

Mass - or "Bernstein's Mass"

MASS: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers is a musical theatre work composed by Leonard Bernstein with additional lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. It premiered for the opening of the Kennedy Center in 1971 when Stephen Schwartz was 23-years-old.

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Questions on Mass

Question:

I am a PhD student writing a thesis on Leonard Bernstein's theatre works, and am currently looking at Mass. I have a couple of questions for Mr. Schwartz, the answers to which would be very helpful in my research.

Question:

Why was Psalm 130 chosen for the Offertory? Was this choice influenced by anything in particular?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I wish you the best with your thesis about Leonard Bernstein's theatre works and will try to answer your questions to the extent that I can. Because MASS was written thirty years ago, my memory as to specific conversations has of course faded, but I will dredge up what I can:

The choice of Psalm 130 was Lenny's. He wanted to use the "De Profundis" because this section of MASS was to be about and dedicated those who had been imprisoned for their opposition to the Vietnam War. Thus the idea of using a text which began "out of the depths" became both metaphorical and literal. Incidentally, I'm sure you have noticed that Psalm 121 is used extensively as part of the text of "Simple Song".

Question:

Did Bernstein mention Benjamin Britten's 'War Requiem', or Beethoven's 'Missa Solemnis', at all during the composition of Mass?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

To the best of my recollection, Lenny did not specifically refer to the "War Requiem" or the "Missa Solemnis" in discussions of his MASS (though the influence of the Britten piece seems obvious to me.)

Question:

I know that some of the music was created from trunk music, eg, 'Simple Song', 'Lauda', 'Sanctus', and 'The Word of the Lord'. Were any of the other numbers based on existing music?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

To my knowledge, the songs you cited were not really "trunk songs" in the sense that the music was not written for other shows and then recycled for MASS. I know for a fact that the music for "The Word of the Lord", while based on a South American folk melody with which Lenny was familiar (I think because of his wife, Felicia, who was of course Chilean), was written specifically for a lyric which I gave to Lenny.

As to the other songs you mention, "Simple Song" was largely written before I became involved with the project, but I find it difficult to believe that it was derived from music Lenny had written for something else. It is possible that that was the case for the two Latin texts you mention and some of the other music (perhaps from the aborted PRAY BY BLECHT project that Lenny had been working on around the same time), but I have no personal knowledge of any of them being trunk songs.

Question:

Do you think that any of the songs from 'Godspell' had a direct influence on songs in Mass?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I don't believe there was much musical influence from GODSPELL -- most of the music had been composed or partly composed by the time Lenny saw GODSPELL in May of 1971. I think there's no question, however, that some of the youthful spirit of GODSPELL influenced the content of the piece and the character of the Celebrant that Lenny and I devised once I became involved with MASS.

Question:

Did Bernstein describe his use of particular musical motifs within the show? I would be very grateful for any information that Mr. Schwartz can give me about Mass.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I apologize that my memory fails me as to any specific conversations I had with Lenny about his use of motifs; sorry. I hope these fragmentary recollections are of some use to you in your preparation of your thesis, and again, I wish you the best with it. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Bernstein's Mass: Paul Simon

Question:

In the booklet to Paul Simon's "solo" 3-CD box set, a writer mentions that Paul contributed a couplet to "Mass." Does anyone know if this is true?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Not only is it true, but in my opinion, Paul wrote the best lyric in the entire piece (way superior to anything I came up with, as far as I'm concerned.) He wrote:

HALF OF THE PEOPLE ARE STONED
AND THE OTHER HALF ARE WAITING FOR THE NEXT ELECTION
HALF THE PEOPLE ARE DROWNED
AND THE OTHER HALF ARE SWIMMING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

That's why he's Paul Simon. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Collaborating on Mass/Bernstein Influence?

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Though Lenny and I collaborated in more or less the usual way -- often spending much time together going over what we had each written, sometimes music first, sometimes lyrics first -- I didn't really know enough about collaboration at that point to do as good a job of it as I like to think I would now. For instance, if I had provided a lyric first and then Lenny set it to music, I didn't know enough to go back

then and rewrite the lyric to help it sit on the music better. I don't think working with Lenny influenced my writing style particularly, though listening to his music when I was younger probably did a bit. I do remember waking up one morning when I was in high school to the "Candide" Overture on my clock radio and spending the next week desperately trying to find out what that wonderful music was. But much as I admired it, I wouldn't count his music among my main influences. Stephen Schwartz

Revisiting "Mass"

Question:

Hello Stephen, Six months after the overwhelming success of your next musical "Wicked" has occurred, please consider the following hypothetical. With the advent of ubiquitous 5.1 Dolby Surround Sound and digital video technology being what it is these days, let's say you were invited to dinner by Tommy Mottola of Sony Records. When you arrive at the restaurant, you are seated at a table with Stephen Sondheim, Paul Simon, Hans Zimmer, and Mr. Mottola. Mr. Mottola suggests that a Leonard Bernstein "Mass" dream team be assembled because they are interested in producing a version of "Mass" for DVD complete with all the accoutrements of behind the scenes captions and narratives we have come to expect from the entertainment industry on DVD. In addition, the Leonard Bernstein family estate is strongly behind the proposed venture and funding capital has been secured. And finally, you are granted the artistic latitude to update and improve the work to your liking. Given that scenario, how would you feel about collaborating on such a production in tribute to one of the greatest composers and musicians of the 20th century? Happy Thanksgiving to you and your family. Best, Mike Smith

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mike: Unlikely as that scenario is, it was still fun to think about for a moment. I recently saw a concert performance of MASS at Carnegie Hall, presented by the Collegiate Choral Society of New York. It was very well sung and performed. Not having seen the piece for many years, I found it fascinating to hear it again. Once I got over being embarrassed about some of my clunkier lyrics (yes, I would love the chance one day to fix some of the more egregious), I was quite proud of much of the work. And most of the music is, needless to say, glorious. The most interesting and disturbing thing about seeing it was how not-dated the political content of it was, how timely lyrics like "Word of the Lord" actually sounded. It certainly doesn't speak very well for where we are as a country right now that a piece written at the height of the Vietnam War sounds ominously contemporary. Thanks for providing a moment of enjoyable daydreaming, and Happy Thanksgiving to you and your family as well. Best, Stephen Schwartz

MASS Updates

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The original MASS was written very quickly over the summer of 1971. Speaking of looming deadlines, we had a major one then, as the Kennedy Center was set to open at the beginning of September and SOMETHING had to be up on the stage! Therefore, many of the lyrics were first draft, without time to go back and polish. It only recently occurred to me that I could do just that, and with the approval and cooperation of the Bernstein estate, I have attempted to do so. My revisions sometimes addressed what I felt was weak or unclear content and sometimes addressed what struck me as clumsy writing. One of the challenging and enjoyable aspects of these revisions is that I was careful not to change a note of music or rhythmic stress, even when the music or rhythm had been written to accommodate the original lyric! In any case, I at least am considerably happier with the revised English texts, and I now hope for a recording of this new version (perhaps by Marin Alsop, who conducted the excellent performance at the Bowl.)

Mass: Controversy/Politics

Question:

...This also transitions to something I saw last night on "American Masters" (PBS) featuring Leonard Bernstein. The evening was late (nearing 1 AM), but I wanted to see any bit about "Mass". I only know the music/lyrics, never saw a production and was not familiar with its controversy.

The show mentioned that it didn't do well (I can't imagine why as it is filled with vibrancy and emotion) and mentioned that it was created during the Vietnam war. They said "Mass" challenged convention and authority appealing to youth with its questioning of tradition. It also mentioned that several sections of it made FBI (!) feel threatened. (Can't remember the exact phrasing... too late at night.) How's that for writing a musical/ theatrical event that 'attacks' politics?! Interesting that the part that the FBI thought was subversive was the end of 'Mass' which says "Pax". Peace.

I've read several of Stephen's posts on his work with Leonard, but I wondered if he could tell us about the actual work of "Mass" and its impact/controversy when it was released. Also, was it ever captured on video and aired? (They showed clips but I don't know where they came from.) Finally, they showed the Priest at the end with a dart board (?) and something else. I was wondering about that and the symbolism. Thanks! MAV

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The truth is that I remember far more artistic controversy about it than political. (But then, that era was so constantly fraught with political controversy that one tended just to take it for granted. Oddly enough though, it was different than now -- not as petty and mean and bigoted. I guess it was because there was something real for politicians to disagree about -- the Vietnam War -- as opposed to now, with what mostly seems to me like jockeying for power and publicity.) In any event, Lenny was always a controversial figure. Some critics loved MASS, such as the Washington Post music critic, and some despised it, such as the critic for the New York Times, who always gave Lenny a hard time. I would say that the reviews and reception were truly "mixed", without the euphemistic quality that description has come to have. Audiences were large though and tended to be enthusiastic, both at the Kennedy Center premiere and at the later production at the Met. But it is true that the work hasn't really entered the repertory and is produced now only sporadically. Whether this is because of its "Massive" size or because it has dated or because too few people respond to it is hard to say. The choice of the Catholic Mass as the content and form for Lenny to work within was either Jackie Kennedy's (not yet Onassis, I don't think) or his tribute to her and President Kennedy, whom he told me he truly loved. I mostly worked with him on shaping the dramatic structure. There was and remains a lot of disagreement about the worth of the music, and truth be told, there are a lot of the lyrics that I feel I would do better with now than I was able to then, given my age and the limited time and pressure of the occasion. But it was certainly exciting to be involved with, and I have come to learn over the years that there are a great many people, such as yourself, who really appreciate the work. In terms of a video: There was a broadcast done on PBS of, I believe, a production at Yale University, and since it has been re-broadcast a few times, I would think the video might be available.

Schwartz on Bernstein

Post from Michael Cole, written by Stephen Schwartz:

Stephen wrote this for an upcoming REPRISE production of On The Town and we thought it might be of interest for the archives.

Lenny was one of the most generous men I have ever known. I worked with him when I was a twenty-three year old kid just starting in my career, while he was world-famous and one of the most respected musicians on the planet. Yet he was always open to my ideas, and completely respectful of my contributions as a collaborator on MASS. As I have had more experience, I have found it rare for a person of his stature to go to such pains, as I always saw Lenny do, to make younger and less experienced people feel comfortable around him and to treat them as total equals. In addition to his obvious musical influence on me (one need only listen to the opening number of "WICKED" to hear it), his generosity of spirit is one of the things about him I have tried hardest to emulate."

On Mass

Question:

I'm wondering what it was like working with Bernstein, and how you both structured the MASS. I love the jumble of styles, but also how Bernstein "unifies" it with the use of the tritone (a marker of doubt, I believe) and how he incorporates that quasi-12-tone row from Beethoven's 9th.

Though the piece focuses on the crisis in faith, there's also a political dimension. Did you and Bernstein have explicit discussions of the anti-war message you wanted to incorporate, and how explicit you wanted to be about that in, say, "Dona Nobis Pacem" section?

What did you learn working with Bernstein, and what did he learn from you? (For instance, did you give him advice about the more "rock" sections?) How do you feel about MASS, then and now?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I have been pleased to see that MASS has seemed to age very well. When it first premiered, the combination of styles that you cite as a strong point was widely criticized at the time; the use of Broadway and pop styles was considered vulgar and somehow beneath "classical" music. Now much of contemporary classical music makes use of those combinations, which seems to indicate that Lenny was ahead of his time in that regard.

What I contributed, in addition to helping with the English lyrics, was to help structure the piece -- to devise the idea of the Celebrant, his journey to "encrustation" with the trappings of organized religion and his being weighed down by the needs and demands of his congregation, until finally he has a breakdown and it is left to the congregation to move forward as a community on its own. If there is some similarity to the structure of "Godspell" in that, it's probably not entirely coincidental.

I learned more from Lenny that I can possibly describe; his approach to music and to art in general have informed my subsequent life in a myriad of ways. I'm not sure he learned anything from me, but I know he was grateful for my energy and focus that helped him to finish a piece he was struggling to complete.

Hope these responses are useful to you and along the lines of what you were looking for. Sincerely,
Stephen Schwartz

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://www.musicalschwartz.com/more.htm>

The Stephen Schwartz biography "Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked" includes a brief history of Stephen Schwartz's role with *Mass*, a photograph from

the opening, and information on Mr. Schwartz's career support from Shirley Bernstein (Leonard's sister) who was Schwartz's long-time agent. www.DefyingGravityTheBook.com.