



Noted for her musical command, cosmopolitan artistry, and visionary independence, Sara Davis Buechner is one of the most original concert pianists of our time. Lauded for her “intelligence, integrity and all encompassing technical prowess” (*New York Times*), “thoughtful artistry in the full service of music” (*Washington Post*), and “astounding virtuosity” (*Philippine Star*), Japan’s *InTune* magazine sums up: “Buechner has no superior.”

In her twenties Ms. Buechner earned a bouquet of top prizes at the world’s premiere international piano competitions — Queen Elisabeth (Brussels), Leeds, Mozart (Salzburg), Beethoven (Vienna), and Sydney. She was a Bronze Medalist of the 1986 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow and the Gold Medalist of the 1984 Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition.

Ms. Buechner has performed in every state and province of North America — as recitalist, chamber musician and soloist with top orchestras like the New York Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony and Philadelphia Orchestra; and in venues such as Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center and the Hollywood Bowl. She has toured throughout Latin and South America and Europe; and she enjoys a special following in Asia, where she has been a featured soloist with the Sydney Symphony, New Zealand Philharmonic, New Japan Philharmonic and Shanghai Philharmonic, among many others.

She has commissioned and premiered important contemporary scores by composers such as Michael Brown, John Corigliano, Ray Green, Dick Hyman, Vítězslava Kaprálová, Jared Miller, Joaquín Nin-Culmell, and Yukiko Nishimura. Ms. Buechner’s performance versatility extends to unique collaborations with film and dance (including tours with the Mark Morris Dance Group, and Japanese kabuki-mime-mask dancer Yayoi Hirano).

Ms. Buechner has released numerous acclaimed recordings of rare piano music by composers such as Rudolf Friml (“a revelation” — *The New York Times*), Dana Suesse, Joseph Lamb, Joaquín Turina, Miklós Rózsa, and Ferruccio Busoni (including the world première recording of the BachBusoni “Goldberg” Variations). *Stereophile* magazine selected her Gershwin CD as “Recording of the Month,” and her interpretation of Hollywood Piano Concertos won Germany’s coveted Deutsches Schuplatten Preis. Most recently her recorded traversal of the score to Carl Dreiser’s silent movie classic *Master of the House* (1925) may be heard on Criterion Collection DVD.

Sara Davis Buechner joined the faculty of Temple University’s Boyer College of Music and Dance in 2016, after previously teaching at the Manhattan School of Music, New York University and the University of British Columbia. She has presented masterclasses and workshops at major pedagogic venues worldwide, adjudicated important international piano competitions, and is also a contributing editor for Dover Publications International. In 2017 Ms. Buechner marked her 30th year as a dedicated Yamaha Artist.

As a proud transgender woman, Ms. Buechner also appears as a speaker and performer at important LGBTQ events, and has contributed interviews and articles about her own experience to numerous media outlets worldwide. Sara is a dual American-Canadian citizen who makes her home in Philadelphia.

~Program Notes~
Berkshire Symphony Orchestra
March 11, 2022

Kevin Kaska (b. 1938)

Louis Stewart (b. 1944)

Sondheim Celebration (2020)

The name Stephen Sondheim is certainly familiar to those in the artistic world especially in the world of musical theater. His work as a lyricist and composer has been a major influence on many composers for the Broadway musical stage. Aside from the beauty of his music and lyrics there is a more important side to his work in theater. Sondheim has said on many occasions that there are only two reasons for a musical number in a show. The first is that it helps move the story along. The second is that, and this shows Sondheim's genius, it tells something about the character---in Sondheim's case not just the surface of the character. Sondheim had the ability to get into the depth of a character whether it was about an experimental painter in the late 19th century or a mad barber in 18th century England who quickly dispatched his customers with his silver razors.

In the SONDHEIM CELEBRATION bits and pieces of Sondheim's melodic lines have been chosen that exemplify the essence of the characters in question. In the beginning one hears a bit of EVERYBODY'S GOT A RIGHT TO BE HAPPY from THE ASSASSINS. After a brief touch of ANYONE CAN WHISTLE one hears a change of meter to $\frac{3}{4}$ and LAST MIDNIGHT is heard from INTO THE WOODS. When the tempo slows a little one hears one phrase of PRETTY WOMAN from SWEENEY TODD repeated which leads to COLOR AND LIGHT from SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE. Later one hears PRETTY LADY from PACIFIC OVERTURES in counterpoint with BARCELONA from COMPANY. The rest consists of LOVING YOU from PASSION and SUNDAY from SUNDAY IN THE PARK.

This CELEBRATION is dedicated to the memory of Stephen Sondheim with affection and much respect.

Louis Stewart

W.A. Mozart (1756 – 1791)

Piano Concerto in C Major K. 503

In just under three years, Mozart wrote twelve piano concertos. It is the genre that absolutely dominates his work schedule in 1784, 1785, and 1786, and what he poured out—almost all of it for his own use at his own concerts—is a series of masterpieces that delight the mind, charm and seduce the ear, and pierce the heart. They are the ideal realization of what might be done with the piano concerto. Beethoven a couple of times reaches to where Mozart is, and perhaps Brahms, too, but still, in this realm Mozart scarcely knows peers. K.503 is the end of that run. It comes at the end of an amazing year, amazing even for Mozart, that had begun with work on *The Impresario* and *Figaro*, and whose achievements include the A major piano concerto, K.488, and the C minor, K.491, the E-flat piano quartet, the last of his horn concertos, the trios in G and B-flat for piano, violin, and cello, as well as the one in E-flat with viola and clarinet, and the sonata in F for piano duet, K.497. Together with the present concerto he worked on the Prague Symphony, finishing it two days later, and before the year was out he wrote one of the most personal and in every way special of his master-pieces, the concert aria for soprano with piano obbligato and orchestra, *Ch'io mi scordi dite*, K.505.

Such a list does not reflect how Mozart's life had begun to change. On March 3, 1784, for example, he could report to his father that he had twenty-two concerts in thirty-eight days: "I don't think that this way I can possibly get out of practice." A few weeks later, he wrote that for his own series of concerts he had a bigger subscription list than two other performers put together, and that for his most recent appearance the hall had been "full to overflowing." In 1786, the fiscal catastrophes of 1788, the year of the last three symphonies, were probably unforeseeable, and one surpassing triumph still lay ahead of him, the delirious reception by the Prague public of Don Giovanni in 1787. Figaro was popular in Vienna, but not more than other operas by lesser men, and certainly not enough to buoy up his fortunes for long. Perhaps it is even indicative that we know nothing about the first performance of K.503. Mozart had planned some concerts for December 1786, and they were presumably the occasion for writing this concerto, but we have no evidence that these appearances actually came off.

What has changed, too, is Mozart's approach to the concerto. It seems less operatic than before, and more symphonic. The immediately preceding one, the C minor, K.491, completed March 24, 1786, foreshadows this, but even so, K.503 impresses as a move into something new. Its very manner is all its own. For years, and until not so long ago, it was one of the least played of the series, and it was as though pianists were reluctant to risk disconcerting their audiences by offering them Olympian grandeur and an unprecedented compositional richness where the expectation was chiefly of charm, operatic lyricism, and humor.

This is one of Mozart's big trumpets-and-drums concertos, and the first massive gestures make its full and grand sonority known. But even so formal an exordium becomes a personal statement at Mozart's hands—"cliche becomes event," as Adorno says about Mahler—and across the seventh measure there falls for just a moment the shadow of the minor mode. And when the formal proclamations are finished, the music does indeed take off in C minor. Such harmonic and expressive ambiguities inform the whole movement. Mozart always likes those shadows, but new here are the unmodulated transitions from major to minor and back, the hardness of his chiaroscuro. The first solo entrance is one of Mozart's most subtle and gently winsome. The greatest marvel of all is the development, which is brief but dense, with a breathtaking harmonic range and an incredible intricacy of canonic writing. The piano has a delightful function during these pages, proposing ideas and new directions, but then settling back and turning into an accompanist who listens to the woodwinds execute what he has imagined. (And how keenly one senses Mozart's own presence at the keyboard here!)

The Andante is subdued, formal and a little mysterious at the same time, like a knot garden by moonlight, and remarkable too for the great span from its slowest notes to its fastest. For the finale, Mozart goes back to adapt a gavotte from his then five-year-old opera *Idomeneo*. In its courtly and witty measures, there is nothing to prepare us for the epiphany of the episode in which the piano, accompanied by cellos and basses alone (a sound that occurs nowhere else in Mozart), begins a smiling and melancholy song that is continued by the oboe, the flute, the bassoon, and in which the cellos cannot resist joining. Lovely in itself, the melody grows into a music whose richness of texture and whose poignancy and passion astonish us even in the context of the mature Mozart. From that joy and pain Mozart redeems us by leading us back to his gavotte and from there into an exuberantly inventive, brilliant ending.

Michael Steinberg

Leonard Bernstein (1918 – 1990)

Three Dance Variations, from *Fancy Free*, *Danzon*

Bernstein was not serving in the military because he suffered from asthma. He tried to get himself assigned to a musical post within the Armed Forces, but channels were closed to him. In the event, *Fancy Free* and *On the Town* did serve to raise spirits on the home front. The idea for *Fancy Free* came from Jerome Robbins, who in 1943 was a dancer with Ballet Theatre. He had floated the idea with that company—a period story using popular social dances

like the boogie-woogie and the lindy-hop—but he was having trouble fixing on the right composer. Someone mentioned Bernstein, Robbins looked him up, and the match was made. Bernstein condensed the narrative for a program note:

From the moment the action begins, with the sound of a juke box wailing behind the curtain, the ballet is strictly wartime America, 1944. The curtain rises on a street corner with a lamp post, a side-street bar, and New York sky-scrapers pricked out with a crazy pattern of lights, making a dizzying backdrop. Three sailors explode onto the stage. They are on twenty-four-hour shore leave in the city and on the prowl for girls. The tale of how they meet first one, then a second girl, and how they fight over them, lose them, and dash off after still a third is the story of the ballet.

He set to work during the winter of 1944, while Ballet Theatre was away on tour. When they returned, Bernstein attended rehearsals and worked out the details of his score on the spot as Robbins created the choreography. There is nothing complicated about the plot, which reaches its apex in the dance variations. There the three sailors compete with each other in turn so as not to be the one left dateless. They each dance a solo variation crafted to their own character: the punchy Galop (Harold Lang had to repeat it at the premiere), the more lyrical Waltz (showing off dancer John Kriza's gentler style), and the Latin-style Danzon (a sensual solo for Robbins). Each is so persuasive that the girls can't make up their minds. The sailors decide to settle the matter with fisticuffs, and the girls flee as the men fight.

James M. Keller

Leonard Bernstein

Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story"

From its opening night on Broadway on 26 September 1957, *West Side Story* has been recognized as an epoch-making musical, a touchstone for the musical and dramatic possibilities of the modern American musical theater. Freely derived from *Romeo and Juliet* translated into a modern urban setting, the story was told especially in inventive dances created by Jerome Robbins for the two rival gangs. Leonard Bernstein's music for the songs and dances provides a score unusually unified in harmonic language and melodic motives. The most important motive is the melodic tritone of the very opening – a signal whistle for one of the gangs; the interval recurs in many of the songs, sometimes left hanging tensely (as in "Cool"), sometimes resolved to produce emotional paydirt ("Maria"). The dances are so all-embracing in the show that a symphonic treatment of the dance music can provide a musical and dramatic précis of the story. The suite contains the following segments:

Prologue (Allegro moderato), an extended dance depicting the growing rivalry between the Sharks and the Jets; **"Somewhere,"** a visionary dance sequence in which the two gangs are united in friendship in a beautiful but unreal never-never-land, breaking out of the city into a place of sunshine, freedom, and open spaces; a **Mambo**, in which the two gangs dance competitively, and ever more vigorously; a graceful **Cha-cha** (based on "Maria") in which the two lovers see each other for the first time and begin to dance together; a fugal dance sequence, **"Cool,"** in which the Jets attempt to control their hostility; the **Rumble**, in which the two gang leaders are killed; and **Finale**, the procession that draws the two gangs together in the tragic reality of Tony's death, with recollections of "Somewhere."

Steven Ledbetter