

MASS

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

BORN 1918, Lawrence, Massachusetts, USA

DIED 1990, New York, USA

FIRST PERFORMED 8 September 1971, Kennedy Center, Washington, DC, conducted by Maurice Peress, directed by Gordon Davidson

DURATION 110 minutes

On 22 November 1963, US President John F Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Alongside the trauma that the killing provoked throughout America, the event had a profound personal impact on Leonard Bernstein, who considered Kennedy a friend and, to a large extent, a role model.

At the time, Bernstein was music director of the New York Philharmonic, an 11-year tenure (from 1958 to 1969) during which he only found the time to complete two new pieces of music – both of which, however, reflect the turmoil of the times.

He was already advanced with his Third Symphony, *Kaddish*, when he learnt of Kennedy's killing. Devastated by the news, he transformed what was already a deeply personal work about his own crisis in faith into a howl of fury at the human potential for destruction, and dedicated it to Kennedy's memory. His *Chichester Psalms* (performed by the RSNO and RSNO Chorus last week) is an altogether more consoling work, whose unsettling glimpses of violence are calmed in a closing prayer for peace and unity.

When Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis approached Bernstein with the suggestion that he might compose a new work for the inauguration of the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, Bernstein was understandably eager

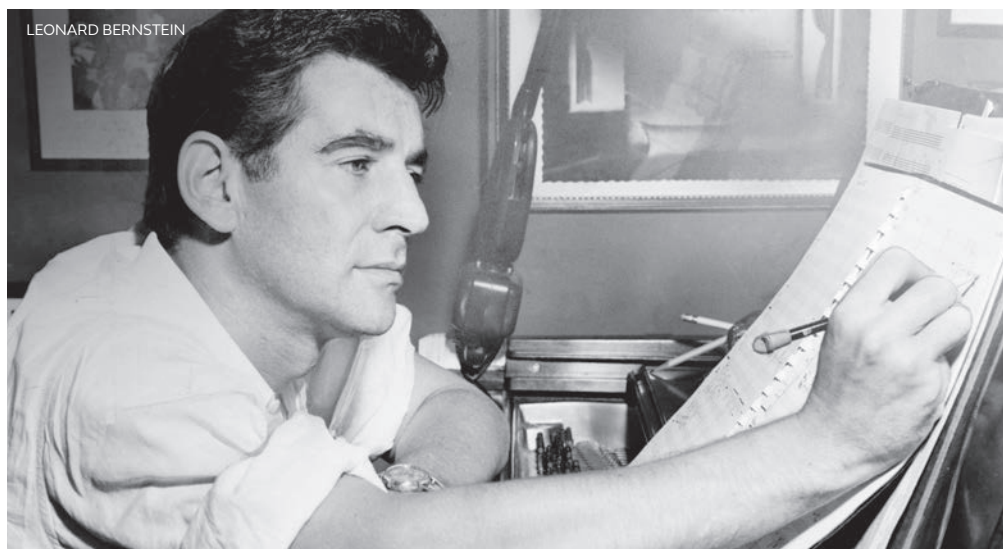
to be involved – and to provide something substantial, memorable, and fitting for the occasion. It no doubt helped his ambitions that since the commission was funded by the Kennedy family, cost was no object.

Theatre from faith

His choice of subject for this new work, however, was perhaps surprising. The son of Russian Jewish parents, and a lifelong social liberal and political activist, Bernstein nevertheless focused on a pillar of unquestioning faith and traditional Christian worship – the Roman Catholic Mass. His motivation, however, may have been the Mass' innate drama as much as its religious significance. Bernstein wrote: 'I've always wanted to compose a service of one sort or another, and I toyed with ecumenical services that would combine elements from various religions and sects, of ancient or tribal beliefs, but it never all came together in my mind until Jacqueline Onassis asked me to write a piece dedicated to her late husband... The Mass is also an extremely dramatic event in itself – it even suggests a theatre work.'

Indeed, in what became his *MASS*, Bernstein subverts, or at least questions, the traditional liturgy by turning the service into a huge, eclectic, theatrical event, combining the texts and traditions of this ancient religious rite with music and lyrics that could only have come from the late 20th century. Quite simply, *MASS* is Bernstein's most ambitious and most controversial work, one in which he uses connections and contrasts between the old and the new to explore the crisis in faith and breakdown in culture in the era following the Kennedy assassination.

This was also the time, after all, of the Vietnam War, when the atrocities of the conflict and the savage treatment of objectors and protesters were polarising America. *MASS* seemed to provide a channel for these frustrations, offering an underlying message that somehow reflected protesters' values.



Its themes, ideas and musical elements may feel very much of their time, but *MASS* is a work for us, too. It might be Bernstein's centenary year that's prompting ensembles around the world to revisit this enormous, sprawling contemplation of mankind's beliefs and humanity, but it feels an entirely fitting experience in an era where we face profound political, cultural and environmental challenges of our own.

Help from Broadway

Six months before the scheduled premiere, Bernstein realised he was running very late, and enlisted the help of young lyricist Stephen Schwartz on the project. Schwartz had already had an off-Broadway hit with his musical *Godspell*, which itself had transformed religious teaching into powerful contemporary theatre, and Bernstein hoped he might do the same here. The two men hit it off immediately, and the young Paul Simon even supplied four lines of lyrics as a Christmas present to Bernstein: 'Half 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.' Another

close consultant was Catholic priest and prominent activist Father Daniel Berrigan, who had been on the FBI's 'ten most wanted' list and even imprisoned for his anti-war activities.

Despite its vast forces and its operatic length, however, there's a simple conception behind Bernstein's *MASS*, one that blends elements of Christian and Jewish traditions. Bernstein employs the Catholic liturgical sequence as his underlying structure – in fact, the Tridentine Mass, a highly ritualised rite intended to be recited verbatim as an immutable truth that can never be questioned. But he intersperses these sections with what he calls 'tropes', passages in contemporary English that question and challenge the meaning of the Latin service, as well as providing moments of reflection in a series of meditations. It's this provocative combining of the high Catholic tradition of unquestioning obedience with the Jewish practice of debating and arguing with God (earlier seen in a more extreme way in Bernstein's *Kaddish*) that makes *MASS* such a controversial but revelatory work, one that so profoundly questions authority.

A spiritual crisis

Bernstein embodies these underlying themes in both the very forces he calls for, and the storyline of what's a profoundly theatrical work. The Mass sequence is performed by the Celebrant, a solo singer, who's joined by a chorus, boys' choir, acolytes and musicians. His congregation (Bernstein calls them the 'street chorus') sings in the intervening sections, questioning and challenging the church's dogma – more and more vigorously as MASS progresses, in the end turning on the Celebrant himself. Overwhelmed by the burden of his authority, he hurls the sacred sacraments to the ground in a complete spiritual breakdown. It's only through this moment of crisis that a space is opened for a return to the simple, pure faith of the opening of the work. Perhaps, Bernstein seems to be saying, it's only through our own crises in belief and humanity that we can discover those essential attributes all over again.

Musically, MASS reflects the full, bewilderingly diverse variety of Bernstein's career, with elements of harsh, dissonant serialism, classical chorales, hymns and meditations alongside blues, gospel, rock, folk and jazz – and even a chorus of kazoos. Significantly, Bernstein symbolises the dogma of the church in the work's uncompromisingly atonal, modernist music, while it's the swaggering freedom and directness of the more popular idioms that challenge it, taken up by his 'street chorus'.

Conflicting reactions

MASS received its premiere, as planned, on 8 September 1971, at the opening of Washington's Kennedy Center, conducted by Maurice Peress, in a staging directed by Gordon Davidson, and with choreography by Alvin Ailey. Reaction was mixed: many in the audience were deeply moved by its spiritual message, but critics were heavily divided about the work's unbridled collision of styles.

One figure conspicuously missing from the audience, however, was US President Richard Nixon. He had been warned beforehand by FBI director J Edgar Hoover that the piece may contain coded anti-war messages in its Latin sections, and thereby 'it is anticipated that they will applaud the composition without recognizing the true meaning of the words', in Hoover's words. Nixon offered the excuse that the event 'should really be Mrs Kennedy's night'.

The Catholic Church, too, was divided in its responses to the piece. Some churches across America stepped in to force venues to cancel performances of it in protest, while other clergy offered their enthusiastic support. The Reverend Paul Moore, Episcopal Bishop of New York, wrote that he identified strongly with the work and had been moved by its insights: 'I could deeply identify with the inordinate demands people make upon the church and the priest, and with the deep revulsion one sometimes feels toward the role.' In 2000, MASS achieved perhaps the ultimate Catholic approval when Pope John Paul II himself requested a performance of the work at the Vatican.

Bernstein was fond of suggesting that composers spend their entire lives writing what is essentially the same piece of music, in attempts to answer the same unanswerable questions. He said in an interview: 'In a sense I am always writing the same piece, as all composers do, but with new dimensions and new vocabulary. The work I have been writing all my life is about the struggle that is born of the crisis of our century, a crisis of faith.' MASS is almost certainly his biggest, most ambitious and most personal attempt to answer that question, in a profound musical and spiritual journey both for himself and for all its listeners.

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