

Symphony no. 1, *Jeremiah*
by Leonard Bernstein (1918 – 1990)

Duration: Approximately 25 minutes

First Performance: January 28, 1944 in Pittsburgh

Last ESO Performance: June, 2007; Ollie Watts Davis, mezzo-soprano; Robert Hanson, conductor

In the spring of 1939 Leonard Bernstein received his diploma *cum laude* from Harvard, and, like many another college graduate, wondered what to do next. His father, Sam Bernstein, tried to woo him into his prosperous beauty supply business, an offer which he firmly refused. (It must be admitted that the notion of Leonard Bernstein selling hair products is a delightfully surrealistic image.) He went instead to New York for the summer, where he rented a roach-infested apartment with his friend Adolph Green (the future lyricist and writer of Broadway and Hollywood fame). In addition to pondering his future, cavorting with bohemian friends, and lounging around Greenwich Village nightspots, he began work on *Lamentation*, a piece for soprano and orchestra set, in Hebrew, to a text from the Lamentations of Jeremiah.

It is possible that Bernstein intended from the beginning that *Lamentation* would be part of a larger work. In any case, the sketch made that summer was put aside as he enrolled at the Curtis Institute for two years to study primarily conducting and piano. The impetus to complete the work came in 1942 in the form of a competition sponsored by the New England Conservatory of Music. The young composer was particularly eager to make an impression because the chairman of the jury was Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the man who had already become his mentor and surrogate father figure. Bernstein had decided to add two orchestral movements and use the *Lamentation* as the finale of his first symphony. The deadline for entry into the competition was the last day of 1942, which Bernstein met only after many sleepless nights and the assistance of his sister Shirley and what she called “a small army of friends” to do the copying. Bernstein and a friend hopped a train from New York and the friend delivered the manuscript, anonymously as the rules required, to Koussevitzky’s Boston apartment at about 10:00 p.m. on New Year’s Eve.

Although Koussevitzky was not impressed with the symphony and Bernstein did not win the competition, the new work soon attracted attention. Harms Publishing was eager to publish it, and, best of all, Bernstein received a call from his former conducting teacher at Curtis, the redoubtable Fritz Reiner. Reiner, who would cap his career with a memorable stint as conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, was then conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and he offered Bernstein the opportunity to conduct the premiere of his new symphony in Pittsburgh. Generous as the offer was, there seems also to have been some measure of ulterior motive. Reiner, a notoriously testy and thin-skinned fellow, was apparently jealous that Koussevitzky, a major conducting rival, was receiving most of the public recognition as Bernstein’s mentor.

Reiner's ploy proved successful- the Pittsburgh premiere in January of 1944 was a sensational triumph for Bernstein both as composer and conductor and Reiner could bask in the reflected glory of his protégé. Koussevitzky himself had apparently overcome his misgivings about the symphony and gave Bernstein the opportunity to conduct it with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in February. Following that, Bernstein, who had already been appointed assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic, conducted it four times in New York. In May, the New York Critics Circle voted the symphony the best new work of the season.

The *Jeremiah* Symphony may have structural flaws, as critics have been quick to point out, but it is a stunning achievement for a 24 year old composer, and has proven to be a remarkably durable addition to the small number of symphonies by American composers that have managed to hold a place in the symphonic repertoire. Although Bernstein took pains to say that the instrumental portions of the work were not to be taken as literal story telling, the extra- musical associations clearly dominate the entire work and had deep personal significance for the composer. To begin with, the symphony is dedicated to Bernstein's father, with whom he had a loving but somewhat problematic relationship. Among the issues between them was Sam Bernstein's opposition to his son's plans for a musical career. The elder Bernstein, himself the immigrant son of a rabbi, didn't want his son to be a *klezmer*, a wandering musician who never knew whence his next meal would come. If not the hair business, then why not become a rabbi? It was not until his son's spectacular debut as conductor of the New York Philharmonic in November of 1943 that Sam Bernstein became reconciled to his son's career choice, and it was then that the young composer decided to dedicate his first symphony to his father. The entire family drama was deftly summarized by Papa Bernstein's often quoted line, "How could I know that my son would grow up to be Leonard Bernstein?"

Despite their differences, Sam Bernstein's influence on his son was considerable. A deeply religious man and a scholar of holy writ, he was fond of quoting from the Talmud and would sing in the shower the same Hebrew chants which deeply moved his young son in the synagogue. Although in his own program notes the composer has written that "the symphony does not make use to any great extent of actual Hebrew thematic material," it seems that he may have used more of such music than he himself was aware of. Bernstein's longtime friend and assistant Jack Gottlieb has made a careful analysis of the work and found a number of melodic references to Hebrew liturgy, some of which may have been unconscious in a young composer who had been steeped in the tradition.

The *Lamentation*, with its impassioned setting for mezzo-soprano of the words of Jeremiah mourning the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., remains the center of gravity of the whole work, the opening two instrumental movements serving as a kind of prologue. Both Fritz Reiner and the composer's father urged him to add a fast fourth movement that would be more optimistic in tone, but it was advice that Bernstein stubbornly resisted.

The somber opening movement ("Prophecy") represents Jeremiah's castigation of his people for their corruption and lack of faith and his prediction of dire consequences if they continue to ignore God's laws. As the composer himself has written, the music tries "to parallel in feeling the intensity of the prophet's pleas with his people." According to

Jack Gottlieb, the principal theme of this movement is derived from the High Holy Day liturgy.

The second movement is a scherzo (“Profanation”), whose frenetic, irregular rhythms give, as Bernstein says, “a general sense of the destruction and chaos brought on by the pagan corruption within the priesthood and the people.” Listeners familiar with Bernstein’s *West Side Story* style may recognize a foretaste of those jazzy rhythms here. The first theme of this movement comes from melodies used to chant the Bible on the Sabbath, and which, as Mr. Gottlieb says, “are well-known to those who chant Bible passages in preparation for Bar Mitzvah.”

The finale is, again in Bernstein’s own words, “the cry of Jeremiah as he mourns his beloved Jerusalem, ruined, pillaged, and dishonored after his desperate attempts to save it.” Mr. Gottlieb has identified several dirge chants sung in the Hebrew liturgy to mourn the destruction of the Temple which are used in this movement. Finally, the primary theme of the first movement is heard again, indicating that Jeremiah’s grim prophecy has come to pass.

Early works can often provide clues to an artist’s entire life work. Mr. Bernstein would say later that his youthful symphony was about the primary crisis of the twentieth century, a crisis of faith. “I wouldn’t say that it’s God up there watching over me, as much as me down here looking up to find Him – I guess you would call that a chief concern of my life.”

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Symphony No. 4 in G major
by Gustav Mahler (1860 -1911)

Duration: Approximately 54 minutes

First Performance: November 25, 1901 in Munich

Last ESO Performance: April, 1996; Karyn Stewart, soprano; Robert Hanson, conductor

Among the most important legacies of nineteenth century Romanticism was a new kind of nationalism, which in addition to its obvious political effects had a profound influence on the arts. According to theorists of the time, the state received its political legitimacy from a particular unified ethnic group (*Volk* in German) that expressed its essence through a common language, culture, and set of traditions, thus superseding the old concept of the divine right of kings. Such Romantic nationalism, or identity nationalism as it is sometimes called, led not only to movements for national independence among many European ethnic groups but also greatly stimulated interest in the study of national folklores. There was no better way to discover the true nature of such a society, said the thinkers of the time, than by studying its folklore and folk culture.

One of the most important expressions of these ideas in the German speaking world was the publication in 1805 and in 1808 of several volumes of folk songs and poems called *Des Knaben Wunderhorn (The Boy's Magic Horn)*, edited by the poets Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim. Although taken as a model of folk culture, it must be admitted that the collection was considerably revised by its editors, who were highly sophisticated and ambitious poets in their own right, and who actually included some of their own original work. The result was a kind of idealized folk poetry which had an enormous popular impact, causing Goethe, that ultimate arbiter of German culture, to say that the collection "has its place in every household". Brentano and Arnim, incidentally, were strong influences on the brothers Grimm in their exploration of German folk tales.

In that most musical of cultures, it was inevitable that the *Wunderhorn* would make its way into the music of the time, and composers such as Weber, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms all made use of its poems. The composer who became most closely associated with the collection, however, was Gustav Mahler, who called the *Wunderhorn* his favorite book and treated it with a kind of obsessive, almost religious reverence. In addition to his many settings of individual poems, he also wove them into a number of his early symphonies, to the point that many Mahler scholars refer to Symphonies One through Four as the "*Wunderhorn* symphonies."

In 1892, Mahler completed a setting of the *Wunderhorn* song *Der Himmel hängt voll Geigen (Heaven is Filled with Violins)*, which he renamed *Das himmlische Leben (The Heavenly Life)*. The poem is a child's view of heaven, carefully describing its many delights, including good music, good food, and many saints for good company. A few years later, Mahler contemplated using the song as the finale to his Third Symphony, but changed his mind, instead working fragments of the tune into the work, as well as using several other *Wunderhorn* songs. He eventually decided to use it as the conclusion of the Fourth symphony instead, which was written during the years 1899-1901 and premiered in Munich in 1901, with the composer himself conducting.

In contrast to the gigantic Third Symphony, which is scored for huge forces and lasts a full hour and a half, the Fourth is one of the shortest of Mahler's symphonies and uses the smallest orchestra (no trombones or tuba), making it, as one historian put it, by Mahlerian standards "practically a miniature." The Fourth is a beguiling mixture of innocence and sophistication that bewildered many early listeners as it dealt with some of the issues referred to above as part of the Romantic philosophy. Philosophers such as Rousseau had preached that civilization was a great corrupter of mankind and that the best life was the simple one of simple folk. Mahler himself was, of course, the product of high culture, the very model of a modernist, hyper-sophisticated urbanite who nevertheless seems to have had an obsession with lost innocence and a nostalgic longing for a simpler time. Thus it is that he chose to end this symphony not with high-flown philosophy but with the wisdom of a child.

Like Leonard Bernstein in his *Jeremiah* Symphony, by choosing to end his symphony with the sung word, Mahler was compelled to work backward. In various remarks that he made about the symphony, it is clear that he was concerned that listeners realize that the first three movements carefully prepare and find their ultimate meaning in the final movement. The symphony opens with a rustic touch, the chirping sound of flutes and sleigh bells that will reappear at important structural points in the movement as well

as in the finale. (In some other symphonies he would go even further in the quest for rusticity by actually using cowbells.) The movement continues with a more typical sonata form than is usual in Mahler, with the conventional layout of two contrasting themes. At one point in the development section, the flutes introduce a new theme which, as it floats in the high register, seems to give a foretaste of the heaven that awaits us in the finale.

If the rustic good humor of the first movement was unusually cheerful for Mahler, the second movement presents us with one of his sinister scherzos and acquaints us with his well known obsession with death. Mahler named the movement *Freund Hein spielt auf*, which might be freely translated as “Brother Death Strikes Up a Tune.” According to Mahler’s wife Alma, the movement was inspired by a painting by the artist Arnold Böcklin in which he depicts himself as listening to Death playing a *danse macabre* on the violin. In this case, the tune is played by a violin tuned higher than usual and playing in an aggressive style to sound “like a fiddle”, or country instrument, as the composer himself marked it in the part. As usual in scherzo movements , there is a contrasting section , which in this case presents a merrier mood.

The third movement is a vast, extremely sophisticated theme and variations that juxtaposes a wide variety of moods. The movement begins with some of the most radiantly beautiful writing for strings in all of Mahler. The composer himself, who incidentally, considered this his finest slow movement, said that he had been inspired by a church sepulchre with its reclining figures of the dead , “their arms closed in eternal peace. “ In addition to serene music , however, we hear some of Mahler’s searingly emotional style as well as a carnival –like outburst in one variation. Finally, just as the music has returned to serenity and seems about to close, comes the pivotal point of the symphony. A huge outburst by the orchestra in the new and unexpected key of E major presents a triumphant view of heaven as horns and trumpets announce what will be the theme of the last movement while the timpani joyously hammers out the all important first and fifth notes of the new key (tonic and dominant , in technical jargon) . The outburst quickly calms down, however, as the music returns to the home key of G major and quietly connects to the child-like innocence of the finale.

As might be expected of a heavenly scene, the tone is mostly one of serenity and delight, introduced by the simple, folk-like theme in the clarinet and then echoed by the soprano. (Lest there be any doubt about his intent, Mahler even bothers to instruct the singer in the score that the song must be sung without irony.) Even here , though, we glimpse a darker side , as the quick perceptions of a child notice the fact that the delicious meal means the death of animals. There are also solemn chords in a minor key heard first at the words “St. Peter in heaven looks on”, indicating a change of mood. The composer himself put it this way: “It is not that heaven itself really dims: on the contrary it shines on and on in its eternal blue. It is only that we sometimes react to it with sudden terror, just as on the most beautiful day, when the woods are drenched in sunlight, one is suddenly gripped by a panic fear.”

Finally, however, in the final stanza of the song the music moves unexpectedly to the key of E major that was forecast at the end of the third movement and achieves a blissful serenity. In an earlier age the idea of ending a symphony in G major in any other key was unheard of. Mahler , however, was an important user of “progressive tonality,” as it is known in the technical jargon, and feels free to flout the age-old principle.

Here, E major acts as a metaphor for heaven. As the music quietly trails off into infinity, we feel that we have arrived not only at a new key but at a new and better place.

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