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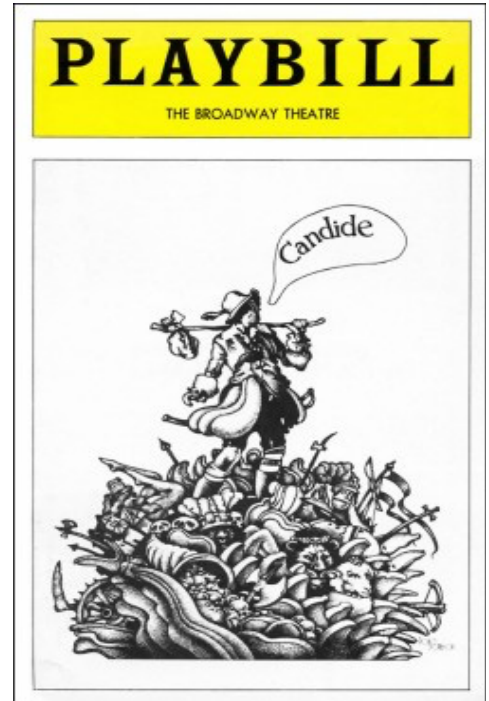
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Genre and Stylistic Expectations in the Musical Theater of Leonard Bernstein

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As a composer, Leonard Bernstein never felt constrained by expectations of genre. One of the few American composers to make meaningful contributions both in concert music and the Broadway theater, he forged his own path in terms of what type of composition he should write. Of Bernstein's three symphonies, each was programmatic and also unusual in form and conception. The first, "Jeremiah" (1942), told the story of the ancient Hebrew prophet's warnings about Israelites turning away from God, capped by a finale with a solo mezzo-soprano mournfully singing Jeremiah's *Lamentations*. Symphony No. 2, "The Age of Anxiety" (1949), inspired by W. H. Auden's introspective poem by the same name, followed the poem's structure fairly closely, but with extensive writing for solo piano, making the piece closely resemble a piano concerto. "Kaddish" (1963), the third symphony, is like an oratorio, combining three settings of an important Jewish prayer with narrator, mezzo-soprano soloist, chorus, and orchestra, addressing nothing less than the relationship between God and humans and the threat of nuclear annihilation, among other issues.

Bernstein never really could decide whether he was a conductor, composer, pianist, or music educator, pursuing all of these careers while sometimes leaning more in one or two directions. In a letter to a friend from May 1955, Bernstein, then thirty-six, actually wrote: "Some day, preferably soon, I simply must decide what I'm going to be when I grow up."¹ For example, while directing the New York Philharmonic between 1958 and 1969 and also heavily involved with television activities, he wrote only the "Kaddish" Symphony and *Chichester Psalms* (1965). He completed no musical theater works during those eleven years. *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson spoke for the theatrical community in 1960 when he wrote: "Let's not speculate on how many vibrant scores the Philharmonic has deprived us of. The thought is too melancholy."² Indeed, Bernstein's forays into musical theater occurred irregularly. The success of the ballet *Fancy Free* in 1944 inspired turning its scenario into the musical *On the Town*, but Bernstein's conducting mentor Serge Koussevitzky disliked his protégé writing popular music. Bernstein concentrated on conducting and composing concert works until the Russian conductor's death in 1951, except for incidental music he wrote for a production of *Peter Pan* in 1950. Bernstein's most active decade as a composer was the 1950s, and that included his busiest period on Broadway, completing *Wonderful Town*, *Candide*, and *West Side Story* between 1953 and 1957, in addition to incidental music for the play *The Lark*. Bernstein tried to collaborate on a musical version of Thornton Wilder's play *The Skin of Our Teeth* during his sabbatical season from the Philharmonic in 1964–65, but the effort failed. His next musical theater work was not completed until 1971, when *Mass* helped inaugurate the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. His final Broadway musical, *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, opened



Candide Playbill, 1956

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in 1976 but ran for less than a week. Further attempts over the last fourteen years of his life resulted in no finished works.

The remainder of this query will look at his five Broadway musicals and *Mass* in chronological order. The genre of each of his non-operatic works (as on title pages) is considered with regard to the composer's approach to the score and critical expectations of the music. *On the Town* (1944) was a striking debut for Bernstein and his collaborators: Jerome Robbins as choreographer and Betty Comden and Adolph Green writing lyrics and the book. This was their first Broadway musical, but their mastery of the medium was immediate. They set out to write a musical comedy—the show's advertised designation—and the result was riotously funny, but the collaborators also self-consciously adopted the type of integration praised in *Oklahoma!* from the previous year. They included even more ballet than had appeared in *Oklahoma!* and ensured that most songs contributed to the storytelling. With three sailors on leave for twenty-four hours in New York City, they made wartime realities part of the story, allowing the couples to draw close quickly and writing the serious song "Some Other Time" for late in the show, when the principals realize that there are things they have not experienced in their rushed relationships. It is a sobering moment, and along with all of the ballet and Bernstein's sophisticated music, provides this musical comedy with an artistic soul. Some of Bernstein's score was unusual for a musical comedy: the knowing parody of the blues in "I Feel Like I'm Not Out of Bed Yet," the dissonance and harmonic complexity of "New York, New York," the interplay of blues and boogie-woogie tropes in "Come Up to My Place," the operatic parody of "Carried Away," and the mixture of various vernacular influences and nostalgic sentiment reminiscent of Copland's ballet scores that forms "Lonely Town," just to consider five numbers from Act 1. Bernstein poured as much variety into the dance music for *On the Town* as he did the ballet *Fancy Free*. His contribution to his first Broadway score demonstrated that this young artist was unafraid to treat vernacular idioms in his theater scores in a similar way that he did in his concert music.

Wonderful Town (1953) demonstrates that Bernstein and his collaborators had no intention of changing their sophisticated approach to musical comedy, also this show's designation of genre. George Abbott, who had also directed *On the Town*, turned to Comden and Green as lyricists when his first team failed to produce usable songs for the score. Comden and Green enticed Bernstein to write the music; the score had to be finished quickly before the producers lost their option on the star Rosalind Russell. They did most of their work in five or six weeks in late 1952. The show's development was difficult. Book writers Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov wanted to update the story from their play *My Sister Eileen* from the 1930s to the 1950s, but Bernstein, Comden, and Green desired to reference 1930s swing music. Abbott sided with his composer and lyricists and then endured a contentious time getting the show to Broadway, but the collaborative difficulties did not affect the show's reception. Bernstein's music contributed strongly to the overall effect and drew praise from Olin Downes, music critic for the *New York Times*, who saw the effort as a step in the development of American opera: "This is an opera made of dance, prattle and song; and speed. ... We are coming to believe that when the American opera created by a composer of the stature of the Wagners and Verdis of yore does materialize, it will owe much more to the robust spirit and the raciness of accent of our popular theater than to efforts of our emulators, in the aesthetic brackets, of the tonal art of Bartók, Hindemith and Stravinsky."³ The songs of *Wonderful Town* include an eclectic mixture of vernacular and concert references, heard to great advantage at the conclusion of the musical scene "Conversation Piece" with wild, operatic coloratura layered on top of a more popular, patter song; and the "Wrong Note Rag," a comic reaction to the early twentieth-century genre that at moments verges on Stravinskian dissonances.

Candide (1956) failed in its initial run, partly because book writer Lillian Hellman and composer Bernstein never managed to agree on the work's tone. Hellman wrote a bitter, pointed satire aimed at the United States in the throes of McCarthyism. Bernstein, however, working with several lyricists but mostly Richard Wilbur, wrote a delightful operetta score based upon European dance types and other influences

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Leonard Bernstein with Carol Lawrence and the cast of West Side Story, 1957
Library of Congress Music Division

far from the American vernacular characteristics that dominated Bernstein's Broadway scores. Advertised as a "comic operetta," *Candide*'s score in some ways was typical for its announced genre with some waltzes, but Bernstein added the schottische, gavotte, and other dances, and also entered the opera house with the aria "Glitter and Be Gay" and dramatic finale "Make Our Garden Grow." The aria's coloratura matches almost anything from the nineteenth-century repertory, and the finale opens with wide-ranging solos and a duet for Candide and Cunegonde, followed by a contrapuntal tour-de-force for principals and chorus. Its tone is invariably hopeful, in glaring contrast to the remainder of the show. It is one place where one must question what Bernstein intended in a musico-dramatic sense.

West Side Story carried the appellation of a "musical." It is hard to know what an audience's expectations might have been for a show designated a musical in 1957, but the tragedy and violence of *West Side Story* surprised many in the audience and critics. Bernstein's iconic, well-known score demonstrated what was possible in a serious musical for later composers, combining distinctive references to various Latin dances, swing, bop, and cool jazz. In addition, he employed sophisticated compositional techniques that one would expect more in concert music: omnipresent major/minor triads of the "Prologue," rhythmic uncertainty in "Something's Coming," the level of dissonance and a fugue in "Cool," many meter changes in the "Tonight Quintet," the strong influence of Stravinsky in the dissonance and rhythmic complexity of "The Rumble," the argumentative counterpoint between Maria and Anita in "A Boy Like That/I Have A Love," and the prominence of the tritone throughout the score. Bernstein's wide compositional palette in *West Side Story* surely influenced his lyricist Stephen Sondheim in his sophisticated Broadway scores that followed starting in the early 1960s.

One cannot consider genre as a factor in Bernstein's musical theater output without mentioning *Mass*, which was not conceived for Broadway. In 1971 the Kennedy Center offered a huge production with over 200 singers, dancers, and musicians. The work combined a concert mass with dramatic and dance elements, several different types of vernacular music, and concert pieces for orchestra. Bernstein was the primary creator and had the final say on content, but he procrastinated to such an extent in the compositional process that he had to bring in Stephen Schwartz less than four months before the premiere to write the English texts that provide dramatic context. Schwartz also helped craft the loose plot, which includes political, religious, and philosophical commentary.⁴ Bernstein designated *Mass* as a "theater piece." *Mass* showed Bernstein at his most eclectic with the addition of rock to the usual vernacular styles that he accessed, and the instrumental music represents a wide range indeed. Even several examples

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cannot illustrate the composer's large stylistic palette in *Mass*, but these three excerpts demonstrate the contrasts inherent in the score: the pop-influenced, Broadway sound of "A Simple Song;" the rock-based "I Don't Know;" and the orchestral "Meditation No. 2," variations on a famous eleven-note passage from Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. Although controversial in its premiere, *Mass* has remained in the repertory for institutions that wish to make a major musical statement, and many people find it spiritually moving.

The designation "musical play" has become a favorite among scholars to describe pieces of musical theater that are serious in content, applied today to musicals ranging from *Show Boat* to shows by Rodgers and Hammerstein and beyond. The only work that Bernstein composed to which the moniker was applied in its advertising is *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, for which Alan Jay Lerner wrote book and lyrics. They crafted an interesting score, but Lerner's book was flawed, based on the difficult notion that the same white actors would play many presidents and first ladies and the same African American actors would play a slave couple that later became servants at the White House. Lerner and Bernstein were deeply concerned about the country's direction and what they saw as the self-congratulatory feeling of the American Bicentennial in 1976, and they used the show to lecture audiences on racism in the United States, not the message that patriotic white Americans wished to hear at that moment. The result was a disastrous run of seven performances and no original cast recording, causing this major score mostly to disappear until it was recast as *The White House Cantata* for concert performance in the late 1990s. Bernstein's approach to the music corresponded with the show's satiric spirit, with parodies of patriotic tunes, references to period dances, minstrel shows, and other types of American entertainment. These were juxtaposed with songs based on familiar Bernstein tropes, like the moving, anthem-like "Take Care of This House" (an admonition to look after the White House and American democratic institutions) and the cheerfully irreverent "Ten Square Miles by the Potomac River." The score shows that Bernstein made intelligent musical decisions to reflect and offer commentary on dramatic situations, setting some fine lyrics by Lerner.

While interacting with theatrical genres, Bernstein was the eclectic, probing composer one finds in most of his concert works. In the musical comedy, perhaps the most predictable of Broadway genres, he accessed the vernacular styles that were staples of the genre for many composers. But he also found sophisticated elements from his concert music that he made part of the show's humor, a distinctive approach in the popular theater seldom used by other composers, perhaps with the exception of Kurt Weill. When writing *Candide*, Bernstein followed the usual European style of operetta, but he ranged further than some composers in doing so, and also provided operatic numbers. Bernstein reserved his widest eclecticism for Broadway and brought his most sophisticated devices to the musical and musical play, *West Side Story* and *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*. The diversity in those effective scores, however, was not as broad as *Mass*, the work where Bernstein had the highest degree of creative control. *Mass* was one of his most personal statements, the likes of which would never have made it to Broadway. If one wants to get to know Bernstein the man and composer, *Mass* is required listening. Its memorable eclecticism provides crucial context for Bernstein's Broadway scores, and a delightfully puckish commentary on the man's complicated engagement with genre expectations in all of his works.

Notes

1. Nigel Simeone, ed., *The Leonard Bernstein Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 337.
2. Brooks Atkinson, "Man of Notes: Leonard Bernstein's Musical Career Deprives Broadway of Able Writer," *New York Times* (8 May 1960): Section 2/1.
3. Olin Downes, "Wonderful Time: Bernstein's Musical Is Brilliant Achievement," *New York Times* (10 May 1953): Section 2/7.
4. Paul R. Laird, *The Musical Theater of Stephen Schwartz: From Godspell to Wicked and Beyond* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 46–47.