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"Lauda, Laude"

As we have seen, Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* (1971) is a huge, complex work that unabashedly reaches for profundity and grandeur. Bernstein poured into it his deepest religious longings, his agony over the political scene, his sense of the timeless psychological dramas that play out in both. He also brought to the project his eclectic musical sensibility. There is jazz, there is rock, there are rumbling organs, choruses, kazoos, and soaring strings, twelve-tone rows and simple, conventional harmonies.

This enormous, strenuous, and unique mixture may have drawn a 30-minute standing ovation at its original performance, but it was not always a favorite with the critics. For instance, Harold Schonberg reviewing that same performance in the New York Times called it "at times ... little more than fashionable kitsch." Marin Alsop, Maestra of the Baltimore Symphony leading its latest staging, never discussed the piece with Bernstein during her studies with him when she was a conducting fellow there in 1988 and 1989. She knew it was a raw topic with Bernstein. While he sometimes claimed never to read a review, the fact was he could quote bad ones verbatim.

Despite sparing Bernstein's feelings about this work, Alsop has been deeply engaged with it over the years. She sees it as an "extraordinarily successful piece." She believes it achieves what it sets out to do, on many levels. She describes it as being paradoxically a "very simple, terribly complex piece." Simplicity, she says, "is what gives everyone who sees it access. It is a simple story about self-examination, self-questioning, and conclusions" to be drawn from that. Yet at the same time it is "a journey piece that takes you through religion, politics, tonality, and atonality." She has conducted it in Eugene, Oregon, at the Cabrillo Festival, in Colorado, in London, and at the Hollywood Bowl. She cheerfully owns up to being "the leading champion of the piece."

This production will be a full staging, with 20 performers singing the "street people," the 60-voice Morgan State University Chorus, the 40-voice Peabody Children's Chorus, a boy soprano, the central role of the Celebrant sung by baritone Jubilant Sykes, a 40-piece marching band, and a rock band, as well as the Baltimore Symphony. In deference to the somewhat constricted footprints of the stages of the four venues among which this production will travel, dancers will be the only ingredient missing from the original mixture. But, as Director Kevin Newbury (who has worked with Alsop on two productions of *Nixon in China*) promises, this piece will be fully acted, fully lit, and have a full sound design.

Newbury emphasizes the acting. Of course the 20 "street people" had to be really good singers. But they had to be "real story tellers" and strong actors as well - and they needed to be able to move. This called for an eclectic casting search: 200 auditions for 20 parts, drawing performers from Broadway as well as opera backgrounds.

Returning to Alsop, one senses that her encounters with *Mass* have not been static, that she has been working up to a point, and that this production is the point. "The piece can sustain rough edges," she comments. "It doesn't have to have the greatest of everything. But at this performance, the parts are going to be at a very high level." It was not merely a matter of the 20 marquee parts. She mentions the musicianship in the orchestra and the quality of the chorus. And perhaps the

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most important index to the quality of the production in the panoply of *Alsoop Masses* is the fact that this one will be recorded - only the second American recording of the piece, she notes.

The libretto used will be the 1981 revision, the last in which Bernstein himself had a hand. Stephen Schwartz has since revised it to keep it contemporary, but *Alsoop* is trying to be as faithful as possible to Bernstein's voice, even at a cost of some currency.

In any case, neither *Alsoop* nor *Newbury* is overly worried about currency. To *Newbury*, the piece has only gotten stronger. Peace and community, major preoccupations in *Mass*, are very topical today, and questioning of faith never goes out of style. "The ultimate message," *Alsoop* says, "is about authenticity of experience, genuineness of living. That's a message that's timeless." As to Bernstein's questioning of war and wanting to believe that we as a human race can come together, it's "very Beethovenian," she adds, coining a phrase. She is willing to go even further, and say that in certain ways it is more relevant now than, say, a decade ago, musically. Certain styles are returning.

In the end, the test of this huge musical melange (something ancient, something new, something classical, and something blues) and the brigade of performers with their broad array of skills, will be the impact on the audience. As it all comes together, the audience should be taken on the same journey as the Celebrant, from the peaceful and lyrical "Lauda, laude" of the opening through the crisis of faith, religious and personal and political, to the profound peacefulness of the conclusion.

Both leaders of the creative team believe the audience will feel that the peacefulness after the crisis has been earned, musically, dramatically, and spiritually. *Alsoop* acknowledges that Bernstein never personally resolved the issues he wrestles with here. He led what she calls a "completely unresolved life." But from an artistic standpoint the resolution feels real to her.

Newbury says that the power of the resolution derives partly from the staging. The children are important to this. The Celebrant's journey, with his initial signature song, is commenced by his receipt of his priestly garments from a child. And at the end, freed from the complexities of authority and doubt, he reemerges amongst children; he is literally sung back to wholeness by a boy soprano who reiterates the "Lauda, laude" of the opening in new variations; and that synthesis is amplified by children passing through the audience passing on a wish for peace in a moment reminiscent of the passing of the flame, the symbol of resurrection, throughout the congregation in a Catholic Easter service. To *Newbury*, this is not exactly a reversion to the Celebrant's original childlike faith, but an affirmation of peace and hope and community. God may or may not be real, our politics may or may not be in vain, but these other things, and the connectedness they bring us, are unquestionable and timeless. And it is their solidity, like the resolution of a musical phrase on the tonic note, that audiences will finally take away from *Mass*.

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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**

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