Leonard Bernstein: “Three Dance Variations” from *Fancy Free*

*The key to the mystery of a great artist is that for reasons unknown, he will give away his energies and his life just to make sure that one note follows another . . . and leaves us with the feeling that something is right in the world.* -- Leonard Bernstein

In tallying all of Leonard Bernstein’s endeavors, it might be easier to list what he didn’t accomplish – it would be a much shorter list. Composer for the concert hall, Broadway and film, conductor, pianist, teacher, writer, lecturer, television star, and human rights activist, Bernstein had the uncanny ability to master any discipline to which he turned his formidable intellect. While one could point to Copland or Ives as ultimately far more influential composers, it would be difficult to dispute that Bernstein was the greatest musical influence on American classical music in the last half of the twentieth century. No one crossed the boundaries of classical and popular music with both the ease and the virtuosity that he did and no one so fully understood the potential for connecting to the American public through music. His numerous television programs (*Omnibus, Young People’s Concerts*), books (*The Joy of Music*), and televised concerts brought the concert hall into the home. Chosen as the Charles Eliot Norton Lecture at his alma mater, Harvard University, in 1973, his six lectures entitled *The Unanswered Question* displayed the breathtaking scope of his erudition and his natural flair for teaching. That these lectures come down to us today on audio, video and in book form speaks both to Bernstein’s ability to make the arcana of art palatable and accessible to a broader audience, but also to Bernstein’s mastery of media long before that skill became mandatory for performing artists.

The ballet *Fancy Free* is from the period shortly after Bernstein’s meteoric rise to fame as a conductor. On November 14, 1943, conductor Bruno Walter fell ill with the flu on the day he was to lead a performance of the New York Philharmonic in a Carnegie Hall concert that was scheduled to be broadcast live across the country. The Philharmonic management called their young assistant conductor, Leonard Bernstein, at 7 a.m. to inform him that he would be taking Walter’s place on the podium that afternoon. The program included Schumann’s *Manfred* Overture, a new work by Miklós Rózsa, Richard Strauss’ *Don Quixote*, and Wagner’s Act I Prelude from *Die Meistersinger*. More than a little hungover from a party the previous night, Bernstein conducted a brilliant performance to rave reviews, which gave him the first big break of his career.

*Fancy Free* premiered a scant five months after Bernstein’s Carnegie Hall concert. It is one of his first homages to New York, a series of works that would include the Broadway musicals *On the Town*, *Wonderful Town*, and *West Side Story*. It is also the first time Bernstein worked with choreographer Jerome Robbins, a partnership that would bear its fullest fruit in the dance sequences of *West Side Story*. *Fancy Free*’s music displays Bernstein at his most eclectic, as popular song styles, jazz and modern
classical music combine in a wholly original synthesis. The ballet was an immense success in its initial production and played to sold-out houses in the middle of World War II.

Bernstein described the story of Fancy Free this way:

*Three sailors explode on the stage. They are on a 24-hour shore leave in the city and on the prowl for girls. The tale of how they first meet one, then a second girl, and how they fight over them, lose them, and in the end, take off after a third, is the story of the ballet.*

The Three Dance Variations heard this evening are the progenitors of Dancing with the Stars and So You Think You Can Dance?; the three sailors each dance to try to win the favor of the two girls that they’ve just met, with the loser ending up as the only guy without a date. The opening Galop impresses through its bold, brash energy, while its angular melodic lines and percussive accompaniment might feel at home in a Stravinsky ballet. The Waltz is worlds away from the Strauss family, switching between seductively lyrical strings and a brassy march. The final Danzón (danced by Robbins in the first production) is a jazzy, syncopated tour-de-force, with a bold trumpet solo backed by claves, maracas and castanets. At the conclusion of the three dances, the sailors resort to throwing punches to determine the winner, which frightens their potential dates. The women run off, leaving all three sailors without companions for the evening.

As one final example of Bernstein’s versatility and humanity, I would direct you to Bernstein’s Israel Philharmonic recording of Fancy Free. On that recording the vocalist singing “Big Stuff Blues,” the popular song that opens and closes the ballet, is...Leonard Bernstein.

**Elmer Bernstein: Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra**

Notes by Elmer Bernstein c. 1999

The creation of the Concerto for Guitar & Orchestra is a story of friends. Sometime in the sixties when I was President of the Young Musicians Foundation we were privileged to encourage the career of a very young Christopher Parkening. Christopher went on to become an artist of the first rank, and for some years I watched from afar, pleased with the knowledge that I was able to have been of some small help at the beginning.

In the years that followed I met Patrick Russ, a very gifted musician who came to me interested in orchestrating and arranging music for film. As it turned out, Patrick and Christopher were great friends, and so Christopher and I met again, and proposed the idea of writing a concerto for guitar and orchestra.

My closest colleague and friend in the seventies, until his timely death in the nineties, was Christopher Palmer who could arguably be considered one of the greatest orchestrators of all time. He became a champion of the idea that I write this concerto. I had misgivings about the project as I had never played the guitar, but I started to work on the piece with Christopher Palmer urging me on. Following several unsuccessful attempts to find a way into this work, I gave up as I was inundated at the time by other professional commitments. Nevertheless, over the years Christopher Palmer kept feeding my guilt about
a promise not kept, and when Christopher Parkening urged me to try once again at the end of last year, I
decided that this time I would keep a promise made once to both Christophers.

The guitar is an instrument that lives happily in the diatonic world, a world in which I am most
comfortable. I have made no attempt to force the instrument into what I would consider to be
unnatural harmonic territory and have instead elected to let the guitar sing comfortably and joyously
where it feels most natural. The entire process of the creation was worked through with Christopher
Parkening.

The concerto is in three movements. The piece is harmonically conservative. The beginning of the first
movement is based completely on the notes of the open strings of the guitar...therefore involving E A D
G B E. Eventually an F-sharp is introduced and we're away. The first movement is energetic in character.
The second movement is more reflective. Each of the first two movements has a broad melodic line as
its centerpiece. The last movement is the shortest of the three and is basically in rondo form. Both of us
owe a special debt of gratitude to Patrick Russ who helped, edited, corrected wrong notes and was
always on the other end of the phone when I needed to ask a specific question about the instrument.

Reprinted with the kind permission of Hal Leonard Corporation

Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

Sometimes the people we randomly meet in life have a profound and lasting effect on the direction of
our lives, whether intentionally or not. Joseph Haydn was settling into a comfortable, if frugal,
retirement in Vienna in 1790, when he received a visit from one Johann Peter Salomon, who burst into
his rooms and declared, “I am Salomon from London and have come to fetch you. Tomorrow we shall
make an accord.” That accord made Haydn a wealthy man – the composer’s two visits to London (1791-
1792 and 1793-1794), managed by Salomon, sparked the creation of some his greatest music, including
chamber music, opera, and his final twelve symphonies.

Tchaikovsky’s case is even more astounding: his life was completely turned around by a woman he never
met, other than passing in the street (and when that happened, he was too shy to speak to her).
Nadezhda von Meck was the widow of the engineer who built the Russian railway system. She was a
passable pianist and an enthusiastic patron of the arts, giving financial assistance to Nikolai Rubinstein
and Polish violinist Henryk Wieniawski as well as employing Claude Debussy as a piano teacher for her
daughters. She and Tchaikovsky communicated by letter from 1877 to 1890, exchanging more than
1,200 letters. She provided Tchaikovsky with an annual stipend of 6,000 rubles, which freed him from
teaching and allowed him to devote himself to composing. In appreciation, Tchaikovsky dedicated his
Fourth Symphony to her.

By the time of the Fifth Symphony, Tchaikovsky was experiencing symptoms of what we would describe
today as professional burnout. He openly speculates in his correspondence to Madame von Meck as to
whether he could write anything further. He later told his brother Modest that he was “...getting a
symphony out of his addled brain, with difficulty.” By the time the work was finished in August of 1888,
he had managed to come to grips with the work and expressed the hope that listeners would find some merit in it.

The Fifth is a cyclic symphony, in that the opening idea of the first movement appears transformed in the three subsequent movements. He had used this technique both in the Fourth Symphony and in Manfred, and in his writings, he indicated that this initial idea was a kind of “Fate” motive, much like the opening fanfare in Symphony No. 4.

The first movement opens with the brooding motto theme, heard hesitantly in the lowest register of the clarinets, punctuated by sparse string chords and then supported by the string section in a richer texture. The ensuing Allegro con anima begins as a grim march in 6/8 time, led by the chocolate low tones of the clarinets and bassoons. The stormy agitation of the movement is broken only by the sweetly yearning waltz-like second theme, Molto più tranquillo, heard first in octaves in the violins, with discreet counterpoint from the woodwinds. This moment of nostalgic calm does not last long and the movement is propelled back into drama and conflict. Tchaikovsky flings motifs from all the themes throughout the orchestra, gradually building to a huge climax. At the height of the storm, the orchestra relentlessly pounds out the opening rhythm of the Allegro, with different sections of the orchestra battling each other for supremacy. When the tempest subsides, the solo bassoon brings in the recapitulation, and the themes of the movement return as presented at the beginning. After one final impassioned roar of the Allegro theme in the coda, the movement’s energy collapses, with the march gradually disintegrating into rhythmic fragments and the texture thinning to the final black chord in bassoons, timpani, cellos and basses.

One of the many strokes of genius in this symphony is the opening of the second movement, where Tchaikovsky quietly starts with a texture similar and yet subtly different from the end of the first movement, providing a perfect transition. The violas, cellos and basses intone a rich chorale which serves to introduce one of the most ravishingly beautiful horn solos in the symphonic literature. Both this melody and the subsequent oboe melody will serve as the basis for most of this movement, outside of a brief exotic-sounding episode led by the solo bassoon. The entire movement sings with a passionate ardor, stopped only by two interruptions of the motto theme, bursting angrily from the woodwinds and brass. Yet both times, the soothing balm of the two lyrical melodies restores calm, and the movement concludes with a final wistful farewell from the clarinet.

The third movement is one of Tchaikovsky’s most elegant symphonic waltzes. The graceful lyricism of the opening idea appears first in the violins and then wreathed by string counterpoint. The middle “trio” section is all nervous energy, with scurrying strings and woodwinds weaving their lines through the staccato interjections of the rest of the orchestra. The dancing returns, but the motto theme makes an ominous appearance just before the concluding chords.

The motto theme opens the finale, but strikingly transformed from grim E minor into luminous E major. The theme sings confidently in the violins and cellos, and later passes to the woodwinds, surrounded by murmuring triplets in the strings. The introduction reaches a heroic climax, but then dies away in questioning phrases from the horns leading to a quiet timpani roll. The drum roll suddenly roars to life, setting off the ensuing ferocious Allegro vivace, which leaps forward with grim and gritty energy in the
strings. The battle for supremacy between darkness and light rages through the movement, with neither gaining an upper hand. Suddenly, all forward motion ceases. After a brief pause (almost as though the orchestra holds its breath in anticipation), woodwind triplets lead the way for the triumphant motto theme, sung passionately by the strings and punctuated by fanfares in the horns and trumpets. The triumphant procession passes through the entire orchestra, and the final exultant sprint to the finish is pulled back only for a final fanfare of the march theme of the first movement, blazing forth in the trumpets just before the final cadence.