Leonard Bernstein
Born August 25, 1918, Lawrence, Massachusetts.
Died October 14, 1990, New York City.

Symphonic Dances from West Side Story

Bernstein composed the musical West Side Story in 1957. These Symphonic Dances were extracted from the score in 1960, by the composer with Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal, and performed for the first time on February 13, 1961, by the New York Philharmonic. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, harp, piano, celesta, strings, and a percussion battery consisting of pitched drums, jazz drum set, snare drums, bass drum, conga drum, cymbals, suspended cymbals, finger cymbals, tambourine, gourds, maracas, cowbells, woodblock, tom-toms, bongos, triangle, timbales, tam-tam, police whistle, xylophone, vibraphone, chime, and glockenspiel. Performance time is approximately eighteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first performances of Bernstein’s Symphonic Dances from West Side Story were given on special high school concerts at Orchestra Hall on February 22 and 26, 1993, with Kenneth Jean conducting. Our first subscription concert performance was given on May 8, 1997, with Daniel Barenboim conducting.

Originally it was the story of a Jew and a Catholic falling in love during the time of Easter and Passover. Later, when the subject was switched to ethnic gang warfare in New York City, it was (in all seriousness) called Gangway! But when it opened on Broadway in 1957 as West Side Story, the shape of American musical theater was changed forever, just as Leonard Bernstein had predicted.

The initial idea came from Jerome Robbins, whose smart and flashy choreography would contribute so decisively to the final product. In 1949, while Robbins was coaching actor Montgomery Clift on how to play Romeo in a more contemporary manner, Robbins began to envision an updated version of the Shakespeare play. Bernstein’s own log suggests that he realized the show’s broader implications, as well as its enormous challenges, as soon as Robbins contacted him—on January 6, 1949, he wrote:

Jerry R. called today with a noble idea: a modern version of Romeo and Juliet set in slums at the coincidence of Easter-Passover celebrations . . . But it’s all much less important than the bigger idea of making a musical that tells a tragic story in musical-comedy terms, using only musical-comedy techniques, never falling into the “operatic” trap. Can it succeed? It hasn’t yet in our country. I’m excited. If it can work—it’s the first.

But various postponements and interruptions (a musical version of Candide among them), several creative impasses, and Bernstein’s increasingly busy schedule kept the modern Romeo off the boards for another eight years. Finally, on February 1, 1957, Bernstein wrote in his diary: “Candide is on and gone; the philharmonic has been conducted; back to Romeo. From here on, nothing shall disturb the project.” And this time he was right. By then the working title was East Side Story, but when it was discovered that the tenements on that side of Manhattan had all been razed, the setting was switched to the gang-dominated stretches of the Upper West Side.

West Side Story opened on Broadway on September 26, 1957. Although the reviews were not entirely enthusiastic—Harold Clurman, writing in The Nation, found it “phony” and accused Bernstein and his colleagues of slumming in order to make money—nearly everyone seemed to agree that fresh air had at last blown through Broadway. West Side Story ran for nearly two years (tallying 722 performances), toured nationally for another year, and then returned to New York City for an additional 253 performances.
Bernstein’s music became overwhelmingly popular throughout the country almost at once, and over the next few years his publisher was kept busy printing editions of songs, selections, and highlights from the score, as well as arrangements for guitar, Baldwin organ, and even accordion.

In 1961, shortly after they had completed the scoring for the film version of the musical, Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal prepared a suite of Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* under the composer’s supervision. (Ramin and Kostal proposed a list of numbers, Bernstein determined a running order.) The principal sections are a prologue, depicting the rivalry between the Jets and the Sharks; “Somewhere,” in which the gangs unite in friendship; a scherzo depicting a visionary world of open space, fresh air, and sun; a combative mambo; a cha-cha treatment of “Maria”; the lovers’ first meeting; a fugue on “Cool”; the climactic gang rumble; and the tragic finale, based on “I Have a Love.” Like the musical, the suite ends with a haunting, unresolved chord.

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