

## FOUR YOUNG AMERICANS

Represented by major works in New York this year

Sketched by B. DOLBIN



LEONARD BERNSTEIN



LUKAS FOSS



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NORMAN DELLO JOIO

## YOUNG AMERICA: BERNSTEIN AND FOSS

IRVING FINE

IN 1938 Leonard Bernstein was reviewing Boston's season for MODERN MUSIC. The contributors' page described him briefly as a young Harvard music student, but made little mention of his many extra-curricular activities. His extraordinary memory and his flair for improvisation were almost legendary at college. I remember with great nostalgia his appearance as piano accompanist at a series of historical films presented by the Harvard Film Society. *The Battleship Potemkin* rode at anchor to the accompaniment of Copland's *Piano Variations*, excerpts from *Petrouchka* and Bernstein's own paraphrases of Russian folksongs.

Many Harvard Music Club programs would have been lost if Bernstein had not been willing to tackle, almost at sight, anything from the Stravinsky *Concerto for Two Solo Pianos* to a work by one of his fellow students. At these club meetings he performed some of his own earlier essays. Sketches for *Jeremiah* date from approximately this period. His gaudy score for the Harvard Classical Club's production of Aristophanes' *The Birds* was notable, if for no other reason for the completely up-to-date and jazzy manner in which he set classical Greek poetry. A mock solemn processional in this youthful farce became, six years later, the chase music that accompanies the changes of scene in *On the Town*.

It is difficult to regard Bernstein's style today from the standpoint of a body of practices consistently employed. Numerous influences are at work on his music, and one doubts that they are completely fused. His indebtedness to Copland is great, but neither Copland nor anyone else is predominant in his style. With Bernstein the dramatic and emotional elements get first consideration and stylistic derivations are of minor importance. These derivations are in his music because they correspond to the emotional attitude he wishes to express, but for which he has found no equivalent personal expression. In one way this is healthy, for he can write without the self-consciousness that hampers many who desire originality at all cost. Yet a franker avowal of his models might provide a unifying core for expanding development.

Bernstein's harmonic vocabulary obviously reflects the diversity of his stylistic influences. He shares the popular preference for chords in which the roots are either concealed or omitted altogether, and for that much maligned mainstay of his contemporaries, the ostinato. The juxtaposition of these elements with rhythmic asymmetry at times recalls Stravinsky, as in this excerpt from the pas de deux in *Fancy Free*.



This ballet, like the last movement of the *Clarinet Sonata* and most of the *Seven Anniversaries*, is pan-diatonic and tends toward harmonic staticity. When, and again we refer to *Fancy Free*, emphasis is placed upon interval contrast (what Boulanger calls "composing with intervals") the result can be very pretty.



The periodic and repetitive phrasing, which gives the impression of a constant and unsuccessful striving to get away from the starting point, serves only to underline the music's static quality. Later the convulsive change to boogie-woogie is quite original and superb theatre.

Not all Bernstein's music is as diatonic. While at Tanglewood he came under the spell of Hindemith. The results may be seen in the *Clarinet Sonata*. In this ingratiating piece, especially its first movement, the harmony has more motion and the writing is more contrapuntal than usual. Less attractive are the few instances of post-Wagnerian chromaticism in *Jeremiah*.

Bernstein's rhythmic devices are common practice in American music. A partiality for jazz and Latin American meters is especially noticeable in *Fancy Free* and in the ballet sequences of *On the Town*. And, as in this

example from the *Rite* from *Jeremiah*,



he inherits from Copland a fondness for rapidly pulsating eighth-note rhythms, asymmetrically grouped in twos and threes. (Bernstein inclines to asymmetry even in slower tempi.)

One should not expect from so youthful a composer an individual orchestral style. From an orthodox standpoint, his may even seem incomplete. Yet the strength of his instinct leads him to striking effects, such as the astonishing ping of the percussive sonorities in *Jeremiah's* second movement.

Bernstein's mind is agile and intuitive, if not overly introspective. The blending of sophistication and naïveté in his music has great popular appeal, especially when it is combined with such a strong dramatic sense. Though not a conscious popularist like Blitzstein, he may be far more successful in leading the way to a truly modern popular style. This direction has attendant dangers for the composition of serious music. When dramatic effectiveness is emphasized refinements may fall by the wayside. Bernstein does not belong to the *note choisie* school. In the improvisational élan of the music, hiatuses in the harmony go unheeded, as do occasional lapses of taste. But in such a work as *Jeremiah*, these defects seem insignificant in relation to the loftiness of the conception.

On the basis of his present output, Bernstein's talents appear most appropriate to the theatre. The gift for brilliant improvisation, the flair for striking and not too subtle contrasts, the free rein he gives to sentiment, his relative objectivity — does this not all suggest the theatre composer? But it is dangerous to make any prediction about this young man. He can be anything he wants to be, providing he wants it hard enough.

### III

Lukas Foss and Bernstein were fellow students at Curtis Institute and protégés of Koussevitzky at the Berkshire Music Center. To the American public they are the twin prodigies, the fair-haired boys of the contemporary musical scene. Foss has had a less spectacular popular success, since his achievements are those chiefly of a composer. He is, however, a virtuoso pianist and has conducting aspirations.

He is now twenty-two years old. (Bernstein is twenty-six.) Since he began writing, at seven, he has turned out an enormous amount of music, much of which he naturally chooses to forget, though he marvels at his temerity in undertaking two operas before he had even begun to shave. In the early days his models were Bach and Haydn. But when he was fourteen one of his teachers introduced him to contemporary music, specifically the *Violin Sonata in E* by Hindemith, on whose style Foss was completely sold, at least for four or five years. Later he studied composition under Hindemith at the Berkshire Music Center.

The earliest work he cares to acknowledge is the *Four Two-Voiced Inventions* for piano, written in 1938 shortly after he came to this country from Paris. (He was born in Berlin.) The technic is clearly that of Hindemith's *Reihe Kleiner Stücke* with their dissonant counterpoint which is freely chromatic yet tonal. The writing ranges extensively in its registers and apes Hindemith's baroque ornamentation. Still these inventions have considerable individuality. The third is quite remarkable for smoothness of melodic contour and rhythmic flow. The freshness of Foss's music at this period comes partly from its charming, almost Haydnesque tunefulness. A neat inspiration is the middle section of the second invention, the continuation of which, too long to quote here, is especially interesting.\*



Here is another example of this melodic charm from the *March* for two pianos.



His music at this time (though the following criticism does not apply to the inventions) often lacks harmonic refinement. An occasional crude sonority comes from indifference to the problems of spacing. Also the texture is frequently complicated by a youthful passion for imitation and contrapuntal accompaniments when the thematic material is essentially homophonic. For his chord vocabulary, Foss seems to share Hindemith's partiality toward harmonic tensions which derive from the use of perfect fourths and fifths and major seconds, with occasional melodic doublings at the fourth or fifth. Recurring elements, all of which con-

\* Musical illustrations from works of Lukas Foss by permission of G. Schirmer, Inc. Copyright — *Four Two-Voiced Inventions*, 1938; *Grotesque Dance*, 1938; *March*, 1940; *Passacaglia*, 1941; *The Prairie*, 1944.

tinue with modifications into the more recent music, are (a) a modal cadential formula taken directly from Hindemith, (b) a fondness for false relations and (c) the simultaneous use of major and minor thirds, reminiscent of the jazz blue note.



In the *Passacaglia* for piano and the *Concerto* for piano and orchestra, both transitional pieces, these devices, especially the false relations, become more conspicuous. Yet the tendency is away from Hindemith, toward a more romantic style, with rich almost over-ripe harmonies.

The *Concerto* was originally conceived as a clarinet trio, then rewritten as a clarinet concerto. In its final shape it had accumulated new themes, a few additional purple harmonies, and one or two mannerisms. Stylistically it is one of Foss's most heterogeneous concoctions, but the first movement has some delicious themes. The Haydnesque lyricism of the earlier pieces veers slightly toward a sentimental combination of Schumann's expressiveness and Grieg's two-bar limp. This is less true in the second movement, which seems most coherent formally and most sustained in expression. The shortwinded Finale shows Foss aware of Stravinskian neo-classicism for the first and last time.

One notices a growing tendency in this piece to resort to construction of themes by symmetrically repeated fragments, which are in turn extended by sequence. However this device is used not only for phrase extension but also for climactic effects, in the manner of the romantics. In his most recent work Foss has aggravated this sequential tendency by the addition of ostinato rhythms. Such a combination is, of course, a sure-fire method of generating excitement.

There has been much nonsense heard lately about Foss's desire to be "one of the boys," to be known as an indigenous American composer. Some time before he started his magnum opus, *The Prairie*, his attitude toward musical expression was undergoing a change. He had conducted Copland's *Billy the Kid* suite during the 1941 session of the Berkshire Music Center and was ready for a new influence anyway. It was natural that Copland and cowboy Americana should fascinate this intensely lyrical young composer.



*The Prairie* was an extremely ambitious undertaking. This big step forward produced one of the most impressive contributions to American choral literature during the past two decades. Though exception can be taken to such technical details as propulsive ostinati, repetitions and frequent squareness of phrasing, they seem minor beside the work's generous emotion and its extraordinary wealth of invention. The influence of Copland is strong, especially in the opening measures, but it can be overestimated, for Foss's writing is more contrapuntal and has not achieved Copland's transparency. The harmony too is both richer and less pure. But at its best the work, beside being impressive, achieves an individual and sensitive lyricism.



Of his most recent compositions the *Ode* seems the weakest, though to hear Foss play it on the piano is an exciting experience. The overblown romanticism is esthetically not far removed from Liszt's *Funérailles*, and weaknesses in orchestration impair the effect. Much of the middle section's incisive thematic material, for instance, must be swallowed up in the hectic piano figuration assigned to strings. More dangerous however is the increasing tendency to build climax upon climax and to become over-sentimental in his harmony.

The writer's acquaintance with the *Symphony in G* is slight. However, it confirms the impression that Foss is developing an individual style that is more tonal, less dissonant, and perhaps more conservative than his earlier manner. The Scherzo in particular has a fine exuberance. In achievement, the symphony deserves to rank at least as high as *The Prairie*.

Foss is one of the most gifted composers who has appeared on the American scene. Endowed with enthusiasm and native talent to spare, he needs only the achievement of complete technical mastery to assure him a place high among the composers of our time.