



# BERNSTEIN CENTENNIAL OPENING NIGHT



CLASSICAL SERIES

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, AT 8 PM

## NASHVILLE SYMPHONY

GIANCARLO GUERRERO, *conductor*

SASHA COOKE, *mezzo-soprano*

### LEONARD BERNSTEIN

#### Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town*

The Great Lover

Lonely Town (Pas de deux)

Times Square 1944

#### Symphonic Suite from *On the Waterfront*

– INTERMISSION –

#### Symphony No. 1, “Jeremiah”

I. Prophecy

II. Profanation

III. Lamentation

*Sasha Cooke, mezzo-soprano*

#### Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

Prologue

Somewhere

Scherzo

Mambo

Cha-cha

Meeting Scene

Cool Fugue

Rumble

Finale

*This concert will run TK minutes*

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# THE BERNSTEIN LEGACY

Exactly two weeks ago, August 25, marked the official 100th birthday of Leonard Bernstein. His profound and lasting influence as an artist, humanitarian and educator feels needed more than ever. Nashville Symphony's opening night program celebrates with selections across the spectrum of his legacy as a composer whose passions straddled the Broadway stage, contemporary political and social issues, and the classical heritage he inherited and absorbed and reinvigorated for a rapidly changing American audience.

In her just-published memoir, *Famous Father Girl*, eldest daughter Jamie Bernstein recounts how her immigrant grandfather responded after he was confronted by a reporter about opposing his son's desire to follow a career in music: "Well, how was I supposed to know he'd turn out to be Leonard Bernstein?"

The first major turning point in that transformation happened on November 14, 1943, when the formerly sickly, pale child they called Lenny had to fill in at the last minute for the ailing Bruno Walter and conduct the New York Philharmonic's Sunday matinee concert in Carnegie Hall, which was also broadcast live across the nation. The 25-year-old Bernstein earned a front-page report in *The New York Times* (alongside news of the war).

But that was just the start of Bernstein's sensational career as a conductor. The previous day had been another landmark: the New York premiere of his song cycle *I Hate Music* at Town Hall. Bernstein's identity as a composer went into overdrive during this period. His abundance of gifts spilled over from one area to the next, so that even in his most serious works for orchestra we can find Broadway- or jazz-inspired moments — and vice versa. But a unifying element, as we hear in all of the works on our program, is the vivid *theatricality* that gives Bernstein's music (and his conducting, for that matter) its distinct flair.

Already during his overnight conducting triumph, Bernstein was at work on the first of his path-breaking collaborations with the similarly young choreographer Jerome Robbins: the one-act ballet *Fancy Free*, which in turn inspired his first full-scale musical comedy, *On the Town* (which opened in December 1944, becoming Bernstein's first Broadway hit). Both pieces involve the same scenario: a trio of sailors searching for love during their 24-hour leave in New York City.

In 1945 Bernstein orchestrated a set of extracts from *On the Town's* score to create a short symphonic suite, *Three Dance Episodes*. Here we already find the composer fusing the varied worlds his insatiable curiosity explored — musical theater, concert hall, ballet and jazz — into a sophisticated but accessible compositional style.

Bernstein wrote only one score specifically for film, but it is regarded to be among his masterpieces: *On the Waterfront* (1954), which tells the story of the dock worker Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) and his defiance of the thuggish union boss who controls operations. In the orchestral suite he adapted from the score, touches of mournful blues suggest the loneliness of the modern city, while its violence is evoked by some of Bernstein's most aggressive writing. Here, he uses his "jazz mode" to convey nightmarish brutality rather than big-city exuberance. At the suite's emotional center is the music depicting the story's young lovers. After the violent music resurfaces, it yields to a glorious transformation of Terry's theme.

Even before his first Broadway venture in the mid-1940s, Bernstein had undertaken his first major statement in one area where his achievements remain arguably undervalued: his work as a symphonist. But it was with the premiere of his Symphony No. 1 "Jeremiah" in January 1944 (just a few months before *Fancy Free*) that Bernstein first came to the attention of a larger public as an emerging American composer.

Begun soon after Bernstein's graduation from Harvard in 1939, "Jeremiah" began as a single-movement setting (for female voice and orchestra) of Hebrew excerpts from *The Book of Lamentations*. The context of World War II made the Prophet Jeremiah's sorrow over the destruction of Jerusalem all the more powerfully relevant, and in 1942 Bernstein decided to make this piece the final movement of a larger symphonic work. Barely making the deadline, he submitted it to a composition competition whose jury was chaired by one of his most significant mentors, Serge Koussevitsky, then music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

While "Jeremiah" did not win the competition, it so impressed another of Bernstein's teachers, Fritz Reiner, that he arranged for the world premiere with the Pittsburgh Symphony. "It outranks every other symphonic product by any American composer of the younger generation," declared the writer and

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composer Paul Bowles.

Several years later, Koussevitsky would commission the second of Bernstein's three symphonies, which was inspired by W.H. Auden's long narrative poem *The Age of Anxiety* and which features a prominent solo role for the piano. In fact, all three of Bernstein's symphonies share a larger concern, which, in the composer's own words, involves "the struggle that is born of the crisis of our century, a crisis of faith." (The third, dedicated to the late John F. Kennedy, sets the Jewish prayer known as *Kaddish* and will be performed by the Nashville Symphony in April 2019.)

Cast in three movements (the third one calling for a mezzo soloist), the "Jeremiah" Symphony paraphrases traditional Hebrew chant for some of its material, while the composer's unmistakable rhythmic vitality comes to the fore above all in the scherzo second movement, Profanation.

Bernstein's legendary partnership with Jerome Robbins also gave birth to *West Side Story*, which opened in 1957 following a protracted genesis. Resetting Shakespeare's timeless story of tragic love amid the grittily American reality of urban gang violence was a more radical venture at that time than is often remembered. Bernstein and his collaborators pioneered a revolutionary type of American musical theater that synthesizes the elements of music, lyrics, drama and dance, in the process addressing more serious social themes.

The biographer Humphrey Burton observes that "even in its show form, *West Side Story* is symphonically conceived." From the start, the vital pulse of the dance had also been integral to its conception. A concert suite of the 1957 musical was therefore inevitable. In the winter of 1960-61, Bernstein (with assistance from his colleagues Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal) prepared *Symphonic Dances*, the title alluding to a famous late-period work by Rachmaninoff. The

work was premiered just a few weeks after President Kennedy's inauguration, in February 1961, as part of a "Valentine" by the New York Philharmonic for Bernstein. (The *West Side Story* film was released later that October.)

*Symphonic Dances* weaves together nine separate episodes from *West Side Story* — though not in their original dramatic sequence. The music for the Prologue's danced confrontation between Jets and Sharks boils with tension. Bernstein once compared the fanfare-like motif of the opening to the call of the shofar, the ram's horn traditionally used in Jewish services. This motif pivots on an uneasy-sounding interval (the tritone) that serves as a unifying motivic idea throughout the score.

Menace yields to the fragile hope expressed in "Somewhere," a dream vision of a world that makes love possible. The brief Scherzo hints at the Americana landscapes of Bernstein's friend Aaron Copland. This acts as a transition to "Mambo" in the Dance at the Gym scene, where Tony and Maria meet and instantly fall in love. The stylized energy of the dances curbs the rival gangs' violent impulses, while the gentle rhythms of "Cha-cha" focus on the young lovers.

The brief "Meeting Scene" is set against the ever-present threat of violence, here channeled into a thrilling jazz-fugue sequence, "Cool." Bernstein unleashes the pent-up ferocity of ethnic hatred between the Sharks and Jets in the climactic "Rumble." But the possibility of a way out of this dead end returns in the Finale with the lyrical intensity of Maria's "I Have a Love," introduced by a meandering flute solo. The harmonies darken once more into a funereal procession, and a brief reprise of the "Somewhere" chorus concludes the Suite.

— *Thomas May is the Nashville Symphony's program annotator.*

## ABOUT THE SOLOIST



**SASHA COOKE**  
mezzo-soprano

**G**RAMMY® Award-winning mezzo-soprano Sasha

Cooke has been called a "luminous standout" (*New York Times*) and "equal parts poise, radiance and elegant directness" (*Opera News*). She is sought after by the world's leading orchestras, opera companies and chamber music ensembles for her versatile repertoire and commitment to new music.

In 2018/19, Cooke's operatic engagements will include role debuts as Eduige in *Rodelinda* at the Gran Teatre del Liceu and the title role of *Orlando* with the San Francisco Opera. She returns to the title role in Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*, which she performs with the Los Angeles Opera under the direction of James Conlon. Orchestral appearances include the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for Handel's *Messiah*, the National Symphony Orchestra for Ravel's *Shéhérazade* under Mirga Gražinyte-Tyla, and Houston Symphony in her first performance of Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* led by Andrés Orozco-Estrada. Cooke celebrates the

centennial of Leonard Bernstein's birth by performing his songs with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Symphony No. 3 *Kaddish* with the St. Louis Symphony with Leonard Slatkin. She will reprise *Passage*, a work she created at the Kennedy Center in 2017, with the Sioux City Symphony Orchestra.

Cooke has performed at the Metropolitan Opera, Opéra National de Bordeaux, San Francisco Opera, English National Opera, Dallas Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Israeli Opera and Seattle Opera. Previous orchestral engagements have included the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, Hong Kong Philharmonic, London Symphony Orchestra and Tokyo Symphony, among others. She has also performed with the Orpheus, Los Angeles and St Paul Chamber Orchestras.

Cooke is a recording artist for Hyperion Records, Naxos, Bridge, Yarlung, GPR Records and Sono Luminus. She is a graduate of Rice University, The Juilliard School and the Metropolitan Opera Lindemann Young Artist Development Program.