

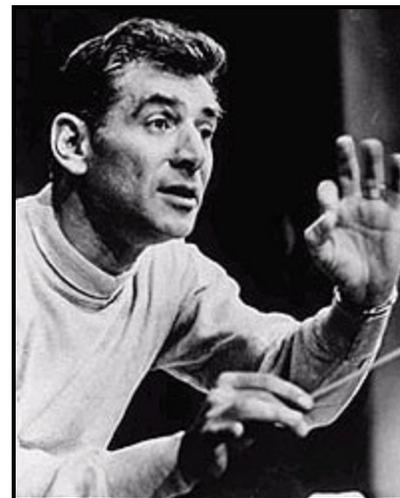
LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Born in Lawrence, Massachusetts 1918

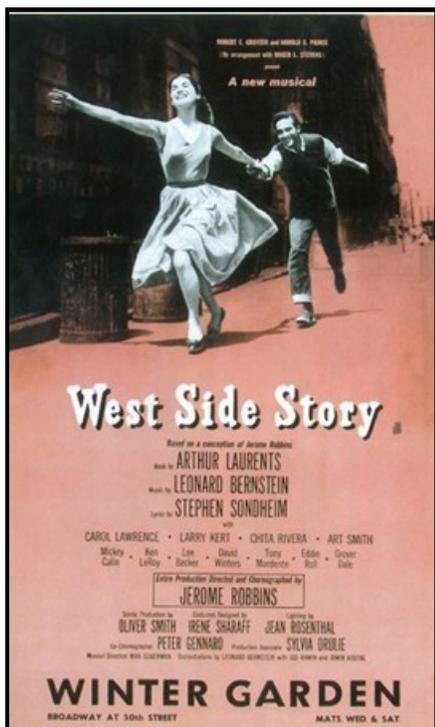
Died in Brooklyn, New York 1990

Overture from *West Side Story*

Composed in 1957



Leonard Bernstein, the first conductor born in the United States to receive world-wide acclaim, was born on August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Flamboyant, inspired and voracious in his conducting style, Bernstein demonstrated extraordinary musical ability very early on. He took piano lessons as a boy and after graduating from Boston Latin School in 1935, he attended Harvard where he studied music with Walter Piston. Subsequently he attended the renowned Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, studying conducting with Fritz Riener and piano with Isabella Vengerova and Heinrich Gebhard. Bernstein then went on to study at Tanglewood during the summers of 1940 and 1941 with Serge Koussevitzky. Koussevitzky was so impressed with Bernstein that he asked him to be his assistant in 1942. Also in that year, Bernstein was invited to be Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic, where in November of 1943, he substituted for Conductor Bruno Walter when Walter became ill; Bernstein was an immediate overnight success. In 1948 he joined the staff at Tanglewood and succeeded Koussevitzky as head of the conducting department. Bernstein took over the post of Music Director of the New York Philharmonic in 1958, and held it until 1969. Twenty years later, on Christmas day, Bernstein conducted Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 to honor the fall of the Berlin Wall; the performance reached approximately 100 million people as it was broadcast live in more than twenty countries. Bernstein conducted his final performance with the Boston Symphony on October 9, 1990. He died five days later in New York City, on October 14, 1990, of a heart attack brought on by emphysema and other complications.



Bernstein was a versatile musician and in addition to being a conductor of international renown, he was also a pianist, composer and educator. As a composer, Bernstein was prolific writing music that includes orchestral works, works for theater, chamber music pieces, choral works for church or synagogue, vocal music, various piano pieces and occasional works. In the late 1950's his highly successful series of *Young People's Concerts* was broadcast by CBS; these concerts were very effective introductions to classical music and earned Bernstein many accolades. As a composer, Bernstein created many concert pieces as well as works for musical theatre, which include *Candide*, *On the Town* and most famously *West Side Story*.

WEST SIDE STORY

As a contemporary composer, Bernstein was very alert to the melodic and rhythmic possibilities of popular styles, styles prevalent in his Broadway musicals. The score for *West Side Story*, in particular, is an example of virtuosic symphonic treatment. *West Side Story* is a musical written by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. The story uses Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as inspiration, and is the musical theater's only real tragedy. In using the universal themes of prejudice, disenfranchisement and the destruction of love through hate, themes profound and disturbing, the work transcended the musical theatre medium.

West Side Story is a highly successful work because of the unity of its parts: the music, the book, the eloquent lyrics along with Jerome Robbins's choreography are fully interwoven. Characterization, action and exposition are related through all of these elements in a way that was truly innovative.

West Side Story debuted September 26, 1957 on Broadway at the Wintergarden. The *Overture* from *West Side Story* features themes from many of the musical's songs including "Maria" and "Tonight". The "Overture" sets the stage for the action that will follow. The dramatic conflict that will ensue of warring rival gangs and the ill-fated love of Tony and Maria is foreshadowed in this music.



In order to create the sense of tension, restlessness and ruthlessness inherent in the action of the story, Bernstein employed a musical device of called a tritone, an interval that spans three whole tones, also known as an augmented fourth. This interval is one of dissonance, known for a long time as Diabolus in Musica (Devil in music) and was considered a "dangerous" interval. The tritone is apparent in almost every number in the musical. In "Maria" the first three notes span a tritone and then a rising half step, a motif that first appears in the "Prologue" but is repeated throughout the work, appearing in several other numbers, including "Mambo" "Rumble" and "Cool."

SYNOPSIS

West Side Story involves the age-old theme of two lovers whose destiny is hindered by circumstances beyond their control. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the hero and the heroine come from feuding families, the Montagues and the Capulets. The two lovers in *West Side Story* come from rival New York city gangs, the Jets and the Sharks. The action takes place on the upper west side of the City. The Jets are made up of a mix of ethnic types: Polish, Italian and Irish, who think of themselves as being more American than the Puerto Rican Sharks. Both groups share the same lack of prospects and perpetually feud over territory.

Tony, a former Jet, and Maria, the sister of the Shark's leader Bernardo, fall in love at a dance. At this same dance, the Jets challenge the Sharks to fight. Tony tries to extricate himself from any involvement, but Maria wants him to stop the "rumble." To satisfy her, he attempts to halt the fighting. But, when his best friend, Riff, is mortally stabbed by Bernardo, Tony becomes enraged and in turn kills Bernardo. Devastated by this news, Maria still forgives Tony. In the meantime Chico, Bernardo's right hand man who is also in love with Maria, pursues Tony to exact revenge.

Maria convinces Anita, Bernardo's girlfriend, to deliver a message to Tony that Maria will come to him so that they can run away together. Tony is in hiding at Doc's Soda Fountain, When Anita arrives, the Jets abuse her. In anger she screams at them to tell Tony that Chico has killed Maria. When Tony hears this, he dashes outside and screams for Chico to kill him too. Then Maria appears and he realizes she is still alive. They run to each other; at that very moment, Chico comes out of the shadows and shoots Tony. Only as all the gang members watch Tony die in Maria's arms do they begin to realize that it is their hate that has brought this about. At the play's end, joined together through death, the Jets and the Sharks carry Tony as Maria follows.

Listening Map—Themes heard in the Overture

1. *Tonight*
2. *Somewhere*
3. *Dance Music*

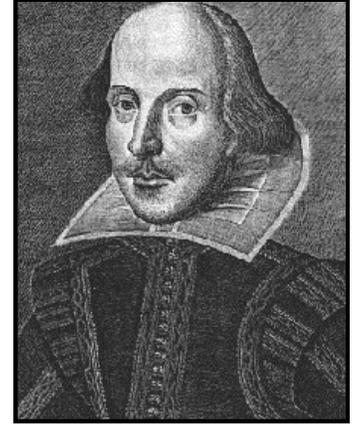
→ Click this link to listen to the BBC Concert Orchestra playing the Overture:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EsBONupjkU>

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

English poet and playwright William Shakespeare is the author of a body of literary work considered to be the greatest in the history of English literature.

Shakespeare was born April 23, 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon in the area of England known as the Midlands. He left Stratford for London sometime in 1586 where he embarked on a life in the theatre. In 1595 he became one of the senior members of the Lord Chamberlain's men, making him a playwright to the King of England and by 1596 he was so successful that he was granted a Coat of Arms and was allowed to call himself a "gentleman." Interestingly, Shakespeare died on April 23, the same date as his birth, in 1616.



The Prologue from *Romeo and Juliet* is written as a sonnet because the play's theme is one of thwarted love. A sonnet is a poem written in iambic pentameter, consisting of 14 lines and in Shakespeare's case made up of three quatrains and an ending couplet; sonnets were traditionally used to express love in conflict.

The Prologue from *Romeo and Juliet* plays the same role in verse that the Overture from *West Side Story* plays in music. In both instances, the Prologues serve to establish mood and action of the ensuing play and musical.

PROLOGUE from *Romeo and Juliet*

*Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whole misadventured piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
The which if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.*