

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

April 27, 2019

Michael Allsen, unless otherwise noted

Our final program of the season is titled "Great Cities: New York," and brings together music about or premiered in the "Big Apple." The opening work is an emotional orchestral passage from the opera *Vanessa*, which Samuel Barber premiered at the Metropolitan Opera. Pianist Geoffrey Duce joins the orchestra to play MacDowell's second piano concerto, a phenomenal success at its New York premiere, and widely recognized as one of the first great orchestral works by an American composer. Maestro Stelluto's own *Legends of Broadway* brings together several great songs written for the Broadway stage. We end with music from one of the greatest Broadway shows—and a showcase for the orchestra—Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story."*

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Intermezzo from *Vanessa*

Barber's opera Vanessa premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City on January 15, 1958. Duration 5:00.

By the time he was in his 40s, Barber was already among the most successful American composers of chamber and orchestral music, but he had yet to write an opera... and New York's Metropolitan Opera had begun to encourage him to write a work the company could premiere. After years of searching for a proper subject, he finally turned to his partner Gian Carlo Menotti, who volunteered to write an original libretto in 1952. Menotti for his part was already recognized as one of America's most operatic composers. He was also busy and did not begin serious work on Barber's libretto—which would become *Vanessa*—for two years, finally finishing it in 1956. Barber completed the

score in short order, and when the opera was performed at the Met in early 1958, it was wildly successful.

The setting of *Vanessa* was inspired by *Seven Gothic Tales* by Isak Dinesen, but the story was entirely Menotti's. Vanessa has lived a barren, isolated life in her large house for 20 years—she had had a passionate affair with a married man, Anatol, who then rejected her. She retreated to her house “in a Northern country” to live with her mother (who refuses to speak with her) and her young niece Erika. Word arrives that Anatol will come to visit, but when he appears at the door, Vanessa is devastated to find that it is not her lover, but rather his son. She retreats to her bedroom, leaving young Anatol and Erika together. Anatol seduces Erika, and later proposes to her, but she rejects him. Anatol and Vanessa then begin a relationship and plan to announce their engagement at a grand New Year's ball. Erika appears distraught at the ball, and runs out into a blizzard. When she is finally found, the weather and her distress have caused her to lose Anatol's child. Two weeks later there is a rather cold leave-taking—the opera's final scene—as Vanessa and Anatol leave the house to go to Paris. Erika resigns herself to the same barren, solitary life that Vanessa had previously lived.

The *Intermezzo* appears in the opera's final act, between the climactic scene of Erika's miscarriage and the heartbreaking ending. In the opera, this orchestral passage acts as a kind of emotional release. A melancholy theme laid out by the woodwind is picked up by the strings, and worked into a grand emotional climax, before subsiding into quiet resignation.

Edward MacDowell (1860-1908)

Concerto No.2 in D minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op.23

MacDowell completed this concerto in late 1885, and was the pianist in the first performance in New York City on March 5, 1889. Duration 26:00.

Though Edward MacDowell is often known as the “first great American composer,” his outlook was almost entirely European. Born in New York City, he left as a teenager to study at the Paris Conservatory, and then went to the conservatory in Frankfurt, where he studied with Joachim Raff. After teaching piano in Frankfurt and Darmstadt, MacDowell returned briefly to United States in 1884, where he married Marian Nevins (who had been his piano student in Frankfurt). The MacDowells soon returned to Germany, living in Wiesbaden where he devoted the next few years entirely to composition. They returned permanently to the United States in 1888, settling in Boston. MacDowell had a successful career as a concert pianist, and was able to secure occasional performances of his music. In 1896 the MacDowells moved to New York City, where he led in the creation of a music department at Columbia University, and directed the department until 1904. Shortly before his death, Marian MacDowell founded the famous MacDowell Colony in Petersborough NY, a retreat for artists, composers, playwrights, and choreographers that still exists today.

Though some of MacDowell’s later music does touch on American themes—notably Native American music—his music owes most of its style to Raff, Grieg, Schumann, and Liszt. He premiered his first piano concerto as a 22-year-old student in Frankfurt, but it is his second piano concerto that is widely believed to be his finest work. Completed while he was in Wiesbaden, it was premiered in New York City by the orchestra of Theodore Thomas in 1889. Reaction was thoroughly positive, and the fact that this was a work by an *American* seems to have been part of the thrill—as one reviewer wrote: “It is a splendid composition, so full of poetry, so full of vigor as to tempt the assertion that it must be placed at the head of all works of its kind produced by either a native or an adopted citizen of America.” The concerto remains the most often-performed of MacDowell’s large works.

It is cast in the traditional three movements, each of which is set in a classical sonata form. The opening movement begins with solemn introduction (*Larghetto*) before a dramatic solo cadenza (clearly an echo of Liszt). The orchestra reintroduces the main theme and the piano amplifies it, and a more restrained second theme is transformed into a soaring melody in the solo part. A stormy development culminates in another grand cadenza. MacDowell makes room for yet a third(!) cadenza in the recapitulation, which ends with a long wistful meditation on the opening theme.

The main themes of the scherzo (*Presto giocoso*) were recycled from a never-completed symphonic poem on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Here MacDowell seems to be channeling the light-footed fairy music of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The movement is a brilliant virtuoso showpiece for soloist that leads to a humorous ending. The opening of the finale (*Largo*) is an abrupt change in mood, with a dark, brooding melody introduced by the low strings and then carried by the soloist. Timpani strokes announce a further change in mood and tempo (*Molto allegro*), and the piano introduces the exuberant main idea, echoed by the brass. Piano and horn introduce a second, lighter idea. Near the end the end, there is an extended slow passage from the orchestra that echoes the introduction, but the piano soon reasserts itself to end the movement in the blazing virtuoso passage.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story"

Bernstein's West Side Story was composed in 1956-57, and this orchestral suite was completed in 1960. The suite was premiered by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in February 1961. Duration 21:00.

Bernstein, like many of his predecessors, was attracted to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as subject-matter for a stage work—the tragic story of lovers from two warring clans has universal appeal and relevance. Bernstein was particularly intrigued when playwright Arthur Laurents suggested that he write the music for an “updated” version of the tragedy, set not in 16th-century Verona, but in modern New York City. The doomed lovers in *West Side Story* are a Puerto Rican girl named Maria, and a Polish-American boy named Tony. In place of warring Montagues and Capulets, we have two rival gangs fighting for territory. The Sharks are Puerto Rican immigrants, and the Jets are an “American” gang, primarily Tony’s Polish-American buddies. Using Puerto Rican culture in the characters of Maria, Anita, and the Sharks allowed Bernstein to introduce Caribbean instruments into the score. He also makes subtle use of Caribbean rhythms in many numbers—basing the hilariously sarcastic “America” on the *huapongo*, and introducing the syncopated *beguine* in Tony and Maria’s love duet “Tonight.”

Bernstein was also attracted by the idea of writing a truly serious score for the Broadway stage. In 1956, when he had just begun work on *West Side Story*, he wrote in his diary: “Chief problem: to tread the fine line between opera and Broadway, between realism and poetry, ballet and ‘just dancing,’ abstract and representational. Avoid being ‘messagy.’ The line is there, but it’s very fine and sometimes it takes a lot of peering around to discern it.” Bernstein had already composed relatively “operatic” Broadway shows—his *On the Town* (1944) and *Wonderful Town* (1952) contained serious undercurrents and had an integrated approach to drama, music, and dance. His opera *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952) and his operetta *Candide* (1956) approached the “fine line” from the opposite direction, adapting elements of Jazz and popular song. *West Side Story*, completed in 1957, was an amazingly successful synthesis of classical and Broadway elements. It was also a thoroughly successful collaboration between Bernstein, lyricist Stephen Sondheim, and choreographer Jerome Robbins. The show opened on Broadway on September 26, 1957 and ran for 973 performances.

Symphonic Dances from “West Side Story” dates from 1961. The music is “symphonic” in a couple of ways. Bernstein takes the ballet music of *West Side Story* out of the crowded confines of the orchestra pit and expands his score to include a full symphony

orchestra. It is also “symphonic” in that he uses a few basic musical ideas, transformed over and over again, to represent the actions and emotions of the story. The score provides the following outline of the dramatic action portrayed in the *Symphonic Dances*: “*Prologue* (Allegro Moderato) — The growing rivalry between two teenage gangs, the Jets and Sharks. ‘*Somewhere*’ (Adagio) — In a visionary dance sequence, the two gangs are united in friendship. *Scherzo* (Vivace leggero) — In the same dream, they break through the city walls, and suddenly find themselves in a world of space, air and sun. *Mambo* (Presto) — Reality again; competitive dance between gangs. *Cha-cha* (Andantino con grazia) — The star-crossed lovers see each other for the first time and dance together. *Meeting Scene* (Meno mosso) — Music accompanies their first spoken words. ‘*Cool*,’ *Fugue* (Allegretto) — An elaborate dance sequence in which the Jets practice controlling their hostility. *Rumble* (Molto allegro) — Climactic gang battle during which the two gang leaders are killed. *Finale* (Adagio) — Love music developing into a procession, which recalls, in tragic reality, the vision of ‘*Somewhere*’.”

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Broadway Legends Suite

Duration: 20:00.

Broadway Legends is a three-part suite of highlights from beloved musicals of either historic significance or ground-breaking impact on Broadway. Ever since the PSO’s program *100 Years of Broadway* several years ago, I have thought of coalescing such a suite. I use the term coalesce because the arrangements for these highlights are taken from those already in our PSO library and include some of the greatest Broadway composer/arranger teams in history, such as Richard Rodgers and Robert Russell Bennett, Lionel Bart and Alfred Reed, and Marvin Hamlisch and Robert Lowden—just to name some. The suite is arranged in three movements representing recurring dramatic themes throughout Broadway’s history: I. Dark Plots, Reluctant Kings, Brave Princesses, II. Dudes, Dames, and Orphans, and III. The Show Must Go On. Some may describe this suite as a collage, but I prefer to think of it as kind of musical roller coaster with fun, unexpected turns and twists. Broadway aficionados will enjoy identifying the songs used as well as their juxtapositions with other musicals. The suite does not, of course, cover the entire

range of Broadway repertoire, rather, it leaves room for more such mash-ups in the future.
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