

Leonard Bernstein remains America's most famous and successful native-born musician. His rich legacy includes many recordings, along with writings and compositions for the musical theater, opera, concert stage, ballet, and film. He was a teacher, pianist, conductor, and musical ambassador who bridged the worlds of popular and classical music. His contribution to *West Side Story* alone ensures his immortality in the annals of American musical theater. During his tenure as music director of the New York Philharmonic, he made the orchestra the very center of the city's cultural life and one of the preeminent musical establishments in the world. Bernstein's passion and energy were matched only by the diversity of his musical and literary interests; *Time* magazine rightly called him "the Renaissance Man." He once told the *New York Times*: "I don't want to spend my life, as Toscanini did, studying and restudying the same fifty pieces of music. It would bore me to death. I want to conduct. I want to play the piano. I want to write for Hollywood. I want to keep on trying to be, in the full sense of that wonderful word, a musician. I also want to teach. I want to write books and poetry. And I think I can still do justice to them all."

Bernstein's *Candide* is a comic operetta based on a picaresque novella by Voltaire. In Voltaire's version, *Candide*, the naïve protagonist, has been taught to espouse Leibnizian optimism—the belief that everything happens for the best—but becomes disillusioned by a series of personal disasters. Through *Candide*'s travels and misadventures, Voltaire satirizes the government, religion, and philosophy of his day.

Bernstein's adaptation, begun around 1950, was originally to have been a play with incidental music but soon evolved into a full-blown operetta. Lillian Hellman, author of the first libretto, conceived the work as a counteroffensive to the McCarthy hearings, which had caused her and her lover, pulp fiction writer Dashiell Hammett, to be blacklisted. Several other musicians and literary figures contributed, including Richard Wilbur and Dorothy Parker as lyricists. Despite the impressive pool of talent involved, the work never quite came together. Bernstein biographer Joan Peyser described the situation this way:

The problem was that the various elements did not jell in the way that would have made the piece work, maybe because there were just too many large talents and large egos involved. Tinkering continued throughout the production process with nobody ever feeling satisfied with his own or anybody else's contribution.... Bernstein—unnerved by what was going on at rehearsals--- would come back to his friends and complain, "But I've never had a flop before."

While not exactly a flop, the original 1956 *Candide* ran to fewer than eighty performances. Hal Prince, of *West Side Story* fame, directed a 1973 revival based on a new libretto by Hugh Callingham Wheeler and fresh lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. The official "Final Version" (i.e.

approved by Bernstein), which appeared in 1989, returned to Hellman's libretto but retained music and lyrics from previous reworkings.

Common to all versions is the operetta's sparkling overture, which quickly became a favorite concert piece and entered American popular culture as the theme music of the Dick Cavett Show. Bernstein's music is especially apt in that context, given Cavett's penchant for tackling controversial and taboo subjects.