

Bernstein (1918 – 1989)

Chichester Psalms

Leonard Bernstein spent much of his life craving recognition as a “serious” composer. Certainly he wrote a considerable amount of serious music, including three symphonies, the second of which (***The Age of Anxiety***) is at times almost a piano concerto. This music has considerable merit, however, it is notable that the most striking passages are those which are most redolent of the more popular side of the composer’s output. The fantastical fourth movement of the second symphony is a mercurial and rhythmically insistent scherzo for piano and percussion, in which it is impossible to ignore the jazz influence. Similarly, the middle movement from his ***Jeremiah*** symphony (number one), with its omnipresent and frenetic 5/4 metre, looks forward in some ways to both the works in this programme.

Someone once remarked of Bernstein: “if one recognises in the symphonies Bernstein’s talent as a composer, it is in his musicals that we find his genius”. Without decrying the achievements of his symphonies and other works such as the beautiful ***Serenade***, it is difficult to disagree with this assessment (is there any real doubt that ***West Side Story*** is Bernstein’s masterpiece, and ranks with Gershwin’s ***Porgy and Bess*** as the greatest American music theatre work to date?). Indeed, such an assessment might be seen as inevitable, given Bernstein’s mission to create, above all, an “American music”, since it is in his more popular works that he reflects contemporary America. Certainly, he recognised this quite early. In 1939, while studying at Harvard, he wrote in a dissertation that “jazz in the 20th century has entered the mind and spirit of America; and if an American is a sensitive creator, jazz will become an integral part of his palette, whether or nor he is aware of it”.

There was, however, a further important influence in his life, and that was his Jewishness. Examples of Jewish works permeate his output, including two of his three symphonies (the aforementioned ***Jeremiah*** and the third symphony, the ***Kaddish***), the ***Dybbuk*** ballet and the ***Chichester Psalms***, which uses Hebrew text throughout.

The ***Chichester Psalms*** were written in 1965, in response to a commission from the Bishop of Chichester, who (according to Humphrey Burton’s biography of Bernstein) specified the forces available: “The string orchestra will...be a first-rate group. In addition there could be a piano, chamber organ, harpsichord and, if desired, a brass consort.” The commission arrived at the end of a year-long sabbatical from conducting, which Bernstein had taken in order to resolve his dilemma as to whether or not he should become a full-time composer and, more specifically, to experiment with serialism (the twelve-tone compositional method introduced by Arnold Schoenberg early in the twentieth century and which was belatedly being taken up by composers in the USA, including the now-naturalised Stravinsky). The sabbatical was a failure on both counts: Bernstein continued to vacillate regarding his true destiny and he concluded that serialism was, for him, neither a fruitful nor natural way to compose. In a sense, the ***Chichester Psalms*** was an extreme reaction to his serial studies, in that he turned back to tonality to produce what he proudly called “my most emphatically Bb major work”.

But how should we view this work? Is it one of Leonard Bernstein’s serious pieces or is it the product of the more popular “Lenny”? Actually, it is both; in reality, however, most of Bernstein’s works reflect both sides of his personality, and it makes one wonder that the distinction, whilst firmly set in the composer’s mind, is in fact somewhat arbitrary. (Shortly before starting the piece, Bernstein was working on a musical based on Thornton Wilder’s ***The Skin of Our Teeth***, which never came to fruition. Ever a scavenger of his own work, not only did he use some of the material in the ***Chichester Psalms***, he also borrowed some material from ***West Side Story***, thus he evidently had no qualms about “crossing over”). In any event, the Bishop of Chichester was delighted with the work and observed, after the first performance, that he had “seen David dancing before the Ark”,

The work starts with a short declamatory passage, interspersed with brassy interjections, before settling into a fast 7/4 rhythm which dominates the first movement (a setting of the opening of Psalm 108, and the whole of Psalm 100). Bernstein often used irregular rhythms (such as 7/4 and 5/4), although often (as in this movement) in a “regular way”, so that the seven beats in each bar are always heard as 2+2+3. (Indeed, he uses precisely the same rhythm in the number *And it was good* in his later, controversial theatre piece, **Mass**).

Rhythmic energy is replaced by melodic and harmonic simplicity at the start of the second movement, with a setting of Psalm 23 predominantly for solo voice (Bernstein's preference is for a boy treble), although melodic interest is shared with the female voices in the choir. In the central section of this movement, marked *Allegro feroce*, Bernstein sets part of Psalm 2 (“Why do the nations rage...”) with the male voices rapidly singing rapidly, in alternation (this is a reworking of part of the Prologue to **West Side Story**). They are joined eventually by the female voices in counterpoint singing a continuation of Psalm 23 calmly and apparently slower, although within the same tempo. This striking episode ends with the choral voices fading away and the soloist once more taking the lead.

Bernstein was often criticized for his tendency towards sentimentality, and the final movement can certainly sound sentimental in the wrong hands. After a dramatic string introduction (strongly redolent of **The Age of Anxiety**), a gently rocking rhythm heard as 5/4 (although seen in the score as 10/4) underpins a sinuous (and perhaps insidious) melody which permeates the whole movement. At one point the choir interrupts the text and sings “ah” to the melody, an effect which can be moving but which also can sound somewhat cloying if care is not exercised. The movement – and, indeed the work - ends with a hushed, unaccompanied choral passage, which once more looks forward to **Mass** (the number, *Heavenly Father*).