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Western Symphony Orchestra April 29, 2022 Program Notes

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Western Symphony Orchestra April 29, 2022 Program Notes

By

Johnathon M. Lyons

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Music in Conducting

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Master's Thesis

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Johnathon M. Lyons

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Music

by
Johnathon M. Lyons
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Abstract

This thesis will provide a brief history and analysis of *On the Waterfront*, a symphonic suite by Leonard Bernstein.

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Western Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

April 29, 2022

Johnathon M. Lyons

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

On the Waterfront

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) is recognized as one of America's most prolific musicians and was well known throughout his adult life as an accomplished composer, conductor, educator, and scholar. He was also an outspoken progressive, publicly advocating for progressive social-political policies and actions. While his musical contributions grew in status and recognition, it was his political dialogue that threatened the core of his professional life and ultimately led to his only film score composition, *On the Waterfront*.

Bernstein's rise to fame began during his studies at Harvard, where he had the opportunity to meet two individuals who would influence his professional training and subsequent first professional conducting position: Dimitri Mitropoulos (a frequent guest conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra), and Aaron Copland, an established and recognized composer Bernstein deeply admired. His relationship with these two individuals was a huge inspiration and would impact his career greatly.¹

Following Bernstein's graduation from Harvard, Mitropoulos and Copland recommended him to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he studied conducting from Fritz

¹ Bushard, Anthony. *Leonard Bernstein's On the Waterfront: A Film Score Guide*. Scarecrow, 2013, 11-12

Reiner and continued to expand his skills as a composer. His studies at Curtis ushered in a steady stream of professional engagements.

Mitropoulos and Copland were also influential in Bernstein's appointment as the Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic in August of 1943. In November of the same year, guest conductor Bruno Walter became ill, and Bernstein stepped in to conduct the Philharmonic on national radio. This led to multiple guest-conducting engagements, leading orchestras in Boston, Montreal, Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and Detroit. Bernstein's reputation as a conductor continued to grow and he would eventually take over the conducting department at the Tanglewood Music Center after his mentor Serge Koussevitzky passed away.²

As Bernstein's career as a conductor flourished, the United States was entering a time of political transition. The late 1940s and 1950s were some of the most productive and influential years for Bernstein, both as a musician and as an advocate for social issues. He was a vocal progressive who was able to cement his importance and popularity as a musician, composer, and conductor into the hearts of America. However, Bernstein's popularity had limits, and soon he would be faced with difficult realities of the times. Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were starting to deteriorate, and the Cold War was on the horizon. Fear of communist subversion pervaded the United States' cultural consciousness. As a result, the "Red Scare" was born. Even during this unsettled time, Bernstein's outspoken advocacy of progressive policies continued, as he participated publicly in an effort to restore the US- Soviet alliance.³ The panic of communism, supported by the progressive "left," fueled the flames of suspicion, fear,

² Laird, Paul R., and Hsun Lin. *Leonard Bernstein: A Research and Information Guide*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015, 3-4.

³Seldes, Barry. *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician*. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2009, 38.

and unsubstantiated accusations against suspected communist, historically known as McCarthyism.

During the height of McCarthyism, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was instrumental in blacklisting many actors, directors, screenwriters, artists, entertainers, and musicians suspected of communist ties, preventing them from securing work.⁴ Studios refused to work with those blacklisted. Despite his reputation, Bernstein was not immune to the social tensions exacerbated by the Red Scare. Both he and Copland were publicly suspected of communist leanings due to their progressive stances.

One individual responsible for the blacklisting of several Hollywood artists was the acclaimed director, Elia Kazan. In the article *Elia Kazan the Ferocious Look Back*, author Megan Rosenfeld summarized Kazan's reasoning for naming his fellow Hollywood cohorts writing that "he didn't do it for money – as was suggested at the time – but did do it, partly, to protect his career."⁵ Kazan echoes this summation stating, "there's a normal sadness about hurting people, but I'd rather hurt them a little than hurt myself a lot."⁶ Clearly Kazan felt that he made the right decision.

During this upheaval of Hollywood, Bernstein's career was at risk in part due to his progressive stance and alignment with communist ideology.⁷ Ever the forthright political activist,

⁴ Ibid, 39.

⁵ Rosenfeld, Megan. "Elia Kazan the Ferocious Look Back." *Washington Post*. June 26, 1988. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1988/06/26/elia-kazan-the-ferocious-look-back/e9345b5b-378f-4e4e-a52d-273cf52d4b92/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Seldes, Barry. *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician*. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2009, 53.

Bernstein expressed his indignation regarding the Hollywood studios' participation in blacklisting his fellow artists, which in his view indicated their submission to the HUAC.

By 1951, Bernstein began to see the ramifications of his progressive ideology. Suddenly, he found himself removed from projects and blacklisted by CBS. In July 1953, the U.S. State Department refused to renew Bernstein's passport. Bernstein felt forced by his attorney, James McInerney, to admit his political "wrongdoings" and swear through an affidavit that all activities linked to supposed communist suspects or organizations were without his knowledge of their inner workings. As a result of signing the affidavit, Bernstein was able to resume his professional career; however, his actions remained closely monitored. Seldes wrote Bernstein was "on a long leash and potentially marked as a self-debasing coward."⁸

It was during this unsettling time-period that Kazan asked Bernstein to compose the music for the movie, *On the Waterfront*. Although the composer was not fond of film scores and actively avoided composing for movies, he accepted the invitation. In his book, *The Joy of Music*, Bernstein wrote:

Although I have thereto resisted all such offers on the grounds that it is musically unsatisfactory experience for composer to write a score whose chief merit ought to be its unobtrusiveness. It has often been said that the best dramatic background music for a motion picture is that which is not heard. At least, not consciously heard. If it is heard, something is wrong: it is in the way; it is no longer background music.⁹

⁸ Ibid, 71.

⁹ Bernstein, Leonard. *The Joy of Music*. Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2004. First published 1959 by Simon & Schuster. 66-67.

Like Kazan, Bernstein was interested in protecting his career. Considering the many different risks that Bernstein had to navigate, it is plausible that he made a calculated decision to become involved with *On the Waterfront*. The affidavit was damaging to Bernstein's career and reputation but *On the Waterfront* presented an opportunity to Bernstein. Kazan, although a pariah in the eyes of some in Hollywood, was a famous director with many awards and the movie's lead actor, Marlon Brando, was also an award-winning actor. Bernstein surrendered to the pressures surrounding his political past and he begrudgingly agrees to involve himself in film composition. *On the Waterfront* was his ticket to freedom.

On The Waterfront follows the struggle of former boxer and longshoreman, Terry Malloy (played by Marlon Brando), against the corrupt union boss Johnny Friendly (played by Lee J. Cobb). The movie opens with the first theme, which is Terry's theme. It consists of a melodic line played by the French horn, and later by flutes and trombone in canon. Terry's theme is used several times as a familiar anchor point for the listener. Joey Doyle, a fellow longshoreman, is murdered and thrown off the roof. Malloy suspects Friendly was involved. The events preceding Joey's murder introduce the second theme consisting of a lively and energetic percussion statement that continues until his body hits the pavement. The main melodic idea of the second theme is first played by the saxophone, and then by the entire orchestra, illustrating the rising tension leading up to Joey's murder. The after some time, Terry is introduced to Doyle's sister (Edie) who becomes a love interest and, with Terry, gets caught up with the turmoil that is about to occur. The third theme is the "love" theme, illustrating the passion between Terry and Edie. It begins with a lyrical line in the flute, then in the first violins, and expands to include all the strings and brass, signifying the strongest expression of Terry's and Edie's love.

Terry decides to face Friendly and the two fight. The fight is accompanied by the fourth theme, which is loud and combative. Accented by abrasive hits in the orchestra that illustrate the intense fight between Terry and Friendly, the fourth theme continues until Terry finally succumbs to Friendly's men after being ambushed. After being badly injured, Terry stands up and walks into the warehouse with the support of his fellow longshoremen behind him, leaving Friendly powerless to stop him. Bernstein uses a variation of Terry's theme to signify the triumphant determination Terry needed to stand up. Terry's theme starts very softly, then becomes louder with a final explosive victorious sound signally Friendly's ultimate defeat and realization that he (Friendly) is no longer in power.

Bernstein's involvement with film music resulted in an Academy Award nomination for Best Music Score. Following the release of *On the Waterfront*, Bernstein's reputation rebounded. With his political troubles behind him, he continued his ascent to the international spotlight as arguably the world's most famous classical musician. Bernstein's calculated risk paid off, and *On the Waterfront* was his vehicle to redemption.

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