

Analytical and semantic aspects of Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms

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Abstract: *Chichester Psalms* by Leonard Bernstein can be interpreted by formations with different levels of musical accomplishment and express the idea of harmonious communion. By analysing the parts of the score - an extended choral composition in three movements for boy treble or countertenor, choir and orchestra, we present semantic aspects of it. Aided by his componistic techniques, Bernstein is successful in acquiring a strong dramatism in his *Chichester Psalms*, that is effective in communicating a strong urge of the present but also of transcendence. The use of intervals, chords, tonal functions are very expressive, when overlaid with the *Psalms* of David.

Key-words: *semantic, psalms, Chichester Psalms, Leonard Bernstein, analysis*

1. Introduction

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) is one of the most important musical figures in America of the 20th century. His musical language was defined by critics (and confirmed by the author himself) as eclectic, regarding his choice of sources of inspiration, creators as: Modest Mussorgsky, Igor Stravinsky – from whom he admired the folklore installations, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov – fascinated by their chromatic language, Johann Sebastian Bach and Aaron Copland – where he found harmonic and tonal structures to follow (Laird 2002, 4-5). His music also fused elements of jazz, similar to those of Thelonious Monk and Benny Goodman, as well as rhythm techniques employed by the commercial music industry (Finch 2011, 15-16). As a composer, conductor, pianist and pedagogue, he helped bridge the gap between musical concert halls and the musical theatre, leaving behind a rich artistic inheritance – recordings, compositions, writings and schools.

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The essence of logic in Bernstein's composition process can be deduced by his words: „*Who are you if you are not the sum of everything that's happened before? Otherwise you don't exist.*” (Laird 2002, 21). One of the unmistakable characteristics of Bernstein's music is accessibility. If countless musical compositions of the 20th century concern a specialised audience, the composer strived to avoid this scenario, as the hermeticism of the cultural performance does not agree with his convictions. The accessibility mentioned above refers to his musical writing, which includes lyrical melodic parts, harmonies that are unintelligible to an uninitiated auditorium, a vernacular textual writing, the preference for Broadway musical genres, film music and symphonic opuses with programmatic character. Those specific compositional features originate in a human characteristic, his contemporaries often talking about Bernstein as of an extrovert fearing solitude and having a constant yearning to communication (Laird 2002, 24).

2. Discussion

2.1. Chichester Psalms

In 1965, Leonard Bernstein was commissioned to compose the Chichester Psalms. The musical score was written for the annual festival that took place in Chichester Cathedral – Sussex, Great Britain, a traditional artistic manifestation celebrated ever since the time of Thomas Weelks (1576-1623). In the atmosphere after the Second World War, the attempt to preserve the ancient tradition of a musical festival in the Chichester Cathedral proves the yearning for harmony. On the other hand, the sounding texture of this particular musical creation has a special significance, taking into account the historic context of the first representation.

The composer describes his work in these words: “*It is quite popular in feeling . . . and it has an old-fashioned sweetness along with its more violent moments. The title has now been changed to 'Chichester Psalms'*” (Burton 2018). The world premiere of the composition for orchestra took place on June 15, 1965 in the Philharmonic Hall, New York, under the direction of Leonard Bernstein with the New York Philharmonic, appreciated by the critics as “extremely direct and simple and very beautiful” (Burton 2018).

The show was followed by another premier (in 31 of July 1965), during the Chichester music festival, with a different orchestration for organ, harp and percussion, more adequate to the place in the church. These two orchestrations prove Bernstein's interest for flexibility and accessibility.

Chichester Psalms, a work structured into three parts, requires the ensemble of two harps, three trumpets, three trombones, percussion instruments, a chord orchestra, a mixed choir and a boy treble soloist voice (or countertenor). The wish to only use masculine voices in the solo expositions respects both the requirements of the Anglican conformist choir and of the orthodox Jewish tradition of the writer's religious thesaurus. The musical pages composed by Bernstein in these circumstances represent a compositional mosaic for the peace and unity in the world. The verses of the psalms appear in Hebrew, in a metric version, and, for a good understanding, the author provides their English translation (Fishbein 2014, 1). Thus, Bernstein combined the musical eclecticism and the texts of the Jewish psalms, testifying about a consensus of themes (Gottlieb 1980, 287).

The *Chichester Psalms* reverberate with an elevated character and an optimistic spirit, in contrast with other contemporary musical operas in Hebrew.

2.2. Elements of Semantic Analyse in Chichester Psalms

a) The first part of the musical composition makes use of the second verse of the Psalm 108 as an introductory sign for awakening, in order to express, after that, the godly glory by the words of the Psalm 100. In the composer's words, the section "opens with a choral prayer, which then makes the transition towards a merry, dancing exposition, in the spirit of David, of the Psalm 100" (Gottlieb 1990, 20D).

Having the agogic notation *Maestoso ma energico* – valid for a declamatory introduction, the score of the *Chichester Psalms* contains an explosive debut, in an alternating metrical frame, due to the borrowing of the textual accents into the musical canvass. After an instrumental movement (blowing and percussion instruments and double-bass) of major seventh chord, based on B flat, the choir and the other instruments of the ensemble (violins, cellos and harp) introduce a rhythmical homophony having the dynamic indicator *ff*.

The choir group is represented by a modern organum, where the female voices indicate the primary voice, with the appearance of the simultaneous conduct in the bass voice, completed by the score for the tenor – in a seventh interval. It must be noticed the permanent presence of the dissonant interval of the seventh figures in the vertical entities of simultaneous contour, symbolizing the impulse to revival.

Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass

U - rah, ha - ne - vell!

M7 m7 m7 m7 M7

Fig. 1. Choir Introduction of the main motif (m. 1-2)

Maestoso ma energico \downarrow = 60
ff marc.
Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass
Orchestral Reduction

U - rah, ha - ne - vell! v - chi - nor u -
U - rah, ha - ne - vell! v - chi - nor u -
U - rah, ha - ne - vell! v - chi - nor u -
U - rah, ha - ne - vell! v - chi - nor u -

Maestoso ma energico \downarrow = 60
Opesante

Fig. 2. Timbre dialogue (reduction for piano and choir) – bars 1-4

The musical theme read in the choir score of the feminine voices (in unison) is one to be found again in the sequences of the musical introduction (bars 1 to 10). The shrill and modulating musical contour brings into the light a melodic interpretation of the tonal system, with the sounds that comprise the central theme as symbols of the main functions and a mixolydian modal insertion (with base in B flat).

T D SD T
ff marc. Inserție mixolidică

U - rah, Ha - ne - vell!

Fig. 3. Main theme of the feminine voices (bars 1-2), where the sounds symbolize map of the main tonal functions, together with a mixolydian insertion

The division of this theme brings with it the conservation of the principle of the textual rhythms and their introduction in an alternative measure, so that the newly constructed structures, based on the C and G tonalities, are present in the following notation:



Fig. 4. The second occurrence of the feminine voices in unison, in C (bars. 4-5)



Fig. 5. The third occurrence of the motif for feminine voices in unison, in G (m. 7-8)

As a musical map, the central theme and his reoccurrences include various explanations:

- a) the symbolical understanding of the tonal triangle;
- b) the ascending division of the tonal sequences, to create the gradual accumulation of expressive tension;
- c) the marking of the tonal areas of interest through the three confirmed tonalities, for the following section (a map of the future modulations);
- d) the procurement of the sound material of the orchestral discourse;
- e) the placement in a neutral space and time, on an imaginary bridge between the biblical post-Exodus and post-Holocaust times, through intervals of perfect fourth and fifth chords symbolizing (in a general acceptance) an outdated language.

Coming back to the imaginary bridge between the biblical post-Exodus and post-Holocaust times, the intervals of perfect fourth and fifth chords that form the foundation of the musical conduct – a symbol for the archaic (or the timeless) fuse with the seventh chord displayed in the vertical dissonance which can only invoke the tension of the times the creator lived in (Finch 2011, 33).

After the imposing introduction, the creator invites the auditorium to a festival of sounds and timbres, having the agogic indication *Allegro molto* and the rhythmic indication *ff con brio*, a section that brings light on the message of the words of the Psalm 100. This musical sequence starts with an instrumental passage, where the shrill and tortuous contour of the central introductory theme is reasserted.

If in the previous passage the sequencing of the themes aimed at the tonal ascendant evolution from fifth to fifth, omitting the F tonality (the first is B flat, the second C and the third G), the new musical exposition, bringing to a change in expression, completes the mosaic with the confirmation of F. This aspect has a remarkable expressive feature, meaning that the composer goes round the tension of the dominant function, by the progressive-sequential exposition in the Introduction, for a special bestowal as a sign of musical transformation in the current section (which constitutes the actual body of the first part of the *Chichester Psalms* opera).

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the first part of the *Chichester Psalms* opera. It features four staves: three vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, and Bass) and one piano accompaniment staff. The tempo is marked 'Allegro molto' with a metronome marking of ♩ = 120 (♩ = 1). The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The score includes lyrics: '- rahl' and '(ah)'. There are performance instructions such as '(non rit.)' and 'Allegro molto'. The piano part includes dynamic markings like 'ff con brío' and 'dim.'. A circled section in the piano part indicates a specific musical phrase.

Fig. 6. The beginning of the first part, after the introductory section, with the apparition of F tonality (bars 10-13)

The metric chosen by the composer is a heterogeneous compound, about which Laura Louis said that it has the capacity to “push the music, as a waterfall, from one measure to the other, energising the call. And what is the call? The call into the House of God” (Louis 2015, 198). The first verse is written for the bass voice, in division. The musical phrase composed for the bass voice is an accessible variant of the central theme, taking into account the intervallic perspective, and the way the sounding material is processed undergoes to the principle of sequencing. Thus, the avalanche of modulated choir dialogue between the masculine voices, has the purpose to progress towards the fulmination of the choir orchestration accompanying the words *Know ye that the Lord, He is God*.

The occurrence of the central theme in the first choir intervention after the change of mood (bars 14 – 16):

The image shows a musical score for the bass voice. The tempo and dynamics are marked as *mp ma molto marc.*. The lyrics are: Ha - ri - u I' A - do - nai kol ha - a - rets. The music consists of a series of chords with fermatas, indicating a slow, sustained performance.

The translation of the above occurrence into thematic melodic shape:

The diagram shows a thematic melodic shape on a bass clef staff in 7/4 time. The intervals are labeled as T, D, SD, Insertie mixolidica, and T. The notes are: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3.

Fig. 7. The musical phrase proposed for the bass voice, an accessible variant, from the intervallic perspective, of the main theme

The bass voice provides the exposition in F major, answering the tenor voice in the same sounding range and the dialogue continues with the sequential reply of the bass voices in transitory modulation to E major and the response to the tenor voices, which carry their discourse in a tonality preparing the explosion to follow: G major.

A new fulmination is the grandiose exposition in C major. As the map of the melodic sequences in the Introduction showed, the C tonality (the second in the figurative process), delineating a dynamical height (by the notation *f marcato*), textual and expressive (according to the verse *Know ye that the Lord, He is God*, stating a collective recognition of the divine), timbral (through the concourse of the soprano, alto and bass accompanied by the string and percussion ensemble) and harmonic (through the extension of the vertical composition in consonant chords), in the sheet of the first part. The intervallic and functional principles of the primary theme (from the Introduction) appear again in the multiple culminations imagined by the composer through the sets of the first part of the **Chichester Psalms**.

The musical sheets reveal a musical height integrating the first verse of Psalm 100 in a grandiose manner. The grave choir voices are the ones that pick up the melody presented first by the masculine voices after the introduction, and the higher voices punctuate the *ostinato* which amplifies the sound and the tension.

The image shows a musical score for a choir and piano. It consists of five systems of staves. The first four systems are for vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The fifth system is for the piano accompaniment. The score is in 4/4 time and features a melodic theme starting at bar 40. The lyrics are 'Ha - ri - u - l' A - do - nai kol ha - lo.' The tempo is marked 'con gioia' and 'marc.'.

Fig. 8. Culmination started at bar 40, rendering the melodic theme after the introduction (see fig.7)

After this culmination, the consecrated musical material is sequentially arranged in voice pairs, based on transitory modulations and various intensities, according to the text's message, with a rhythmic base established by the percussion instruments on the same anapaest in ostinato formula (bars 44 – 59). The expressive writing pattern, rendered in a few words, can be described as a succession of modulation sequences followed by explosive peaks.

The end of the first part of *Chichester Psalms* reminds of the slow introduction, due to the sound material; the words, repeated as a conclusion, are: *For the Lord is good* (bars 109 – 117). The main theme of the slow introduction is taken over by the choir, in the fundamental E flat, written for pairs of voices. Thus, the high voices in the choir sing the central theme, and the grave voices make their entrance with delay, with a variation of the theme where the 2nd and 3rd sounds are reversed, and the mixolydian insertion is missing.

b) The second part of the *Chichester Psalms* is an antagonistic edifice, sonorously expressed by means of contraries. The two factors of the expressive binomial are generated by the spiritual meanings of the two psalms, placed in a musical antinomy in this section. The first psalm brought in the componistic writing is Psalm 23 (*The Lord is my shepherd*), which begins with a pastoral, quiet mood and the harp accompanies the soloist. The debut of the second part is marked by a tonal ambiguity, as the structure of the chord anticipates the parallel between A major/A minor. From the scale known as Blues Scale, the composer chose to use the duality major-minor, provided by the duality of the third (from the major scale). This confers the feeling of accessibility, as a symbol of placing the biblical psalm in the contemporaneity.

Example 7 (Mvt. II, measure 1 – 21)

Andante con moto, ma tranquillo $\text{♩} = 92$ 6

mp semplice, senza cresc. o dim. (senza sentimentalità)

Boy Solo
(or
Counter-
Tenor)

A - do - nai - ro -

p ma marc. (non arpeggiando)

Arpeggiando rapidamente

Fig. 10. Blues Scale in A major (tonality proposed by the composer for the second part of the Chichester Psalms)

The second musical transformation of a psalm in the second part of the composition (Psalm 2) is introduced after a musical signal of the masculine voices in unison (bars 64 – 66), with the notations *ff* and *allegro force*, indicating the change of register. A melodic recitative based on cellular repetition is profiled, creating the suggestion of a frantic feud (Finch 2011, 67). Bernstein's musical moderation is present here in the form of the cellular ostinato. The music cell reminds of the composer's grounding in the tonal language (adopting a scale based on minor arpeggio), but it also reminds of the text's authority over music – the rhythm respects the language requirements, in a rapid tempo:

TENOR Semnale în unison

La! ...mah! La - mah! La - mah ra - g' - shu?

pp sub. stacc. e marc.

BASS *ff* La! ...mah! La - mah! La - mah ra - g' - shu?

pp sub. stacc. e marc.

Allegro feroce $\text{♩} = 108$ 65

(Violently) *ff* Celula prelucrată în recitativ

pp sub.

Fig. 11. The incipit of the contrasting section – Psalm 2 (bars 64-67)

c) The third movement sets Psalm 131 in its entirety and in the coda of Psalm 133, verse 1. Bernstein described this movement in a letter to Hussey as follows: “Begins with an orchestral prelude based on the opening chorale, whose assertive harmonies have now turned to painful ones. There is a crisis; the tension is suddenly relieved, and the choir enters humbly and peacefully singing Ps. 131 complete, in what is almost a popular song (although in 10/4 time!). It is something like a love-duet between the men and the boys. In this atmosphere of humility, there is a final chorale coda (Ps. 133, v. 1) – a prayer for peace” (Gottlieb 1990, 20D). The fact that he borrowed from the sonorities of the introductory sequence shows a wish for unity, and way it is worked symbolizes a transformation which is only natural for evolution. The painful feature the composer spoke about is given by the prevalence of the tonal chords and the contextual minor and ninth chords. Another harmonic feature that produces the tension in the introductory instrumental segment is the occurrence of minor second chords. It can be noticed that during this movement, the second chord has both the meaning of tension and modulation (it must be observed that the sound structures often extend or diminish by a semitone).

Fig. 12. Reduction of the beginning of the first part, with the exposition of the recurring sequential theme (m. 1-4)

The last part of the *Chichester Psalms* can be seen as connective tissue, fact which can be seen from the musical textures of the first bars. The choral homophony of the first part (in introduction) was accompanied by the orchestra, and the writing ending the third movement is exclusively vocal. This constant parallelism is a faithful simbolization of the psaltic message; through vocal range manipulation the concepts of *rest* and *awakening* are put in antithesis. Reinterpreted in the context of Psalm 133, verse 1, the melodic and harmonic main theme of the first part is nor energizing, nor furious, this time, but rather calm and affectionate. From harmonical perspective, notable is the way in which the organum writing of the third part becomes more consonant than in the prelude of the first movement or in the opening of the play. Such an unprecedented consonance comes from the peaceful expression conveyed by both the music and words. It is important to mention the

fact that the adjective “consonant”, belonging to Bernstein, to describe the final choral of his music created around the verses of psalms, is based on the harmony between pairs of voices; cantus firmus from the soprano part is enhanced by the melodic line of the alto, in a preponderantly parallel contour using the intervals of perfect third (or sixth) and fourth. The same approach is used for the masculine voices, as consonant intervals of third and fifth define their parallel discourse.

The image shows a musical score for the first part of the soprano part (bars 61-62) from Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms. The score is in 3/2 time and G major. It consists of four staves: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are "U - mah - na - im, She - vet a - chim". The Soprano staff has interval markings: 4P, 4P, 4P, 4P, 6m, 6m, 6m, 3m, 3M. The Tenor staff has interval markings: 5P, 5P, 3m, 5P, 5P, 5P, 5P.

Fig. 13. Consonant interval relation in voice pairs, with the main theme of the first part for the soprano (bars 61-62) – 3rd part

3. Conclusions

Chichester Psalms by Leonard Bernstein can be interpreted by formations with different levels of musical accomplishment and express the idea of harmonious communion. The composer combines into a musical texture “*the calculated dissonance, asymmetric meter, musical juxtapositions, borrowed material, and a deliberate splicing of psalm texts*” (Finch 2011, 91) with talent and mastery.

Analyzing the first part of the Chichester Psalms from the perspective of melody and harmony, it could be seen how theoretical elements such as tonal functions or fifth interval generate a natural harmonic development. It could be noticed that the sequential main melodic theme, present in the introduction for the feminine voices form a map of the tonal modulations from the first part, a harmonical synthesis. Also, this theme is the main melodic material that Bernstein used to build the discourse of the first part. The perfect fifth interval becomes the generating cell of the melodic and harmonic evolution in the first part of the

Chicester Psalms. In the second part, what becomes obvious is the way the composer arranged the musical dichotomies brought to light by the text of two contrasting psalms. The third part works around the main theme of the first part, but the atmosphere it creates is moulded around the psalm Bernstein used as the closure of his creation.

Aided by his compositional techniques, Bernstein is successful in acquiring a strong dramatism in his *Chicester Psalms*, that Jonathan Talberg describes as effective in communicating a strong urge of the present but also of transcendence (Talberg 2004, 35). “Essentially, *Chicester Psalms* speak about communion and the benefits of living together. In this context, to be blessed is not to coexist; it means to live together in harmony; it means to fight behind and to embrace peace. Bernstein, though, is artful in rendering all these as harmony, enhancing the value of unity in his canvas” (Finch 2011, 92).

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