

Leonard Bernstein, *West Side Story*, and The Devil's Interval

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Ever since I developed the attention span to sit in front of a screen, I can remember watching *West Side Story*. I sang along to "I Feel Pretty" with Maria as loud as I could. I have never wanted a dress so badly as I wanted Anita's purple dress from "America." Once we were old enough to understand how funny it was, my sister and I giggled along to every line of "Officer Krupke." Like many others, *West Side Story* lives in me forever. The colorful, dance-filled scenes are combined with a score that faces social issues of its time, highlighting real problems with urban gang violence, racial tension, and immigration in New York City, making it unprecedented. As with many things I loved growing up, I began to learn more about the musical as I got older. The 1961 Hollywood adaptation of *West Side Story* that I so religiously watched faced some criticism and speculation as a film for its choices in depicting race, mainly its unfortunate use of actors in brownface portraying Puerto Rican characters. I specifically remember when I first noticed a name other than Natalie Wood for Maria's singing voice and realizing that *both* actresses were white. As disappointing as I found this, I knew that the message in *West Side Story* was deeper, and the story couldn't be defined by poor casting decisions. I find it helpful to distinguish that the casting choices in the 1961 adaptation were made to increase the audience's tolerance to a biracial love story. Maria, a Puerto Rican being played by a white actress, softened the blow for a society still grappling with racism. Nevertheless, it seemed like there was a reason I felt so connected to the music, and how the music made me feel so connected to Tony and Maria's story.

When closely considered, composer Leonard Bernstein's musical choices point to an actual awareness of the racial prejudices present in teen life in the 1950s in *West Side Story*. What I discovered is how he managed to highlight this awareness through the actual composition of the music. Through his use of composition tools and ideas, most notably the tritone and the use of consonant and dissonant sounds, Bernstein dives into an analysis on racially driven violence and whether or not love can ever overcome it. *West Side Story* was written as a retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, but Leonard Bernstein effectively transformed the narrative to depict the culture of post-war New York City and unanswerable questions that ultimately surrounds the musical.

Romeo and Juliet

Although Bernstein used the score to reconstruct the context of *West Side Story*, the narrative he presents in his composition not only comments on the drive behind the story's conflict but also maintains the classic Shakespearean themes.

Just as *Romeo and Juliet* examines the relationship between star-crossed love and hatred based on class, Bernstein begs the question of whether or not Tony and Maria's love is stronger than the racially motivated hate held between Maria's family, The Sharks, and Tony's Jets.

Bernardo, Maria's brother, would be the Capulet Tybalt in the *Romeo and Juliet* world. Riff, the leading member of the Jets and Tony's best friend, Mercutio. The character of the nurse is represented by Anita. Her lines are strong and witty, and she is the voice of reason, not only comforting Maria through her pain but always having a clear understanding of the true conflict taking place. She is the one worried about Bernardo, her boyfriend, and the rest of the Sharks as she sees violence unfold. She tells him, "Well, I mind your nose and your head broken... They

used Maria as an excuse to start World War III,” (West). Here, Anita touches on an important question examined throughout the musical. Is the racial tension between the groups much bigger than Tony and Maria’s story? Will this kind of conflict ever really be settled? Bernstein himself was known to be a human rights enthusiast who craved peace in humanity. At the New York University, the Bernstein Institute for Human Rights still researches and advocates on equality issues throughout the world today, so it is not so out of the question that Bernstein would have been considering these big questions in his artwork. The biased conflict between the Jets and the Sharks, enhanced by the music, not only outlines the harsh realities of street violence and disenfranchised, corrupted youth but also comments clearly on racial tension and corrupt policing. Maria and Tony’s story confronts racial problems not present in the Shakespearean original, but the idea of love and hate is still at the center of Bernstein’s plot, and both of these ideas can be understood through examining the specific dissonant sounds he presents as musical motifs.

The Tri-Tone

As I set out to learn what it was about the score that made *West Side Story* so transcendent, I quickly realized I would have to give myself a basic lesson in music theory to truly understand. What I learned is that in music, as opposed to a Pentatonic scale (which has only 5 notes) when we listen to a Major scale (with 7 notes), we get this urge to hear it “finish,” or to resolve. This need for a resolve comes from the two extra notes in the Major scale, which, when played together, create a jarring, dissonant sound that almost feels like it needs another note to be complete (Kogan). The feeling the tritone gives is why it has been called “The Devils Interval” and why, before Bernstein, it had not seen much use in Broadway musical scores. Other intervals in music are terms like the perfect fourth or fifth, which would sound like one note

played with a note 4 whole steps above it, for a perfect fourth, or five whole steps above it, for a perfect fifth. These are all terms for ways that musicians explain the space between two notes, and where to find that sound on a scale, and the words “perfect” and “augmented” describe *how* the intervals sound to the ear. The tritone is one of these spacings with a particularly dissonant sound. Throughout the score, it does not always show up in the same form but it is woven into the songs of the musical. To keep it simple, Bernstein used the tritone in different keys throughout the score, and in some cases, with different following intervals to resolve it, like the perfect 4th. The idea of resolving and not resolving certain motifs is where we can really examine how *West Side Story* is truly about the aggression that the Sharks faced from the Jets, and about what truly prevails at the end of the story: Love or Hate.

Conflict Motif

Perhaps the sound heard most throughout the score is what is known as the “Conflict” motif, also called the “Hate” or “Discord” motif. Right from the first scene, this shows up in the music whenever either gang mentions their opposer, when they mention the rumble, and most importantly in moments of confrontation. Here the tritone can be heard clearly, as the motif is jarring and suspenseful. It suggests violence in the plot. In the overture especially, where the Jets and Sharks dance-fight through their turf on the New York City streets, the Conflict motif is repeated many times, as Bernstein sets the mood for the rest of the story. Perhaps the most important thing about the Conflict motif is how Bernstein uses it to point to the racial intolerance that the Jets and the police display to the Puerto Rican characters. While it is used for both gangs, both tritone motifs (the Jets and the Conflict) are more musically associated

with the Jets than with the Sharks. While the conflict motif shows up during fighting, *and* sometimes when the Jets are just talking, it *never* appears in scenes with only the Sharks.

Jets Motif

The Jets motif is what everyone thinks of when they hear the words “West Side Story.” Most easily recognized in “Jet Song” the Motif plays often in the show, whenever the Jets are joking around together or hanging out at Doc’s candy shop. The tritone in the Jets motif does not resolve musically when we hear it. It’s used to show loyalty to the Jets, and the brotherhood that

Fig. 1 - Jet motive



they feel. During their signature song, as they prepare for the dance at the Gym, the Jets leader, Riff, assures the other boys that

Tony will be at the dance with them and that he’s a loyal brother. As Riff is saying the words, “Now I know Tony like I know me, and I guarantee you can count him in!” The Jet motif plays in the background. However, when the audience first actually meet Tony, there is silence until he starts to sing his song “Something’s Coming.” Tony has already moved on from the Jets, and *his* musical identity is tied to Maria, and Bernstein is already telling us this through the music.

Even though this motif is for the Jets, Bernstein uses it to show how the police in West Side Story clearly take their side in the street conflict. When the Sharks and Jets are jostling around on the Basketball courts in the opening scene, we are introduced to Officer Shenck and the famous Officer Krupke. When they are first introduced, the Jets motif plays in the background. So, even from the beginning, it is clear that Bernstein is sending a deliberate message with the placement of these motifs.

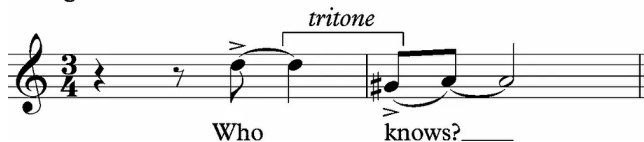
By exclusively using the conflict motif with the Jets and the Police, and by using the Jets motif to initially introduce the Police to the audience, Bernstein effectively associates hate and

discrimination with the Jets gang and shows how the police favored the white kids on the street. Bernstein gives the Jets a notable musical identity, while the only time the Sharks really express themselves is in “America” and “Dance at the Gym” where they mambo. The rest of the time, the Sharks defend themselves from the racist taunting and often violent threats from the Jets.

“Somethings Coming”

Bernstein also uses the idea of musical resolution to make comments on the strength of each character in different scenes. He purposefully resolves melodies when the audience is watching Tony or Maria, providing a sense of safety and satisfaction, but takes that resolve away when showing us the real tension that cuts through the love story. In “Somethings Coming,” Bernstein resolves the tritone that the audience has just heard in “Jet Song.” So, even though we all aren’t musical geniuses and can recognize when the music we hear is resolving or not, what

Fig. 3 - Tritone resolution



we can definitely do is feel the mood of that music as we watch. Even if it is subconscious, because of the music, we know that Tony is happier when he is not with the Jets. Bernstein

intended for audiences to feel that the score, and the whole West Side Story world, falls into place when Tony and Maria are together. In an essay on Bernstein’s use of the tritone for From Score to Screen, Kerry Fergus explains:

“A descending tritone can be resolved in one of two ways: by moving half a pitch up to the (perfect) fourth or by shifting half a step down to the perfect fifth. In this case, Tony resolves his initial tritone by moving to the perfect fourth on the lyric, “who knows.” (Fergus).

“Maria”

This quote by Fergus pinpoints exactly how specific Bernstein was in resolving these tritones. Just as he finds a way to resolve the harsh tri tone in “Somethings Coming,” Bernstein gives Tony another resolution when he sings “Maria.” The famous West Side Story tritone is most plainly heard in the first two syllables of Maria’s name. Directly after, Bernstein resolves the tritone to the perfect fifth. This resolution is, in the music world, considered a more powerful resolution. The best explanation I could find for why this is is because the perfect 4th sounds a fraction more dissonant than the perfect 5th (Kogan). Bernstein chooses *stronger* ways to resolve the melodies when Tony and Maria are in scenes together, or singing about each other, showing how their love strengthens the music around them. When Tony and Maria are together, the

Fig. 4 - "Maria"



strongest, most sturdily supported melodies

can be heard. In fact, in many of their duets,

like “Somewhere” and “Tonight,” the tritone,

the Devil’s Interval, cannot be plainly heard anywhere. This points even more specifically to the

idea that Bernstein was utilizing this tritone to convey conflict and tragedy. Fergus also states:

“That being said, it is surprising that Bernstein features the tritone at all in a love song. Perhaps the presence of this uncomfortable interval is an indication that the threat of violence still looms over this relationship. Tony might be oblivious to the possible ramifications of this union. The audience is not.” (Fergus).

Above, Fergus touches on a key element of *West Side Story*, which is that these lovers are doomed, and the audience knows it. While the aesthetic choices of *West Side Story* are full of bright, flourishing colors and wild dances, with the tritone, Bernstein manages to maintain this feeling of dread throughout the narrative, finalizing with an ominous musical inquiry.

Final Scene

The final pages of music for *West Side Story* reflect on the battle between Love and Hate, ending the musical with an open-ended, tragic air. While both Romeo and Juliet die in their story, Bernstein defeats Maria in another way. After the rumble, as the Sharks and Jets stand around Tony's body, Maria screams at them for their violence: "You all killed him! And my brother! And Riff! Not with bullets and knives! With hate! Well, I can kill now too, because now I have hate!" But, she drops the gun she is pointing at them and falls next to Tony.

As she holds him in her arms, she sings their lines from "Somewhere," but she sings with no music, no resolving melody that they had before. As the two gangs come together to carry Tony away, the music fades in. In the final notes, the music battles between Tony and Maria's melody from "Somewhere" and the infamous Devil's Tritone. As Maria trails off and the music takes up the melody, Bernstein adds in the tritone between F# and C from the very beginning. As this tritone is played against Tony and Maria's theme, the music frames the fundamental battle between Tony and Maria's love ("Somewhere") and all the racially motivated violence and hate in their world (the tritone).

With this musical narrative and commentary included in the score almost so intricately that it could stand alone, Leonard Bernstein effectively revolutionized the art of writing a musical. *West Side Story* shows how even something as complex as racial conflict can be explained through music in a delicate yet powerful way. The music tells the story on its own, strengthening when the star-crossed lovers come together and never resolving when they are apart. By creating stronger, more sonically pleasing musical sounds to accompany the love story, and deeper, unsettling sounds to highlight the racial violence and intolerance, Bernstein asks the question: Can love conquer hate? While the Jets and the Sharks coming together to carry Tony

away suggest a resolution, Maria's newfound hate suggests a much larger, timeless dilemma. Perhaps Bernstein gives away his intention for posing this question in *West Side Story* with the quote below.

“A work of art does not answer questions, it provokes them; and its essential meaning is in the tension between the contradictory answers.”

- Leonard Bernstein

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