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Leonard Bernstein's *Jeremiah* Symphony: Jewish Content and Connotations

Unlike much of the music he conducted, none of Bernstein's three symphonies are pieces of absolute music; all strive to convey an extra-musical idea (Tawa 109). His first symphony, titled *Jeremiah*, begins this trend. The symphony in three movements depicts the destruction of Jerusalem, beginning with the prophecy of Jeremiah, and ending with his lament over the profaned, ruined city: a setting of passages from the book of Lamentations in the original Hebrew. There is no question that this symphony is a strong expression of Bernstein's Jewish background and identity. However, the connection between the music of the symphony and Jewish liturgical music, as well as the relationship between the message conveyed by the symphony and contemporary events are debatable. Bernstein's *Jeremiah* uses traditional Jewish music, both literally and affectively, as sources for motives that are developed throughout the symphony. The result is a work of distinctly Jewish music that was intended, at least in part, to be a signal of solidarity with Jewish suffering in Europe.

Leonard Bernstein composed *Jeremiah* while still struggling to begin his career in New York City in 1942, for a composition contest sponsored by the New England Conservatory (Tawa 113). Serge Koussevitsky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Bernstein's former mentor and teacher at Tanglewood, was the chairman of the competition jury, which doubtlessly encouraged Bernstein's entry (Tawa 111; Burton 104). Bernstein had previously sketched in 1939 what would become the final movement, a setting from the Hebrew book of Lamentations for soprano and orchestra, and had always intended for it to become part of a larger work (Tawa 113; Burton 104). The competition provided the perfect opportunity, and Bernstein rushed to complete the first two movements, titled

Prophecy and *Profanation*, and revise the final *Lamentation* movement, changing from a soprano soloist to a mezzo-soprano, in time to meet the deadline. He enlisted a small army of friends and relatives to assist with copying the completed parts, while he finished composing and orchestrating the rest of the symphony (Burton 104). The symphony was finished at the last minute, not only forcing Bernstein to bring the completed score to Boston himself on December 31st, 1942, but also necessitating that his girlfriend deliver it to Koussevitsky's wife in order to preserve the composer's anonymity and abide by the rules of the competition (Tawa 113). Despite the presence of Koussevitsky on the jury, the symphony failed to win the prize, which was awarded instead to Gardner Read for his Symphony No. 2 in E flat minor. Bernstein later played through the symphony at the piano for Koussevitsky, who remained by all accounts unimpressed (Butterworth 162).

Despite losing the competition, Bernstein's career gained momentum after a last-minute substitute conducting appearance with the New York Philharmonic in 1943, which earned him great critical acclaim (Tawa 111). Spurred by this and other recent advances in Bernstein's career, Bernstein's publisher Harms informed him that they wanted to add *Jeremiah* to their catalogue. This encouraged Bernstein to send the newly published score to his conducting teachers, Koussevitsky and Fritz Reiner, music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (Burton 106). Reiner loved the symphony, and was eager to have it performed in Pittsburgh, though he requested that Bernstein add a fourth movement in order to have the symphony end on a more uplifting note (Butterworth 162). Bernstein refused this request, writing to Aaron Copland, "he is most anxious for a fourth movement; insists it's all too sad and defeatist. Same criticism my father had...I really haven't the time or the energy for a fourth movement. I seem to have had my say as far as that piece is concerned and I want to get on with something else." Bernstein won this debate, and the symphony was performed, conducted by the composer, in Pittsburgh with Jennie Tourel as the soloist in January 1944,

followed by performances in Boston – after Koussevitsky finally seemed to have warmed to it – in February, and New York in March and April (Burton, 107; Butterworth 162). *Jeremiah* was voted the “outstanding new classical work of the season,” by the New York Music Critics Circle, and was broadcast nationwide by NBC Symphony Orchestra (Tawa 113).

Much of the scholarship on Bernstein’s first symphony explores the extent to which Bernstein drew upon traditional Jewish musical sources for the music of the symphony.

Bernstein wrote in his program notes to the piece for its premier in 1944,

The symphony does not make use to any great extent of actual Hebrew thematic material. The first theme of the scherzo is paraphrased from a traditional Hebrew chant, and the opening phrase of the vocal part in the “Lamentation” is based on a liturgical cadence still sung today in commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. Other remembrances of Hebrew liturgical music are a matter of emotional quality, rather than of the notes themselves.

Though it makes sense to take Bernstein at his word, many scholars, particularly Bernstein’s friend and scholar of his work Jack Gottlieb, have argued that more of the symphony is based on liturgical music than this note leads the reader to believe, and that Bernstein subconsciously incorporated other direct quotations. Gottlieb even goes so far as to assert that these motives occur throughout Bernstein’s works, and always symbolize certain contexts and ideas (Gottlieb, “Working with Bernstein” 253-4, 202). Bernstein was clearly influenced greatly by the Jewish music he heard growing up. His father was the son of a Rabbi, who immigrated to the United States from Russia at the age of sixteen (Tawa 110). Bernstein began attending Synagogue Mishkan Tefilah in Boston at the age of eight, and was so moved by the music there that he began frequently attending Shabbat services. He even credited the synagogue with awakening his early interest in music (Sarna, “Leonard Bernstein and the Boston Jewish Community” 40). Although Bernstein was immersed in Jewish liturgical music from a very young age, and it is certainly possible that he incorporated remembered themes into *Jeremiah* subconsciously, identifying passages that he may have quoted from liturgy is a fruitless and difficult venture. If he did stumble across these motives

from the Rosh Hashanah *Amidah* (See Ex. 2) as the source for this theme, although Bernstein did not (Gottlieb, “Funny” 181). Though there is a clear connection between these themes, Bernstein did not specify this theme as being derived from liturgical sources, and the main motive of the symphony derived from it – a falling fourth followed by a whole step – is not particularly distinctive. Therefore, while the resemblance is undeniable, it is perfectly possible that it is coincidental. Both Jack Gottlieb and Neil Butterworth describe the horn theme as representing the voice of Jeremiah, referring to it as the “prophecy” motive

Ex 2

"Misod chachomim" (Rosh Hashanah liturgy)
Jeremiah theme *Katchko2, p. 16*

Mi- sod cha-cho-mim u - n'-vo-nim u-mi-le-med da-as m'-vi-nim
(With words of the wise and knowledge of the learned, I open my lips in prayer...)

Cadence
va-a-do-nei ho-a-do-nim
(...before the Lord of Lords)

(Reproduced from Gottlieb, “Funny” 181)

(Butterworth 163; Gottlieb, “Funny” 181). Because of its use as the primary motive of the first movement, which is titled *Prophecy*, and its use later in the symphony, this is not an unlikely assertion. The horn call, or “prophecy” theme, along with the dissonant eighth note motive, are presented and developed, outlining different tonalities throughout the A section. As the A section progresses, the theme is broken down into its essential motive, the falling fourth followed by a whole step. It is this motive which closes the movement.

Another notable motive presented in the A section is the descending half step followed by a descending whole step, which ushers in a more raucous passage of the A

Ex 3

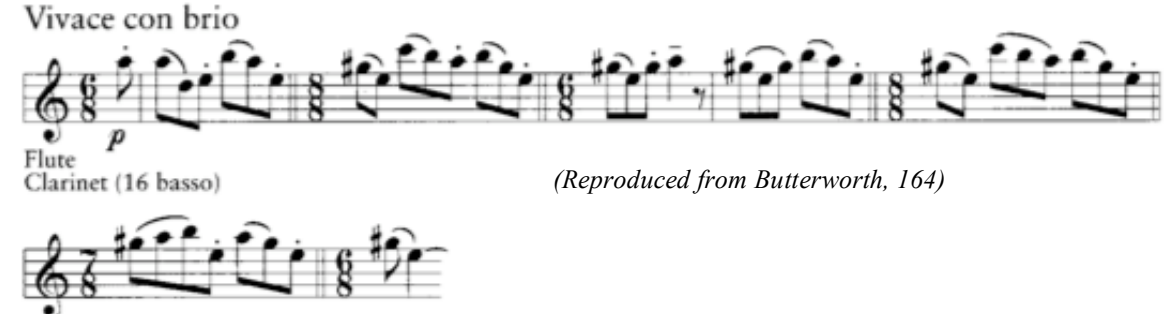
section, and helps initiate the return to the opening music after the B section (See Ex. 3).

This motive, spanning a minor third, is closely related to the primary motive of the final movement, perhaps to give the sense that this movement represents a prophecy of what is to come later in the symphony.

characterized by high energy, rhythmic intensity, and a rough and lively, though not necessarily humorous, character (Thompson). The *scherzo*'s driving, asymmetrical meter

Ex 6 may be a sign of the influence of Aaron Copland, his mentor, on

Vivace con brio



Flute
Clarinet (16 basso)

(Reproduced from Butterworth, 1964)

Bernstein (Butterworth, 1963). The movement opens with a theme that Bernstein indicated in his program notes was “paraphrased from a traditional Hebrew chant” (See Ex. 6). The “Hebrew chant” he refers to, as reported by Gottlieb and Butterworth, is definitely a version of the cantillation used when reading the *haftarah* (Butterworth, 1963; Gottlieb, “Working With Bernstein” 255). By distorting this easily recognizable liturgical chant into a sort of off-kilter, driving dance with uneven accents and shifting triple meters, Bernstein conveys the image of the profanation of something holy.

The A section of the *scherzo*, in the return of the first theme, also contains a figure requiring very quickly tongued sixteenth notes overlapping in the trumpets, perhaps an imitation of the call of the *shofar*. The *scherzo* recalls two themes from the first movement. First, in the contrasting music of the *scherzo*, the strings and flutes recall the second theme of the B section of the first movement. Then, the “prophecy” motive is restated prominently in the horns, while the rest of the orchestra plays a dotted rhythm on a single, unchanging chord at the climax of the Trio section, just before the return of the *scherzo* music. These recollections help to tie the movements together, giving the symphony a tightly organized feeling. Programmatically, the recurrence of these themes represents the presence of the prophet during the desecration of the city. However, the fact that after the powerful statement

of the “prophecy” theme the music returns almost immediately to the opening *scherzo* music gives the sense that even the voice of the prophet has no power to impede the destruction.

The final movement of *Jeremiah* is a setting of passages from the book of Lamentations (*eicha* in Hebrew) traditionally ascribed to Jeremiah, for mezzo-soprano. Unlike the first two movements, which are both ternary forms, the final movement of the *Jeremiah* symphony does not feature a recapitulation of the opening music. The movement is through-composed, but cycles through a number of returning motives throughout. The vocal line primarily makes use of the *selicha* liturgical mode. This mode is similar to the Dorian church mode, and was traditionally used in the chanting of prayers of pardon, request, petition, and mourning (Rubin and Baron 135). Bernstein writes in his program notes to the symphony that “the opening phrase of the vocal part in the ‘Lamentation’ is based on a liturgical cadence still sung today in commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon.” As Jack Gottlieb asserts, Bernstein is referring to the *kinnot*, or dirges, chanted on

Ex 7

24

E-cha yash-va va - dad ha - ir Ra-ba-ti am Ha-y'-ta k'-al-ma - na

Ex 8

מִדְּכָא טִפְחָא מוֹנָח אֲתוֹנְחָא
Mer-chaw tip-chaw mu-nach es-nach-taw

מִדְּכָא טִפְחָא סוֹף פְּסוֹן
Mer-chaw tip-chaw mer-chaw sof paw-suk

(Reproduced from Binder, 111)

the holiday of *Tisha B'Av* commemorating the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

However, the music is not based on “series of motives,” as Gottlieb states (Gottlieb,

“Working With Bernstein” 255). Bernstein specifies that it is the *cadence*, or musical conclusion of a phrase, from the *kinnot* that is the source he draws on in the movement. It is therefore most likely that the “liturgical cadence” that he refers to is the “*etnachta*” and “*sof pasuk*” cantillation, used to end a phrase of biblical chant. It is this three note motive, a falling half step followed by a falling whole step, spanning a minor third, that is the basis for all of the other recurring motives of the piece (See Ex. 7& Ex. 8). The opening phrase, sung on the words “How doth the city sit solitary...like a widow,” recurs several times throughout the movement in different instruments and outlining different tonalities. It is also repeated by the mezzo-soprano, with the same words, in the middle of the movement, and by the whole orchestra at the major climax of the movement, but does not end the movement.

All of the major motives of the final movement of *Jeremiah* are derived from the minor third of the *kinnot* motive. The movement sets this up by opening with a rising minor third motive in the horns, followed by the clarinets sustaining a minor third as the vocal line enters. Another motive, based on a repeating dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythm, is introduced just before the voice repeats the opening line, is also based on the falling minor third (See Ex.

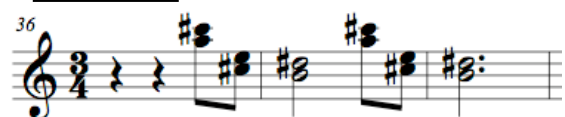
Ex 9



9). This motive is used to build the music up to its first climax, leading into the singer’s repetition of the opening line. Just

before this climax, the “prophecy” motive is stated in the flutes and violins. However, rather than leading to the repetition of the opening phrase, the climax reaches its peak and dies out before the singer comes in. After this repetition, a new motive is introduced: a falling major sixth followed by a half step (See Ex. 10). As the inversion of the minor third, this motive is also derived from the minor third. After the

Ex 10



introduction of this motive, the rising minor third motive from the opening of the piece is

passed around the orchestra, and the voice re-enters. The tessitura rises, building intensity, as the singer declares, “Depart, ye unclean! They cried unto them, depart, depart! Touch us not...” This leads into the major climax of the movement, in which the orchestra, but not the singer, states the opening line. Once the climax winds down the singer requests, “Turn us unto thee, oh Lord,” and the vocal line takes up the descending fourth, descending whole step motive of the “prophecy” theme. This is followed by quiet statements of the falling sixth motive, and the piece ends with a prominent, repeated rising minor third in the piano, giving the sense, as Bernstein stated in an interview in 1977, of “comfort, not a solution” (Gottlieb, 1).

Clearly, the music of the symphony is deeply rooted in Jewish ideas and content. However, it is important also to examine the historical context of *Jeremiah*. Though the piece was written years before the Nazis executed their “final solution”, the war was certainly on Bernstein’s mind as he composed *Jeremiah* (Burton 126; Tawa 114). “Street attacks against Jews, molestation of Jews in cafes and theatres, disturbances of religious services in synagogues and of Jewish meetings of all kinds, desecration of synagogues, and pollution of cemeteries,” had been reported in the *American Jewish Year Book* as early as 1930, after the Nazi party became the second largest in the Reichstag (Sarna, “American Judaism” 258). By 1935, the same publication notified its readers that there was a “deliberate premeditated policy of a ruling clique ruthlessly to exterminate German Jewry—a policy springing from maniacal adherence to a fanatical dogma of race nationalism” (259). On November 9, 1938, the day known as Kristallnacht, around 195 synagogues were burned, over 800 Jewish-owned stores were destroyed and 7,500 were looted in Germany and Austria (Morse 222). In 1942, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who had received a tip from a politician in Switzerland that was confirmed by the United States government, told the press that 2 million Jews had been killed by the Nazis’ “extermination campaign” (Sarna, “American Judaism” 261). Reports about the

early events of the Holocaust certainly existed, even if perhaps they were not widely attended to.

It is certainly clear that Bernstein had become aware of the connections between his symphony and what was happening to Jews in Europe by the time *Jeremiah* was premiered in Pittsburg in 1944. The war was fully under way by this time; the Nazis had invaded Russia, the United States had entered the war after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the tide had been turned for the allies at Stalingrad. By 1943, Stephen Wise's reports of atrocities against Jews had received wide attention. In the classical music world, musical tributes to Russia abounded (Seldes 28). Bernstein was politically active as well as connected to the Jewish community, and was certainly aware of reports of persecution and atrocities against Jews in Europe. When *Jeremiah* was premiered in Pittsburg, Bernstein boasted about his project of writing "six antifascist songs," and spoke about the *Jeremiah* Symphony's connection to Jews being persecuted in Europe, saying, "How can I be blind to the problems of my own people? I'd give everything I have to be able to strike a death blow at Fascism" (Burton 123). Before the premier of the symphony in Pittsburg, Bernstein also reportedly said to his friend David Diamond, "I am going to show these Nazis!" (Butterworth 165).

While it is clear that Bernstein had a message of solidarity with Jews in Europe in mind by the time of the symphony's performance, it is difficult to say whether this message was his intention from the time he originally composed *Jeremiah*. Though Bernstein's biographer Humphrey Burton asserts that the symphony's resonance with the events of the Holocaust was discovered only around the time of its first performance, it is not improbable that Bernstein had chosen the subject of Lamentations originally with the war in Europe in mind (Seldes 205). After all, Bernstein's original sketch of "Lamentation", though composed relatively early in the war in summer of 1939, was begun only months after Kristallnacht, which had appeared as the headline of the November 11, 1938 edition of the New York

Times (Morse 222). The article also reported that around twenty thousand Jews had been rounded up during the night and were being held concentration camps (Morse 224). The subject of *Lamentations* certainly resonates very clearly with this situation. In November 1942, just before Bernstein picked up the *Lamentation* movement again and composed the first two movements for the New England competition in December, Stephen Wise had just made his announcement to the press revealing the Nazi's campaign to exterminate the Jews, and that the State Department had confirmed this information. A widespread "day of mourning" was organized by the Jewish community on December 2. New York City, where Bernstein was residing at the time, was a center of the day's activities (Sarna, "American Judaism" 261-62). Because both Bernstein's initial writing of the *Lamentation* movement and completion of the symphony took place soon after major publicized events of the Holocaust, it is not wild to speculate that these events inspired the message of the *Jeremiah* symphony.

The social climate of the Jewish community caused by these events may also have been partially responsible for the symphony's success. The revelation of Nazi atrocities inspired a spiritual and cultural revival in the American Jewish community (Sarna, "American Judaism" 267). This was characterized by a resurgence of Jewish education, the beginning of the Jewish camping movement, and a move toward religion in more secular Jewish organizations (Sarna 269-70). Many argued that in the face of the destruction of European Jewry, it was the task of the American Jewish community to preserve Jewish culture, tradition and values (Sarna 271). The fact that the *Jeremiah* symphony contained obvious Jewish musical and programmatic references probably helped it to take advantage of this revival. *Jeremiah* was very well received by audiences and critics alike. In addition to winning the New York Music Critics Circle award and being nationally broadcast, Bernstein conducted the symphony in Boston, Chicago, New York, St. Louis, Detroit, Rochester, Prague and Jerusalem over the succeeding three years (Burton 125). The fact that many of

these cities had a large Jewish population at the time probably played a role in enabling those performances. Supporting what was seen at the time as a great new work of American classical music, which also paid homage both to Jewish heritage and the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust, was probably an excellent way for American Jews to feel that they were fulfilling the task of preserving Judaism in America.

Leonard Bernstein's *Jeremiah* symphony is embedded both in Jewish tradition and contemporary Jewish issues. Bernstein makes use of traditional Jewish material in the symphony to comment on the events of his own time, and project a message of solidarity to European Jews, whether this was his intention from the start or applied retroactively. The symphony reveals much about both the history of American music and the history of American Jews.

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