

13 | *West Side Story* and the Voice

SYLVIA STONER-HAWKINS

‘I say it is not an opera’, Mr. Bernstein offered. ‘It’s a work on its way toward being one. Some parts are operatic, but it isn’t one.’¹

‘The American theatre took a venturesome forward step last evening. This is a bold new kind of musical theatre – a juke-box Manhattan opera.’²

Although many have speculated as to which genre *West Side Story* belongs – it is a musical that at times requires vocal skills often demanded of opera singers. Bernstein wrote for the voice with a keen understanding of how drama becomes heightened through music. Since *West Side Story* broke the mould of traditional musical comedy, the vocal demands are equally non-traditional. By examining the vocal writing, one can understand Bernstein’s sense of character and how each musical number propels the story through song.

The main singing roles of Maria, Tony, Anita, and Riff require two classically trained ‘legit’ singers for Maria and Tony, and two Broadway belt/character voices for Anita and Riff. Bernstein divides the solo material so that the majority of singing falls to the star-crossed lovers, which leaves less singing for Riff and Anita, but more room for dance to be incorporated into their performances. Although Bernstein writes sensitively for each kind of singer, occasionally the vocal categories blur. At times, Anita is required to perform in a more classical style as in the ‘Tonight’ Quintet and ‘I Have a Love’. Tony also has moments of standard Broadway belt mix in his solos ‘Something’s Coming’ and in the ‘Tonight’ (Quintet). Bernstein’s use of the voice paves the way for the modern musical, where composers write less for a particular kind of voice and expect the singer-actor to be able to sing in many different kinds of styles.

The Vocal Writing in *West Side Story*

In the opening scenes of the show, Bernstein sets up a strong vocal contrast between Riff and Tony. The ‘Jet Song’, led by Riff, begins seamlessly from underscored dialogue. This integration of speech into song helps Riff ease

into song from his extended speech about Tony's loyalty. The song's opening lines are set in a typical mid-range that allows for the baritone (or bari-tenor) to easily start pitching speech instead of creating a full tone. Bernstein recognised the importance of the singer-actor being able to deliver text and have its meaning carry from the stage into the theatre. Although rhythmically challenging for a singer, the use of hemiola allows for Riff to separate his words, using strong rhythmic accents that create the impression of a rough, streetwise gang leader. When Riff's line eases into a tune ('You're never alone . . .') in 6/8 time, the line suggests a jazzy swing with angular intervals. Moving through these vocal register shifts in a melody with such wide intervals can make the voice sound rough. This is because of the constant transitions between the low and high range of the voice. The actor may also choose to carry the chest register up past this transition to create a strong belt sound, as in the phrase 'You're well protected', which takes Riff to his highest solo note in the show, an F4.

With the change of scene, Tony sings in a completely different vocal style in 'Something's Coming'. In contrast to Riff's angular, loud, and rhythmic melody, Tony starts at a *pianissimo* volume in falsetto and then simply holds a note for several bars. As the song develops, Tony sings in eager rhythmic articulation, but the melodic line follows a smoother trajectory. This allows the voice to create a steady flow of tone without abrupt register shifts. Like his friend Riff, Tony has moments of sung speech with 'It may come cannonballing . . .' or 'I got a feeling' on the second verse, as the line swells to a *fortissimo* E4 sustained over eight bars. However, despite his impetuous arc into sustained high notes, both Tony and Maria always quieten down from such *crescendi*, as can be heard later in their duets 'Tonight' and 'One Hand, One Heart'. This is true for Tony in his first number, as he continues to have moments of *sotto voce* that swell into broad phrases, which Bernstein indicates should be sung 'warmly, freely'. Despite the swell, the song concludes as it starts, again *pianissimo* and *sotto voce*, sounding unresolved, so as to leave the question 'Who knows?' lingering in the air, unanswered.

It is easy to compare the structure of 'Maria' to a *bel canto* operatic tenor aria. The expanded structure of Tony's solos 'Something's Coming' combined with 'Maria' reflects the traditional form of a flowing cavatina followed by a fiery cabaletta, separated by 'A Dance at the Gym'. Naturally, Bernstein understood such operatic forms and knew how to sustain a steady musical build up for maximum dramatic effect. Beginning with a gentle recitative style as Tony learns Maria's name, Bernstein bridges the transition into the aria-like section through a gentle melodic pull first

with Tony singing 'Maria' on a perfect fourth, then the next phrase as a perfect fifth, and finally the glorious tritone, which seems both unexpected and bent towards tonal resolution. The challenge vocally, of course, is to maintain accurate pitch on the changing, wide intervals. As Tony continues into the *Moderato con anima* section the melody becomes stepwise and more lyrical. This scalar movement allows for the singer to create a smoother legato and richer tone, especially as Bernstein moves the melody through the singer's *passaggio* and into a higher tessitura.

The *passaggio* literally means 'passage' in Italian and the term applies to the transition from one register, or area of the voice, to another. Singers experience a specific kind of vocal production in one register and an altered or totally different production in another, dependent upon the degree of tension in the thyroarytenoid muscles and changes to the vocal fold length and vibration. Vocal pedagogue Cornelius Reid noted: 'The smooth and easy negotiation of the *passaggio* without the loss of range, resonance, or flexibility is the hallmark of technical mastery.'³ Because of the stepwise writing in 'Maria', Tony transitions smoothly into a head dominant tone without too much exposure of a register shift. Shifting between registers in musical theatre requires the performer to decide how to shift in a way that supports the character. Tony often sounds more operatic at this point because that is what is needed for efficient vocal production; for most actors using a belt sound in this range could potentially damage the voice during long runs of the show. Delaying a transition from chest voice into a head dominant voice produces a belt or belt-mix that has an extremely different sound than transitioning earlier into a dominant head register, which produces a more classical tone.

Bernstein's overall trajectory for 'Maria' follows a similar pattern as Tony's first solo. As with 'Something's Coming', the first broad *crescendo* in 'Maria' ends abruptly with a *subito piano* indicated for the lyric 'say it soft and it's almost like praying'. Dramatically, it helps rein in the dynamics so that the second, broader *crescendo* can move to the climax of the song. Vocally, it is an opportunity for the singer to relax any tension and sing with less pressure by using his falsetto (if desired) before he returns to the next section of intense singing. Falsetto singing eases the stress at this point because only a portion of the vocal folds are in contact, as opposed to full voice when the folds are in full contact and vibrate their full vocal length. At the climactic moment, Bernstein's score indicates that he originally wrote a B \flat 4 to be sustained at a *forte* over three bars at the climax of the song. In the iconic Deutsche Grammophon recording of 'Maria' performed by José Carreras, he sustained the B \flat 4 effortlessly under the baton of Bernstein.

Likewise, musical theatre tenor Matt Cavenaugh sailed through this sustained B \flat 4 in the 2009 revival. However, most singers prefer to sing the *ossia* line that allows them to sing several shorter phrases and at lower pitches. This line proves a bit less strenuous and allows brief pauses of relaxation in a very high range. Following this second *crescendo*, Tony once again ends in *subito piano* and falsetto, creating an overall boy soprano effect, reminiscent of an innocent prayer.

Following ‘Maria’, Tony has a brief exchange of dialogue with Maria that sets up the ‘Balcony Scene’ duet. This is the third singing number in a row that involves Tony. Following his pseudo-cavatina/cabaletta aria, Tony now sings an extensive duet with Maria. It is important that the singer-actor paces himself through these three numbers, so that he has the stamina to maintain a consistent tone and perform the nuanced dynamics required in these three songs.

Tony has a brief vocal break at the start of the ‘Balcony Scene’, when Bernstein gives Maria an opportunity to start the duet with a solo section. Once again, Bernstein grows the solo vocal line out of spoken word and he suggests Maria begins ‘freely’ at a low dynamic level. A common speaking tone for most female voices begins around A3, and Bernstein sets her starting note only a half-step higher at B \flat 3. This allows for the drama to be more integrated from the spoken word into singing, and slowly allows the audience to alter how they listen to the words, which makes the text more understandable and the singing more believable. Her melodic line creates a beautiful arc into her *passaggio* and then gracefully descends. This rise and fall of the melody naturally encourages a dynamic swell in the middle of the phrase. These opening solo lines encourage use of the head voice and legato singing, and in this soprano range the voice sounds light, giving the impression of a soubrette or ingénue. The duet builds in anticipation as Tony interrupts Maria, followed by Maria interrupting, or overlapping, Tony’s line prior to their first kiss.

With the start of the *molto allegro* section, Maria begins again with a solo. Her melodic line broadens into longer phrases that linger in her middle voice, eventually rising into the upper range of her *passaggio*. Sondheim’s ‘simple’ lyrics help Maria sing fewer consonants and more vowels as she leaps from the vowel [i] of ‘on-ly’ on F4 into D5, F5, and E \flat 5 on the words ‘you to-night’. This proves to be another ‘operatic’ moment in *West Side Story*, because the text cannot be Maria’s first priority at this moment. She needs to focus on creating a consistently free tone as she moves into her upper register. It is harder to maintain clarity in the lyric because ‘... vowels must be modified for the resonator (vocal tract) to

work efficiently'.⁴ Also, using head register dominance for a vocal line that hangs in this tessitura allows for efficient breath flow, especially over sustained notes. The classically trained singer will most likely choose to modify the diphthong vowel in the word 'say' and 'today' so that the F5 and G♭5 can be sustained on a modified 'eh' without spreading the mouth, causing loss of air and tonal focus.

The duet continues in a restatement of Maria's 'Tonight' solo material, this time sung in unison octaves. Tony, most likely a tenor or bari-tenor, must face similar issues of shifting registers and potentially modifying vowels as he moves into the higher tessitura. Maintaining breath energy, a clear and precise tone, and singing with expression requires adequate vocal technique. Actors cast as Tony must understand how to shift vocal registers seamlessly in order to give consistent performances throughout the run. The conclusion of the duet offers one final challenge to the singers – they end in *pianissimo*, perhaps suggesting a blissful whisper that floats into the clouds as both soprano and tenor are required to sustain a *dolcissimo* A♭5. This kind of vocal float can be achieved more easily by the tenor if he flips into falsetto, but the soprano needs both relaxation and agility to support her intonation at such a low dynamic level in this range. Although Bernstein wrote for the singers to be in unison, it is common for Tony to conclude this duet a perfect fourth lower on E♭4. This is certainly an understandable adjustment in light of the vocal load for Tony thus far in the show.

The next two musical numbers, 'America' and 'Cool' (their order in the Broadway/stage musical adaptation), remind us that this show is not an opera but a musical. The style of singing is markedly different than that of Tony and Maria and there are definite elements of comedy interspersed. Bernstein attempts to create a Latin-sounding vocal number with 'America'. Sondheim noted that the original scene conceived by Arthur Laurents was to have been an argument between Anita and Bernardo, 'then Jerry Robbins said he didn't want boys in this dance . . . "all girls"'.⁵ Of course, in both movies this number returned to Laurents's original concept and included Bernardo and the other members of the Shark gang.

In the stage version, 'America' includes solos for Rosalia and Anita with the Shark girls as ensemble. The vocal style depends of course upon the casting, but in most recordings this number is sung with an affected Puerto Rican accent, which often results in a nasal tone and bright chest dominant sound. Most of the melodic material is in a possible belt range for both altos and sopranos. In this ensemble, Anita sings the lowest line and Rosalia tends to remain in a more mezzo-soprano range. Rosalia's solo is usually performed in a mix of head and chest register, with a sense of legato.

Bernstein suggests that she sings ‘nostalgically’ of Puerto Rico, while Anita repeats Rosalia’s melody ‘mockingly’, and thereby creates a speech-like character sound that can be quite pointed and *marcato*. Anita opens into a full belt on her *subito forte* line, ‘I like the island Manhattan . . .’ This strong tone creates an energetic transition into the ‘Tempo di Huapango’ vocal ensemble of Anita and the Shark girls (except Rosalia). This is clearly written in a way that allows the performers to both dance and sing. Vocal phrases are short and rhythmic, with little or no sustained singing, which allows for more manageable air flow while executing challenging choreography.

‘Cool’ provides a stark contrast to ‘America’ by situating the two gangs (as noted above, the Shark men appear in the film versions of ‘America’) in back-to-back group numbers. The Jets sing in more of a contemporary pop or musical theatre tone as opposed to the more classically trained sounds of Tony and Maria. With the intent to calm his gang, Riff begins ‘almost whispered’ as he speak-sings the opening lines of the number. The vocal style remains consistent for Riff to what he did in the ‘Jets Song’, but this time there is a definite swung, jazz style. Bernstein marks the tempo as ‘Solid and boppy’, which gives Riff the opportunity to use both smooth and rhythmic articulations of the text. On the fuller, longer notes, Riff can also embellish the tone with some vibrato as is consistent with the big band style popular songs of the 1930s and 40s. The vocals at the start of this number clearly lead into the extended dance section, followed by a reprise of the opening lines by the ensemble, and ending with Riff returning to his whispered, falsetto singing at the end.

After two traditional musical theatre songs, Bernstein returns to semi-operatic writing with ‘One Hand, One Heart’. Sondheim explains that this was previously an instrumental tune that Bernstein wrote for *Candide*, but strictly in dotted half notes: ‘I had to ask Lenny for more notes.’⁶ Thankfully, Bernstein included a few more quarter notes to give Sondheim the opportunity to write more words, and the performers more melody to sing, which propels the text. Since this is the wedding scene at the dress shop, both Tony and Maria speak their vows. Tony’s opening solo line responds to Maria’s spoken text and continues the profession of vows in song in a *dolce piano* tone. The first phrase arcs to C \flat 4 on ‘hands’, to D \flat 4 on ‘hearts’, and to E \flat 4 on ‘vows’. Because of the close stepwise progression and repeated pitches, the overall line of the melody is intuitively easier for a singer to sing legato. When the register changes are gradual, the tone remains consistent. Throughout this duet Maria must float the voice in the *passaggio* on G \flat 5 and Tony often moves to falsetto on

G \flat 4. Following the instrumental interlude, Bernstein modulates on the reprise from G \flat to A \flat , so Maria floats a step higher, to A \flat 5. Tony's melodic writing moves down to a falsetto F4 and ends on a low A \flat 3. Intonation in sustained soft singing is always challenging, but the soft high notes again seem to lift these lovers into their dreams and out of reality.

The blaring horns of the next musical number awaken both the audience and the dreamers as the plot turns to the 'Tonight' (Quintet). If the director chooses to have both gangs sing in addition to Bernardo and Riff, this is the only number that involves almost the full company. Unlike other musicals which include some full company number in both acts, often bookended at the beginning and ends of acts, this number appears in the middle of the show at the height of tension. This 'Fast and rhythmic' agitated ensemble opens in a speech-like range with little pitch movement for the opening gang's phrases. Sung *marcato* (with a marked accent), it is easy to understand the text, whether sung by a solo voice or the entire gang. Also, it is interesting that the same melodic structure appears for both gangs. In some way, Bernstein helps to unify these two groups and suggest that such emotion reflects the overall human condition, regardless of race.

In contrast to the shouting quality of the gangs, Anita sings with a sultry articulation, but still maintains the same shifting rhythmic patterns as the gang ensemble. Although the meter shifts are written to follow a natural speech pattern of the text, Anita has to make those shifting rhythmic patterns sound relaxed and easy, while still singing accurately. Following Anita, Tony sings a reprise of 'Tonight' from the earlier 'Balcony Scene'. Much of the prior dynamic shaping returns to these long phrases, but his solo section ends on a broad *crescendo* on 'night'. Interrupting Tony's reverie, Riff reintroduces the gang counter-motive to 'Tonight'. Following Riff's solo, the two motives (gang *vs* lovers) build intricately into a quintet that is clearly the most contrapuntal and harmonic vocal section of the entire show. With the harmony shifting every two bars or fewer, the ensemble needs to be keenly aware of the chromaticism of each vocal line in order to shift in tune with each other. Bernstein's dynamic markings provide guidance to the storytelling, as if to shift the scene from one location to another while the group sings together. Therefore, the performers must be sensitive to their dynamics so that they know when the focus is on their story and when it is not. The climactic ending has a driving *crescendo* throughout the ensemble, with every voice ending at the top of its range, including Maria who sustains a C6 for the last four bars.

Following 'The Rumble', 'I Feel Pretty' provides a fresh start in Act II and breathes some momentary hope and light into the tragedy. This

number features Maria and the three girls at the dress shop: Consuelo, Rosalia, and Francisca. Set in 3/8 time, the music feels like a fast waltz, and Bernstein indicates that Maria should begin singing 'with pulse'. Since dialogue precedes the singing, Bernstein starts Maria in her speaking range, and much of this melody lies in a more speak-singing range. Her friends respond to Maria's solo by teasing her, and often the tone is a bit nasalised and pointed. Future productions of *West Side Story* will need to carefully evaluate this number and other 'exotic' treatment of the Puerto Ricans, whether through exaggerated accents, or other stereotypes. Certainly, singers cast in these roles should accurately represent this ethnic group and perform with cultural authenticity. While singing in Puerto Rican dialects, there is a different vowel formation and resonant space than what is typical of *bel canto* vocal training. Since Bernstein did not consciously write for the Latinx voice, musical directors and vocal coaches must be aware of and sensitive to these differences.

The 'Ballet Sequence' involves two singing sections. The first is a brief duet between Tony and Maria, which begins the ballet. These few lines definitely seem to be lifted out of an opera. Both characters sing in a middle to high range in long phrases. Since Bernstein is knowingly guiding us into a dream sequence, this heightened delivery of text seems absolutely appropriate. 'Somewhere' also appears in the ballet and is performed by 'A Girl'. Whoever is cast to sing this solo needs to feel comfortable singing such an exposed line. Maintaining accurate intonation in these wide intervals is challenging at the least, especially with the orchestra responding in canon to the vocal line. Yet the vulnerability of this bare vocal line beautifully mirrors the plight of the young lovers. When the lush chords of the orchestra finally move homophonically with the voice, the result is transcendent on 'Someday, Somewhere' and 'Somehow, Someday, Somewhere!' The last two lines of the song conclude the ballet, this time shared by Tony and then Maria. Bernstein begins and ends the ballet with their voices, bringing them back to their tragic reality.

In the original stage production, 'Gee, Officer Krupke' follows the ballet. The song's vaudevillian slapstick continues an emotional roller coaster, careening the story from the ballet's tragedy into comedy. Conceived as a comedic social commentary that parodies the gang members' plight as juvenile delinquents, the vocal lines are basically sung speech, often in character voices. For example, Bernstein's score indicates that Baby John put his voice in falsetto when he pretends to be the social worker. Also, since this is an extremely physical number, the phrases need to be short enough to allow for adequate breath when needed.

Although 'Krupke' brings high energy into the show, the true '11 o'clock' number lies in 'A Boy Like That/I Have a Love' duet between Anita and Maria. This was the only number for which Sondheim wrote all of the lyrics first, then Bernstein set the text to music. For the most part, according to Sondheim, other musical numbers developed collaboratively between the two, with a constant interchange of textual ideas and melodies.⁷ The stakes are high as the tempo starts *Allegro con fuoco*. Anita must find a steely quality in her belt voice to maintain volume and resonance in the low pitches at the start. The metric shifts between 4/4, 3/4, and 3/2 create a rhythmic ambiguity that heightens the tension and escalates the conflict. Also, each of Anita's phrases end with a driving *crescendo*. When singing the role of Anita, one needs to establish a pace of this intensity to avoid vocal tension but still invest emotionally, without compromising her stamina. Anita's solo culminates in a sustained Db5 on the words 'heart' and 'smart', which allows her to sing on an 'ah' vowel and gives her more flexibility in how to focus her tone. She could sing it in a mix, full-on belt, or more of a twang to achieve the necessary *crescendo*.

The dramatic contrast between the two women's voices further illustrates the conflict. Anita's belting can only be subdued by Maria's operatic high notes. Rhythmically, Anita continues with her earlier motives over which Maria sustains longer and higher notes. As the duet continues into Maria's solo, 'I Have a Love', the tessitura drops so that she can now sing more calmly. The ascending sevenths are challenging leaps for accurate intonation, but such an interval truly sounds like yearning in the voice. At the *con espansione* end of the solo, Maria's vocal writing turns more operatic with higher tessitura and longer sustained phrases. Her last note of a sustained G5 over four bars breaks Anita's anger, and the two reconcile by singing in thirds and unison. Such a consonant ending offers a final glimpse of comfort and hope, at least for the two characters.

The last moment of singing occurs in the 'Finale', as Maria cradles the dying Tony who sings, 'Hold my hand and we're halfway there . . .' Maria joins him with, 'Hold my hand and I'll take you there somehow . . .' Tony dies in song as Maria continues, 'Someday!' then 'falters and stops'. Indeed, singing takes over when spoken text can no longer express the heightened emotional state. It would seem awkward to break into an *a cappella* singing at another point in the story, but as a brief reprise of a hope that could not be realised in their world, this is the perfect end to a dreamer's life.

The Voices of *West Side Story*

Bernstein's vocal writing in *West Side Story* created a descriptive road map for character development and provided a crucial element to the storytelling. There are three specific performances that offer vastly different interpretations of this vocal map: the original Broadway cast recording, the 1984 recording conducted by Bernstein himself with opera singers, and the 2009 bilingual Broadway revival. Additionally, the 2021 movie built upon ideas from the 2009 revival and further developed vocal color and interpretation.

Both of the Broadway recordings were sung by performers who in some way are 'triple threats', capable of acting, singing, and dancing the role. Often in singing callbacks for the roles in *West Side Story*, the groups of performers could be divided between 'singers who act' or 'actors who sing'. The principal roles of Tony, Maria, Anita, and Riff perform a large amount of singing with varying styles. Only Tony and Maria are not dance-heavy roles and must perform the most operatic style of singing. The 1984 recording by Bernstein represents the only time that he personally conducted his score and was directly involved with the casting: 'When I knew we were going to have a recording, I decided to go for sound. For the first time in my life, we can have exactly the singers we want.'⁸

The original Broadway cast recording features a group of then 'unknown'⁹ performers with Larry Kert as Tony, Carol Lawrence as Maria, Chita Rivera as Anita, and Michael Callan as Riff. After many weeks of auditioning, Larry Kert, a bari-tenor, was cast as Tony. Kert apparently never intentionally auditioned for the role since the character was described as a 'high tenor'. During the previews, producer Goddard Lieberson observed, 'I hope Kert gets his first two songs into shape . . .'¹⁰ As of opening night, Walter Kerr of the *Herald Tribune* observed, 'When hero Larry Kert is stomping out the visionary insistence of "Something's Coming" both music and tumultuous story are given their due.'¹¹ Obviously, Kert grew stronger with more runs of the show. It was Lieberson who encouraged the artistic team to make a cast recording, but CBS President William Paley strongly reacted to the vocal lines, ' . . . there's nothing in it anybody could sing, too depressing, too many tritones, too many words in lyrics, too rangy – "Ma-ri-a" – nobody could sing notes like that, impossible.'¹² Perhaps that is what makes *West Side Story* remarkable; 'anybody' cannot sing it. It is a challenging work that requires sensitive casting and patient coaching.

These leading performers trained arduously to get the roles in their voices. Carol Lawrence spoke kindly of Bernstein's style as a vocal coach: 'None of us was an opera singer, and we knew it, yet we were singing opera. If Lenny saw that we were having difficulty with a passage in a song, he would say: "Tell me, how does that note feel in your mouth? If it doesn't feel comfortable, I'll change it."' ¹³ This approach gave the performers comfort and support in their roles, thus giving them the confidence to attain stellar performances. Chita Rivera remarked that Bernstein, '... taught me how to hit those notes.' ¹⁴ The role of Anita requires a strong belt, but also a flexible head–chest mix, specifically in the 'Tonight' (Quintet). Anita provides mezzo-soprano counterpoint to the soaring lines of Maria's high soprano, which naturally carries Anita's phrases into a higher range. In order to blend in this range with the operatic quality that Maria needs to produce for her notes, Anita cannot carry a belt into her Eb5 or F5 and has to allow for a more resonant space that is head voice dominant and perhaps vibrato in the tone in order to tune and blend with Maria. In the original Broadway cast recording, Chita Rivera sang most of this line down the octave and occasionally jumped to the written octave in a belt mix. In the 1961 movie adaptation, with most of the singing dubbed by 'ghost singers', the role of Anita in the 'Tonight' (Quintet) was dubbed by Marni Nixon, who also dubbed Maria, because the vocal line was too high for Betty Wand, who dubbed the rest of Anita. ¹⁵ The 1984 opera recording added the Shark Girls towards the end of the 'Tonight' (Quintet) to create a full company number, singing the lines as written. For the 2009 Broadway revival, Karen Olivo also sang Anita in the original range, with some edits at the very end of the ensemble.

For the 1984 recording conducted by Bernstein with opera stars José Carreras, Kiri Te Kanawa, and Tatiana Troyanos, among others, the range of the vocal lines did not pose an issue. The major challenge for the operatic voices was dramatic interpretation. The rich instruments of Dame Te Kanawa and Carreras bring unfitting maturity to the young lovers Maria and Tony. Whereas the sound itself proves thrilling, the story seems distant and often disconnected to the music. Bernstein's son, Alexander, and daughter, Jamie, convincingly portrayed Tony and Maria in the speaking scenes that precede the singing numbers. Yet the recording loses the sense of integration from their spoken word into the sung vocal lines of Carreras and Te Kanawa. Classical training rarely focuses on sung speech unless the role requires *secco recitative*. Even then, when opera singers are expected to declaim their text, they still must maintain spacious resonance for an easy transition into full singing. Also, the tone for classical voices most likely

shifts into a dominant head voice earlier than musical theatre singers, who have a more dominant chest mix in the middle voice. This is most visible in Troyanos's interpretation of Anita. Her velvety mezzo-soprano switches into a headier mix at C4 and D4, whereas Chita Rivera sang in a belt-mix style on those notes.

Likewise, most of these opera singers were schooled in *bel canto* technique, which generally trains the voice using consonant passages often in scalar motion and in sequence of half or whole steps. Bernstein's writing for Tony and Maria often leans towards *bel canto* at its most operatic moments, such as in the beginning of the 'Balcony Scene'. But when these singers are faced with wide intervallic leaps the continuity of tone quality seems more of a priority than acting the text. Vowels become modified to enhance the tone but decrease the understanding of the words. The consistent use of vibrato also obscures the communication of the text and occasionally misplaces stress on unstressed syllables. Whether sung by singers who primarily perform opera or musical theatre, the songs have a transportive and staying power.

'The consummate craftsmanship of *West Side Story* with its matchless ability to weave a solemn narrative through music and dance, still dazzles after more than 50 years. Leonard Bernstein's majestic score, in particular, is undiminished . . . fueled by testosterone and rage, and some of the most achingly beautiful expressions of love ever sung', writes David Rooney of the 2009 Broadway revival.¹⁶ Directed by the then 91-year-old Arthur Laurents, this revival took risks to reimagine the story. Laurents strove for a more realistic interpretation than he felt was possible in the 1950s. For some critics, Laurents's attempts at realism enhance the show, and for others it seemed more like a gimmick. One of the most dramatic changes to the show was provided by Lin-Manuel Miranda's translations of lines and lyrics into Spanish for some of the Puerto Rican characters. Ideally, a bilingual performance gives the Sharks more presence, dignity, and ' . . . adjust[s] balance with the Jets, who always tended to dominate the proceedings'.¹⁷ It also creates more of a division between the two cultures, and the sound of the sung Spanish adds a very different dimension to the characters. Unfortunately, the use of Spanish did not go over well with the audience and the creative team restored much of the English later in the run.

Unlike in opera, there was no attempt to provide supertitles in this production, which fuelled some criticism because entire scenes would be performed in Spanish. For others, the use of Spanish added to the drama and overall experience. A powerful example of the use of both languages

was heard in 'A Boy Like That/Un Hombre Así'. The musical argument begins in Spanish as Anita chides Maria. However, at the midpoint of the duet, just prior to the musical shift into 'I Have a Love', Maria departs from her native Spanish and speaks the lyric, 'You should know better!' in English. This shift to English in this moment demonstrates her love for Tony, even at the cost of losing her own brother. After that, the duet continues in English. In a way, it signals that Anita accepts this love, which is understood when she sings with Maria at the consonant, harmonic end of this duet.

Karen Olivo's performance of Anita drew critical acclaim, including the Tony Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Featured Role in a Musical. She was the first Broadway Anita to receive such an award. Vocally, she maintained exceptional power and nuance throughout her musical numbers. Also impressive was the portrayal of Maria by Josefina Scaglione, who was hailed for her operatic training and ease in the upper register. Tony's portrayal by Matt Cavenaugh drew mixed reviews, noting the challenges of this role. Occasionally critics compared Cavenaugh to Kert's performance, noting the vocal demands and dramatic challenges of portraying a convincing Tony. Although their voices were completely different, Cavenaugh a tenor, and Kert more of a baritone with a high extension, it seems likely that the critics found comparable interpretation styles.

Although some confessed that they resented the missing Sondheim text, the sound of the Spanish brought a new authenticity to the world of *West Side Story*. This revival added the voice that was missing in the original production, that voice of the marginalised and stereotyped Puerto Ricans, which was previously ignored and unheard. Likewise, the gender lines blurred in this production. Bernstein originally indicated that the song 'Somewhere' should be performed by 'A Girl'. In the 2009 revival, the character of a young Jet named Kiddo, a young boy soprano (Nicholas Barasch) sings 'Somewhere'. Critic Adam Feldman notes the significance of this adaptation for the twenty-first-century Broadway audience: '... the show had to adapt, and Laurents has labored – within the constraints of what remains a faithful account of a 1950s musical – to disguise its traces of old-fashioned corn and bring its themes into hardened focus'.¹⁸

And the adaptations continued with the 2021 movie version, directed by Steven Spielberg with new dialogue by playwright Tony Kushner. This film reframes the story through a sociological lens that prioritises racial equity. Similar to the 2009 revival, many scenes were completely in Spanish

without translations to amplify the Puerto Rican voice in the story and acknowledge 'that America is not a monolingual country'.¹⁹ An important addition to the vocal landscape was including 'La Borinqueña', the Puerto Rican anthem, after the first gang altercation. Vocal coach and consultant for the film, Jeanine Tesori, collaborated with Puerto Rican dialect coach Victor Cruz to coach the actors on the transition from speaking into singing. Rachel Zegler integrated speech into song with ease as a stunning Maria. Cast when she was only 16 years old, she was the first Colombian to win a Golden Globe award for Best Actress. Tesori's coaching manifests in these singers' honest performances, taking them 'inside out' in their lyrical interpretation. She explains: 'you're singing, and you're not singing, you're actually working something out inside that we happen to (the audiences will) eavesdrop on ...'²⁰ Additionally, the benefits of audio engineering made it possible to capture live vocals on set. Although the majority of the numbers were prerecorded, 'The balcony scene, the duet between Tony and Maria, was all done live. Rita Moreno singing "Somewhere", that was all live. Ariana DeBose and Rachel Zegler doing "A Boy Like That" and "I Have a Love" live, when you watch that passion and power, belting at each other, it's all real, all happening live on the set', explains vocal producer Matt Sullivan.²¹ Occasionally, keys were lowered by a step ('Something's Coming', 'Maria', 'Balcony Scene', and 'I Feel Pretty') and songs were reassigned ('Cool', 'Somewhere'), but the integrity of the story remained. What was exemplary in this film was the seamless integration from spoken text into sung lyric, which resulted in a compelling reimagining of the 1957 musical.

When considering the vocal writing of *West Side Story* across more than sixty years of interpretation, the genius of the team of Bernstein, Robbins, Laurents, and Sondheim accounts for its longevity. The songs challenge the performers to throw themselves into the operatic passion, but also maintain a vocal technique that cultivates stamina and efficiency. Likewise, the genre of musical theatre continues to evolve and include extremely varied vocal styles. The combination of operatic and popular singing in one musical seems more common now than in 1957. Singers are expected to have the ability to 'cross over' from opera into musical theatre and vice versa. From the theatre to the opera house, to film, productions of *West Side Story* abound with vitality and relevance, and these voices will be heard for years to come.

Notes

1. John Rockwell, 'New Recording of *West Side Story*', *New York Times*, 7 September 1984, Section C, 3. Used by permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.
2. John Chapman, *Daily News*, quoted in Steven Suskin, *Opening Night on Broadway: A Critical Quotebook of the Golden Era of the Musical Theatre* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 695.
3. Cornelius Reid, *A Dictionary of Vocal Terminology* (New York: Joseph Patelson Music House, 1983), 265.
4. Berton Coffin, *Phonetic Readings of Songs and Arias* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1982), ix.
5. Stephen Sondheim, 'Song Specific Commentary by Stephen Sondheim', Extras: *West Side Story* (United Artists, 1961). Streaming on iTunes.
6. Sondheim, 'Song Specific Commentary by Stephen Sondheim'.
7. Sondheim, 'Song Specific Commentary by Stephen Sondheim'.
8. Humphrey Burton, 'A Session Report by Humphrey Burton First Featured in the April 1985 Edition', *Gramophone*, 26 August 2015, www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/berNSTEIN-s-west-side-story (accessed 11 July 2011).
9. Richard L. Coe, 'On the Aisle: *West Side* has that Beat', *Washington Post*, 20 August 1957, quoted in: Nigel Simeone, *Leonard Bernstein: West Side Story* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 116.
10. Goddard Lieberson, letter to L. Bernstein, 30 August [1957], in Leonard Bernstein Collection, Library of Congress, quoted in Simeone, *Leonard Bernstein*, 142.
11. Walter Kerr, '*West Side Story*', *Herald Tribune*, 27 September 1957, quoted in Simeone, *Leonard Bernstein*, 123.
12. Otis Guernsey, *Broadway Song & Story: Playwrights/Lyricists/Composers Discuss their Hits* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985), 46. Used by permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.
13. Carol Lawrence, *Carol Lawrence: The Backstage Story* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1990), 46.
14. Chita Rivera, speaking on: 'A Place for Us: 50 Years of *West Side Story*', presented by Scott Simon, National Public Radio, 26 September 2007; quoted in Simeone, *Leonard Bernstein*, 50.
15. Michael Portantieri 'It All Began Tonight: Marni Nixon and Jimmy Bryant Reminisce about Recording Maria's and Tony's Songs', <https://westsidestory.livejournal.com/125418.html> (accessed 11 July 2021).
16. David Rooney, "'West Side" Revival Reaches New Heights', *Variety*, 23 March 2009, 20, 24.
17. Elisabeth Vincentelli, 'Shark Attack! *West Side Story* Feels Pretty Good', *New York Post*, 20 March 2009, 45.

18. Adam Feldman, “West Side Story”: A Broadway Classic Leaps to New Life’, *Time Out New York*, 26 March–1 April 2009, 103.
19. John Schilling, ‘Composer Jeanine Tesori Talks “West Side Story” Music’, *The Brooklyn College Vanguard*, 9 December 2021, <https://vanguard.blog.brooklyn.edu/2021/12/09/composer-jeanine-tesori-talks-west-side-story-music/> (accessed 7 July 2022).
20. Schilling, ‘Composer Jeanine Tesori Talks “West Side Story” Music’.
21. Jon Burlingame, ‘How *West Side Story*’s First-Class Music Team Preserved the Authenticity of Leonard Bernstein’s Score’, *Variety*, 10 December 2021, <http://variety.com/2021/artisans/news/west-side-story-john-williams-leonard-bernstein-1235131071> (accessed 19 April 2024).