

February 25, 2017

PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey Decker

Symphonic Suite from “On the Waterfront,” by Leonard Bernstein

We all know and love our favorite American classical musician and composer: Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990). The 1949 movie of his Broadway musical *On the Town*, with Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly, introduced him to moviegoers across the country, and the 1961 release of the film version of his musical *West Side Story* firmly cemented his immense popularity and made his something of a household name. To even Bernstein’s surprise, the latter became the second highest grossing movie of the year and was nominated for 11 Academy Awards, 10 of which it won, including Best Picture!

In between the two musicals released in film versions, film producer Sam Spiegel invited Bernstein to write a bona fide film score for his *On the Waterfront*. Citing over-commitment and the fact that he and dramatist and screenwriter Lillian Hellman planned to embark on a scathing satire of McCarthyism based on Voltaire’s *Candide*, he declined the offer. Some say that the real reason was that he despised the film’s director, Elia Kazan, due to his actions on behalf of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Spiegel persisted, though, and invited Bernstein to see a rough cut of the film before making his final decision.

Very impressed by Marlon Brando’s acting and the film’s depiction of the very real union corruption in New York’s dockyards, Bernstein accepted the offer and worked steadily on the score between February and May 1954. Describing the excitement he felt watching the film’s rough cut, Bernstein later wrote, “I heard music as I watched: that was enough. And the atmosphere of talent that this film gave off was exactly the atmosphere in which I love to work and collaborate. Day after day I sat at a Moviola, running the print back and forth, measuring in feet the sequences I had chosen for the music, converting feet into seconds by mathematical formula, making homemade cue sheets.”

Working away from the hustle and bustle of Hollywood and without much restriction from Kazan, Bernstein produced the music in much the same manner he had his musical theater works. Short sequences of music supplemented scenes and action on the screen and, as a New York resident, he felt completely familiar with nearly all depicted. Bernstein biographer Humphrey Burton describes short snippets of music

and scenes with “titles like ‘Roof Morning’ and ‘Kangaroo Court.’” He goes on to say, “The bustle of the Hoboken dockyard is expressed by a fierce *fugato* for three sets of timpani; a later scene, played out on a desolate stretch of wasteland dominated by a dump of old tires, has a stabbing violin motif which is reminiscent of the North Sea music Benjamin Britten composed for [his opera] *Peter Grimes*. Over and over again Bernstein establishes a decisive mood in a few brilliant bars: the furioso fight passages are as terrifying as anything to come in *West Side Story*, and among the sequences of innocent tenderness there is a rooftop night scene between the inarticulate lovers Edie and Terry, where despite Bernstein’s complaint that his contribution was sacrificed to the dialogue at the dubbing session, the music rises to a *Tristan*-like climax.” (The latter comment refers to Richard Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde*, which contains two of music’s most exciting and devastating climaxes, the first a duet between the two lovers, Tristan and Isolde, and the second Isolde’s “Love Death” following Tristan’s death.) Burton believes that Bernstein’s finest achievement in the score is his thematic integration of the whole score.

Released later that year, *On the Waterfront* starred the aforementioned Marlon Brando, Karl Malden, Eve Marie Saint – in her film debut – and Lee J. Cobb. Winning eight of its 12 Academy Award nominations, the American Film Institute now ranks it as the eighth-greatest motion picture in American film history. And although he lost the Oscar to composer Dimitri Tiomkin, Bernstein gained overnight recognition and respect as a major international film composer after its showing at the 1954 Venice Film Festival. Writing in the magazine *Score*, Austrian music critic Hans Keller hailed Bernstein’s music as “about the best film score that has come out of America. In sheer professional skill, it surpasses everything I have heard or seen of the music of his teacher [*sic*] Aaron Copland (himself one of the very few contributors of musical music to the American film), while in textural style and harmonic idiom it is more daring even than many more individual scores by our own leading composers.” Thus came to an end Bernstein’s film score career.

Wanting to perform the work in concert settings, Bernstein distilled tonight’s symphonic suite from the full movie score in 1955. Scored for a large orchestra consisting of piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, 2 timpanists, percussion (bass drum, chimes, cymbals, glockenspiel, snare drums, tam-tams, triangle, tuned drums, vibraphone, wood block, xylophone), harp, piano, and strings, Bernstein conducted the work’s première at the Tanglewood Music Festival in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts on August 11, 1955.

Recommended Recordings

Recommending a recording of Bernstein's "On the Waterfront" is easy; either of the two the composer himself recorded are sure bets. The first was recorded in the studio by Columbia (Sony) in May 1960 with the New York Philharmonic, and the second was recorded live in concert by Deutsche Grammophon in the mid-1980s with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. The first is precise yet still has that famous Bernstein emotional impact we all know and some of us love. Marin Alsop, one of Bernstein's own protégés, recorded the work – alongside Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms" and the "Three Dance Episodes" from *On the Town* – for Naxos in the U.K. in April 2003. The ensemble is the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and, under Alsop's expert guidance, they fully adopted Bernstein's uniquely American style and sound for the recording.

Concerto for Violin in D Major, Op. 35, by Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Born in Brno in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897–1957) began his career in an august manner at age 9 when Gustav Mahler heard him at the piano playing one of his own compositions. Mahler declared the boy a genius. Not long after that, his ballet *Der Schneemann* (The Snow Man), premièred at the Vienna Court Opera and, due to its great success, was eventually given a command performance for Kaiser Franz Joseph I. The young man's fame and respect spread quickly across Europe. Some of the young composer's biggest fans were among the most famous musicians in the world at that time: composers Richard Strauss, Jean Sibelius, Karl Goldmark, Engelbert Humperdinck, and Giacomo Puccini, pianist Artur Schnabel, and conductors Arthur Nikisch and Bruno Walter, to name just a few.

At the prompting of impresario Max Reinhardt, Korngold left his position as professor of music at the Vienna State Academy in 1934 and made his way to the United States. Reinhardt quickly put Korngold to work writing the score for his critically acclaimed 1935 film *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Korngold's Hollywood career was off to a great start and, in high demand after that, he composed 15 more film scores and ended the Hollywood part of his career in 1956, a year before his death there. Included in the scores he composed are those for the film that made actor Errol Flynn an immediate sensation, *Captain Blood* of 1935, and, two more films also starring Flynn, *Anthony Adverse* of 1936 and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* of 1938, the latter two for which Korngold won Oscars. It is said that he, Max Steiner,

who composed the score for 1939's very famous *Gone With the Wind*, and Alfred Newman were the "founders" of all film music. In addition to his success in Hollywood, more or less facilitated by his move to the United States, being a Jew, his and his family's personal safety were assured when Hitler's *Anschluss* (annexation) of 1938 put all of Korngold's homeland under Nazi control.

After prompting by violinist Bronislaw Huberman, a fellow emigré and founder of the Palestine Orchestra, predecessor to the Israel Philharmonic, Korngold set out in 1937 to create a concerto for violin. When he completed and revised the work in 1945, he hoped that it would bolster his reputation as a serious music composer. He probably stepped on his own feet, though, by desiring to save some of his film music of the 1930s from oblivion. In the days before VHS tapes, HBO, DVDs, Blu-rays, and Netflix, after a movie left the theater, so did the music *for* that movie. To avoid the inevitable, Korngold implemented music from his film scores into each of the three movements of his Violin Concerto.

Keeping with the tradition set down by Beethoven, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky in their violin concertos, Korngold chose the key of D major for his. Like its predecessors, it also has three movements. The first, sumptuously orchestrated and marked *Moderato nobile* (of moderate speed with nobility), quotes themes from both the 1937 film *Another Dawn* and 1939's *Juarez*. The second, marked *Romanze* (romance), utilizes a theme from the 1936 film *Anthony Adverse*. The third and final movement, marked *Allegro assai vivace* (quickly and quite lively), is extremely demanding of the soloist and utilizes the main theme from the score for the 1937 film *The Prince and the Pauper*.

British music writer Jessica Duchon, wrote, "Why a work as lyrical and memorable as Korngold's Violin Concerto should have gone virtually unplayed for decades is a mystery." The reason is twofold: First, Korngold used melody and harmony in a way that was passé in the late 1940s; and, second, he was a film composer which was, at that time, looked down upon by the establishment. In fact, after an early New York performance, one critic wrote, quite famously, that Korngold's Violin Concerto is "more corn than gold." Another wrote, "This is a Hollywood concerto." We can now be thankful that the concerto is restored to its proper place in the repertoire and that we can enjoy it live tonight.

Dedicated to Alma Mahler, Gustav Mahler's widow, Korngold's Violin Concerto was premièred by Jascha Heifetz in St. Louis on February 15, 1947, under conductor Vladimir Golschmann. Followed in March by a nationally broadcast performance by Heifetz at Carnegie Hall, the work was immediately launched into the repertoire

and became Korngold's most popular piece. Heifetz eventually recorded the work in 1953. In recommending the recording, British writer Jessica Duchon says, "It is still a classic account. While some other violinists lay on the sugar, the work's bittersweet beauty is strong enough without that." She concludes her review of the recording, "Heifetz's incisive, questing sound and immense musical personality never falls into that trap."

Recommended Recordings

Of the recommended recordings, two stand heads above all others. The first is that mentioned above, with Jascha Heifetz and the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Alfred Wallenstein on RCA (Sony), and the second with violinist Gil Shaham and the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir André Previn on Deutsche Grammophon. Of course, the latter of these two is a modern digital recording and the first is monophonic. The Shaham disc also contains an excellent account of Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto, Op. 14, and Korngold's own suite for violin and piano from his score for *Much Ado About Nothing*, Op. 11, with Sir André Previn accompanying at the piano.

Mendelssohn Symphony No. 4 in A Major, Op. 90 ("Italian"), by Felix Mendelssohn

When Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) began work on the symphony we now know as his Fourth, the "Italian," Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was only six years old and Beethoven himself only dead about four years. Although it is a very – what might be called – conservative work with few surprises in orchestration, harmony, and structure, we are somehow not reminded of Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven when hearing it. Its individuality and seeming modernity cannot be compared to Berlioz's exactly contemporary and shockingly advanced *Symphonie fantastique*, Op. 14, but the characteristics are still there. It just does not sound "of its time."

Mendelssohn was born into an affluent Jewish banking family in the independent city-state of Hamburg in 1809. Like Korngold – and, of course, Mozart – musicologists consider him a child prodigy. Even though he achieved much fame during his own short lifetime, his works and their popularity are firmly rooted in classical music as we know it today. We prove this easily by the fact that even the occasional classical music listener knows at least some of his works, especially this symphony we hear tonight and the Overture and Incidental Music to Shakespeare's

A Midsummer Night's Dream. Although they might mistake it for Richard Wagner's wedding procession commonly known as *Here Comes the Bride*, nearly everyone can hum, sing, or whistle the *Wedding March* from Mendelssohn's music for Shakespeare's play.

Did you know that Mendelssohn was more than just a famous composer? He was also a conductor, piano soloist, and, even more importantly, worked persistently and successfully to revive enthusiasm for the music of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) whose music was all but forgotten at the time. In 1829, at age 20, Mendelssohn arranged and conducted a performance of Bach's *Matthäus-Passion* (St. Matthew Passion) in Berlin. It was the first outside of Bach's hometown of Leipzig since the composer's death and it sparked a huge interest in his music; an interest that has not subsided in the nearly 200 years since Mendelssohn's performance. Like composer Robert Schumann, who searched for, studied, wrote about, and successfully disseminated knowledge of the music of Franz Schubert, Mendelssohn deserves the distinction of musicologist.

Mendelssohn was 21 when he began work on his Fourth Symphony – actually the third in his compositional chronology – while visiting Venice in 1830. After completing the symphony in Berlin on March 13, 1833, he took it along on a visit to London and conducted its first performance there on May 13 of the same year. But, when he returned to the continent, Mendelssohn left the autograph score in London to fulfill the commission he received for the work from the city's Royal Philharmonic Society.

In 1834 and without the score from which to begin, Mendelssohn drew on his amazing powers of memory and revised the symphony's last three movements. Unlike the sweeping revisions of their major works undertaken by Beethoven and later, Anton Bruckner, usually Mendelssohn only made slight adjustments to orchestration, removed what he considered redundant material, and generally tightened a movement's structure; many cannot be discerned by the average listener.

Strangely enough, though, his revised version is not the one we play today. The 1833 complete version left in London was published in 1847 after Mendelssohn's early death at age 38. We have to wonder why he never returned to revise the first movement. He considered doing just that in 1835 but, in a letter to his friend, Karl Klingemann, he wrote, "Auch am ersten Stück der a-dur Sinfonie knabbere ich und kann es nicht recht kriegen – ganz anders werden muss es auf jeden Fall – veilleicht ganz neu – aber eben dieser Zweifel stört mich bei einem neuen Stück." ("I am also puzzling over the first movement of the A major Symphony and cannot get it right

– in any case it must become totally different – perhaps completely new. But it is very much these doubts that disturb me with any new piece.”) As the musicologist R. Larry Todd wrote, “We can only imagine how Mendelssohn would have reworked the buoyant music of the first movement, how he would have unraveled his score, like Penelope’s web, only to reassemble it, weaving into it new life, new expression, and new meaning.”

Mendelssohn’s Fourth Symphony consists of four movements, titled, in succession and key, *Allegro vivace* (very fast) in A major, *Andante con moto* (slowly, but with motion) in D minor, *Con moto moderato* (with moderate motion) in A major, and *Presto and Finale* (very fast and final movement): *Saltarello* in A minor. Scoring is very traditional and exactly that of an early Beethoven symphony: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, tympani, and strings.

Finally, we ask, “What prompted the subtitle “Italian”? It’s because the work has an overall Italianate character. But, more specifically and obviously, Mendelssohn titled the fourth movement a saltarello, referring to a 19th-century Italian folk dance. It is a moderately rapid dance in triple meter – that is, 3 beats per measure – and involving some sort of jumping by the dancer. Mendelssohn included two saltarellos in the movement. Quoting his predecessor, British musicologist William Smith Rockstro (1823–1895), the eminent Sir Donald Francis Tovey (1875–1940), wrote that, in addition to the use of the saltarello, the legato, or slow, running theme so prominent in the development of the fourth movement is a tarantella. The latter is another Italian folk dance of the same era, named because its movements were thought to resemble those of people bitten by a tarantula spider. Furthermore, he wrote that the very Italian *saltarello* and *tarantella* rhythms of the final movement are easily discernible by their melodic styles and qualities of movement. In tonight’s performance, listen carefully and see if you can hear two separate dances in the final movement.

Recommended Recordings

Good to excellent recordings of Mendelssohn’s Fourth Symphony abound. Several stand out, though, as really special. The first was the late Italian conductor Giuseppe Sinopoli’s Deutsche Grammophon debut recording made in the mid-1980s with the Philharmonia Orchestra. A bonus is that it is coupled with what many believe to be the finest recording of Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony available. A second one is that recorded in 1958 in somewhat early stereo by Charles Munch leading the Boston Symphony Orchestra and recorded by RCA (Sony). Like many of the RCA Living Stereo releases, the recording quality belies its age. The third is with the Berlin

Philharmonic conducted by Herbert von Karajan, recorded in Berlin's Jesus-Christus-Kirche in January 1971. Although very fleet-of-foot, nothing sounds hurried in this latter recording. And, in its most recent DG Originals release, it is coupled with the Scottish Symphony and what must be the finest account of Mendelssohn's Hebrides Overture ever set down. A real treasure for sure.

© Geoffrey D. Decker 2017