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**Bernstein's Mass**

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 B. Gohn**

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## "Is There Someone Out There?"

When Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis commissioned Leonard Bernstein to compose *Mass* for the opening of the Kennedy Center, his first plan had been to produce a requiem commemorating President John Kennedy, the Center's namesake. But what would have revisited territory covered by an existing Bernstein enterprise, his third symphony *Kaddish* (1963), based on the Jewish prayer for the dead. That work had been completed just as news of Kennedy's assassination reached Bernstein, and it was dedicated to Kennedy's memory. Instead, Bernstein's restless creativity reached out to something newer and larger.

Bernstein was no stranger to composing pieces based on religious themes and texts. These included not only *Kaddish* but the *Jeremiah* symphony (1942), Bernstein's first, and the *Chichester Psalms*, a choral and orchestral work (1965). In these pieces, Bernstein had staked out a stance composed of equal parts of yearning for divinity and skepticism about the nature and existence of God. He approached God man-to-man, as it were, lodging complaints about the transitory nature of human existence and God's apparent aloofness.

The format of a Catholic Mass gave Bernstein an advantage none of his previous essays at the religious Big Questions had done: accessibility. As in *Kaddish*, much of the text would be in English, but much would be in the original language. Church Latin, especially the Church Latin of the Mass, was undoubtedly familiar to far more of his listeners than the Hebrew of Jewish Scripture had ever been. And few dramatic structures were more compelling, for in Catholic theology each consecration is mystically one with the Crucifixion, and any story arc that climaxes with a Crucifixion wields great potency, and there is little risk the audience will fail to recognize the event or grasp its significance.

Nor was Bernstein content to rest there in ramping up the accessibility; he embedded the Mass structure in the trappings of a giant theater piece, complete with dancers, singers, and bands. As Bernstein was an absolute master of the theater, with four musicals to his credit, at least three of them (*Candide*, *On the Town*, and *West Side Story*) unforgettable, there was little doubt he could wield these elements to maximize the audience's impressions.

And the audience on the other side of the stage apron was just as important: the political and intellectual luminaries of our nation's capital, at the opening of its most important performing arts arena. Bernstein's message was bound not only to be heard, but to be heard in the highest quarters.

So at what then did Bernstein aim this big blunderbuss of a religious piece? With an unparalleled opportunity to be heard and understood, what messages did he convey?

First, that Faith, where attainable, is beautiful and dynamic. The piece follows the spiritual path of a character called the Celebrant, i.e. a priest in his role as the leader of the Roman Catholic Mass. The Celebrant's songs, so long as he possesses his belief, are lyrical. As the great Simple Song with which he starts spirals upward, we can almost touch the sense of required longing for the Divinity. A choral prayer for (and by) the congregation, *Almighty Father*, expresses a placid but

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surpassing confidence.

Faith is hard to maintain, however. As the production proceeds, the Celebrant's Faith is assaulted from all sides: by the displacement of the sacred amidst sexual license, by a sense that signs of divine compassion are missing in a predatory natural order and an even more predatory social one, and most of all by the absence of any perceived response from God in prayer. ("Is there someone out there?/ If there is, then who?") The Celebrant repeatedly struggles to retreat from doubt into religious ritual, and Bernstein gives that ritual full credit, writing some of his most powerful melodies to support it. And yet even ritual fails to reassure the Celebrant in the end. By the point of the *Our Father*, the Celebrant's God is nowhere to be found.

With the breakdown of Faith comes chaos. The sacramental vessels are shattered, the Celebrant rebels against the burden of his priestly role, casting off his authority and his vestments, the lyrics break down into gibberish and the music into fragments, and then the Celebrant lapses into a depressed silence. It is a bold but telling move for Bernstein to make of this experience a kind of Crucifixion, timed to coincide with the Consecration.

Finally, redemption and regeneration, if it comes at all, must come as the result of having gone through this process, not of avoiding it. In the end, something of the Celebrant's original Faith is restored, not through the force of ritual, but through the consensus of the community which has accompanied the Celebrant on his spiritual journey, and whose spark rekindles by some mysterious spontaneous regeneration at the bitter end. The last music in the production is a reprise of the *Almighty Father*, which is nothing if not an expression of the very confidence the Celebrant had misplaced.

There is an eternal theme. The Dark Night of the Soul has been chronicled by believers for hundreds of years. But there is nothing outdated about it. Within the last year, for instance, we have learned that Mother Teresa walked in the Celebrant's doubtful spiritual shoes for most of her life. The persistence of Faith notwithstanding the frequent perception of Divine silence is a mystery to unbelievers (and often to believers themselves), but it is an observable fact that it resurges despite the disparagement of secularists, and the chilling power of philosophical empirism.

How or if Bernstein personally resolved the religious crisis chronicled in Mass is not clear. But Mass is a first-rate depiction of that crisis, which is a human universal: the search for God in a world in which He is not easily perceived.

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