

“The Personal and Political in Bernstein’s MASS”
Scott Slocum Interviews Doreen Rao

*At the heart of MASS was **Leonard Bernstein’s** passion for peace. Intended to be ecumenical in both a musical and religious sense, Bernstein used the Latin text of the Catholic Mass as the basis for this monumental and original work. The mass form unifies the edgy and appealing popular song forms that question the values of faith contrasted with the expressive concert melodies that symbolically reference faith beyond doubt. The musical tensions created by this mixture of diverse song styles mirrors the tensions of an American period of political unrest. Bernstein’s prayers for peace and quest for renewed faith heard in his lyrical melodies and probing rhythms in MASS reflect a time in history, not unlike the world today. Doreen Rao’s concert adaptation, taken from the original full-scale theatre production, celebrates Leonard Bernstein’s life-long dedication to the music education of young people and his passion for peace.*

Conductor **Doreen Rao**, Music Director and Conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus will conduct her newly edited concert edition of Bernstein’s MASS at the Chautauqua Institution Saturday, July 23. The concert edition was carefully adapted for the benefit of community, school and church choirs to enjoy the study and performance of this great 20th century classic from the lengthy full-scale theatre production for singers, players and dancers.

Interviewer **Scott Slocum** is a member of the Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus. Scott is a therapeutic masseuse and dancer who sings bass. The following interview is extracted from a recent discussion between Scott and Doreen Rao in Doreen’s Buffalo home.

SS- I understand that Bernstein MASS was written as a dedication to John F. Kennedy after his death. I thought it was ironic that President Nixon did not attend the 1971 Bernstein Mass opening of the J. F. Kennedy Center out of a suspected conspiracy that Bernstein was going to try to embarrass the United States Government. I’m also impressed that Bernstein took the traditional Mass form and developed it in a uniquely contemporary manner.

DR- Bernstein’s music flew in the face of the political climate of the time. He was considered a subversive by J. Edgar Hoover, and MASS was considered by some critics as a total travesty -- a vulgar mélange of ideas. By others, MASS was considered Bernstein’s greatest composition. These were not easy times. Has anything changed?

By using liturgical form alongside American popular song, Bernstein achieved a ‘crossover’ composition that philosophically speaking, united the Church and the people. He used a liturgical ‘mass form’ to portray faith and hope alongside doubt and despair through the juxtaposition of concert and popular musics.

SS- A garden image comes to mind -- the idea of one who knew very intimately how "life" worked and could bring it forth and cultivate it through the use of sacred tradition set forth in a modern language with modern images – the cultivation of a 'new' tradition. What a wonderful experiment.

DR- It was a glorious experiment. Perhaps an experiment for all time. I think Bernstein set the tone for what could be understood as an essentially American musical experience. By developing an interdependent relationship between the sacred and secular; the concert stage and popular music; celebration and lamentation; faith and doubt, Bernstein was able to portray the relationship between musical styles within the context of a unified work made whole through the mass form.

SS- The thing that really impresses me about that imagery, and the way that you're putting it, is that contrasting and diversified ideas reflect one another -- one face reflects the other somehow -- that's a new and tasty idea, for me.

DR- Formal religious practice and the liturgical framework for religious faith can provide comfort and assurance. I think that what Bernstein suggests in MASS is that religion should not be separated from the daily experiences of life. In MASS Bernstein brings street life to the Church and Church life to the street; the music symbolizes the tensions between doubt and faith.

SS- I think it's very beautiful if you don't have to go to church to find church – in this way, you're always at home.

DR- When I think of the tensions often felt between the experiences of faith and doubt, I remember the ancient Irish saying: "the whole world is sacred." I think we go to church to be in church, but Bernstein's music suggests that we can also be 'in church' at home, and we can be 'in church' in music, and we can be 'in church' in a loving relationship. This I believe is the partial essence of Bernstein's message.

SS- That's wonderful. It would seem that because Bernstein showed the "sacred in the secular," and the "secular in the sacred," he did a service to both. MASS ennobled popular music and brought social relevance to the ancient mass form. How enriching.

DR- In MASS, Bernstein uses a liturgical form to organize popular song forms. And while he borrowed a fair amount of material from his previous theatre works (including West Side Story and the Skin of Our Teeth) the Catholic Mass sung in Latin unifies Bernstein's effort to portray his own struggles with sustaining faith in God during troubled times in a uniquely original work. It's important to remember that the use of these compositional devices like borrowing old material is not unique to Bernstein specifically or to twentieth century composers generally. J. S. Bach was doing this long ago. As a devout German Lutheran living in eighteenth century Leipzig, Bach often borrowed

material from his previous compositions (cantatas, motets for example) and often used secular melodies (medieval street songs) as the basis of chorale harmonizations and choral counterpoint. As in Bernstein's *MASS*, Bach transformed secular melodic fragments (songs) and previously composed materials into works like *Magnificat* and *Mass in B Minor*.

So the idea of the 'secular in the sacred' can be found throughout music history. Bernstein brought it to America in a form that we consider very "20th century," but that particular distinction goes way back in music history. This can be found most brilliantly, I think, in the music of J.S. Bach.

SS- That's wonderful. It's exciting to know that what's impressive about Bernstein has been going on at least as far back as Bach.

DR- The thing is, Bach composed in a compositional language unique to German Lutheranism during Bach's lifetime. Bernstein used the compositional language of 20th century American song. While the way Bernstein composed *MASS* was new in many respects, philosophically speaking, the practices of stylistic variation and borrowing previously composed themes is not new.

SS- That's a good point.

DR- If I may cautiously approach a comparison of Bernstein with Bach. We know that Bach's music is an absolute manifestation of his faith. His biblical scholarship and unquestioning religious faith are deeply embodied in his compositions. There is not a note Bach wrote that was not a symbol of his faith. I think in some ways, the same may be true of Bernstein. Bernstein felt very much that the African-American traditions -- the Negro spiritual and gospel singing for example, were the spiritual essence of American music. *MASS* was for Bernstein, a manifestation of his own religious struggles. Every note of this work is deeply rooted in Bernstein's commitment to diversity and peace making. As Bach's cantatas and passions were a celebration of Christian faith, I see *MASS* as a celebration of Bernstein's faith in American diversity as unity.

SS- Tell me about your experience of adapting and editing the Bernstein *MASS* into a shortened concert version.

DR – I undertook this project a number of years ago in anticipation of Leonard Bernstein's 90th birthday. This newly adapted and edited version of *Mass* seeks to honor the composer's life-long commitment to music education and bring what Bernstein biographer Humphrey Burton called "Bernstein's most original work" to school, community and church choirs unable to produce the original full-scale theatre production. I worked diligently to assure that the work's liturgical form and dramatic intent were carefully preserved. Every note of this edition is pure Bernstein.

I have always been a great lover of the work of Leonard Bernstein -- certainly his compositions and his conducting, but most importantly, his teaching. Bernstein was the quintessential American music educator, not only as a teacher to generations of young people, but through his compositions themselves. His music is a way of investigating the world around us. His music broadens our understanding of the Torah, the Bible and also points to the ethical and moral dilemmas of cultural confusion and societal conflicts today. It is an investigation of life from historical, sociological, anthropological and purely musical perspectives.

The choices that Bernstein made musically in his theater work, symphonies, and in MASS teach us about life in a new voice. While the music is often very beautiful in and of itself, his works are not just about music for its own sake. Every note of Bernstein is in some way provocative and challenging. It evokes intellectual curiosity, emotional response and seems to serve as a form of social inquiry.

I'm drawn to Bernstein's music because it teaches me not only about music, but also about life itself. Bernstein was not afraid to examine doubt. He grappled compositionally with the conflicts that people have always stayed away from. Bernstein's music allows us to sit still with conflict and examine our faith in relationship to the suffering and doubt that surrounds us. I have always been drawn to the process of examining, investigating, questioning, not because there is *one* answer, but because I think as human beings we need to be comfortable with the notion that there may not be an answer to every question. We need to view doubt without fear.

Bernstein's music explores all this from a broad, existential perspective. This comes across in all his music. His melodic material, based as it is on what we would call "popular tunes," is a perfect example of how gloriously beautiful simple melody can be, in both a harmonically tonal and atonal context. In other words, turning a melody around on its head and doing something really 'strange' with it, then stating it again in the original form demonstrates a kind of non-duality. Bernstein twists his ideas; he turns them around and examines them from a multiplicity of compositional and social perspectives. Bach did the same thing. I like that.

SS- Me too. Me too.