

Program notes by Eric Bromberger

nights bright days

LAURIE SAN MARTIN

Born December 8, 1968

Oakland, CA

The composer has supplied the following program note.

nights bright days was written for the Composers Conference at Wellesley College. The conference is organized by Mario Davidovsky, and the premiere of this piece was conducted by the late Efrain Guigui. I was very excited to be invited to participate in the summer of 1998. The conference brings together composers and performers, and in the many decades of its existence it's served as an incubator for a wide variety of new pieces. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to write a new chamber orchestra piece for the excellent musicians in residence at the conference.

The single-movement piece is in an ABA form; the slow and lyrical opening section returns at the end, after a fiery middle section which features many wind solos. Much of the piece was written in the middle of the night, and so when it came time to name it, I was happy to get a recommendation from my partner to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare's Sonnet 43. The title *nights bright days* makes a connection to the sonnet, but it also describes the atmosphere of the vivid nights of writing and dreaming I experienced while composing this piece.

Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Opus 93

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

The *Eighth* has always seemed out of place in the progression of Beethoven's symphonies. It comes after the dramatic *Fifth*, expansive *Sixth*, and powerful *Seventh*, and it precedes the grand *Ninth*. Within this sequence, the *Eighth* seems all wrong: it is brief, relaxed, and—in form and its use of a small orchestra—apparently a conscious throwback to the manner of Haydn and Mozart. But the unexpectedness of the *Eighth Symphony* is also the source of its charm. Two things in particular mark this music: its energy (it has no slow movement) and its humor. The *Eighth Symphony* is one of those very rare things: a genuinely funny piece of music,

full of high spirits, what (at first) seem wrong notes, unusual instrumental sounds, and sly jokes. Beethoven wrote the *Seventh* and *Eighth Symphonies* at exactly the same time—in 1812—and the *Seventh Symphony* has universally been judged one of the Beethoven's greatest creations. The composer, though became angry when early audiences showered that work with praise—he felt the *Eighth* was a better symphony.

The *Allegro vivace* explodes to life with a six-note figure stamped out by the whole orchestra—this figure will give rhythmic impulse to the opening movement and function as its central melodic idea. A second subject—flowing, elegant, and waltz-like—quickly arrives in the violins. What distinguishes this movement is its incredible energy—this music seems always to be pressing forward, sometimes spilling over itself with scarcely-restrained power, sometimes erupting violently. At the very end, the pace slows, things grow quiet, and matters conclude gracefully with the opening figure, now heard very softly in the strings. Even when quiet, that figure feels full of coiled energy. The aptly-named *Allegretto scherzando* brings some of the symphony's best humor. Beethoven's friend Johann Nepomuk Maelzel had invented a metronome, and the woodwinds' steady *tick-tick-tick* at the beginning is Beethoven's rendering of the metronome's sound. Over this mechanical ticking, the violins dance happily until the music explodes in a shower of 64th-notes (some have felt that here Beethoven shows us the metronome—wound too tight—suddenly blowing its spring and flying to pieces). These catastrophes occur throughout the movement, and the loudest brings it to a close.

The *Tempo di minuetto* seems at first very much in the manner of the third movement of a Haydn or Mozart symphony, rather than the scherzo we have come to expect from Beethoven in such a position. Once again Beethoven delights in the unexpected: the outer sections of this “minuet” feature stirring fanfares from brass and timpani (try dancing to *this* minuet!), while the trio section brings a moment of unexpected beauty. Scored at first for just two horns, clarinet, and accompanying cellos, the trio seems like some nocturne from deep within the forest: over murmuring lower strings, the two horns sing their haunting song (Beethoven marks it *dolce*) and the clarinet quickly takes up their theme and makes it sing in new ways.

The blistering *Allegro vivace* finale is full of jokes. Racing violins present the main idea—built on both triple and duple rhythms—and this opening section zips to what should be a moment of repose on the strings' unison C, the expected dominant, but instantly Beethoven slams that C aside with a crashing C-sharp, and the symphony heads off in the “wrong” key. The jokes come

so quickly in this movement that many of them pass unnoticed: the “wrong” notes, the “oom-pah” transitions scored for just timpani and bassoon, and so forth. The very ending brings the best joke of all, for the coda almost refuses to quit. Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* had concluded with a coda that seemed stretched beyond reason, but in his *Eighth Symphony* he delays the final cadence to the point where one wonders if this symphony will *ever* end. It eventually does, and with massive chords for full orchestra Beethoven at last wrenches this most good-natured and energetic music to a resounding close.

Symphony No. 3 “Kaddish”

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Born August 25, 1918, Lawrence, MA

Died October 14, 1990, New York City

Each of Leonard Bernstein’s three symphonies has a subtitle, and each—in quite different ways—is a philosophical exploration. His *First Symphony* (1942), subtitled *Jeremiah*, sets a text from the Book of Lamentations that agonizes over the destruction of Jerusalem and wonders if it is possible for Jews to reestablish a relationship with God. Bernstein’s *Second Symphony* (1949), subtitled *The Age of Anxiety*, is a purely instrumental work, but it was inspired by Auden’s poem that describes the overnight experience of four young people in New York City who gradually move from partying to an acceptance of faith. Bernstein’s “*Kaddish*” *Symphony* (1963) interweaves an ancient Jewish prayer for the dead with a text by Bernstein himself that violently challenges God’s apparent disinterest in the face of human suffering. All three symphonies pose troubling questions, and each arrives at a different answer.

The “*Kaddish*” *Symphony* got its start in 1955, when the Boston Symphony and the Koussevitzky Music Foundation commissioned a work from Bernstein. But Bernstein was unbelievably busy in the following years, which saw the premieres of *Candide* and *West Side Story*, as well as his own appointment as music director of the New York Philharmonic, and he kept putting off the commission from Boston. Finally, in 1961 Bernstein set to work. He wanted to find a poet to write the text for his new symphony, but his efforts to enlist Robert Lowell did not work out, and Bernstein decided to write the text himself, declaring “so I’m elected, poet or no poet.” He completed the short score in August 1963 and was in the process of finishing the orchestration when President Kennedy was assassinated that November. Bernstein, who had been a classmate of Kennedy at Harvard, was shattered by the news, and he dedicated the

symphony “To the Beloved Memory of John F. Kennedy.” Bernstein led the premiere in Tel Aviv with the Israel Philharmonic three weeks later, on December 10, and Charles Munch led the American premiere with the Boston Symphony the following January.

Dramatically, the *“Kaddish” Symphony* sets two quite different texts against each other. The first of these is the ancient Kaddish prayer that gives the symphony its name. Kaddish is a Hebrew prayer recited for the dead; it was originally in Aramaic, and that word means “holy” in Aramaic). But the Kaddish prayer never mentions the word “death.” Instead, it is a prayer of praise for God, of acceptance, and finally of peace, and it will be sung—in quite different ways—in all three sections of the *“Kaddish” Symphony*.

Bernstein’s own text flies in the face of this ancient prayer, defiantly rejecting the prayer’s consoling acceptance. It should be noted that when Bernstein wrote the *“Kaddish” Symphony*, World War II and the Holocaust were recent memories, and the Berlin Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Kennedy assassination all took place as he worked on this music—the threat of nuclear annihilation was on everyone’s mind in those years. Bernstein’s narrator is not a humble supplicant but an angry and disillusioned soul, anxious to believe but unable to accept what life has become: she addresses God as “Angry, wrinkled Old Majesty,” and questions whether He is still in touch with humankind or whether He has lost faith in the covenant that He forged with humankind (the “rainbow” of the Book of Genesis). Acknowledging failures on both sides, the narrator sets out to help God reconnect with humankind: God must confront the reality of His creation, and in the process God and humanity will recreate each other and forge a vital new relationship.

Not surprisingly, Bernstein’s text produced sharp reactions, with many finding it pretentious, even blasphemous. Bernstein himself was not happy with the text, and in 1977–fourteen years after the premiere—he revised it (this is the version performed at these concerts). The revised text is somewhat shorter and less abrasive, and Bernstein now specified that it might be spoken by either a man or a woman (in the original, the narrator was a woman, and Bernstein’s wife Felicia Montealegre took the part at the American premiere). The character of the two versions is much the same, however, and the *“Kaddish” Symphony* remains the least frequently performed of Bernstein’s three symphonies. Some of this, of course, has to do with the vast forces it requires—narrator, soprano soloist, boys choir, chorus, and a huge orchestra—but the *“Kaddish” Symphony* can still, over half a century after its creation, produce sharply

different responses.

If the *“Kaddish” Symphony* was written at the height of the Cold War, it should be noted that another war was taking place in these same years. That war was musical—it pit the followers of Schoenberg, who rejected traditional tonality in favor of serial techniques, against those who wished to hold onto tonality. Bernstein, who would remain firmly committed to tonality, nevertheless found himself torn, and we sense some of his own musical conflict in the *“Kaddish” Symphony*. He employs some of the techniques of serial composition here, beginning with a twelve-tone theme to represent the crisis of belief and the current state of humankind. But as the symphony progresses, the music returns to a more tonal language, particularly in the choruses of the final movement. Bernstein himself noted “that one of the main points of the piece is that the agony expressed with the twelve-tone music has to give way . . . to tonality and diatonicism even so that what triumphs in the end, the affirmation of faith is tonal.”

A BRIEF OVERVIEW: The *“Kaddish” Symphony* is in three sections. The *Invocation* opens with an ominous rumble over which the narrator announces her intention: “I want to pray.” The spiritual confusion of mankind is set to a twelve-tone theme as the narrator introduces the first Kaddish, sung by the full chorus. This presentation is violent rather than consoling, and it sets the stage: mankind is alone “On this one, dazed speck.”

The second section is titled *Din-Torah*, which means “judgment,” but here it is man who judges God. The narrator accuses God of failing to maintain His side of the covenant (“the rainbow”). Furious outbursts of percussion alternate with spirited dance music before the narrator asks if she can rock God to sleep. The second Kaddish is sung as a lullaby by the soprano soloist and boys choir, and the movement glides to a peaceful conclusion.

The third section functions as both scherzo and finale. In the scherzo, the speaker confronts God and asks to renew the covenant, and the boys choir begins to sing the third Kaddish—this section reaches its climax on a soaring theme that sets the word “Believe.” But reality intrudes at the beginning of the finale when the narrator announces grimly that “The dawn is chilly,” and a long orchestral interlude draws us toward the conclusion of this journey. The narrator proposes a new covenant with God, this one based on mutual dependence and mutual re-creation, and soprano, boys choir, and chorus sing the final prayer. Yet the fierce concluding chord—dissonant and unsettling—suggests that the *“Kaddish” Symphony* ends not in triumph but with its spiritual quest still ongoing.