



St Laurent Studio YSL 78-200

LEONARD BERNSTEIN Cond. Israel Phil., w. Jennie Tourel (MS) & Hanna Rovina (Narrator):

Kaddish Symphony #3, to the memory of John Fitzgerald Kennedy (Cond. by the Composer).

Live Performance, 10 Dec., 1963 (World Première Performance).

From rare acetates from Charles Münch Collection [sent to Münch in preparation for the forthcoming American premiere]. Transfers by Yves St Laurent.

#### CRITIC REVIEWS:

“Leonard Bernstein’s much-criticized ‘Kaddish’ Symphony acquires a remarkable new identity in this extremely rare release. Never previously issued, the tape of the work’s premiere in Tel Aviv on December 10, 1963 has a visceral power and strength of expression not surpassed even in Bernstein’s official recording with the New York Philharmonic. Something close to a radical transformation has taken place now that we can hear the composer’s intentions expressed, not in English, but in Hebrew, which for more than one reason feels like the language the symphony was destined for. Readers familiar with the history of Bernstein’s Third Symphony, dedicated to the memory of John F. Kennedy mere weeks after the assassination, will be aware that its central narration, which delivers Bernstein’s personal problem with God, suffered derision almost immediately. The funeral service of Kaddish is for God, in fact, recalling the famous TIME magazine cover that proclaimed ‘God Is Dead’, although it didn’t appear until 1966. Sixties disillusionment didn’t spare religion, and the mask of postwar conformity and runaway prosperity in the U.S. couldn’t conceal the shock and horror of the Holocaust. This alone would give the use of Hebrew a powerful justification.



The reason the English text fell short is that Bernstein’s argument with God felt overweening and self-indulgent. One squirmed at the suggestion that Bernstein had found an equal to talk to. In addition there was an uneasy juxtaposition of the high-minded and the colloquial that was jarring, and finally the declamation by Felicia Montealegre, Bernstein’s wife, was histrionic on the verge of campiness. In the aftermath of the Symphony’s failure, there were various attempts over the years to improve the text and rid it of embarrassment, but each new version felt anemic without the chutzpah of the original (this was true

even of the revised version with the Israel Philharmonic that Bernstein later recorded for DG).

There are other examples where hearing the words in a language you don't understand is the best way (Wagner's RING cycle immediately comes to mind; apparently its rhymes sound like doggerel to a native German speaker). But that's only a fraction of the transformation that occurs here. Again with a woman narrating, the presence of the prominent Israeli actress Hanna Rovina is decisive. Born in Minsk in 1888, she had been acting from a young age in the Russian Jewish theater before immigrating to Palestine in 1928. This history, along with Rovina's powerful voice and age (she was 75 at the time), gives her narration rabbinical authority. If this seems too extreme, there's no doubt that every trace of self-preening is absent here. This is no conversation but a painful, angry harangue against the Almighty, combined with a tone of Old Testament lamentation.

Bernstein's performances of his own music are peerless, needless to say, but on this occasion there's a palpable electricity. Rovina's urgency is matched by the Israel Philharmonic and the excellent chorus trained by Abraham Kaplan, considered the best chorus master in New York. At times the passion of the performance, especially from the narrator, is overwhelming. In her solo mezzo Jennie Tourel sings affectingly, even though her tone is mature rather than fresh. (Both she and Kaplan's Camerata Singers appear on the studio recording.)



This is the second redemptive recording that the 'Kaddish' Symphony has received, the other being in English using the original text, narrated by soprano Josephine Barstow with Antonio Pappano conducting (Warner). It was a highlight of the Bernstein centennial year and riveting for Barstow's performance, which proved that the original words were not nearly as embarrassing as Montealegre made them out to be.

The music itself didn't need redemption. Bernstein's idiom was not much changed from the 'Jeremiah' Symphony #1 of 1942, itself a lamentation featuring a mezzo soloist. What I said about that music applies here, too: 'Some composers hide their personalities in their music, but not Bernstein. The 'Jeremiah' Symphony is as much a people pleaser as he was himself. Warm, giving, sentimental, extravagant, it's a symphony that wants to embrace you without embarrassment'. (FANFARE 42:3)

To give a balanced picture, a few other things need noting. The narrator is miked very closely here, to the point that the orchestra takes second place. Therefore, it is mandatory to follow with the English text, which isn't supplied. I imagine most purchasers will already own at least one previous recording with text. Producer Yves St-Laurent notes that many improvements had to be meticulously made from the original source. Despite some light surface crackle, I found the sound full and more than listenable, despite the too-distant orchestra.

I hardly need to add that this is a 'must-listen' for anyone who like me has been following Bernstein's achievements since youth. He remains the transcendent American conductor, who shaped a generation's love of classical music. His strongly felt Jewish identity wasn't emphasized in his public image, but it comes out with tremendous force and sincerity here."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE



Charles Munch received this recording of the World Premiere two days before conducting the American Premiere on January 10, 1964 in Boston.