

Adrian Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

Selections from West Side Story

Leonard Bernstein (1918 - 1990)

Leonard Bernstein, a native of Boston, had a life-long fascination with New York City. He served as music director and conductor of the New York Philharmonic for many years, and used the city as the setting for several of his own original works. He was introduced to the idea of an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* set in New York by choreographer Jerome Robbins as early as 1949. His idea was to turn the story of the warring Capulets and Montagues into one about New York Jews and Catholics, and set on the east side of New York. Bernstein liked the idea but could not make time in his busy schedule to really think about it until about six years later. By then the idea had evolved (based partly on national news reports) into a gang feud between white New Yorkers and Puerto Ricans on New York's west side. He enlisted the aid of a very new Stephen Sondheim to supply the lyrics. Arthur Laurents put together the story and Robbins did the staging, finally completing the show in 1957. *West Side Story* came to the stage on Broadway in September of that year and ran for almost 2 years. Its New York run ended in 1960 after 732 performances and 6 Tony awards. In 1961 it was made into a movie and took 10 Oscars, including Best Picture.

When *West Side Story* was adapted for the big screen the cast included an unknown Richard Breymer as Tony, after Elvis Presley reportedly turned down the role, and Natalie Wood as Maria. Bernstein's music was so difficult that, although Breymer and Wood could both sing, more adept vocalists were used and their voices dubbed in. Songs like "Maria" and "Cool" are filled with tense, angular meter. "America" has a series of lightening quick syncopations and acrobatic Latin-inspired patterns. There are also romantic and achingly lovely melodies like "Tonight", "Somewhere" and the wedding hymn "One Hand, One Heart". "Something's Coming" introduces us to Tony, who would rather avoid fighting and simply be with the naively sweet Maria, as she sings "I Feel Pretty".

The score was orchestrated by Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal, who said of Bernstein, "If he'd had the time he wouldn't even need us. When it came to *West Side Story* every note was his."

Beryl McHenry