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Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

Level 3 Music Studies 2024

91423 Examine the influence of context on a substantial music work

Credits: Four

Achievement	Achievement with Merit	Achievement with Excellence
Examine the influence of context on a substantial music work.	Examine in depth the influence of context on a substantial music work.	Examine perceptively the influence of context on a substantial music work.

Check that the National Student Number (NSN) on your admission slip is the same as the number at the top of this page.

Answer ONE of the essay questions in this booklet.

If you need more room for your answer, use the extra space provided at the back of this booklet.

Check that this booklet has pages 2–12 in the correct order and that none of these pages is blank.

Do not write in the margins (// // //). This area will be cut off when the booklet is marked.

YOU MUST HAND THIS BOOKLET TO THE SUPERVISOR AT THE END OF THE EXAMINATION.

Excellence

TOTAL 08

INSTRUCTIONS

Write an essay on a substantial music work that you have studied, in response to ONE of the questions below.

Give the details of the work in the box at the top of page 3.

QUESTIONS (Choose ONE)

1. Music works may be closely associated with, or respond to, a specific event or occasion (e.g. a celebration or a natural disaster).
Discuss how such an association has impacted the conception, production, and interpretation of your work.
2. Music is sometimes used to communicate the values or beliefs of a particular person or group of people.
Discuss how the conception, production, and interpretation of your chosen work has been influenced by a set of values or beliefs.
3. "Music is a language that doesn't speak in particular words. It speaks in emotions ..."
Discuss how an intention to communicate emotions through music has impacted the conception, production, and interpretation of your chosen work.
4. Different performances of a music work may lead to changes in musical style, particularly when the context (time or place) is also different.
Discuss how the conception, production, and interpretation of your chosen music work has changed when comparing one performance to another.

Work title(s): West Side Story
Composer(s) / performer(s): Leonard Bernstein
Genre/style/period: 1957, Musical Theatre

PLANNING

Consider the following aspects of the work:

- its conception
- its production
- its interpretation.

"Music is a language that doesn't speak in particular words. It speaks in emotions."

Discuss how an intention to communicate emotions through music has impacted the conception, production, and interpretation of your chosen work.

Music is uniquely powerful in its ability to evoke strong emotions from the listener. It provides a vehicle, through which composers can articulate emotions that cannot be fully communicated via mere words. While music may often contain lyrics, it is rarely the lyrics of a piece of music that evoke the strongest emotions within us. The emotion of a piece is conveyed almost entirely by its musical elements and the artistic choices made by the composer.

This is particularly true in the 1957 musical, "West Side Story", as made evident by its score composed by Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein sought to portray the emotions felt by the characters in the musical, and this intention was a cornerstone in the process of realising his vision for the Broadway production. The modern adaptation of Romeo and Juliet is set in New York in 1957, and capitalises on the strong emotions of the zeitgeist of the time, detailing the very current conflict between Puerto-Rican immigrants and Americans.

It could be argued that for the majority of the conceptual development of "West Side Story", Leonard Bernstein did not feel a strong desire to convey emotions through the music. While it was completed in 1957, Bernstein and playwright Arthur Laurents had been working together on their modernised version of Shakespeare's classic play since as early as 1949. It was initially conceived as "East Side Story" and focused on a conflict between Jews and Catholics, but the concept was shelved for nearly five years due to the pairs'

lack of passion for the project. However, in early 1956, upon reading a headline about Mexican gang violence, Bernstein was struck by an inspiration to revisit the concept, basing it around the "Sharks" and the "Jets", which were fictional Puerto-Rican and American gangs respectively. Giving him a newfound drive to convey strong emotions through his score, this spark of inspiration led to a vast array of innovative, and unconventional musical choices, which, even today, evoke complex emotions in audiences. Throughout the narrative arc, numerous key musical motifs can be heard. To illicit emotions consistent with the play's themes of conflict and unease, Bernstein used the famously dissonant tritone interval. Located six semitones from its root note, the tritone is known to be an extremely tense and unnerving sounding harmony. He used this technique in pieces such as "Maria", and "Cool". The audience can quickly associate the motif with the Jets (**quotation 3**), as it conveys their racist frustration and distrust of the new Puerto-Rican immigrants, a complex emotion that could not be effectively communicated through mere dialogue. In a sense, it is an "inverted" version of a similar motif, which is played in scenes of conflict and hate (**quotation 2**). It uses the same notes, G, C, and F# in succession, however the G is raised an octave, and the F# is lowered by an octave, creating a perceived descent. This is commonly associated with moody, suspicious feelings, much amplified by the very real racial tensions felt by the audience and general population of the time in which the music was written.

When arranging the score for an orchestra, Bernstein aimed to convey both sides of the conflict. He considered the nuanced psychology of the Puerto-Rican migrants leaving their home country and arriving in America for the first time, only to be met by racism and spite. His empathy towards them allowed him to capture their unique emotions in the music of "West Side Story". His choices of instrumentation were extremely unorthodox and

revolutionary in the world of 1950s musical theatre, incorporating elements from Latin folk music, and American Jazz. The song "America" is sung from the perspective of a Puerto-Rican woman arriving in New York, and features bold instrumentation. The piece begins with the direction "Moderato di seis", which instructs the musicians to accent 8th notes. The arrangement is initially sparse, as the singer laments leaving her country behind. A clave plays a rhythm grouped in triplets, which accents the 8th notes, creating a complex, yet consistent groove, characteristic of Latin music. At bar 46 the orchestra comes in, breathing life into the song with a sense of motion as the character embraces her new life in America. The direction, "tempo di huapango", changes the music to an undeniably Latin rhythm, involving alternating bars of 6/8 and 3/4. The chorus melody is sung as 8th notes in a bar of 6/8, and then as 1/4 notes in a bar of 3/4 (**quotation 1**). Like folk music, the song mainly uses simple, diatonic harmonies. This choice allowed for an optimal musical balance; if Bernstein had opted to use more chord extensions, combining these with an already complex rhythm could have risked making the song sound confusing or disorienting. The chorus begins on a satisfying C Major triad, which moves up to the fifth, an F Major triad. Using G Major as a pivot chord, the chorus modulates up a minor third to Eb Major, coming quickly back down for the verse. This modulation, while chromatic, is not jarring, but gives the music a "lift" which evokes strong feelings of hope and triumph. Rhythmically and harmonically, "America" is greatly influenced by the familiar folk music background of the migrants, yet incorporates instruments used in American jazz music, capturing the emotion of entering an exciting new country. Instruments include horns, flutes, a drum kit, an electric guitar, a double bass, and a string section. The combination of Latin style songwriting, and American instrumentation created a groundbreaking new sound. One could argue that Bernstein intended this stylistic fusion to convey the idea that Americans and Puerto-Ricans were capable of far more together than they were against

each other. Whether this was his intention, Bernstein clearly saw "West Side Story" as an exciting opportunity to combine foreign musical languages and present them to a mainstream audience. His passion for the project is undeniably demonstrated in the way he was able to pour emotion into the evocative sound of the music, not only harmonically, but instrumentally.

While music is just one aspect of musical theatre, it is by far the most crucial. Effective narratives target the human empathy and compassion for others that we all possess. Because of this, in storytelling, and particularly theatre, communicating to audiences the deep emotions felt by the characters on stage is paramount. Acting, stage direction, lighting, and dialogue are all used to target audiences emotions and hook them into the story, but they would not be half as effective without the appropriate musical score. Leonard Bernstein's ability to communicate emotion through music propelled "West Side Story" from an uninspired idea, to a cultural phenomenon which has had vast and far-reaching impacts on musical theatre, and society as a whole. When New York audiences attended the Broadway musical in 1957, they were expecting an escape from the harsh realities of city life. Instead, they found themselves forced to confront the ongoing prejudice and conflict that they were all-too-keen to ignore in the real world. If Bernstein's score had not been as effective at communicating emotions, and had not been the revolutionary, genre-bending, marvel that it was, audiences would likely not have engaged with the intended message of "West Side Story" and the play would not have become as influential as it did. Bernstein's intention to communicate emotion through intriguing use of classical techniques is proved in the piece, "Cool". A twelve-tone-row is heard during the dance break of this piece, which uses every possible note available in a twelve-tone equal temperament. This abrasive chromaticism communicates the feelings of unease,

confusion and anger felt by the Jets towards their Puerto-Rican counterparts, the Sharks. Bernstein also decided to use an incredibly complex technique called "fugue", which involves the layering of contrasting melodic ideas which harmonise at certain points, and clash at others, again mirroring a state of confusion, with many thoughts flooding the brain, sometimes working together, sometimes conflicting. These techniques, contrasted with those used to create empathy for the Puerto-Ricans, work together to illicit strong emotions from the audience. The innovative nature of the production brought its important societal messages to larger and larger audiences, which not only provided entertainment, but raised awareness to an issue that was occurring outside the theatre in real time. The effect of Leonard Bernstein's emotionally charged score on audiences' interpretation of "West Side Story" likely contributed to improving attitudes towards immigrants, leading to a more progressive and inclusive society.

Ultimately, Leonard Bernstein's ambitious score for the musical "West Side Story" demonstrates the capacity of music to emotionally impact audiences, changing societal attitudes and the world in the process. When a composer feels and prioritises communicating strong emotions through their music, there is no end to the positive change that can result from their efforts. Musical works are most effective when a desire to convey emotion is forefront at every stage of development, from initial inspiration to the final piece heard by audiences. Spoken language can help to add context to a piece, but without a musical accompaniment, its ability to convey feelings is limited. Words are necessary and useful in everyday life; however, in communicating complex human emotions, any effective composer will find that music alone, is more than sufficient.

MUSICAL QUOTATIONS

Make sure it is clear which part of your answer any quotation relates to.

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Excellence

Subject: Music Studies

Standard: 91423

Total score: 08

Q	Grade score	Marker commentary
One	E8	A well-crafted response that insightfully discusses how the intention to communicate emotions through music has impacted a range of aspects of the conception, production, and interpretation of the work. The candidate makes frequent use of well-chosen musical examples that are clearly explained with use of with accurate and informative musical terminology. Each paragraph has a clearly defined purpose and relates specifically to a perceptive response to the question.