

43. Leonard Bernstein

On the Waterfront: Symphonic Suite (opening)

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background Information and Performance Circumstances

Biography

- *On the Waterfront* was made in 1954, and starred Marlon Brando. It is a gritty drama dealing with union corruption in New York's docklands.
- It won eight Oscars, though curiously not for its film score, written by the great American conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein (1918-90).
- Some of his musicals, including the popular *West Side Story*, were filmed, but his music for *On the Waterfront* is his only score originally written for the cinema.
- In 1955 Bernstein arranged a selection of the film music as an Orchestral Suite for performance in the concert hall.
- The extract in the anthology contains the opening section of this suite.

Performing Forces and their Handling

In the fifties, budgets for film scores were high and frequently enabled the use of a full symphony orchestra. This was of course in the days before digital scores. In general Bernstein's choice of instruments is conventional, with a large string section, and a standard brass section. The woodwind section is large, including piccolo and double bassoon. The use of four clarinets is less conventional – including the piercing sound of the small, high pitched E flat clarinet (sounding a minor 3rd higher than written) as well as a bass clarinet (not heard in this extract).

- The emphasis on wind instruments reflects the influence of jazz music. This is also shown in the use of an alto saxophone (in E flat – sounding a major 6th lower than written). It has a long solo at Bars 42-53.
- Jazz style is also reflected in the large, varied percussion section, including 3 tuned drums. Unusually, the music requires two timpani players.
- The orchestration also requires a piano, used in this extract like a percussion instrument (eg. Bar 20, very low in its register).
- The string section has a significantly lower profile and doesn't enter at all until Bar 40.
- Special effects include:
 - A six bar opening section for unaccompanied horn, high in its register.
 - Muted trombone (Bar 7) and trumpets (Bar 13).
 - Frequent use of rim shot on the snare drum.
 - Una corda on the piano – Bar 20 (using left, 'soft' pedal).

- Flutter-tonguing on the trumpets and upper woodwind (Bar 105) – produced by rolling the tongue as if producing an Italian ‘r’ sound.
- Sul ponticello (bowing very close to the bridge) Bar 108.
- Timpani glissando (achieved using the pedal) – Bar 24.

Texture

- One of the most striking uses of texture is the use of monophony, Bars 1-6, with the passage for solo, unaccompanied horn.
- Almost equally interesting is the passage in two part canon (Bars 7-12), with the first part to enter doubled at the octave by the flutes. The distance of imitation (trombone solo) is half a bar.
- The counterpoint extends to fugal style, unusually for percussion (beginning Bar 20).
- Builds to climax at Bar 54 with multiple doubling of sax theme on woodwind and trumpet over riff now in strings as well as percussion.
- Big homorhythmic tutti at Bar 78 leading to homophony at Bar 85.
- Woodwind, brass and percussion have repeated chords over long held pianissimo string chords from Bar 108.

Structure

Essentially there are three sections in the extract:

1. Opening section - *Andante*

- a. **Bars 1-6:** unaccompanied horn solo, with distinctive use of minor 3rd intervals, and triplet rhythms.
- b. **Bars 7-12:** repetition of the first theme, now in two part canon, (see texture section of these notes).
- c. **Bars 13-19:** two part trumpets over an F pedal, playing a version of the original horn theme beginning at bar 4.

2. *Presto barbaro* (20-105)

- a. **Bars 20-39:** Percussion fugal section – begins in Bar 20 with the subject played by timpanist 1. The answer appears in Bar 26, played by the second player. The third entry is on ‘tuned drums’, which don’t actually have a fixed pitch but are sized to produce high, mid and low tones, like the tom-tom drums of a drum kit. The melodic idea of the fuge theme is based on the minor 3rd interval of the opening two notes of the piece.
- b. **Bars 40-53:** 2-bar riff on percussion, based on the first two bars of the fugal theme, accompanying an alto sax solo
- c. **Bars 54-62:** new 2-bar riff in the timpani and lower strings, based on the fifth and sixth bar of the fugal theme. Above this the woodwind and trumpet play a fortissimo version of the saxophone solo theme.

- d. **Bars 62-77:** new, initially quieter, music based on the three-note descending motif from the end of the alto sax solo (Bar 52). The music gradually builds to a climax.
- e. **Bars 78-87:** fortissimo tutti based on the fugal theme with almost all the orchestra playing the theme in homorhythm.
- f. **Bars 88-105:** suddenly quiet again after a 2-note minor 2nd motif from the beginning of the alto sax solo idea from Bar 42. The riff continues on the snare drum, leading to a return of the fugue theme on timpani at Bar 96. A long pause.

3. Adagio coda

This begins with a version of the three note motif from Bar 62, which then becomes just a repeated note rhythm two bars later, played over long sustained dissonant chords in the strings.

Tonality

The tonality of the extract varies from section to section.

- The opening horn solo is initially in simple pentatonic style based on this scale.



- The G flat in Bar 5 (sounding C flat, a 5th lower), transforms the music into a 6-note blues scale with the standard flattened 3rd, 5th and 7th:



- The final notes of the theme extend the scale further (Bars 5-6).
- The fugue seems to begin in the same way but now based on G instead of F, but the frequent raised 3rd B naturals complicate the issue.
- When the second timpanist enters at Bar 26, there is a clear suggestion of bitonality, with a combination of G and C sharp tonal centres. This bitonality appears in its most forceful manner at the big climax at Bar 78 when the two tonal centres are combined in a massive tutti, along with elements of D.
- At other times the music can be described as atonal eg. from Bar 72.

Harmony

- There is an overwhelming sense of dissonance in the harmony. This is first sensed in the clash of a compound diminished octave between the blue note F flat (written G flat in the trumpet part, Bar 16) and the pedal F in the bass.
- The bitonality continues the sense of dissonance, with clashes like the augmented 5th between timpani notes F sharp and B flat in Bar 26.
- In the coda, two simple triads of F major and B major (Eb in viola = enharmonic equivalent of D#) are played simultaneously by the strings (Bars 108-110)

Melody

- The pentatonic style of the opening melody has already been mentioned, as have the blue notes (the flattened 3rd, 5th and 7th) of the ensuing blues scale, and the continuation into notes outside the scale (Bars 5-6).
- Everywhere, the interval of the minor 3rd is paramount, either rising as in the first two notes, or falling as at Bar 4. The interval is extended upwards on occasion, becoming a perfect 4th in the 2nd timpani part in Bar 26.
- The diminished 5th (tritone) interval in Bar 14 is frequently heard and makes for tonal ambiguity.
- The fugal idea at Bar 20 is derived from the same initial rising minor 3rd figure. This kind of motivic manipulation lies at the heart of the melodic writing in this piece.
- The opening two notes of the saxophone solo, with their distinctive minor 2nd interval are played in isolation at Bar 88, and extended to a 3-note figure at the end of the sax solo and elsewhere, eg. Bar 62.

Rhythm and metre

- The opening bar contains a syncopation, with a crotchet followed by a minim on the second beat.
- The idea of a short note at the beginning of the bar, followed by a longer note is a feature of other sections of the piece, for instance in the alto sax solo (Bar 42), where a quaver at the beginning of the bar is followed by a long held note.
- Sometimes the first beat short note becomes a pair of shorter notes as at Bar 52.
- Triplets (Bar 3) and time signature change (Bar 3 changes to triple time from quadruple) are distinctive features.
- The fugal section has an interesting continuous alternation of triple time and cut common time bars.
- The coda (Bar 106 to the end) is in simple common time.