

REBELS WITH A CAUSE

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

TIMELINKS

1924

GERSHWIN

Rhapsody in Blue
(Original Jazz Band
Version)

First coast-to-coast radio
broadcast

1960

BERNSTEIN

Symphonic Dances from
West Side Story
Psycho premieres

1999

MICHAEL DAUGHERTY

Hell's Angels
The Sopranos debuts on
HBO

2011

ANDREW NORMAN

Try
Osama bin Laden killed
by U.S. special forces in
Pakistan

The question, “What is American music?” was asked in a 1924 *New York Tribune* article announcing an experimental music concert by Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra that would attempt to broaden the definition of so-called “serious” music. It’s a question still worth being asked today. One possible answer being offered by the four pieces on the program tonight is that American music is inherently revolutionary, whether it’s combining jazz and classical, as Gershwin did, defying the conventions of Broadway like Bernstein, striving toward the unknown like Norman, or using it to perform a wheelie at 80 m.p.h., like Daugherty. American music breaks rules.

MICHAEL DAUGHERTY

Hell's Angels

REBEL YELLS *Get yer motor runnin'...Head out on the highway....*

With a repertoire that includes Steppenwolf’s “Born to Be Wild,” the Shangri-Las’s “Leader of the Pack,” Meat Loaf’s “Bat Out of Hell,” and Montrose’s “Bad Motor Scooter,” you might think that rock ‘n’ roll pretty much has the genre of motorcycle epics sewn up.

Not so, thanks to Michael Daugherty’s *Hell’s Angels*, a roaring, chaotic mini-concerto based on the titular outlaw biker gang. The piece substitutes long, tubular bassoons for the unmuffled drag-pipes of Harley-Davidson motorcycles, creating a commotion sure to upset the neighborhood. Somebody call the authorities!

Time and again, Daugherty has made it his mission to disrupt the often staid world of the concert hall. The Grammy-winning composer (in 2011, for *Deus ex machina*) draws frequently from American pop culture and has written pieces based on Vegas lounge music (*Le Tombeau de Liberator*), Superman comics (*Metropolis Symphony*), and the King of Rock and Roll (the noted—and notorious—*Dead Elvis*, written for chamber

ensemble and a solo bassoonist dressed as an Elvis impersonator).

Hell's Angels, a rare piece written for bassoon quartet—three bassoons and a contrabassoon—deals with something beyond the mundane rumble of motorcycles. Indeed, the very concepts of Heaven and Hell are introduced.

First, Hell. The piece opens with a low fugue of bassoons, soon joined by cacophonous, polyrhythmic percussion and the boom, rattle, and clash of a bass drum, metal chains, and a thundersheet. Later, Heaven is introduced as the bassoonists strain to play in the highest register the instrument will allow, accompanied by harp and celeste.

Eventually, variations on the themes overlap and race toward the finish at breakneck speed, and the piece plunges headlong into the abyss.

Heady stuff, for sure. But *Hell's Angels* is still more about motorcycles than metaphysics. As Daugherty has said, it's "the musical tale of a gang of hot-rodding motorcycling bassoonists who ride into town and take over a concert hall."

Does all of this make Daugherty a rebel? And if so, what is he rebelling against?

As Marlon Brando said in *The Wild One*, "Whattya got?"

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

STAR CROSSED The history of American musical theater might have been entirely different had *West Side Story* gone forward with the unfortunate title it wore not long before its August 1957 tryout run in Washington D.C. It was at that point called *Gang Way!*

That sounds a little less like a version of *Romeo and Juliet* updated by such distinguished talents as composer Leonard Bernstein, choreographer Jerome Robbins, and librettist Arthur Laurents, and more like a raucous revue staged by the Marx Brothers.

Luckily, things righted themselves before the premiere.

During its composition, however, the piece had gone through a radical transformation in



Born

April 28, 1954, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

First Performance

March 1999, Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by David Zinman, at Royal Festival Hall, London

STL Symphony Premiere

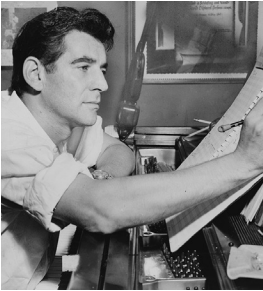
This week

Scoring

3 solo bassoons
solo contrabassoon
2 flutes
piccolo
4 horns
4 trumpets
3 trombones
tuba
timpani
percussion
harp
celeste
strings

Performance Time

approximately 15 minutes

**Born**

August 25, 1918, Lawrence, Massachusetts

Died

October 14, 1990, New York City

First Performance

February 13, 1961, Lukas Foss conducted the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall

STL Symphony Premiere

September 14, 2001, Hans Vonk conducting

Most Recent STL Symphony Performance

May 18, 2012, Ward Stare conducting

Scoring

3 flutes
piccolo
2 oboes
English horn
2 clarinets
bass clarinet
E-flat clarinet
2 bassoons
contrabassoon
alto saxophone
4 horns
3 trumpets
3 trombones
tuba
timpani
percussion
harp
piano
celeste
strings

Performance Time

approximately 22 minutes

terms of both subject matter and geography. The initial idea—posed by Robbins to Bernstein as early as 1949—was to present a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy falling in love during the time of Passover and Easter, set amid the Jewish ghettos of New York’s Lower East Side.

By the time Bernstein began writing the music in earnest in 1956, he was beset with other tasks (among them being named Joint Principal Conductor of the New York Philharmonic and composing his operetta *Candide*). The setting of the play had shifted to the city’s Upper West Side and taken on the grittiness and topicality of the gang warfare going on there. Thus was born *West Side Story* in the form we have come to know it.

Moved to Broadway, it became a watershed for American musical theater. “The radioactive fallout from *West Side Story*’s music will still be descending on Broadway this morning,” the *New York Herald Tribune* critic wrote in his review, an assessment that is still true today.

It did not receive universal rave reviews, however, but still managed a run of 772 performances—nearly two years’ worth. After a national tour, *West Side Story* returned to Broadway for an additional 253 performances. Its popularity was ultimately sealed by the 1961 film version, which won 10 Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

By that time, Bernstein was settled in his post as the Philharmonic’s Music Director, a post he’d ascended to in 1958. In 1961, a gala concert was scheduled to celebrate his re-signing with the orchestra for seven more years. For the occasion—an evening of Lenny’s Greatest Hits, if you will—the Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* was created.

Bernstein’s colleagues Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal did the orchestration for the piece, with Bernstein supervising and selecting the running order. Though played without pause, the *Dances* present nine selections from the complete work. Starting with the Prologue, which sets up the rivalry between the two gangs, it moves into “Somewhere,” which features the hit song and presents the scene in which the gangs reconcile... for the time being. The Scherzo finds two of the rivals joyfully dancing together, a peace that is broken during the Mambo section, in which the

gangs face off in a competitive dance. In Cha-Cha, which contains the hit song “Maria,” the star-crossed lovers meet and dance, followed by Meeting Scene, which features the music accompanying their first spoken words. In “Cool” Fugue, the gangs attempt to control their hostility, but fail, resulting in the violence of Rumble, in which the gang leaders are killed. The Finale reprises the idealism of “Somewhere,” set against the tragic reality of what has taken place.

ANDREW NORMAN

Try

TRIAL AND ERROR A composer’s pursuit of perfection is the subject of Andrew Norman’s *Try*, and in fact it was the impetus behind the piece. Resulting from a commission by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Norman was intimidated by and overwhelmed with the desire to live up to a task given him by such prestigious organizations. He only had one chance to get it right, he reasoned, but Norman considers himself “a trial-and-error composer” and “incurable reviser.”

According to Norman, “The best thing I could do was to try as many new things as I could, to embrace the risk and failure and serendipitous discovery implicit in the word ‘try.’”

As such, the piece throws out a number of ideas, discarding them and circling back on itself in search of one worth pursuing to a satisfying conclusion. Two thirds of the way through, that idea is found. “An unlikely bit of musical material [the composer...or perhaps the piece itself?] likes enough,” Norman comments, “to repeat and polish and hone until it finally (fingers crossed) gets it right.”



Born

October 31, 1979
First Performance
May 24, 2011, John Adams
conducted the Los Angeles
Philharmonic at Disney
Concert Hall

STL Symphony Premiere

This week

Scoring

flute
oboe
clarinet
bassoon
horn
trumpet
trombone
percussion
piano
string quintet

Performance Time

approximately 14 minutes

**Born**

September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York

Died

July 11, 1937, Hollywood, California

First Performance

February 12, 1924, in New York, Gershwin played the piano part, and Paul Whiteman directed the Palais Royal Orchestra

STL Symphony Premiere

February 2, 1946, Jesús María Sanroma was soloist, with Vladimir Golschmann conducting

Most Recent STL Symphony Performance

June 26, 1998, Christopher O'Riley was soloist, with David Loebel conducting

Scoring

solo piano
oboe
clarinet
E-flat clarinet
bass clarinet
2 horns
2 trumpets
2 trombones
tuba
timpani
percussion
piano
celeste
banjo
2 alto saxophones
2 soprano saxophones
tenor sax
baritone sax
strings

Performance Time

approximately 16 minutes

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Rhapsody in Blue (Original Jazz Band Version)

METROPOLITAN MADNESS George Gershwin and his brother Ira, along with songwriter Buddy De Sylva, were shooting pool on January 3 when Ira read in the *New York Tribune* that bandleader Paul Whiteman was going to present a concert in New York that would bridge the worlds of popular and serious music, blurring the deep-set distinctions between the two.

The article claimed that “George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto, Irving Berlin is writing a syncopated tone poem, and Victor Herbert is working on an American suite.” But Gershwin was doing no such thing. Gershwin phoned Whiteman for an explanation and was told that he was asked for such a piece some 18 months prior, when the two worked together on the Broadway revue *George White’s Scandals of 1922*.

Whiteman persuaded Gershwin to go ahead and write the piece. Gershwin set to work, conceiving the general theme of the piece on a train. “I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness,” he told biographer Isaac Goldberg.

One element of jazz that the *Rhapsody* certainly contains—at least in spirit—is improvisation. In the sections of the piece meant for Gershwin’s own solo piano performances, the score was simply left blank. The indication for Whiteman’s orchestra to play again was Gershwin nodding his head.

Another indication that Gershwin was willing to play somewhat fast and loose with his music came during rehearsals. Whiteman’s clarinetist, Ross Gorman, unexpectedly turned a low trill followed by some rising notes in the score into the ascending glissando that opens the piece and has become one of its signature moments. Gershwin heard the bluesy slide and kept it in.

Program notes © 2014 by Daniel Durchholz