Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Three Meditations for cello and orchestra, from “Mass”

*First performance of “Mass”: September 8, 1971, Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C., the composer later arranging several passages from the score as a duo for cello and piano, and then for cello and orchestra, the latter version being dedicated to Mstislav Rostropovich, who gave the first performance on October 11, 1977, at the Kennedy Center with Bernstein conducting the National Symphony Orchestra. Only previous performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra: July 5, 1996, Tanglewood, Seiji Ozawa cond., Yo-Yo Ma, soloist.*

No doubt most of those who attended the first performance of Mass at the Kennedy Center in 1971 assumed (from its title) that the work would be essentially another in the long and distinguished line of Mass settings of which the European cultural tradition is so rich (and which Bernstein himself knew so well as a conductor), perhaps especially a work like Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis, which combines visionary ecstasy with structural strength. As a conductor, Bernstein was one of the greatest advocates the Beethoven score has ever had (he conducted it in a memorable performance at Tanglewood in the last month of work on his own Mass). Such a setting would have been perfectly suitable as a tribute to a Roman Catholic president. But Bernstein’s music was always essentially theatrical, and Mass was not intended to be merely a concert work, but rather a treatment of the burning issues of American society in the early 1970s placed within the context of the traditional elements of the Latin Mass that composers have been setting to music for at least 700 years. The resulting work treated theological questions of doubt and faith, dramatically cast to suggest the debates of the “God is dead” movement that was much discussed at the time, as well as war and peace, race relations, social and economic justice, and ecological concerns.

As the composer noted in a preface to Three Meditations, there were points of “extreme tension” in the stage work in which the principal character of the evening, known simply as the Celebrant, “tries to control the situation by saying ‘Let us pray,’ and it is at these moments that the Meditations are played by the pit orchestra, while the entire company remains motionless in attitudes of prayer, or contemplates ceremonial dance.” This description is true enough of the first two “meditations” (which are actually called “Meditation #1” and “Meditation #2” in the score of Mass). “Meditation #1” comes between the Confession and the Gloria; “Meditation #2” follows the Gloria and precedes the Epistle. The first two movements of the present work are in fact fairly literal arrangements of those two passages, with a leading role now given to the solo cello and considerable reworking of the orchestral part. The second of these is a set of four short variations based on a brief eleven-note passage from the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (a highly chromatic passage that does not at once suggest Beethoven). During the course of the movement there are two brief but quite recognizable quotations from the Beethoven work: the opening notes of the famous “Joy” theme, and the simple major chords to which are sung the word “Brüder” (“Brothers”), played here by the cello and echoed by the string orchestra in the same texture as Beethoven’s original.

The third movement has more complex origins. It does not correspond to the passage labeled “Meditation #3” late in Mass, but is rather mostly a reworking of the music called the “Second Introit,” which consisted of three sections: a lively choral dance in 9/8 time (but, typical of Bernstein, the meter is made vigorous and jazzy with alternations of 3/8 and 3/4); a chorale, “Almighty father,” in something of a simple congregational hymn-singing style; and Epiphany, an extended solo for oboe with percussion. For Three Meditations, Bernstein rewrote the oboe solo for cello and placed Epiphany first (though it returns at the end to round out the movement). The choral dance is now purely orchestral and considerably extended, while the chorale is tranquil and visionary in mood. As the composer’s note to the Three Meditations indicated, by comparison to a full theatrical performance of Mass, “These excerpts can convey at best only a certain limited aspect of scope and intention,” but they do nonetheless capture a good bit of the character of one of Leonard Bernstein’s most unusual—yet most typical—works.

STEVEN LEDBETTER