Schermerhorn Symphony Center
Laura Turner Concert Hall
September 28, 2008 at 8 p.m.

San Francisco Symphony
Michael Tilson Thomas, *Music Director*

OLIVER KNUSSEN — Symphony No. 3, Op. 18

BERNSTEIN — Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*
- Prologue
- "Somewhere"
- Scherzo
- Mambo
- Cha-Cha
- Meeting Scene
- "Cool" Fugue
- Rumble
- Finale

INTERMISSION

PROKOFIEV — Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op. 100
- Andante
- Allegro moderato
- Adagio
- Allegro giocoso

OLIVER KNUSSEN
(born in Glasgow, Scotland, 1952)
Symphony No. 3, Op. 18

Scored for 4 flutes (4th = piccolo), 2 oboes and English horn, 4 clarinets (3rd = E-flat clarinet), 3 bassoons and contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, guitar doubling mandolin ad libitum*, timpani (4 drums), percussion divided among 6 players in 4 groups (Group I: timpani, clashed cymbals, large tam-tam, anvil, triangle, tambourine, and crotales; Group II: small suspended cymbal, hi-hat cymbal, bass drum, temple blocks, whip, maracas, and bongos; Group III: suspended cymbal, tambourine, claves, glockenspiel, xylophone, and marimba or xylorimba; Group IV: side drum, tenor drum, large double-headed bass drum, tubular bells, suspended cymbal, vibraslaps, and guiro), celesta, harp and strings.*

estimated length: 15 minutes

Oliver Knussen was not yet 16 when, in 1968, he conducted the London Symphony Orchestra in the premiere of his First Symphony. He then spent a formative period in the United States, where he studied composition with Gunther Schuller at Tanglewood. In 1975 he returned to the United Kingdom, serving as artistic director from the mid-1980s until 1998 for the Aldeburgh Festival, founded by Benjamin Britten. His early rapport with Michael Tilson Thomas helped solidify an expanding reputation and was a harbinger of things to come. The premiere of the Third Symphony at the London Proms in 1979 – conducted by MTT, to whom the work is dedicated – was a pivotal moment in Knussen's reception as a mature composer.

Knussen's music tends toward concentrated brevity, expressed through his exquisitely crafted sound world. This symphony's expanse of musical and emotional detail seems out of proportion with the quarter-hour it takes in performance. The composer has suggested the best way to listen to his music is "with one ear in either direction": that is, with one ear attuned to what should be a "clear and direct" big picture ("when you stand back from it") and the other to the "internal network" of relationships happening on the most detailed level.

Knussen initially planned the Symphony No. 3 as a work in three movements, inspired by his response to Shakespeare's Ophelia. Michael Tilson Thomas in fact premiered what Knussen had envisioned as the opening movement – the first part of the present symphony – in 1974, as a separate piece entitled Introduction and Masque. But by 1979, when he completed the symphony, Knussen had cut some of the intervening material and used it elsewhere (including in a piece called Ophelia Dances, Book 1, which Tilson Thomas premiered in 1975).

The symphony became a single-movement span with two connected larger parts that evoke Knussen's musical images of Ophelia's madness and drowning. An introductory section, Andante misterioso, sets the scene for her final hours. From an enigmatic phrase in clarinets against a ghostly backdrop of string tremolos, a central thematic idea emerges, claustrophobic with tightly overlaid harmonies, though the music proceeds in a sequence of rapidly shifting textures. The clarinets launch into one of several mad fanfares, percussion heightening the sense of bedlam. Here we also realize how Knussen's orchestration and musical thought are interlaced.

A new section labeled "fantastico" brings in a Stravinsky-like profusion of simultaneous rhythms. With leering mockery, the brass intone a hopping figure that almost resembles a children's song – a desperate attempt by Ophelia to turn back the engulfing madness? Then the Allegro proper begins, as violins trace a tormented, two-layered melody over an extended range. Knussen's score moves with the orchestral equivalent of rapid scene changes, each time foregrounding a new combination of forces. Notice in particular the effect of the celesta, harp and guitar as they suddenly introduce an eerily soothing calm.

Along with non-sequitur babblings in the flutes, Knussen develops earlier thematic material. The sense of distraction grows, focusing on a massive chord at the symphony's climactic center. This chord attenuates and leads into the second part, molto tranquillo, where Ophelia meets her death in the "weeping brook." As counterweight to the busyness of the first part, here Knussen builds an ominous stasis around a series of pallid, shimmering chord sequences. Bayan Northcott observes that these chords form a passacaglia theme around which Knussen then weaves seven variations. These provide

the composer more opportunities to exercise his fertile imagination for instrumental colors and hybrids. A gathering climax spills into a remarkable moment in the fifth variation as the horns overlap in forlorn cries. For the final pages, Knussen returns to the symphony's beginning. The initial atmosphere of uneasy suspense again reigns as strings tremble and clarinets murmur in fragments. It fades out inconclusively, as if the cycle could begin again where it started.

- Program note by Thomas May

LEONARD BERNSTEIN
(born in Lawrence, Mass., 1918; died in New York, 1990)
Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

Scored for 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes and English horn, 2 B-flat clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, alto saxophone, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, tuba, timpani, percussion consisting of 4 drums pitched approximately a 3rd apart (chosen from bongos, timbales, tom-tom, snare drum or tenor drum), 2 snare drums, concert bass drum, timbales, tom-tom, bongos, jazz drums, conga drum, cymbals, tambourine, gourds, large and small maracas, three cowbells, woodblock, triangle, tam-tam, police whistle, xylophone, vibraphone, glockenspiel and chime in F-sharp, harp, piano and celesta, and strings.

estimated length: 23 minutes

Leonard Bernstein was a force not to be contained. As composer, conductor, pianist, writer, teacher, he made an incredible difference. He loved music and had the gift for communicating his love. Tonight, we hear music from one of his most universally loved works.

Talk about *West Side Story* dates from January 1949, but the show, with a book by Arthur Laurents, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and choreography by Jerome Robbins, did not open until Aug. 19, 1957, at the National Theatre in Washington, D.C.; the New York opening took place one month later, on Sept. 26, at the Winter Garden. *West Side Story* was voted Best Musical of the Year in London in 1960, and the movie version of 1961 was voted Best Picture of the Year and won 10 Oscars.

Skitch Henderson, speaking about the Symphonic Dances, said that "The film *West Side Story* was the reason behind this set of dances. By the time MGM got around to doing the picture, everybody had a hand in arranging or, should I say, rearranging the original stage version. These dances are the product of many different orchestrators with a thorough editing job by the composer." The film orchestrations were by Bernstein, Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal.

In *West Side Story,* Leonard Bernstein transposes Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* from Verona to the slums of mid-Manhattan's West Side. The feuding Montagues and Capulets are replaced by the Anglo "Jets" and the Puerto Rican "Sharks," two warring street gangs whose rivalry is inflamed by the city's racial hatreds. The brilliance of *West Side Story* lies in its use of tension and violence – in the dialogue, in the score and most of all in the choreography. No Broadway show had ever leaned so heavily on dance to convey so much.

The Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* communicate all the tension of the play, the frenetic pace, the nervous intensity of urban life in America. From the overt dance rhythms of the Mambo and Cha-cha to the percussive Rumble, the dances mirror the hustle and bustle, the overcrowding, the frayed tempers and pent-up frustrations of *West Side Story,* as well as the tenderness and joy of young love. In the serene "Somewhere" and in the dream sequences where Tony and Maria envision escape lies the only respite from the driven world of *West Side Story*.

A note in the printed score to the Symphonic Dances traces this action for the listener:

Prologue (Allegro moderato) – The growing rivalry between two teenage street gangs, the Jets and Sharks.

"Somewhere" (Adagio) – In a visionary dance sequence, the two gangs are united in friendship.

Scherzo (Vivace leggiero) – In the same dream, they break through the city walls and suddenly find themselves in a world of space, air and sun.

Mambo (Presto) – Reality again; competitive dance between the gangs.

Cha-cha (Andantino con grazia) – The star-crossed lovers [Tony and Maria] see each other for the first time and dance together.

Meeting Scene (Meno mosso) – Music accompanies their first spoken words.
"Cool" Fugue (Allegretto) – An elaborate dance sequence in which the Jets practice controlling their hostility.

Rumble (Molto allegro) – Climactic gang battle during which the two gang leaders are killed.

Finale (Adagio) – Love music developing into a procession, which recalls, in tragic reality, the vision of "Somewhere."

-Program note by David Bowman

SERGEI PROKOFIEV
(born in Sontsovka (now Krasnoye), Ukraine, 1891; died in Nikolina Gora, near Moscow, 1953)
Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op. 100

Scored for 2 flutes and piccolo, 2 oboes and English horn, 2 B-flat clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, bass tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, cymbals, tambourine, snare drum, wood block, bass drum, tam-tam), harp, piano and strings.

estimated length: 46 minutes

Many composers in the 19th and 20th centuries were baffled by how to confront the sonata style defined by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, of how to get at its substance and not just its shell. Here, in his Symphony No. 5, Prokofiev takes on the challenge with the skill of a master.

The work is in four movements, but they are not quite the conventional four of the Classical and Romantic symphony. What Prokofiev gives us is a slow/fast/slow/fast sequence familiar from Baroque music. He begins with an Andante in handsomely made

sonata form. The first melody soars, but Prokofiev presents it, to begin with, in austere woodwind octaves and almost unharmonized. He picks up from Beethoven and Brahms the device of seeming to embark upon a formal repeat of the exposition, only to have a dramatic turn of harmony reveal that the development has begun. The sequence of events for the recapitulation is normal, but their unfolding is compressed. The coda, which twice attains a towering fortissimo, reflects at length on the first theme.

The second movement is a scherzo. With violins marking the time, the clarinet proposes an impertinent tune. Here is a touch of Prokofiev the wry humorist. A slower passage leads into the trio, which itself is actually a little faster than the main section of the movement. The repeat of the scherzo is twisted, and it ends with a bang.

Then comes a weighty slow movement, at once somber and lyric. The dense sound supports an expansive melody. The middle section is darker in character, suggesting a cortege. After an intensely emotional climax, the first theme returns, pianissimo.

The finale begins in a reflective mood, with woodwinds and strings engaged in quiet dialogue. This is followed by something surprising and extraordinarily beautiful, the return of the first movement's opening theme, scored now for the cellos divided four ways. Abruptly, these moods are swept away. Except for a single brief interlude, the mood is joyous, the motion athletic. Throughout, Prokofiev keeps finding new ways of heightening the voltage until, after a dizzying swirl, he ends his symphony in a rush to a final bang.

- *Program note by Michael Steinberg*

David Bowman is former editor of the San Francisco Symphony's program book. Thomas May is author of *Decoding Wagner* and *The John Adams Reader*. Michael Steinberg, a contributing writer to the San Francisco Symphony's program book, is former SFS Program Annotator.