

Classics 2 – October 8 and 9, 2010

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

Overture to *Candide* (1956)

Leonard Bernstein was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, on August 25, 1918, and died in New York on October 14, 1990. The first performance of *Candide* took place at the Colonial Theater in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 29, 1956. The Overture to *Candide* is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, xylophone, cymbals, orchestra bells, tenor drum, harp and strings. Approximate performance time is five minutes.

It was perhaps as early as 1950 that American author Lillian Hellman suggested to Leonard Bernstein that the two collaborate on a musical adaptation of Voltaire's *Candide*. Hellman first conceived of *Candide* as a play with incidental music. But over time, the project grew into a piece of lyric theater, much more in the style of a musical or operetta.

It wasn't until 1954 that Hellman and Bernstein began work on *Candide*. Even then, various other projects and responsibilities intervened, including Bernstein's film score for *On the Waterfront* and the Broadway musical, *West Side Story*. By 1956, Hellman and Bernstein were still in the process of creating *Candide*.

Candide premiered at the Boston Colonial Theater on October 29, 1956. The Broadway premiere took place at the Martin Beck Theater on December 1. The distinguished cast included tenor Robert Rounseville in the title role, and soprano Barbara Cook as Cunegonde.

Bernstein's *Candide* is a work of remarkable energy, lyricism, humor, and, at its conclusion, emotional impact. In her comments on Voltaire's *Candide*, Lillian Hellman hailed "the roaring-river quality that was the mark of the genius who wrote it." Her words might well apply with equal force to Leonard Bernstein's magical score.

The brief and rollicking Overture to *Candide*, featuring melodies from the work, has enjoyed an independent life as one of the most popular concert pieces of the second half of the 20th century.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Opus 18 (1901)

Sergei Rachmaninov was born in Semyonovo, Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943. The first performance of the Second Piano Concerto took place in Moscow, Russia, on October 27, 1901, with the composer as soloist and Alexander Siloti conducting the Moscow Philharmonic Society. In addition to the solo piano, the Second Concerto is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones,

tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals and strings. Approximate performance time is thirty-three minutes.

When Sergei Rachmaninov completed his First Symphony in August of 1895, he was 22, and brimming with all the confidence of youth. “I imagined that there was nothing I could not do and had great hopes for the future,” he later recalled. Rachmaninov’s First Symphony received its premiere in St. Petersburg on March 15, 1897, with composer Alexander Glazunov conducting. The performance was a disaster, and immediately after the final notes sounded, Rachmaninov “fled, horrified, into the street.”

While Rachmaninov was able to escape the confines of the theater, he still had to face the wrath of the critics. Russian composer César Cui wrote in the *St. Petersburg News*:

If there were a conservatory in Hell, if one of its many talented students were instructed to write a programme symphony on the “Seven Plagues of Egypt,” and if he were to compose a symphony like Mr. Rachmaninov’s, then he would have fulfilled his task brilliantly and would delight the inhabitants of Hell.

It’s not surprising that Rachmaninov was devastated by this disastrous turn of events. He lapsed into a deep depression. Rachmaninov’s friends tried all forms of cures to lift his spirits. Finally, they convinced Rachmaninov to consult Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a doctor who had gained some prominence for his employment of hypnosis. Between January and April of 1900, Rachmaninov visited Dr. Dahl on a daily basis.

Rachmaninov told Dahl that he had promised to compose a Piano Concerto. Dr. Dahl set about treating his patient:

I heard the same hypnotic formula repeated day after day while I lay half asleep in the armchair in Dr. Dahl’s study. “You will begin to write your Concerto...You will work with great facility...The Concerto will be of an excellent quality...” It was always the same, without interruption. Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me. Already at the beginning of the summer I began again to compose. The material grew in bulk, and new musical ideas began to stir within me—far more than I needed for my Concerto.

Rachmaninov completed the final two movements of his Second Piano Concerto in the autumn of 1900 and performed them at a Moscow charity concert in December. Rachmaninov added the opening movement in the spring of the following year and appeared as soloist in the October 27, 1901 premiere of the entire Second Concerto. The composer/pianist readily acknowledged Dr. Dahl’s role in the creation of one of the most popular works of the 20th century, and dedicated the Concerto to him.

The Concerto is in three movements. The first (*Moderato*) opens with a series of tolling chords by the soloist, leading to the surging first principal melody, marked *con passione*. The slow movement (*Adagio sostenuto*) is a fantasia on a lovely theme, related to a melody in the Concerto’s opening *Moderato*. The finale (*Allegro scherzando*) is based upon two themes, the second, one of Rachmaninov’s most beloved. That theme makes a glorious return toward the close of the work.

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Opus 95 (“From the New World”) (1893)

Antonín Dvořák was born in Mühldhausen, Bohemia (now Nelahozeves, the Czech Republic), on September 8, 1841, and died in Prague on May 1, 1904. The first performance of the “New World” Symphony took place at Carnegie Hall in New York on December 16, 1893, with Anton Seidl conducting the New York Philharmonic. The Symphony No. 9 is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals and strings. Approximate performance time is forty minutes.

From the fall of 1892 through the summer of 1895, Czech composer Antonín Dvořák served as Director of the National Conservatory of Music of America, located in New York City. Dvořák came to New York at the invitation of Jeannette Meyer Thurber, who founded the Conservatory with the hope that it would foster the development of important American concert music.

Dvořák had always taken a keen interest in the folk music of his native Bohemia, and indeed, acknowledged: “I myself have gone to the simple, half forgotten tunes of Bohemian peasants for hints in my most serious works. Only in this way can a musician express the true sentiment of his people. He gets into touch with the common humanity of his country.”

It’s not surprising that when Dvořák arrived in America, he began to study the musical heritage of the “New World.” Dvořák concluded that America’s great folk tradition was based in the music of African-Americans (it should be noted that in May of 1893, the National Conservatory opened its doors to African-American students). Dvořák also acknowledged the importance of the folk music of Native Americans, which, the Czech composer felt, was “virtually identical” to “Negro melodies.”

On May 24, 1893, Dvořák completed his Symphony in E minor, begun the previous December. The work received its premiere at New York’s Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893, with Anton Seidl conducting the New York Philharmonic. A month earlier, Dvořák gave the E-minor Symphony its famous nickname, “From the New World.”

In an article published in the *New York Herald* the day before the premiere, Dvořák offered this analysis of his “New World” Symphony:

Since I have been in this country I have been deeply interested in the national music of the Negroes and the Indians. The character, the very nature of a race is contained in its national music. For that reason my attention was at once turned in the direction of these native melodies...It is this spirit which I have tried to reproduce in my new Symphony (“The New World”). I have not actually used any of the melodies. I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of the...music and, using these themes as subjects, have developed them with all the resources of modern rhythms, harmony, counterpoint and orchestral color.

The premiere of the “New World” Symphony was an unqualified success. Dvořák proudly informed his publisher, Simrock: “The papers say that no composer ever celebrated such a triumph. Carnegie Hall was crowded with the best people of New York, and the audience applauded so that, like visiting royalty, I had to take my bows repeatedly from the box in which I sat.”

The “New World” Symphony is in four movements. The first opens with a pensive slow introduction (*Adagio*), leading to the principal *Allegro molto*. Dvořák presents several themes, including one introduced by the flute and bearing a kinship to “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” a spiritual especially favored by the Czech composer. The slow second movement (*Largo*) features one of Dvořák’s most beloved melodies. Sung by the English horn, this melody was later adapted by Dvořák’s pupil, William Arms Fisher, as the song “Goin’ Home.” The third-movement *Scherzo (Molto vivace)* was, according to Dvořák, inspired “by a scene at the feast in (Longfellow’s) ‘Hiawatha’ where the Indians dance...The dramatic finale (*Allegro con fuoco*) is notable for the return of themes from the opening three movements.