

Chichester Psalms

Leonard Bernstein (1918-90)

Written: 1965

Duration: 19 minutes

Leonard Bernstein is a towering figure in American music. As musicologist Jeremy Rudkin puts it, “Bernstein was enormously versatile, and he had the energy of three men. He used to sleep only two or three hours a night. He could have been a great pianist, a great conductor, or a great composer. Instead, he was all three.”

In 1964, Bernstein took a fifteen-month sabbatical from his strenuous duties as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic. He needed to rest and regroup, and to write music. Though Bernstein worked on several projects during the sabbatical, the most prominent one was the *Chichester Psalms* for choir and orchestra. The Dean of Chichester Cathedral commissioned the work for the Three Choirs Festival, an event that brings together musicians of the cathedrals of Chichester, Salisbury and Winchester in England.

The three movements of the Psalms take their text from six psalms and are in Hebrew. The first movement begins with a chorale, “Awake, psaltery and harp!” (Psalm 108), that serves as a unifying musical theme for the entire work. The focus of the text is the psalmist’s grateful recognition of God, urging us to worship and serve Him. The broad chorale is quickly transformed into a lilting dance-like treatment of “Make a joyful noise” (Psalm 100) with a seven beat rhythm!

The second movement begins with the familiar text of Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd . . .” Here Bernstein invokes the pastoral simplicity of David, the boy shepherd, by starting the movement with a boy alto. Into this gentle rest the men’s voices intrude with “Why do the nations rage?” Perhaps Bernstein is lamenting the cruel realities of the twentieth

century—of a world torn apart by war, poverty, and racial hatred. However, after this questioning, the peaceful, hopeful strains return to close the movement.

The finale begins with an instrumental introduction based on the opening chorale. The chorus enters with a gentle theme, “Lord, Lord, my heart is not haughty.” The text suggests a resigned but humble acceptance of God’s sovereignty over the events and peoples of the world. The piece concludes with another appearance of the chorale theme, setting the words of Psalm 133, “Behold how good, and how pleasant it is, for brethren to dwell together in unity.”

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