

DLA doctoral thesis – a summary

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Bernstein: Mass

Analysis, reception, and issues of performance

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I. Research antecedents

Many publications discuss Leonard Bernstein as a personality as well as one of his most important works, the *Mass*, however, these writings belong to either of two types. One type is biographically inspired sharing many interesting facts, and stories about Bernstein but saying relatively little about the *Mass*. The other type is of an analytical-comparative character in which the subject being analysed, the phenomenon, the set of problems taken out of context dominates without a perceptible approach of a multi-angle focus on the *Mass*.

I therefore attempted to bring together from several sources the most important biographical details regarding the work in question, and reviews concerning its reception, and its recordings. The most significant among these is the biography book by Humphrey Burton and Joan Peyser, the comparative analysis by William Anthony Sheppard titled *Bitter Rituals for a Lost Nation*, and two volumes by Előd Juhász: *Bernstein Story*, and *Bernstein and Budapest*. Both the audience' and the profession' response was rather diverse, not always resting on scientific fundamentals. Taste often added subjectivism to the opinions of the criticising journalist, politician, or musical expert.

II. Sources

My further sources apart from the above were reviews and analytical papers on the world premiere of the composition. Harold C. Schonberg and Nan Robertson wrote in *The New York Times*, Linda Winer in the *Chicago Tribune*, Martin Bernheimer in the *Los Angeles Times*, Paul Hume in *The Washington Post* about its premiere performance. I also made use of Herman Berlinski's and Clytus Gottwald's analytical works in which the authors looked at the *Mass* from a variety of aspects.

An in-depth analysis of four *audio* recordings and one officially published DVD came as additional assistance to my efforts. In discussing the recordings I attempted to investigate, in the light of the problems experienced by the performers, the relevant parts of the composition, and shed light on the reasons of their polarising character.

Aware of the significance of the *oral history* I interviewed Előd Juhász, who, having met Bernstein several times, and being the Hungarian biographer of Bernstein shared his thoughts with me concerning the composer and the work in question, and interviewed also Kálmán Záborszky, who conducted the Hungarian premiere in 1988. I also managed to find the critiques of the Hungarian performances that prompted me to analyse, and even quote from the writings of Katalin Budai, Ildikó Czigány, Eszter Veronika Kiss, and Emőke Solymosi Tari.

III. Methodology

I first located the *Mass* in the oeuvre of the composer; then I looked at the composition within his career, along with the conditions of its creation, with special regard to the political backdrop; the genre caused me to analyse the relationship of Bernstein and religion, then, with the help of a table I made a sketch of the work's structure. The second chapter consists of a detailed treatment of the circumstances of the premiere and of the translation as well as the analysis of the most important reviews. This is the first time, to my best information, that the majority of these documents are available in Hungarian.

In the third chapter, providing the musical analysis, I did not aim at presenting a complete, comprehensive picture of the entire subject, but, instead, I highlighted genres, musical phenomena, and dissected the piece in the light of these. That part, therefore, includes a discussion of the tropes, orchestral intermezzos, issues raised by the vocal apparatus, the individuality of orchestration, and I dedicated a special sub-chapter to the key part of the *Mass*, the crisis scene.

I collected the most important critiques, and musical analyses of the sound recordings (the Hungarian translation of the key sentences of these are again a novelty), and added my own analytical remarks. I also listed the data of the most significant performances of the composition to date, and examined also the after-life of the composition. I applied the

same approach to the Hungarian premiere of the *Mass*, its reception, and later performances.

IV. Achievements

I feel attached to Bernstein's *Mass* through numerous emotional ties as an average music lover and as a performing artist. As an adolescent I listened countless times to a recording that he himself conducted, then as an assistant conductor I had the opportunity of participating in preparing the *Mass* for a concert working with both the singers and the symphonic orchestra. As student of the doctoral school my knowledge and my attachment to the piece grew more profound through an assignment I was given, and finally musicologist Anna Dalos suggested that I should choose it as the subject of my dissertation.

The novelty of my thesis – apart from the Hungarian translation of critiques, and musical analyses – is perhaps that I have made my best to maximise the information sources regarding the *Mass*. I set out to use partial information from two biographical volumes to fit together the genesis of the work. I corresponded with staff of several foreign journals to get hold of pieces of musical writing from the 1970s, and researched the relevant sections of the National Széchényi Library to find documentation concerning the Hungarian performances.

I summarised all the musical styles appearing in the composition, meaning that I studied the special features of rock and blues music, and the

irregular dodecaphonic structural solutions. My analysis extended also to the so-called Broadway style and sounding, and the appearance of *musical*, *jazz*, and *gospel* in the composition. I tried to shed light on the reasons why Bernstein consciously applied a specific style at a specific point.

In dissecting the crisis scene referred to above I strove, besides a thorough musical analysis, to depict the protagonist's spiritual crisis, and made an effort to highlight its causes. In my analysis of the recordings I specifically commented on the Priest's performance as singer, performing artist, and actor.

The backbone of the chapter on the orchestral intermezzos is formed of an analysis of the second intermezzo containing Beethoven-allusions. I used musical examples, and quotations by Bernstein trying to prove the kinship of the two composers' intellect.

The four sound recordings heard revealed to me different aspects of the work. The 1971 Bernstein *record* is a kind of benchmark hallmarked by an incredibly impulsive conductor personality and the brilliant protagonist, Alan Titus. Despite one or two tiny musical imperfections the masterpiece became the foundation stone for each later recording. The real forte of the compact disc that came out in 2004, conducted by Kent Nagano is the splendid contribution of the choir. Unfortunately the acting of protagonist Jerry Hadley is not altogether unobjectionable as his tenor type did not prove suitable for this baritone role in all respects. The 2008 recording conducted by Kristjan Järvi, and the 2009 recording conducted by Marin Alsop are generally of a very good quality; they had their

emphasis clearly placed on different scenes, but their general standard is very high.

Information concerning the Hungarian premiere is surely important as it has not so far been published about, and because the information comes direct from the conductor of the performances. The July 1988 performances were the first to face the mainly vocal difficulty of the composition. Repeat performances from 2008 are of a much higher musical standard, even though the cast of singers was not faultless this time, either. The articles and critiques I analysed threw light on the difficulties of approach in both a musical and interpretational sense.

I am hopeful that on the whole I have managed to bring closer one of Leonard Bernstein's most important works, the *Mass* to contemporary man.

V. Concerts to the DLA doctoral thesis

8th December 2013, Saturday, 19.30 subscription concert, Arts Hall

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Serenata notturna KV 239

Ludwig van Beethoven: Ah! perfido – concert aria

Ildikó Szakács – soprano

Ludwig van Beethoven: No. 9 symphony

Ildikó Szakács – soprano

Ildikó Gaál-Wéber – contralto

István Horváth – tenor

Gábor Bretz – bass

Zugló Philharmonic – Szent István Király Symphonic Orchestra and Oratorio Choir (Choirmaster: Kálmán Záborszky)

24 May 2014, Saturday, 15.30 Doctoral concert, Music Academy

Claudio Monteverdi: Volgea l'anima mia soavemente

Luci serene e chiare

Io son mi giovinetta

Miklós Csemiczky: Pater noster

György Orbán: Timor et tremor

Cor mundum

Daemon irrepit callidus

Zoltán Kodály: Szép könyörgés (Beautiful prayer)

Johannes Brahms: Nänie op.82

Giuseppe Verdi: Quatro pezzi sacri

Budapest Monteverdi Choir (Choirmaster: Éva Kollár),

Zugló Philharmonic – Szent István Király Symphonic Orchestra and Oratorio Choir (Choirmaster: Kálmán Záborszky)