

**Concert Calendar****\$20 Unreserved Seats****Season at a Glance****Season Highlight:****Bernstein's Mass****Performance & Ticket Information****Leonard Bernstein****Articles on Mass****New York Times****A Personal Note from Marin Alsop****NPR Weekend Edition****Jewish Times****Baltimore Sun****Mass Essays by Jack L. B. Gohn****Multimedia****Photo Gallery****Subscription Series****Choose Your Own Series****2008-2009 Exchange Policy****Holiday Spectacular****Family Concerts****NEW SERIES: Off the Cuff****SuperPops****Soulful Symphony****BSO at Frederick****Group Opportunities****Student Discount Program****Forté: BSO Friends Under 40**

Not Logged In

[Login >](#)

"All You Big Men of Merit"

Leonard Bernstein wrote *Mass* (1971) at the conclusion of the Sixties, a time of social upheaval. Bernstein effectively found himself with affinities on both sides. That ambivalence, as we have seen, played itself out in the conflicted trajectory of the protagonist of the piece, the character called the Celebrant. But insofar as the strictly political debates of the time went, Bernstein was not ambivalent. *Mass* drew a line in the sand.

Bernstein had always been a man of the Left. While an undergraduate in 1939, he had directed and played piano in a revival of Marc Blitzstein's epochal plea for the right of workers to unionize, *Cradle Will Rock*. A roommate had been a member of the Harvard communist cell. He was a protege of Aaron Copland, composer of populist ballets. He had composed the memorable score to Lillian Hellman's *Candide* (1956), which Bernstein himself described in the Sunday Times as tweaking American society for "its puritanical snobbery, phony moralism, inquisitory attacks on the individual, brave-new-world optimism [and] essential superiority."

In *Mass*, Bernstein quite effectively clothes an attack on these *bêtes noires*, particularly "essential superiority," in religious garb.

There are two principal elements to this attack.

First, Bernstein relies upon a "chorus of street people." Oddly, the phrase is slightly dated today, connoting in present usage panhandlers and vagrants. In 1971, "street people" would have meant something more along the line of hippies and political radicals demonstrating in the street. The archetype of this chorus would have been the tribe in Hair (1968) or the clown-apostles in *Godspell*, which had opened earlier in 1971, the same year as *Mass*. (Indeed, Stephen Schwartz, the composer-lyricist of *Godspell*, was Bernstein's principal collaborator on the lyrics of *Mass*.) The "street people" label would tell the audience that the members of this chorus would be young and disaffected. Their alienation would extend not only to the then-reigning Politics with a Capital P (the Nixon Administration and the Vietnam War), but also to the personal-is-political sort of politics that still held sway (sexual, ecological, etc.).

This chorus expresses its disaffection forthrightly. In a timely bit of lyric provided by Paul Simon, for example, the chorus sings: "Half the people are stoned/ And the other half are waiting for the next election." On ecology: "God said take charge of my zoo/ I made these creatures for you/ So He won't mind if we/ Wipe out a species or two." On colonialism: "God said go spread my commands/ To folks in faraway lands/ They may not want us there/ But then it's out of our hands."

Bernstein's other vehicle for blasting at the status quo is the "Gospel-Sermon." There the Celebrant announces that "The Word of the Lord" will ultimately prevail over all the misrule perpetrated by the "big men of merit" who run society. These people "rely on our compliance / with your science and your laws." This loaded phrase is not a mere synonym for the governing class; the "science" part makes clear the Celebrant is talking about a governing *intelligentsia*. Despite the odd Henry Kissinger, the

For more information call
410.783.8000
or toll-free
1.877.BSO.1444

Nixon White House (1969-73) was not known for its intellectuals. This phrase must therefore refer in part to the highly credentialed bigwigs from the earlier Kennedy and Johnson administrations, who, for all their self-confident intelligence, had plunged the nation into a catastrophic war, men with names like Bundy, McNamara, Rostow - and Kennedy.

These could have been the same people Bernstein hobnobbed with at his home in Fairfield, Connecticut. He was as prestigiously credentialed as any of them and seldom one to let his politics change his choice of social circles. But Bernstein was accustomed to slighting friends and patrons, as Serge Koussevitsky and Dmitri Mitropoulos could have attested. And here Bernstein obviously felt he had cause.

That cause is partly - but only partly - explained in the vignettes interspersed in the "Epistle-Sermon." These are spoken excerpts from imaginary letters showing how the Word of the Lord prevails through the witness of imprisoned protestors and evangelists. There are passages that sound like St. Paul's prison writings, and also a wife's account of her husband's contentedness behind bars that everyone in 1971 would have recognized as an echo of Joan Baez's brag from the stage at Woodstock about her then-husband, draft resister David Harris' prison organizing efforts. (The movie and record had come out in 1970.) It is interesting that these vignettes pass over any mention of exactly what has led to the speakers' incarcerations, but the effect is, paradoxically, to strengthen the force of Bernstein's indictment. It conveys that the particular enormities that men and women of conscience must protest will change over time, but that the struggle is perpetual.

Indeed, the Celebrant concludes this section by noting that "the Word" has lasted "for thousands of regimes," and that the expedient of the godly is, if necessary, to "wait in silent treason until reason is restored." At this point, the Chorus has already begun to heckle and question the Celebrant about many of the things he proclaims. But about the political issues, there is no sniping.

Here, then, Bernstein is at his least ironic, his least ambiguous. He may be full of doubts about whether there is a God, and/or what constitutes a godly life, but he has none at all about what kind of politics is godly. As the spiritual crisis of the Celebrant and the Chorus progresses, and the great existential question of what a God-less universe might mean is confronted, Bernstein never suggests that the political Word of the Lord would somehow become less binding without a Lord to speak the Word. In fact, when a singer pictures the end of the world, an end without either God or Man, humankind's failure to meet its ecological duties, is still decried: "No one to soil the breeze/ No one to oil the seas..." God or no God, Man or no Man, political right and wrong remain what they have been.

And because that part of the message has never been undercut or questioned (perhaps the only message in this piece which has not been), when hope and faith and peace are reborn at the end, it is not necessary for Bernstein to attempt any kind of rehabilitation of the political outrage expressed both by the Street People and the Celebrant. The catharsis of the shattered faith and shattered chalice never affected it in the first place, and it stands silently reaffirmed.

*Jack L. B. Gohn practices law in Baltimore, and is the author of **The Big Picture** column in the Daily Record. His writings on legal and literary subjects have appeared in such diverse places as the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, and the Georgetown Law Journal. He acknowledges Joan Peyser's *Bernstein: A Biography* (1987) as the source of many of the facts cited here. He welcomes feedback at jghohn@ghslp.com.*

LOGIN >

Not a member?
Join Our ePatron Club >

[Tickets](#) | [Support Your BSO](#) | [About the BSO](#) | [The Musicians](#) | [Press Room](#) | [BSO Store](#)

[Search](#) | [Shopping Cart](#) | [Plan Your Visit](#) | [Seating Chart](#) | [Contact Us](#)

© 2007 Baltimore Symphony Orchestra | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Funding for the BSO's special subscription pricing this season generously provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra funding provided in part by Maryland State Arts Council. **MSAC|40**

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra is internationally recognized as having achieved a preeminent place among the world's most important orchestras. Acclaimed for its uncompromising pursuit of artistic excellence, the Baltimore Symphony has attracted a devoted national and international following while maintaining deep bonds throughout the Maryland community.

Designed by Lynch² | Powered by eRube