**Shaping *West Side Story***

A Conversation with Michael Tilson Thomas

*Michael Tilson Thomas grew up in a theatrical family. His grandparents were founders of New*

*York’s Yiddish theater at the turn of the twentieth century. His father, a Hollywood film-industry*

*alchemist who helped screen writers turn scripts into gold, was a self-taught composer-pianist*

*who introduced his son to music. Movie and theater people, musicians, and other artists filled*

*the Thomas home during MTT’s childhood. With such a background, and given the musician*

*he became and the close working relationship he cemented with Leonard Bernstein, it is easy*

*to assume that* West Side Story *was waiting for him to conduct. The tale is not that simple, as*

*Michael Tilson Thomas recounts here.* West Side Story *as heard in this recording was captured*

*live, in concert, at San Francisco Symphony performances in June and July 2013—the first*

*concert performances of the complete Broadway score. In this conversation with Larry Rothe,*

*who for many years was editor of the San Francisco Symphony’s program book, Michael Tilson*

*Thomas reflects on the music and the show. For context:* West Side Story *opened on Broadway in*

*the fall of 1957. The film directed by Robert Wise premiered in 1961. Also introduced in 1961*

*was a suite of music from the show, the S*ymphonic Dances *from* West Side Story*. Leonard*

*Bernstein himself did not conduct a performance of* West Side Story *until 1984, when he*

*recorded it with a cast of operatically trained singers.*

***West Side Story* premiered when you were a teenager. When did you first**

**encounter the show?**

For my fourteenth birthday, showbiz friends of my parents gave me the original cast album

of *West Side Story*. But at that point my musical tastes had shifted from those of my parents’

circle. I actually exchanged the album at my local record store for Hans Rosbaud’s recording

of the Berg Three Pieces for Orchestra. But tunes from *West Side Story* were popular at the

time, and I became aware of them.

**When did that awareness turn into something deeper?**

The summer before I started my second year in college, I moved into an apartment. It

was a big sprawling place and we had to paint it. One of my roommates had the *West Side*

*Story* album and played it while we painted. By the time we finished the job,

*West Side Story* had become a part of my life.

My first experience seeing *West Side Story* was the film. That was in Jerusalem, at a

screening that was a little like the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. People in the audience were

enacting the piece. A Jets section and a Sharks section occupied opposite sides of the

auditorium. I’m not sure whether they were different groups of Israelis, or Israelis and

Palestinians. But objects were being thrown from one side of the auditorium to the other,

and you had to duck.

And then I got to know the incredible *Symphonic Dances*, the brilliant synthesis of the

show that Bernstein put together with Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal. Performing those dances

and other numbers from the show is how I began to develop my knowledge of the score.

**And the San Francisco concerts: Was this the first time you had conducted a**

**complete performance of *West Side Story*?**

Yes. Of course no one has conducted a *complete* performance except someone who did a

run of the show. To perform music from *West Side Story*, you must follow protocols that

determine various combinations of numbers you are allowed to do, but not a complete

running order of the show. What makes this project unique is that those who hold creative

rights to *West Side Story* gave us permission to do the complete show and to make this

recording.

The running order I followed was basically the one that Bernstein had done in his own

1984 recording. From a purist’s point of view, we haven’t included every note. For example,

there’s bow music and change-of-scene music—music that repeats what has already been

heard, for the sake of things being accomplished on the stage. We haven’t included that. But

what we offer here is the whole dramatic picture of the piece.

**In his 1984 recording, Bernstein used an ensemble about the size of a Broadway**

**pit orchestra. The orchestration in the movie was for a larger group of players.**

**Bernstein believed the film orchestration overblown**.

Johnny Green, the musical director of the film, re-orchestrated and changed the sequences

of things. His mission was to create the sound of a luscious film score, and he knew exactly

how to do that.

What you hear in the San Francisco recording is basically the Broadway orchestration,

but beefed up a bit, using double the number of string players. Also, the show was originally

conceived with doublers in mind. That is to say, wind players who played many more than

one instrument. The same player might play piccolo, clarinet, saxophone. We divided those

parts, so we used all the San Francisco Symphony’s wonderful specialist players on their own

instruments.

**What is the challenge of playing a work like West Side Story to an orchestra of**

**classically trained musicians?**

If you are an American orchestral musician, you are expected to have a great understanding

of—and flair for—performing music based on any number of different American popular

styles, whether jazz or swing or blues or folk or Broadway. I always kid my Viennese

colleagues. I tell them, “You Viennese have made a religion out of *one dance*—the waltz,

and maybe the polka. But we Americans are expected to play everything!” We play funk and

bebop, swing, Broadway, music hall, and ragtime. It’s just what we do.

The orchestra is such a prime player in *West Side Story*. It has one of the major roles—

perhaps *the* largest role in the drama. And we have so many outstanding soloists and

musicians in the San Francisco Symphony who understand the style of this music. That’s

one of the reasons I really looked forward to making this recording.

**Talk a little about that Bernstein operatic recording of *West Side Story*. What was**

**he after in that?**

One of the tricky things about *West Side Story*, and about much of Bernstein’s music, is

that it’s written not really for pop singers and not really for jazz singers, although people

in both those categories have made much of the tunes and the repertoire. Although the

score makes operatic demands on the singers in many cases, it’s not really for opera singers

*per se.* It *can* go in that direction; and of course, given Bernstein’s friendships with great

opera singers—singers like Montserrat Caballé and Christa Ludwig—he performed his

music with them. Deutsche Grammophon, which recorded Bernstein’s 1984 performance,

wanted a “definitive” recording. I think the cast for that album had something to do with

Bernstein’s desires, and also something to do with the agenda of the recording company—a

little bit of both.

**And what were you after in the version you conducted in San Francisco?**

I wanted to go with people who were singing actors. That’s really who *West Side Story*

was written for. And I wanted to take it back in that direction with artists who sounded

idiomatic. I wanted something you would recognize as part of a Broadway music theater

production.

***West Side Story’s* enduring quality seems to lie in the great tunes, and also in the**

**serious drama those tunes are meant to convey. But it’s a very different kind of**

**show from the Broadway musicals of 1957—different from, say,*The Music Man*,**

**which also premiered that year.**

The creative team was looking for something that had a great universal theme. This is

certainly not the first time such a thing was done. *West Side Story* is in the tradition of shows

like *Show Boat*, or *Porgy and Bess*, or *South Pacific*—other pieces that have dealt with socially

relevant, controversial issues. I like to think this is a tradition that goes back to the Yiddish

theater shows, which were filled with laughs but which often also touched on social and

political questions. *West Side Story* isn’t parody, like the Gershwins’ *Of Thee I Sing* or *Let ‘Em*

*Eat Cake*, which take on serious matters, but in a slapstick way. *West Side Story* proceeds

as an operatic piece would proceed. So it *is* a hybrid, and this plays into the question of

who’s going to sing it. There’s no question that Bernstein meant *West Side Story* to seem

spontaneous. His whole approach to music is that he wanted things to seem as though they

weren’t written down; they just happened at that moment. And there’s something of that in

this piece—as well as intricacies, for example in the way musical motifs are used.

But you mentioned *The Music Man.* In a way that show also treats serious social issues,

such as provincialism and the non-acceptance of the outsider by a hide-bound society. *The*

*Music Man* is brilliantly accomplished, but it’s a much more traditional show.

*West Side Story* did something different. It includes much that is odd, such as the quiet,

very curious endings at the end of Act I and the end of Act II, all the strange ups and starts,

and all the abstract gestures. We know so much about the Jets. They are totally in focus, and

we know all the members. In the Sharks, we know only Bernardo. We have no idea who the

other Sharks are. A lot of things are dramatically unequal.

But musically, the show holds together so well. All the show’s creators—Bernstein,

Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim—are trying to be streetwise hipsters

in this piece. But of course none of them were anything remotely close to that. These are

very highly specialized, trained, sophisticated guys. *West Side Story* is very different from

another Bernstein show, *On the Town*. All the people involved in *On the Town* came from

the world it depicted. *West Side Story*’s team approached their subject in a more abstract way.

**Somehow, their distance helped them achieve a more universal point of view.**

I think the things that work best in *West Side Story* are the punky things, the irreverent,

*sez you* kind of stuff. That’s a quality that all these guys *did* understand from within their

own traditions. But distancing also helps create a simplicity. You can hear that songs like

“Tonight” or “Maria” are musical relatives of a song like “Lucky to be Me” from *On the*

*Town*. But “Tonight” and “Maria” are much simpler. That’s one thing about *West Side Story*’s

appeal: that songs like “Maria” or “America” are very simple in their form and the repetition

of their musical shapes. If you compare these to “Some Other Time” or “I Can Cook Too,”

those songs in *On the Town* are much more complicated in their phrase structure and

offbeat, fragmented procedure.

**And the simplicity of songs like “Tonight” or “Maria” helps them sink into a**

**listener’s head.**

Sure. But you have to remember that *On the Town* was this amazing burst of energy. And

then came *Candide*, which was an attempt to write a more “classical,” operatic type of piece.

*West Side Story* comes off the tail of that. Even some of the music originally planned for

*Candide* winds up in *West Side Story*. It’s all part of the process.

**Joan Peyser, in her biography of Bernstein, makes much of his “lifting” from other**

**composers, and in particular she focuses on “Somewhere,” which she says was**

**inspired by a phrase of the slow movement of Beethoven’s *Emperor* Concerto.**

Bernstein used to say, “Everybody steals, but the important thing is to steal classy.” There are

many references and borrowings in the show, which he was the first to acknowledge. They

begin with the allegedly shofar-derived call that is the main motif of the whole piece. For

me, the most telling references are at the very end. The “Someday, Somewhere” motif is the

same as the music that precedes the “Glorification of the Chosen One” in Stravinsky’s *Rite*

*of Spring*. It is superimposed on the last bars of Richard Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*—

the high major chords with the ominous “out of the key” base notes below. It’s amazing

that Bernstein could take such incredibly well-known disparate musical ideas as these,

incorporate them so effectively, and make of them a message uniquely his own.

**Bernstein thought *West Side Story* might change the face of American musical**

**theater.**

That didn’t really happen. *West Side Story* is a stand-alone piece. Bernstein never wrote

anything like it again. And although others may have tried, nobody succeeded in doing

anything similar.

I think the wonderful thing for all of us involved in the San Francisco Symphony’s *West*

*Side Story* project was to experience the shape of the entire piece and to discover how well it

works, musically, all on its own in a live performance.

*Larry Rothe is author of* Music for a City, Music for the World, *a history of the San*

*Francisco Symphony, and co-author of the essay collection* For the Love of Music.