "By the Pool". The filmmakers eventually decided to use tracks from the Disney library instead but the little alto saxophone piece was not done with me yet. I had gained a love of the instrument from several excellent players with whom I had performed and even tried playing one myself for a while. I thought at first the theme might work in an opera but only found an appropriate place for it when I hit on the idea of a piano concerto in which both the melody and the alto saxophone would figure prominently. It serves as the theme of the second movement and is also heard in a variant form in the finale.

"Three Dance Variations" from *Fancy Free* (1944)
Leonard Bernstein

Leonard Bernstein was 25 years old when he came to national prominence. On his birthday, August 25, 1943, he was named assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic; on November 14th he substituted at short notice for the ailing Bruno Walter in a nationally broadcast concert that made him an overnight sensation. At that same time, he received a commission from New York's Ballet Theatre to compose the score for his first ballet, *Fancy Free*, a production that would also mark the debut of Jerome Robbins as a choreographer. Oliver Smith created the decor and Kermit Love designed the costumes. *Fancy Free*, conducted by the composer, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York on April 18, 1944. It was a smash. The ballet played 99 times in New York that year, and served as the basis for the musical *On the Town*, which opened on Broadway on December 28, 1944. Bernstein derived an orchestral suite from the complete score of the ballet and conducted its first performance with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra on January 14, 1945. The ballet concerns three sailors on shore leave in New York during World War II. The *Three Dance Variations* accompany a dance competition the boys join in at a city bar.

Selections from *West Side Story* (1957)

West Side Story was one of the first musicals to explore a serious subject with wide social implications. More than just the story of the tragic lives of ordinary people in a small, grubby section of New York, it was concerned with urban violence, juvenile delinquency, clan hatred

and young love. The show was criticized as harshly realistic by some who advocated an entirely escapist function for the musical, depicting things that were not appropriately shown on the Broadway stage. Most, however, recognized that it expanded the scope of the musical through references both to classical literature (*Romeo and Juliet*) and to the pressing problems of modern society. Brooks Atkinson, the distinguished critic of *The New York Times*, noted in his book *Broadway* that *West Side Story* was “a harsh ballad of the city, taut, nervous and flaring, the melodies choked apprehensively, the rhythms wild, swift and deadly.” Much of the show’s electric atmosphere was generated by its brilliant dance sequences, for which Jerome Robbins won the 1957-1958 Tony Award for choreography. “The dance movements not only epitomize the tensions, the brutality, bravado, and venomous hatred of the gang warriors but also had sufficient variety in themselves to hold audiences spellbound,” wrote Abe Laube in *Broadway’s Greatest Musicals*. *West Side Story*, like a few other musicals — *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma*, *Pal Joey*, *A Chorus Line*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Rent*, *Hamilton* — provides more than just an evening’s pleasant diversion. It is a work that gave a new vision and direction to the American musical theater.

Mambo is the music that accompanies the dances at the gym, which becomes a competition between the show’s rival gangs. Tony and Maria fall in love at the dance, and Maria expresses her excitement when she goes home in the exuberant *I Feel Pretty*. As the rivalry between the gangs grows, Tony, a Jet, and Maria, sister of a Shark, express their longing for a place free from prejudice in a dance performed while a woman’s voice is heard singing *Somewhere*.

“A Little Bit in Love” from *Wonderful Town* (1953)

Wonderful Town is the story of two sisters from Columbus, Ohio who move to New York City to further their careers as a writer (Ruth) and an actress (Eileen), and find there a series of humorous misadventures and broken love affairs. In *A Little Bit in Love*, Eileen sings wistfully of her first love in her new hometown.

“Gloria in Excelsis” from *Mass* Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Bernstein’s *Mass*, subtitled “A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers,” was composed at the request of Jacqueline Kennedy for the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., and premiered there on September 8, 1971. The *Mass*, like Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem* of 1961, uses a traditional Roman Catholic service as its framework but interpolates into the ancient structure additional texts that comment upon the liturgical words. Britten took his glosses from the powerful, anti-war poems of Wilfred Owen, the gifted English writer killed in France just seven days before the Armistice ended the First

World War on November 11, 1918; Bernstein wrote his own verses with the help of 23-year-old Stephen Schwartz, composer and lyricist of the hit Broadway rock musical *Godspell*. Composed at the height of the national furor over the Vietnam War, *Mass* took a strongly anti-authoritarian position against both church and government, and excited much heated commentary. About the impact of the work as a piece of theater, however, there was no doubt. As could perhaps no other composer of his generation, Bernstein juxtaposed a wildly eclectic mixture of opera, jazz, blues, pop, folk, rock, sacred and Broadway styles in a manner that made *Mass* a virtual microcosm of the musical crosscurrents of its time.

“I Can Cook, Too” from *On the Town* (1944)

In April 1944, Leonard Bernstein’s ballet *Fancy Free* was introduced to great acclaim at the Metropolitan Opera House. The plot of the ballet, according to the composer, concerned three sailors “on leave in [New York] and on the prowl for girls. The tale tells of how they meet first one, then a second girl, and how they fight over them, lose them, and in the end take off with still a third.” The ballet’s setting and characters were the inspiration for Bernstein to try a new piece in a form that he had not previously broached — musical comedy. Soon after *Fancy Free* had been launched, he enlisted lyricists Adolph Green and Betty Comden to write the book and words for the show, which they titled *On the Town*. It was a hit, running for 463 performances on Broadway; Arthur Freed made it into a superb movie starring Frank Sinatra, Gene Kelly and Jules Munshin five years later. The show has been revived several times for Broadway, most recently in a Tony-nominated production in 2014. In the story, Chip tries to speed up his tour around town by catching a cab driven by the aggressively love-starved Brunhilde Esterhazy — Hildy, for short. Hildy talks Chip into coming back to her place and catalogs her domestic virtues for him in the hot swing number, *I Can Cook, Too*.