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"Crashing Right Down to the Floor"

Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* (1971), formally a religious work, was also a secular one in every sense of the word. *Mass* spoke unashamedly of and to its particular moment. Extreme topicality can be a trap, preventing a work from "traveling" well over time. That has not happened to *Mass*, however. In the past 37 years, Bernstein's secular subjects, the politics of a world in the grip of an unpopular war, the loss of moorings in a society of sexual license, and, first and foremost, the illegitimacy of authority in a world of alienation, have not faded away at all. In fact, they have remained remarkably contemporary.

Mass was subtitled *A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers*. Incorporating 200 performers in its original production, including two bands, and featuring a melange of musical styles, the piece by design is a sort of three-ring circus contradicting - by its deliberately chaotic appearance - the controlled authoritarian stance that Bernstein had largely come to deplore politically, socially, in matters of faith, and in matters of art.

Mass indeed appeared at the very crisis of legitimacy - legitimacy of all kinds - in American history. Vietnam, the Draft, Kent State, the great march on the Pentagon, the covert and illegal bombing of Cambodia, and the Pentagon Papers had cast our government into profound disrepute. The Civil Rights movement, the youth culture, and the Sexual Revolution had broadly contradicted the spoken and unspoken principles upon which American life had largely been organized. And the predominance of rock music, an upstart that had displaced symphonies, musicals, and jazz bands alike as the source of the tunes people were humming, and which had into the bargain largely displaced poetry as the source of the lyrical phrases on people's minds, had profoundly undermined the self-assurance of the mandarins of high culture.

Though Leonard Bernstein, Harvard '39, former Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, could hardly disavow his own mandarin credentials, he had long had his other foot solidly planted in the vernacular culture, particularly through his association with the musical stage, including his work on *West Side Story*, a universally-known pop culture phenomenon. And in 1969 he had quite publicly allied himself with radical politics, having played host to a fund-raiser for the Black Panthers flayed by Tom Wolfe in his famous *Radical Chic* piece in *New York* magazine.

J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, had sent White House Chief of Staff Robert Haldeman and Attorney General John Mitchell warnings that Bernstein had consulted with radical priest Daniel Berrigan about liturgical aspects of the piece. That was enough for President Nixon's men, who saw to it that Nixon did not attend the premiere. His failure to post was notable, as Bernstein was then arguably the best-known living U.S. composer, the piece had been commissioned by Presidential widow Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and the premiere was also the inauguration of the Kennedy Center, designed to be Washington's marquee arts venue.

The subversiveness of the piece lived up to Hoover's advance billing.

Though laid out in the format of the Roman Catholic liturgy (notwithstanding that the pieces fall in a somewhat revised order at the end), *Mass* is essentially the story of a character known as the Celebrant. He emerges from the darkness singing a simple,

unassuming song of praise for the Almighty. He makes no claim to authority or power. But his virtuosic song inspires a chorus of "Street People" with a marching band to parade around the stage, voicing a boisterous *Kyrie*, and suddenly the Celebrant has been invested with the role of a priest, apparently by popular demand.

The congregation may have installed the Celebrant in his priestly role, but that does not translate into a cooperative relationship. Instead, the congregation commences an ever-intensifying series of challenges and ironic echoes to the songs of penitence and praise the Celebrant leads, and undercuts much of the Celebrant's homiletics. Initially, the Celebrant fights back; whenever he sings or speaks, he conveys the unironic, received religious message. But there comes a tipping point.

That point arrives, by no coincidence, just after the celebrant has been garbed in what the original stage directions call "rich vestments and a golden Cope." By now he has become unambiguously a figure of religious authority. The Celebrant himself is uncomfortable with this role. He manages to fight his way through the *Our Father* and then sings of his own doubts, about how, even though "the age of Gold is dead," he manages to go on, to "celebrate another day." In short, at the apogee of his priestly role, he has become restive and uncertain how to bear it. Over the subsequent *Agnus Dei* and an attempted consecration of sacramental bread and wine, his struggles, amplified by the chorus, intensify. At the moment of consecration, he can endure no more, and hurls the chalice to the floor, shattering it. (This was probably the aspect of the production that "tore it" for a number of Catholic commentators, including the Archbishop of Cincinnati, who called *Mass* "offensive to our Catholic sense and belief.")

At that moment, the Celebrant seems to have grown even more restive than the rebellious congregation around him. He chides them: "What are you staring at?" He tries to recommend his act of destructive sacrilege as a source of subversive creativity: "Wasn't it smashing / To see it all come crashing / Right down to the floor!" Brought to the floor by that act are not only the vessels but the Celebrant's role. His anguish can only be extinguished by the abrogation of his function as priest. He disappears into the stage pit, emerging eventually and unobtrusively back into the crowd in his original garb. Freed of the burden of authority he is again able to sing a version of his simple song, and with that simplicity to end the piece.

So what, politically and culturally, do we make of the Celebrant's/Bernstein's trajectory? That it has autobiographical roots is obvious. Bernstein the popularizer, Bernstein the promiscuous homosexual, Bernstein the friend of radicals, is in rebellion against Bernstein the composer of symphonies, Bernstein the married man, Bernstein the mandarin comfortable at the top of artistic and political society. But it goes beyond that. Bernstein depicts as horribly misguided the effort to found a whole religious ritual on what was meant only to be a simple song. Likewise, the Vietnam War still raging at the time of *Mass* was a too-clever-by-half effort to extrapolate U.S. resistance to communism (a simple and appropriate thing) into a context where it did not honestly fit. And the cult of personality around our leaders, ironically exemplified by John Kennedy, the namesake and supposed inspiration for *Mass*, in Bernstein's eyes, was carried to extremes Bernstein felt tragically unwarranted.

Whether the men and women in positions of great power then, now, or ever, have felt the Celebrant's sort of ambivalence about that power is at least debatable. The Celebrant is not a very convincing portrait of the psychology of authority. But Bernstein's take on the destructive force and example of authority, its inability to lead and its short-sightedness over the long term, is acutely observed.

We today are nearing the apparent end of a deadly and costly war many if not most Americans think to have been ill-advised from the start. We have observed the simple need to capture and interrogate those who would attack us elaborate into the Grand Guignol of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. We have thus seen the playing-out of the same authoritarian dynamic Bernstein did forty years ago. For Bernstein and for many, there was and remains something liberating, subversive, and ultimately restorative about the prospect of seeing that kind of absolute authority all come crashing right down to the floor. That dramatic insight, whether or not we agree with Bernstein about it, keeps *Mass* fresh and relevant today.

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