

Chichester Psalms

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

BORN 1918, Lawrence, Massachusetts, USA

DIED 1990, New York, USA

FIRST PERFORMED 15 July 1965,
Philharmonic Hall, New York, by the
Camerata Singers and New York
Philharmonic conducted by Bernstein

DURATION 25 minutes

1 *Maestoso ma energico*

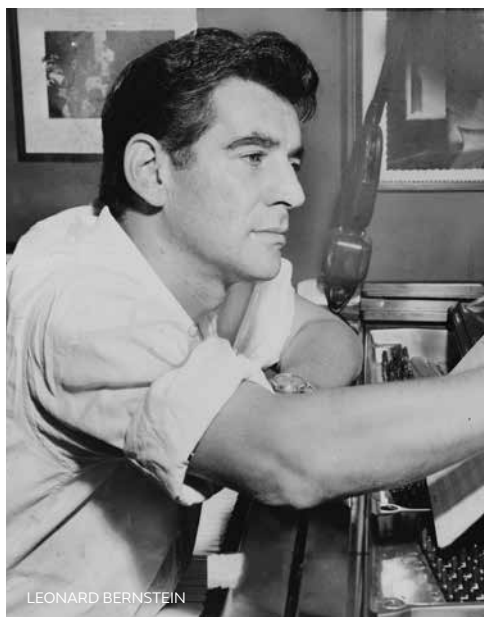
2 *Andante con moto, ma tranquillo*

3 *Sostenuto molto*

In 1965, Leonard Bernstein took a sabbatical from his duties as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic. His intention was to write a new Broadway musical, following the enormous success of *West Side Story* eight years previously, and he'd begun collaborating with director/choreographer Jerome Robbins on a version of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

But despite his hopes for another Broadway success, it was to prove a challenging time. Bernstein was still struggling to cope with the assassination in 1963 of John F Kennedy – a friend, to some extent a role model – and another friend, fellow composer Marc Blitzstein, was murdered in January 1965. Worst of all, *The Skin of Our Teeth* project itself fell through.

In a letter to composer Jack Gottlieb, Bernstein wrote: 'Skin is stalled. Life, this agonising November, is a tooth with its skin stripped off. I don't know what I'm writing. I don't even know what I'm not writing... I can't get over Kennedy or Marc.'



A letter from Sussex

It was at this troubled time that Bernstein received a letter from the Very Reverend Walter Hussey, Dean of Chichester Cathedral in West Sussex, and a noted champion of contemporary arts – among his other commissions had been Benjamin Britten's 1943 cantata *Rejoice in the Lamb*. Hussey hoped to commission a new choral piece from Bernstein, and his original suggestion went like this: 'The sort of thing that we had in mind was perhaps, say, a setting of the Psalm 2, or some part of it, either unaccompanied or accompanied by orchestra or organ, or both. I only mention this to give you some idea as to what was in our minds.'

Bernstein jumped at the idea, and replied suggesting a suite of psalms, to which Hussey in turn replied indicating that Bernstein should feel unrestrained in composing in a lighter vein, despite the sacred nature of the music: 'Many of us would be very delighted if there was a hint of *West Side Story* about the music.'

Language concerns

Hussey must indeed have been delighted that the finished work had more than a hint of *West Side Story* – and even more of Bernstein's unfinished music for *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which he reused extensively throughout what became the *Chichester Psalms*. Another concern, however, was language: Bernstein felt from the start that his setting could only be in Hebrew, since he could think of the psalms in no other way. He was worried about how Hussey would react to this choice, but in the end, the priest's sole concern was the choir's ability to sing convincingly in Hebrew – to which end he enlisted the help of Chichester's Priest-Vicar, who had studied the language.

In the end, Bernstein arranged for the *Chichester Psalms*' first performance to happen in New York – on 15 July 1965, where he conducted the New York Philharmonic and Camerata Singers – but Chichester got the UK premiere, on 31 July 1965, conducted by the cathedral's organist John Birch. There was some negative critical reaction following the Chichester premiere – one commentator called it 'shallow and slick' – but nevertheless, Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* has become probably the only Hebrew-language choral work in the standard choral repertoire.

The music

The **first movement** begins with a joyful chorale (taken straight from Bernstein's unused *The Skin of Our Teeth* music, where it set the words 'Save the human race') which provides the whole work's unifying theme, returning to close its final movement. Faster, more intricate, dance-like music follows, and the music builds to three mighty climaxes. There's a brief orchestral interlude based around the same motifs, an equally brief interlude for soloists from the chorus, then the full chorus joins them for a slow-moving reiteration of the joyful opening chorale, and it's over before you know it.

The **second movement** is essentially a simple song for boy treble (or countertenor), joined by the sopranos and altos of the chorus, setting the famous Psalm 23. The opening melody – again taken from Bernstein's *The Skin of Our Teeth* music, where it sets the words 'Spring will come again, summer then will follow' – is brutally interrupted, however, by the male voices in a fast, aggressive central section. The two different musics come together at the end, the men providing an unsettling counterpoint to a return of the opening song.

The **third movement** opens with the *Chichester Psalms*' most dissonant, rigorously composed music, using impassioned strings in a severe harmonisation of the work's opening chorale melody. A solo trumpet solemnly intones a couple of phrases from the second movement's song, before the music becomes a consoling, rocking lullaby. *Chichester Psalms* ends in remarkable stillness with a prayer for unity.

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