

The Bernstein Centennial - Reflections, Events and Impressions

by Rob Barnett

This little piece strikes not even a glancing blow in the direction of giving an account of Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), composer, conductor, educator, pianist and man. There are plenty of points of reference on the internet that will serve that purpose. For a start, you could go to the [Leonard Bernstein at 100](#) site and be reminded why there are celebrations for the 100th birthday of a man who died in 1990. Those celebrations will run from 25 August 2017, Bernstein's 99th birthday. They continue until 25 August 2019. The present garland of lists, memories, recommendations and thoughts is a disparate, personal and unbalanced thing. I hope that some of it might lend stamina to and interest in watching and listening to Bernstein's flamboyant music-making. It will surely yield up what we now choose to call "inheritance tracks".

There were Mahler paladins before Bernstein but he it was who re-made Mahler's reputation. Here was a composer, he said, that you *had* to hear in the 1960s and beyond. In this he swam against the flow; indeed, he re-directed the flow. He became the first and most phenomenally sweeping populariser of Mahler, mostly with his own NYPO. I recall his face and Mahler's appearing in the Sunday Times Colour Supplement (as it then was) in the late 1960s. He made Mahler a thrilling revelation and always had me wondering why it was not the LPs of Mahler and Bernstein rather than Demis Roussos that put in an appearance at Mike Leigh's later play, *Abigail's Party*. Mahler's symphonies were part of that middle-class hi-fi man's stereo world. After Bernstein the flood of conductors, gifted and so-so, became torrential and interest has remained at the same intensity ever since. "Cometh the hour, cometh the man" and it was not a passing phase. Those CBS, and then Sony, LPs were made over in different formats time after time. They still in their latest audio refurbishment grab the attention. The late [Tony Duggan](#) always has something valuable to say and is worth a detour.

Of his own stage works Bernstein cut a deep furrow. His work with Stephen Sondheim on *West Side Story* saw two comets in spectacular and life-enhancing collision. Sondheim then peeled off to his own brand of greatness but their achievement is picked up in the words of Tony as he sings "cannonballing down through the sky, Gleam in its eye, Bright as a rose!" Everyone will have their own favoured version of *West Side Story* but while I have my reservations about Kiri Te Kanawa's operatic Maria I have nothing but praise for Carreras as Tony. His voice comes complete with that irresistible Italianate throb. The DVD of the recording sessions is compelling viewing even if we may squirm when Carreras leaves the studio desperately upset. The [Naxos CD](#) is good, people will be loyal to the [film soundtrack](#) and Bernstein pupil's [Tilson Thomas's recording](#) is also well regarded. *West Side Story* is special but so is the cracking and crackling overture to *Candide* which, far more than the operetta itself, has carried Bernstein's name far and wide. It has helped revive the genre of the brilliant concert overture: make room there at the front Smetana, Rossini, Reznicek, Suppé, Borodin, Kabalevsky and Copland. Interesting that the NYPO played this, conductorless, in their *Musicians' Tribute* to Bernstein at Avery Fisher Hall on 7 December 1992. However, of all the many pleasures in his theatre music, the piece that is almost certain to leave a tear in my eye is the [Comden and Green](#) duet in *Some Other Time*. There 's a real lump in the throat with the repeated words *Oh well, we'll catch up some other time*. I recall that I first heard the mastery of this fragile song in Robert Cushman's 1980s radio series *Book, Music and Lyrics*. When a composer can do this there is something very special in his DNA mix.

I will always associate the things that draw me back to listen to Bernstein with the man as a pianist-conductor. The Shostakovich Piano Concerto No. 2 might have been made for Bernstein. Its mélange of alert ripping, rapping, rhythmic impact coupled with a total immersion in twentieth century romance is irresistible. I learnt this piece from a friend at Polytechnic through his mid-price CBS LP; one that also included the Ravel Piano Concerto in G. Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto, as played by Previn and Vacchiano, with Bernstein conducting on the [CD reissue](#) is a very different proposition. It may be brilliant but it is just a little hard-eyed like Shostakovich's First Symphony. Sure, it has that

knockabout 'circus' element but it just doesn't blossom as the Second Concerto does when Bernstein is at the keyboard and steering the orchestra. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle and crepitate when the woodwind stalk in right at the start of that Concerto. It's a shame that Bernstein never discovered Walton's *Sinfonia Concertante*.

By and large, Bernstein's own concert music does not 'do it' for me. It might well take more time than I have given. However, among his scores I have enjoyed his Symphony No. 1 *Jeremiah* (1944) in his own pioneering recording. From later in his career I would recommend the *Serenade* which suffers from its title almost as much as does Tanayev's *Suite*. It's better to forget about the Greek philosopher movement titles and drink it in as music. Think of it as a lavish and discursive multi-movement violin concerto - perhaps a latter-day Lalo *Symphoniw Espagnole* but with a firm grip on 20th century's emotions. In my terms, I have yet to hear a finer and more ragingly gear-engaged version than that by Zino Francescatti (he did a great Walton as well) with the NYPO conducted by the composer. I have already mentioned the *Candide Overture*.

Bernstein's teachers included Edward Burlingame Hill, an East-Coast man whose more modern impressionistic scores mark him out from the early East Coast generations. While, as far as I can see, Bernstein dropped Hill in later years, in 1953 he recorded, with the Columbia SO, Hill's *Prelude for Orchestra*. Hiding behind the neutrality of that title is a short work of lush and almost Gallic impressionistic complexity: think early Roussel, Bax *Spring Fire*, D'Indy. It's another aspect of Bernstein not to be missed.

Other American composers? He supported many and his devotion to certain works by William Schuman and Roy Harris is notable. I discovered Schuman through a DG LP (2530 103) conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas who was "a friend and kindred spirit" of Bernstein. MTT with Paul Zukofsky won me over to the cause though Schuman's Violin Concerto although, truth to tell, the Damascus Road conversion took longer than it did for the composer represented on other side of that LP (Piston's Second Symphony); Piston was one of Bernstein's teachers. Fuelled by the blast-furnace furies and triumphs of the Violin Concerto I set about ordering a special import LP (remember those?) from the USA (CBS MS7442). It was of Schuman's Third Symphony, a work of about the same 1940s vintage as the Violin Concerto. That CBS version shook the foundations and raised the dust. The exultant side-drum, slam-dunk punctuated finale is amongst the greatest things in 20th century music. There's plenty to enjoy and be transfixed by in the work and in that specific reading but those last torque-driven five minutes, where Schuman and Bernstein shift up two gears, is extraordinary - it defines kinetic and accelerates the heart-beat.

There was no shortage of other Americans Bernstein championed. In the NYPO's limited edition [An American Celebration](#) we encounter Bernstein and his orchestra in music by Mennin, Rorem (Symphony 3), Foss, Schuman 6, Harris 3, Virgil Thomson and Copland (*Lincoln Portrait*). From earlier generations we get to hear him conducting Chadwick's *Melpomene* and Macdowell's *Indian Suite No. 2*. In an unusual pushing out of the boat he can also be heard in Varèse's *Integrales*. Beyond that collection there is a broadcast tape of John J Becker's Third Symphony. His commercial recordings of American composers also demand to be mentioned. Two of them were the sources of broadcasts by BBC Radio 3, circa 1980 - a series called *The American Symphony*. Bernstein's LP of David Diamond's Fourth Symphony (which he premiered with the Boston SO in 1946). In one of music's most beautiful pages this begins in a once-heard-never-forgotten Ravel-like marine dazzle. Also, one for the treasury is his Randall Thompson Second Symphony which defeats superlatives (but I will have a go). That Second Symphony, which I rejoice to say, I heard live with the BBCNOW a couple of years back, is a joyous combination of perfectly weighted movements. These range across a Far-West melody of idyllic relaxation and the exultant zip and rush that you can also hear in George Lloyd's Sixth Symphony. Speaking of Sixth Symphonies, it's a pity that Bernstein did not record Howard Hanson's Sixth - a work terribly underrated but which rang true in 1968 in a style then long considered unfashionable but which Bernstein embraced. Bernstein's Harris Third, like his Schuman Third, he recorded twice; once in the 1960s and again in the 1980s in better sound for [Deutsche](#)

[Grammophon](#). He also broadcast Harris's *American Creed* to good effect. His Rorem Third is in the NYPO set but he also recorded Rorem's *Sunday Morning*. It's a pity he never took an interest in Rorem's phantasmal short orchestral piece, *Lions*. There was a Sony LP of Schuman's Viola Concerto on *Old English Rounds* - a rather flat mixture after the symphonies. Sony issued his Schuman symphonies 3, 5 and 8 ([review](#)) and there are similar discs of his [Piston and Blitzstein](#) and [Lopatnikoff, Dallapiccola and Shapero](#).

Bernstein seems to have had a predilection for the big name Scandinavians at a time when fashion was rejecting them. He recorded monumental versions of Nielsen 3 and 5 although he never got to the other four. I never connected with the rather sniffy contemporary reviews. His strong and stirring 1960s Sibelius cycle for [CBS](#) has a special place and although it did not extend to *Kullervo* - think of that: a Bernstein *Kullervo* or even a *Lemminkainen Suite* - it did include a *Luonnotar* and a *Pohjola's Daughter*. There would have been a second Sibelius Symphony cycle too in his DG 1980s but he only got as far as 1, 2, 5 and 7 before death intervened. These four symphonies exist in both audio and video versions. The latter was reviewed by John Quinn and his [review](#) is spot on: "Even if the sound and vision may not be up to the very latest standards it's the performances for which you'll buy this disc. Len Mullenger described these performances to me as "wilful but utterly compelling". I really can't say better than that, though the word "wilful" applies less to the Fifth and Seventh symphonies, I think. Leonard Bernstein, as a conductor was an astonishing re-creative artist, albeit a controversial one. In these Sibelius performances he holds nothing back; he is utterly committed and absorbed and the results are, as Len said, utterly compelling. This is a great conductor at work and getting splendid performances from an orchestra which clearly held him in high regard." I also like his Tchaikovsky. His *Winter Daydreams* with the NYPO is excellent, having first met it when I picked up a box of LPs (CBS 78300) of the first three. For years that cheap set did good service complementing my favourite LPs of the last three symphonies (Mravinsky, DG, 1961).

One of Bernstein's controversial recordings, in his last years, was the *Enigma Variations* recorded with the BBCSO ([CD DVD](#)). It was so s-l-o-w and was anathematised by the English critics. True, it is self-indulgent but it never bored me and would I think have secretly delighted Elgar, the sentimentalist. I keep it close by with the alternatives from [Beecham](#) and [Norman Del Mar](#).

It's almost expected, now, to say that Bernstein was one of a kind; you know the sort of thing: "we shall not see his like again". However, there are some signs that augur well. While we can enjoy a huge legacy of Bernstein recordings there are fresh conductors who stands in the line he created or inherited. Michael Tilson Thomas is one of these. There's also the dazzling coruscation that is Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla ("the musical equivalent of forked lightning"). My long-odds addition is John Wilson; we will, I think, hear more from Wilson in a wider range of repertoire than we have become accustomed to. I wondered at one time whether Simon Rattle and Gustavo Dudamel were in the same line but that now looks less likely.

Bernstein's legacy will endure through generation after generation of recording media. Those looking for a quick fix and with deep pockets can still pick up the pairs of orchestral volumes in large format boxes from Sony and DG. A 20th century wonder-child, Bernstein remained a life-long wonder ... and he knew it. He was a prodigious, controversial and rewarding force in everything he tackled. Ignore him by all means but don't be surprised if you discover him in years to come and rue the years you turned your back on him.

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