

Bernstein & Copland – November 17, 2018

An American Port of Call

Adolphus Hailstork
b.1941

One of this country's leading African-American composers, Adolphus Hailstork has composed major works in nearly all musical media, from musical comedy to solo piano and choral works. His compositions have been performed by many major orchestras including the Baltimore, Detroit and Chicago symphonies. He has also been the recipient of several prizes, among them the Ernest Bloch Award for Choral Music in 1995. Critics have described him as a crossover hybrid of African-American and European-American music.

Hailstork grew up in Albany, N.Y., where he took lessons in singing, violin, piano and organ. He studied composition at Howard University and the Manhattan School of Music, and, after service in the U.S. Armed Forces, pursued his doctorate at Michigan State University. He has taught at Youngstown State University in Ohio, at Norfolk State University in Virginia and is currently Eminent Scholar and Professor of Music at Old Dominion University in Norfolk.

Composed in 1984 on a commission by the Virginia Symphony, *An American Port of Call* is a bundle of syncopated energy, including blue notes and jazz riffs, reflecting the hustle and bustle of America's largest naval base. Not surprisingly, there are echoes of Bernstein's *On the Town*.

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14

Samuel Barber
1910-1981

In early 1939, Samuel Fels, a wealthy Philadelphia soap manufacturer, commissioned Samuel Barber to write a violin concerto for his protégé, the young violinist Isaak (changed to Iso) Briselli. Barber's commission was a hefty \$1000 and he received half of it in advance.

This was Barber's first major commission, and he immediately set out to fulfill it. But commissions, while usually sought after by composers, clearly carry their own conditions and risks. Things did not go according to plan, and what actually happened became a *Cause célèbre*. Since all the protagonists have died, it remained for a paper trail to ascertain whose version was the true one. In the process, a lot of egos got nicked.

According to Barber's biographer Nathan Broder, by the end of the summer of 1939 the composer sent Briselli the first two movements, written in a conservative lyrical and romantic style. Briselli, however, considered them "too simple and not brilliant enough" and refused to accept them. Barber supposedly took his revenge by making the third movement fiendishly difficult. When he resubmitted it, Briselli declared it unplayable, and Fels wanted his advance commission back. At that point in the story, Barber summoned Herbert Baumel, a young violin student from the Curtis Institute of Music and an excellent sight-reader, and gave him the manuscript and two hours to prepare. Accompanied by a piano, the student supposedly demonstrated that the movement was indeed playable. The unanimous verdict was that Fels had to pay the rest of the commission. Barber, however, forfeited the second half and, in exchange, Briselli relinquished his right to the first public performance and never performed the concert in public.

Briselli, some 40 years later, told a different story, and a paper trail collected by his friends and supporters has essentially corroborated his account. According to Briselli, he was enthusiastic

about the first two movements but his violin coach, Albert Mieff, was not and even wanted to rewrite the violin part so that it would be more in keeping with the technical expectations for a concerto, citing Brahms collaboration with Joachim as a precedent. Moreover, Briselli found the third movement too lightweight – rather than too difficult – and suggested that Barber expand it. The composer refused and he and Briselli mutually decided to abandon the project with no hard feelings on either side. For a while there was even talk of Briselli suing Barber for defamation of character over the composer's version of the controversy. (A full account of Briselli's side can be found on his website www.IsoBriselli.com.)

The Concerto was finally premiered by Albert Spaulding with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1941 and was a popular success from the start. The first movement, *Allegro*, opens with an expansive, lyrical theme on the violin alone. The second theme, introduced by the woodwinds, continues the romantic mood although it is syncopated and more rhythmic. The whole tone of the movement is that of a quiet discussion, with only occasionally raised voices in the middle, and ending in a tranquil whisper.

An extended cantabile oboe solo over muted strings opens the aria-like second movement. The violin eventually enters with a second theme that develops the mood introduced by the oboe. The violin then returns to the opening melody, rising to a climax, after which the quiet mood of the beginning returns.

The terse and fiery rondo Finale, *Presto in moto perpetuo*, creates a stunning contrast, placing tremendous demands on the soloist, who has to play at a breathless tempo for 110 measures without interruption. Throughout the perpetual motion, Barber subtly changes the meter and every so often inserts a jazzy syncopated refrain.

Suite from the Ballet *Billy the Kid*

Aaron Copland
1900-1990

In 1938 Lincoln Kirstein, director of the American Ballet Caravan, became fascinated by a biography of the outlaw known as *Billy the Kid* (real name William Bonney), and approached Copland with the idea for a ballet. Copland, who admitted that he frankly disliked cowboy songs, agreed to try when he learned that Billy the Kid was originally from New York City. Incongruously, Copland spent the summer in Paris with a package of Western folk songs, working on the Western ballet, completing it in September at the MacDowell colony in New Hampshire. It was premiered in Chicago in October of that year but accompanied by two pianos only. The Ballet with full orchestra finally debuted to great acclaim in New York in May 1939.

In the summer of 1939 Copland compiled an orchestral suite from the Ballet in which he used about two-thirds of the original music. Among the noteworthy features of Copland's orchestration is his use of the upper winds and muted trumpet in imitation of the harmonica. The six connected movements of the suite, which match the action sequence of the ballet, are:

“The Open Prairie:” Copland's characteristic open fifths, which have become the iconic musical symbol of the open spaces of the American West, depict the land as yet undisturbed by the violence of man.

“Street in a Frontier Town:” Copland captures the bustle and energy of the town in a medley of cowboy songs. The first one, played by solo piccolo, is based on the tune “Great Granddad.” It is followed by a lively original melody. A theme on muted

trumpets playing a semitone apart represents a fight between two drunks in the Ballet. The Mexican dance is probably the most famous of the *Billy the Kid* themes. Copland's source was "Come Wrangle yer Bronco." The final tune, based on "Git along Little Dogies," concludes the scene.

"Card Game at Night:" This gentle nocturne belies the conflict one would expect at a card game, but it sets up the audience for the shock of the gun battle. It is based on "Oh Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie."

"Gun Battle:" A volley of timpani, bass trombone and snare drum gunshots ring out over a brief melodic motive for muted trumpet. As the movement closes, the music slows and fades into the distance.

"Celebration after Billy's Capture:" The celebration is hardly an orchestral extravaganza, but rather a folksy dance in which the instruments play the tune a semitone apart.

"Billy's Demise:" This gentle melody is almost nostalgic, as the outlaw's death fixes him in legend. The Open Prairie theme returns, the seemingly endless expanse once again undisturbed and unchanging.

Conspicuously absent from the roster of borrowed melodies, however, is "Home on the Range." "I had to draw the line somewhere," Copland remarked.

Symphonic Suite from *On the Waterfront*

Leonard Bernstein
1918-1990

By the early 1950s, Bernstein cast around for an appropriate film project. He rejected many offers from Hollywood, but viewing the rough cuts of Marlon Brando's acting in *On the Waterfront*, one of the greatest movies of the 1950s, finally inspired him to compose his only film score.

The socio-political action drama is based on a 1949 series of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles in the *New York Sun*, exposing labor racketeering in the New York dockyards. Ex-boxer and dockyard worker Terry Malloy (Brando), a runner for boss "Johnny Friendly," unwittingly enables the murder of a gentle but rebellious co-worker. Pressured to both speak and remain silent in the face of a crime investigation of the longshoremen's cartel, Terry finds redemption through the example of the tough-talking priest Father Barry (Karl Malden), his love for the murdered man's sister Edie (Eva Marie-Saint) and finally, Friendly's murder of Terry's own brother. The film was directed by Elia Kazan and garnered eight Oscars. Bernstein's score was nominated but was beaten out by Gene de Paul's score for the musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*.

Shortly after the premiere in 1954, Bernstein assembled the Symphonic Suite to "salvage some of the music that would otherwise have been left on the floor of the dubbing-room." It has the form of a symphonic poem, loosely following the movie action. The Suite contains four principle themes, opening with a quiet, atmospheric theme sounding like the "Aaron Copland American sound" plus blue notes thrown in. There follows an extensive timpani, percussion and saxophone solo initiating the "dockyard violence" theme that accompanies the fight scenes and foreshadows the gang-fight dance numbers from *West Side Story*. The Suite continues with a slower chromatic section that accompanies Terry's moments of loneliness and self-doubt, gradually blending into the love motive between Terry and Edie, a gentle flute solo, and another forebear for Tony and Maria. The last several minutes of the Suite, however, touch only

incidentally on the climactic fight between Terry and Friendly, whom Terry has denounced in court. Instead Bernstein returns to the opening music, which now takes on an increasingly majestic mood, and eventually accompanies the badly beaten and barely conscious Terry's stagger through the lines of Friendly's grudgingly admiring teamsters.

Selections from
West Side Story

Leonard Bernstein
1918-1990

West Side Story was Leonard Bernstein's attempt to demonstrate that it was possible to write a serious musical. The attempt succeeded beyond all expectations. With lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and Jerome Robbins as director and choreographer, it opened on Broadway on September 26, 1957 and ran for over 1000 performances. The movie was just as spectacular a success, as was the recording.

But its birth was not easy. The show was originally conceived six years earlier as a conflict between Jews and Catholics during the Easter-Passover celebrations and at one point was to be called *East Side Story*. The plot was finally switched to ethnic gangs on the Upper West Side, but no backers could be found; it became notorious for having been turned down by nearly everybody because no one thought that such a tragic story was suitable material for a musical.

Casting was another problem. Robbins, a perfectionist, wanted a cast of 38 who could both dance *and* sing - a nearly impossible demand in those days, but now the rule rather than the exception. Being first and foremost a dance choreographer, he finally settled on dancers who could sing—as opposed to singers who could dance. When Bernstein, unencumbered by staging, re-recorded *West Side Story* in 1988, he used opera singers for the main roles: Kiri Te Kanawa, José Carreras, Tatiana Troyanos and Marilyn Horne. It became another bestseller.

While describing the tragic life of ordinary people in a small section of the big city New York, *West Side Story* tackles an archetypal theme: love clashing with prejudice and clan hatred. It is the Romeo and Juliet story set in today's inner city tenements.

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