

Chichester Psalms

Leonard Bernstein was one of America's most eclectic composers and musicians. Pianist, conductor, writer lecturer, classical composer, Broadway songwriter: all combine in describing this amazing man.

In 1964 he was given a sabbatical from the New York Philharmonic, and he decided "to use that year only to compose...And I wrote a lot of music, twelve-tone music and avant-garde music of various kinds, and a lot of it was very good, and I threw it all away." One of his intentions was to use this time to write a Broadway Musical based on "The Skin Of Our Teeth" by Thornton Wilder, but this was not completed.

In that same year, Bernstein was commissioned by the Very Rev Walter Hussey of the Cathedral of Chichester to write something for their annual Grand Music Festival which included three cathedrals: Winchester, Salisbury, and Chichester, a collaboration dating from the seventeenth century. His request mentioned: "I think many of us would be very delighted if there was a hint of 'West Side Story' about the music..." In fact, Reverend Hussey did get a bit of Broadway: six of the seven songs derived from "The Skin of our Teeth" and the seventh came from a piece planned, and later discarded, for West Side Story titled "Mix." In his sabbatical year, Chichester Psalms was the composer's only completed work.

The work is divided into three movements. The first begins with a powerful opening whose theme is repeated in other sections of the work, followed by a rhythmic setting in 7/4 meter. Movement two begins with a boy solo singing Psalm 23 and is interrupted by the men singing "Why do the nations rage" (from Psalm 2) a tune originally designed to be sung by the Jets and Sharks in Westside Story. The two themes are then combined. Part three begins with a prelude followed by a haunting melody in an unusual 10/4 meter originally meant to be a love song in "The Skin Of Our Teeth" The movement closes with a beautiful benediction from Psalm 133.

- John Drotleff