The score of West Side Story was among the first music I fell in love with — and I was convinced to become a professional musician.

BRUCE RIDGE, NCS DOUBLE BASS

Overture to The School for Scandal, Op. 5

SAMUEL BARBER
BORN March 9, 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania; died January 23, 1981, in New York City
PREMIERE Composed 1931; first public performance August 30, 1933, The Philadelphia Orchestra, Alexander Smallens conducting

THE STORY
Richard Sheridan’s madcap comedy of manners, The School for Scandal, has delighted (and scandalized) audiences ever since it premiered in 1777. Samuel Barber, all his life an avid reader of literature, composed his overture not as a prelude to the play but rather “as a musical reflection of the play’s spirit.”

The overture was Barber’s first completed work for full orchestra. He composed the bulk of it while vacationing in Italy during the summer of 1931, tossing it off between tennis matches, swimming, bicycle trips, shopping expeditions, and other vacation activities.

LISTENING TIPS
The overture opens with a sneering fanfare (perhaps in “tribute” to the play’s principal female villain, Lady Sneerwell). The fanfare sets in motion a scurrying, tonally ambiguous theme, suggestive of the nefarious scandal mongering and plotting of Lady
Sneerwell, her hireling, Snake, and arch-hypocrite, Sir Joseph Surface. The contrasting second theme, a sentimental melody introduced by the oboe, perhaps represents the play’s principal innocent, Maria. There are numerous rapid changes in tempo and dynamics as the two themes are developed — in one place, seven changes within 30 measures.

**INSTRUMENTATION**

*Two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, celesta, strings*

**Violin Concerto**

**GEORGE FREDERICK MCKAY**

BORN June 11, 1899, in Harrington, Washington; died October 4, 1970, in Stateline, Nevada

PREMIERE Composed 1940; first performance in 1941, University of Washington Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the composer with Kensley Rosen as soloist

**THE STORY**

A true son of the West, George Frederick McKay was born in eastern Washington, and except for four years at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, spent his musical career for 41 years at the Composition Department of the University of Washington. He also occupied an honorary chair at the University of Southern California.
McKay was a prolific composer of hundreds of works in all genres, including opera. Described as a folklorist, his goal was to incorporate the songs and dances of the West into the classical repertoire, evoking a “folk feeling.”

McKay composed the Violin Concerto in 1940. There is a tragically dramatic quality to the entire work that suggests that it may have been a reflection of the fraught times during which it was composed. But there is no biographical indication that McKay was directly responding to the Depression or the crisis in Europe that preceded the United States’ entry into World War II.

The concerto was first performed in the fall of 1941 by Kensley Rosen with the University of Washington Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the composer. North Carolina Symphony concertmaster Brian Reagin, soloist in these performances, has recorded the work for Naxos.

LISTENING TIPS
McKay composes in the Neo-Romantic style of the late-19th century, but with greater use of dissonance. In many ways, the work resembles that of classical composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who utilized a similar style in scoring Hollywood dramatic films during the same period.

The concerto’s three movements are played without pause.

First movement: The flamboyant opening of the concerto, a cadenza for the soloist with orchestral punctuation, lasts nearly two minutes. The entire first movement is replete with solo virtuosic passagework in the same vein.

Second movement: This melancholic movement develops a melody in a “classicized” folk idiom that characterizes some of the composer’s other works.
Third movement: The jaunty, brief finale also has a cinematic quality that recalls the stereotypical rhythms used in westerns.

INSTRUMENTATION
Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings

Symphony No. 2, “Short Symphony”

AARON COPLAND
BORN November 14, 1900, in Brooklyn; died December 2, 1990, in Sleepy Hollow, New York
PREMIERE Composed 1931-1933; first performance November 23, 1934, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México, Carlos Chávez conducting

THE STORY
The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Aaron Copland was the creator of what has become a “down home” American musical style, as exemplified by his “Americana” ballets, including Billy the Kid, Rodeo, and Appalachian Spring. But before he reached this stage in his musical development, he sampled all the modern musical “isms” of the 1920s, influenced by his stay in Paris and studies with Nadia Boulanger. (He especially embraced jazz — but the premiere in Boston in 1927 of his jazzy Piano Concerto, under the baton of Serge Koussevitzky, garnered as much heat and as little light as the premiere of Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring in 1913.)

In the early 1930s, Copland’s compositional voice started to change. His Symphony No. 2, although still full of the complex, jagged rhythms so dear to the composers of the 1920s, already sounds like the Copland we are more familiar with.
Composed from 1931 to 1933, the symphony was premiered by the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México under Carlos Chávez. Both The Philadelphia Orchestra (under Leopold Stokowski) and the Boston Symphony Orchestra (under Serge Koussevitzky) canceled promised performances, finding it so rhythmically intricate that they dared not attempt it within the allotted rehearsal period. The U.S. premiere came finally in 1944 with the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Stokowski, in what Copland called an “extremely inadequate reading.”

Coincidentally, the Symphony No. 2 premiered in the U.S. the same year as Appalachian Spring, perhaps Copland’s most beloved composition. If Stokowski and Koussevitzky couldn’t manage the rhythms, the great dancer Martha Graham, who premiered Appalachian Spring, certainly could. So could Copland’s student, Leonard Bernstein.

LISTENING TIPS
The symphony’s three movements proceed without pause, and complex syncopation and abrupt changes in mood and tempo create an episodic effect throughout. Right from the opening bars, the open intervals seem like a musical foreshadowing of the Appalachian Spring ballet.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes (one doubling alto flute), piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, piano, strings.
Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

BORN August 25, 1918, Lawrence, Massachusetts; died October 14, 1990, in New York City

PREMIERE Composed 1961; first performance February 13, 1961, New York Philharmonic, Lucas Foss conducting

THE STORY

*West Side Story* was Leonard Bernstein’s attempt to demonstrate that it was possible to write a Broadway musical with the characteristics of high art. He succeeded beyond all expectations. With lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and with Jerome Robbins as director and choreographer, the show opened on Broadway on September 26, 1957, and ran for more than 1,000 performances. The movie was just as spectacular a success, as was the recording.

But its birth was not easy. The show was originally conceived eight years earlier as a conflict between Jews and Catholics during the Easter-Passover celebrations, and at one point was to be called “East Side Story.” The protagonists were finally switched to ethnic gangs on the Upper West Side, but no backers could be found. *West Side Story* became notorious for having been turned down by nearly every producer because no one thought that such a tragic story was suitable material for Broadway. Finally, Harold Prince and Robert Griffith, two successful Broadway producers, emerged as the show’s financial “angels.”

Casting was another problem. The perfectionist Robbins wanted a cast of 38 who could both dance and sing — a nearly impossible demand in those days, but now the rule rather than the exception. A choreographer first and foremost, Robbins finally settled on dancers who could sing — as opposed to singers who could dance. (When
Bernstein, re-recorded *West Side Story* in 1988, unencumbered by staging constraints, he used opera singers for the main roles: Kiri Te Kanawa, José Carreras, Tatiana Troyanos, and Marilyn Horne. It became another bestseller.)

While describing the tragic life of ordinary people in a New York Puerto Rican ghetto, *West Side Story* tackles an archetypal theme: love clashing with prejudice and clan hatred. In other words, it is an inner-city *Romeo and Juliet*.

**LISTENING TIPS**

The Symphonic Dances, which Bernstein extracted from the musical, are not arranged in the order of the original show. The suite consists of nine segments played without pause.

**Prologue**: Violence rises between the two street gangs, the Sharks and the Jets, portrayed with harsh, jazzy dissonances and rhythms.

“**Somewhere**”: In Tony and Maria’s idyllic dream sequence, the gangs are joined in friendship and the lovers are united.

**Scherzo**: The dream continues as the two gangs leave the city for the idyllic countryside.

**Mambo**: The rival gangs compete at a school dance.

**Cha-Cha**: Tony and Maria, from opposing gangs, meet for the first time and dance together.

**Meeting Scene**: The lovers hesitantly exchange their first words.
“Cool” Fugue: The hostility of the Jets gradually builds in anticipation of street warfare.

Rumble: The violent, dissonant climax results in the final tragedy in which both rival gang leaders are killed.

Finale: Tony dies in Maria’s arms, a victim of gang violence. In an ironic twist, the dream melody of “Somewhere” hauntingly reappears during the funeral procession.

INSTRUMENTATION

Three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, piano, harp, strings

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