

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990), *Chichester Psalms*

Program Notes: In the early 1960s Leonard Bernstein was at the height of his career. *West Side Story*, the 1961 film version of his 1957 Broadway musical, was widely and enthusiastically received, and he had recently completed his *Kaddish* (3rd) *Symphony*. Since 1958 he had been the conductor and musical director of the New York Philharmonic. It was around this time that he received a commission for a new work by Walter Hussey, who was then the dean of Chichester Cathedral in the south of England. Each year the choirs of Chichester, Winchester and Salisbury cathedrals joined together to produce a music festival and Bernstein was commissioned to write a new work for the festival of 1965. The *Chichester Psalms* was completed on May 7 that year. There are similarities and parallels between Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, composed approaching four decades earlier. Both were commissioned works, Stravinsky's by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Both were settings of Psalms. Both were written in three movements. Both were created at a time when their composers were digging into their religious roots – Stravinsky recovering his Russian Orthodoxy, and Bernstein exploring his Jewish background. And both chose to use the language of liturgy rather than modern American-English, Stravinsky with Latin and Bernstein with Hebrew – as he had recently done in his *Kaddish Symphony*. But here the similarities cease. Where Stravinsky is mainly sublime and reflective, Bernstein is often energetic, blunt and down to earth. Indeed, some of the music was recycled from unused sketches from an early version of *West Side Story* that included a Jewish-American gang.

The *Chichester Psalms* was originally written for boy treble or countertenor, solo quartet, choir, and orchestra that includes two harps, three trumpets, three trombones, and extensive percussion. The work was premiered in the Philharmonic Hall, New York City, with the New York Philharmonic and the Camerata Singers, conducted by the composer on July 15, 1965. Just over two weeks later, on July 31, it was performed in Chichester Cathedral with all-male singers, which Bernstein originally had in mind, conducted by the cathedral organist, John Birch. The version we hear today was made by Bernstein in 1966 and calls for organ, one harp, and percussion.

The first movement begins with the call to the instruments, psalter and harp, to wake up and be ready to perform, in the words of Psalm 108: 2. It is a somewhat rude awakening that grows in intensity, with dissonant parallel sevenths of the tenors and basses underneath the unison sopranos and altos. Now awake, the chorus launches into an almost care-free, jaunty setting of Psalm 100 in 7/4 meter. But the Psalm ends in quiet tranquility, “Ki tov Adonai,” (the Lord is good), sung first by the soloists then by the choir, whose final syllable is supported by the 7th chord that was the characteristic of the wake-up call at the beginning of the movement.

Bernstein insisted that the beginning of the second movement should be sung by a male singer, either a boy treble or a counter-tenor, to represent the shepherd-boy David, the author of the shepherd Psalm, Psalm 23, which is set in its entirety. The serene melody is first heard as a solo then repeated by the soprano voices of the choir. The tranquility is interrupted by the staccato threats of the tenors and basses singing the first four verses of Psalm 2, a reworking of an abandoned sketch of music originally written for the early version of *West Side Story*. The menace continues but the sopranos are not intimidated – “Blissfully unaware of threat” is the direction in the score! The movement ends quietly with a repetition of the first verse of the Psalm, with the final syllable sung by the upper voices in unison, a single note held for 11 measures.

The final movement begins with an orchestral prelude, a kind of recapitulation of the beginning of the first movement that leads into a setting of Psalm 131. The music matches the basic humility of the Psalm text, in a swinging 10/4 meter, with passages for solo and tutti voices. At the end of the Psalm, without a break, the choir sings (unaccompanied until the final two measures) Psalm 133:1: “Behold how good and pleasant it is, for brethren to dwell together in unity.” That unity is expressed in an audible form in the final unison G of the voices.

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III.

Psalm 131 (Chorus)

Adonai, Adonai,
Lo gavah libi,
V'lo ramu einai,
V'lo hilachti
Big'dolot uv'niflaot
Mimeni.
Im lo shiviti
V'domam'ti,
Naf'shi k'gamul alei imo,
Kagamul alai naf'shi.
Yachel Yis'rael el Adonai
Me'atah v'ad olam.

*Lord, Lord,
My heart is not haughty,
Nor mine eyes lofty,
neither do I exercise myself
in great matters or in things
too wonderful for me.
Surely I have calmed
and quieted myself,
as a child that is weaned of his mother,
my soul is even as a weaned child.
Let Israel hope in the Lord
from henceforth and forever.*

Psalm 133, verse 1 (Chorus)

Hineh mah tov,
Umah nayim,
Shevet achim
Gam yachad.

*Behold how good,
and how pleasant it is,
for brethren to dwell
together in unity.*



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