

The Society for American Music

Bulletin, Volume XXV, no. 1 (Spring 1999)

Leonard Bernstein: Eclecticism and Vernacular Elements in *Chichester Psalms*

By Paul Laird, University of Kansas

As a master's student in 1982, I interviewed Leonard Bernstein at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC. The following excerpt is from that interview:

LAIRD: You've said yourself that your music is eclectic.

BERNSTEIN: With a certain amount of pride, I think.

LAIRD: Would you consider Copland your greatest influence?

BERNSTEIN: I think Copland is eclectic, very. Because he was strongly influence by, for example, Stravinsky, who was the most eclectic coposer that ever lived himself. . . . If you go into anybody, including Bach, Beethoven, you can make out a case for eclecticism. The greater the composer, the better case you can make out for his eclecticism. This combination of Haydn, Mozart, and Bach, and everything else that goes into making up Beethoven, plus the magic factor which is the individual thing we call Beethoven, that voice, that personal sound. But you can reduce almost any bar of Beethoven to some previous composer, if you want to. Now what can be more eclectic than that? And you can with Stravinsky. I don't care how original. You should set yourself an assignment sometime. Take *Le Sacre du printemps*, which is supposed to be the work that revolutionized music, and changed the world, and just analyze it page by page, bar by bar. You'll find that every bar of it comes form somewhere else. But it has just been touched by this magic guy. You'll find roots in Rimsky-Korsakov, and you'll find sources from Scriabin. . . . note-for-note sources like in the sacrificial dance at the end, which is supposed to be the most original thing of all, righ? (He sings from the "Danse Sacral.") It's from Scriabin's Fifth Piano Sonata. I can show it to you bar by bar. I can show you Balakirev. I can show you the whole thing.

LAIRD: Is there Mussorgsky in it?

BERNSTEIN: Debussy, Ravel. My God, the amount of Ravel in that piece, and

Mussorgsky. But I mean note for note, in the same key even. Compare sometime, when you get around to it, the opening of Part Two of *Le Sacre* and the *Spanish Rhapsody* of Ravel.

LAIRD: So to you . . . every composer is to some extent eclectic.

BERNSTEIN: Every painter, every poet, everybody.

LAIRD: You've got to be basing your work on what's coming before it.

BERNSTEIN: Otherwise you don't exist. Who are you if you are not the sum of everything that's happened before? Everything that you've experienced at least, not everything that has happened, but everything that has been significant in your experience, unconsciously mainly.¹

Those familiar with Bernstein, his career and output, and the music he invoked in his defense surely here much that can be debunked. What Bernstein offers is not the usual definition of eclecticism, and he evinces pride at what many might consider the derivative nature of his music. To call Stravinsky the most eclectic composer ever stretches credibility, and Beethoven surely earns a few more points for originality than Bernstein awards him. Bernstein simply overstates the parallels between *The Rite of Spring* and works by Scriabin and Ravel. The "Danse sacrale" might owe something to Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 5, but there are few direct comparisons to be made.² The "Introduction" of Part Two of the *Rite* is similar in affect and sonority to the "Prelude a la nuit" of Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*, but there are no direct quotations.³

To dismiss Bernstein's statements here as merely the musings of a defensive composer, however, would miss what could be regarded as a revealing compositional credo. Bernstein's answer to my question concerning the influence of Copland contains a barely concealed comparison of Bernstein's works with those of Beethoven and Stravinsky: "The greater the composer, the better case you can make out for his eclecticism." That Bernstein was an eclectic composer is undeniable; here he exudes pride in that eclecticism and equates it with greatness. His statements about Copland, Beethoven, and Stravinsky are exaggerations, to be sure, but each composer mentioned felt the influences that he cites.⁴ Bernstein believed himself to be in a long, grand line of Western composers who reacted to influences. His stylistic variety shows Bernstein cultivated a broader range of influences than most composers. The core of Bernstein's compositional logic as the true eclectic he was is heard in his concluding statement, here in reverse order: "Who are you if you are not the sum of everything that's happened before? Otherwise you don't exist." He cites these experiences as primarily occurring "unconsciously," possibly an interesting insight into a man who conducted so much music by other persons. For Bernstein, paraphrasing his own words, without eclecticism, we would not have "the magic factor which is the individuated thing called Bernstein."

Bernstein's style is based upon dramatic juxtapositions; lively rhythms with asymmetrical meters, surprising accent schemes, and speech rhythms in vocal music; melodic invention based upon wide interval; interest in program music; and motivic development. What makes his works both masterful and thoroughly American is the fluidity with which he moves between concert

music and various vernacular musics, including jazz, blues, and the Broadway idiom. He did not learn these styles as an outsider, as Copland did jazz and blues. Bernstein played jazz and blues as a young musician, and wrote in the Broadway style as an adult.⁵

Of the many of Bernstein's works that illustrate his eclectic genius, *Chichester Psalms* is a felicitous example in which he used a wide variety of music to help bring a text alive. The eighteen-minute piece has proven popular because of its tunefulness, dance-like rhythms, and carefully-wrought form. Although he nurtured grander compositional plans, *Chichester Psalms* was written during Bernstein's 1964-65 sabbatical leave from the New York Philharmonic. Along with choreographer Jerome Robbins and lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Bernstein had acquired rights to make a musical play of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*. They worked for six months, but nothing resulted, to Bernstein's great disappointment.⁶ He also spent time in consultation with Robbins and Arthur Laurents about turning Bertolt Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule* into a musical, but nothing came of that either.⁷ Bernstein's eagerness to resume his career as a theater composer would find no outlet until *Mass* in 1971.

Chichester Psalms was Bernstein's only completed work during the sabbatical. The commission came from Dr. William Hussey, dean of Chichester Cathedral, which had regular music festivals with choirs from Winchester and Salisbury Cathedrals. Hussey described available choral and instrumental forces to Bernstein in a letter, and noted that "many of us would be delighted if there was a hint of *West Side Story* about the music."⁸ Bernstein's inclusion in *Chichester Psalms* of music removed from *West Side Story* and the aborted *The Skin of Our Teeth*⁹ lent the work a Broadway sound. Bernstein admitted this to Hussey in a letter in May 1965: "It is quite popular in feeling . . . and it has an old-fashioned sweetness along with its more violent moments."¹⁰

During this time period, Bernstein made a survey of contemporary compositional methods, an action that moved him back to writing more tonally, and *Chichester Psalms* is harmonically one of his simplest works. Some segments even correspond to common-practice period tonality. The most dissonant passages are the openings of the first and third movements, which include added-tone triads, a sound familiar to anyone who knows twentieth-century American concert music. Bernstein admitted the work's tonal simplicity, describing it in his poetic sabbatical report to *The New York Times*: "The Psalms are a simple and modest affair,/ Tonal and tuneful and somewhat square,/ Certain to sicken a stout John Cager/With its tonics and triads in E-flat major."¹¹

In his letter to Hussey, Bernstein encapsulated the textual structure of *Chichester Psalms*: "[E]ach movement contains one complete psalm plus one or more verses from another complementary psalm by way of contrast or amplification."¹² The first movement opens with Psalm 108: 2, and then includes all of Psalm 100. Movement two sets all of Psalm 23 with Psalm 2: 1-4 serving as contrast. The finale opens with all of Psalm 131 and concludes with Psalm 133: 1.¹³ Texts are sung in Hebrew. Like many of Bernstein's works, *Chichester Psalms* includes dramatic juxtapositions based upon text, especially in the second movement, as will be shown below.

The opening chorale sets the text "Awake, psaltery and harp! I will rouse the dawn! from Psalm 108. It is marked "Maestro ma energico" and includes one of Bernstein's typically angular melodic lines as a melodic cell. It is harmonized with added tone chords and set to declamatory

rhythms in the choir. The faster orchestral interjections are also based on the melodic cell, stated first in B-flat major in the soprano and alto lines in measures 1-2 and carrying on what might be a blues note or modal reference, an A-flat on the penultimate note.¹⁴ Subsequent statements in other keys also include the lowered seventh.

The chorale leads into the "allegro molto" in 7/4, a jaunty segment that sets all of Psalm 100: "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all ye lands." It is jazzy and commercial, in a popular vein, as Bernstein mentioned in his letter to Hussey. Measures of this segment are similar to the theme song from the Hanna-Barbera cartoon *The Flintstones*.¹⁵ When one considers the text, however, the reference makes sense. Psalm 100 concludes with the phrase, "And His truth endureth to all generations." This is sprightly music from a composer whose search for faith was trumpeted in a number of his works. Here he speaks to present generations using a contemporary and accessible musical style. Another vernacular influence in the movement are the three bongo parts in measure 50, demonstrating Bernstein's enduring love for Latin percussion.

The second movement is the set's most theatrical conception, with the peace of Psalm 23 interrupted by Psalm 2's angry "Why do the nations rage." The ideas are combined in the third section. Burton reports that the otherworldly opening melody was originally written with Betty Comden and Adolph Green for *The Skin of Our Teeth* as the song "Spring will Come Again."¹⁶ It is sung by boy alto or countertenor, accompanied by harp. The first phrase is quite angular. The three words with more than one syllable in this phrase are each set with minor leaps. The ascending minor sixth between measures 4 and 5 demonstrates the importance of bold leaps. It is balanced by a descending minor seventh, which raises the expectation for yet another leap, satisfied by the octave leap into measure 9. The descent to the d" that concludes the phrase changes the harmony to a seventh chord, resolved deceptively in the next phrase, opening in F# minor. The major melodic features in the second phrase are the c-naturals" in measures 12 and 16, blues notes. Bernstein could have written a C# here and not have changed the melody's appeal, but clearly he wanted the distinctly American blues reference.

The music originally from the "Prologue" of *West Side Story* forms the central section of this movement. It is marked "Allegro feroce," but is metrically more regular and less dissonant than the "Prologue." Indeed, the melody that the males start to sing in measure 85 is a march, possibly showing more influence from Prokofiev or Shostakovich than American sources. The two main ideas of the movement are combined starting in measure 102, with blues melodic references remaining in the Psalm 23 melody.

Burton was amazed that Bernstein found Psalm texts that fit his earlier music so well: "[B]y a combination of significant coincidence, minor miracle, and sheer good luck, he found appropriate texts to match the rhythms of Comden and Green's Broadway-oriented lyrics."¹⁷ Considering that Bernstein "managed" to find these texts among the most famous passages in all of the Psalms, it is clear that rewriting took place to make the texts fit.¹⁸

Vernacular elements are less important in the finale than in the first two movements. The opening segment is based on the cell from the first movement, but this passage, also chorale-like and homorhythmic, is softer in dynamic level and more dissonant with considerable use of bitonality. In measure 10, material is recalled from the opening of the second movement

(measures 18-21), softening the chorale's bite and preparing the 10/4 melody that starts in measure 20, an extended setting of Psalm 131. This meter is subdivided into two 5/4 measures in almost every detail, except for the paired quarter notes that sometimes accompany the melody, the middle pair tied across the two halves of each measure. One might speculate that Bernstein conceived the setting from the opening two words.

"Adonai," meaning "Lord," when stated twice, easily lends itself to Bernstein's setting, with the leap of a perfect fifth between words, and then the final syllable settling on the long note. This melody could easily have appeared in one of Bernstein's Broadway shows, but it hardly ranks as a major moment of vernacular influence, with rich chromaticism not unlike a late nineteenth-century melody by Mahler, Richard Strauss, or another composer.

Following the five statements of the theme in 10/4 (the third by instruments only) that set Psalm 131's peaceful text, Bernstein recalls the opening of the first movement in a final unaccompanied passage. The text states: "Behold how good,/ And pleasant it is,/ For brethren to dwell/ Together in unity." It is one of the sublime moments in his output, demonstrating his capacity for capturing a text's meaning in his music. It is also a hushed chorale at the end of a religious work, heard as well in *Mass*. As the last note is held in the choir, muted trumpet and harp play the piece's opening cell once again, this time changing the last interval to an ascending major sixth for the final resolution to G major.

Although brief, *Chichester Psalms* is an effective introduction to Bernstein's output. A number of his common stylistic traits -- especially angular melodies, asymmetric meters, dramatic juxtapositions, and motivic development -- are present. The work includes both music written from the inspiration of art music and music actually first written for a Broadway show. Vernacular models also include jazz, blues, and commercial music, always used in service of the text. For Bernstein eclecticism was not a crutch, but a liberating agent that allowed him compositional flexibility. It is this flexibility that makes Bernstein a successful dramatic composer, both for the stage and in concert music.

Notes

1. Personal interview with Leonard Bernstein by Paul R. Laird, Washington, DC, 15 March 1982.
2. There are, for example, few places in Scriabin's piano sonata where rhythms are as irregular as in the "Danse Sacrale." See Alexander Scriabin, *Ten Sonatas* (New York: Leeds Music Corporation, 1949), 86-103, and compare with Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring* (London: Boosey & Hawkes), 1967), 121-53.
3. Compare the Stravinsky with Maurice Ravel, *Rapsodie espagnole* (Paris: Durand S.A., 1908), 1-11.
4. In his *Stravinsky and "The Rite of Spring"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), Pieter C. van den Toorn, for example, compares segments of the work with those by Debussy (p. 116), Glinka (pp. 116-17), Rimsky-Korsakov (pp. 119-23 and elsewhere), and other composers.

5. For an excellent biography of Bernstein, see Humphrey Burton's *Leonard Bernstein* (New York: Doubleday, 1994). Burton recounts Bernstein's youthful work as a jazz pianist (p. 17), among other references. Also see Meryle Secrest's *Leonard Bernstein: A Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 30, on Bernstein playing piano in a nightclub as a teenager.
6. Burton, 343ff.
7. Peter Gradenwitz, *Leonard Bernstein: The Infinite Variety of a Musician* (Learnington Spa/Hamburg/New York: Oswald Wolff Books, 1987), 81.
8. Burton, 348.
9. Burton, 348.
10. Burton, 348.
11. Burton, 346. The poem appeared in *The New York Times* on 24 October 1965, and is reprinted in Burton, 344-47. In this poem Bernstein describes what he studied in recent music: the "death in our time of tonality," Dada and chane music, and serialism. He also makes humorous references to other works. It says much about Bernstein the composer that he completed this study wiht a traditional work such as *Chichester Psalms*.
12. Burton, 348.
13. Leonard Bernstein, *Chichester Psalms* (New York: Amberson, G. Schirmer, 1965), iv-1.
14. Gradenwitz (pp. 205-207) describes Bernstein's use of the melodic cell, which appears as well as the basis for the orchestral accompaniment in the 7/4 segment of the first movement and at the opening and close of the third movement.
15. Although it seems blasphemous to suggest it, this 7/4 section in the first movement of *Chichester Psalms* sounds very much like the theme song of *The Flintstones* in terms of melodic outline, especially in measures 22ff. The television theme, however, is in duple meter. An influence is possible. As noted, *Chichester Psalms* was composed in 1965. *The Flintstones* premiered on network television in September 1960 and ran as an evening program until 1966. See Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime-Time Network and Cable TV Shows* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995). Bernstein had young children during those years who might have watched *The Flintstones*.
16. Burton, 348. Gradenwitz (p. 206) finds the opening of this melody to be derived from the work's melodic cell, but it is at best a distant transformation.
17. Burton, 348.
18. Some rewriting can be observed in a text Burton supplies (p. 348), the second half of "Spring

Will Come Again," the original text for the melody in the second movement of *Chichester Psalms* (mm. 18-32). Comparison of that text with the melody reveals that Bernstein made several changes in the melody, including: adding two slurs in measure 20, adding a grace note and a slur in measure 22, changing the rhythm in measure 23 to allow two syllables to be sung, adding a grace note and slur in measure 24, deleting a note in measure 25 where only one note was now sung, and adding both slurs in measure 29.

Paul Laird is Associate Professor of Music History at the University of Kansas, where he teaches classes in music history and directs the Instrumental Collegium Musicum. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His scholarly interests include the Spanish and Latin American villancico, the music of Leonard Bernstein, and Broadway musicals



Return to the [The Society for American Music Bulletin Index](#)

Return to the [American Music Network](#) Home Page

Updated 6/15/99