

## **“Something’s Coming” from *West Side Story***

**Leonard Bernstein**

### **Keywords**

Syllabic	Push Rhythm	Harmonics (violin)
Word Painting	Legato	Motif
Sustained Notes	C Major (Tonality)	Diatonic
Blue Note	D Major (Tonality)	Tonal
Tenor Voice	3 / 4	Solo Character Song
Jazz Harmony	2 / 4	Musical
Tritone	Modulation	Homophonic
Musicals	Lyrical	Solo & Accompaniment
Riff	Cross-Rhythms	
Syncopation	Tremolo	

### **Context - Musicals**

- Musicals came from lighter versions of opera, such as Opera Comique or Operetta (Gilbert & Sullivan)
- Broadway – New York Musical Theatre hub from 1920s onwards
- Musicals – singing, dancing and acting
- The style of the musical is normally reflective of the genre of the time (i.e. *West Side Story* is based on Jazz harmony, Jazz being a prominent genre of the 1930s-1950s, when Bernstein was around).
- Orchestras provide accompaniment and incidental music/underscoring (background music – like the opening scene (prologue) in *West Side Story*)
- Some musicals are made into films – some films are made into musicals.
- Some pop songs are collated to make musicals (*Moulin Rouge*, *Mamma Mia*, *We Will Rock You*, *Dreamboats & Petticoats* etc)

### **Context - Bernstein**

- Bernstein was born in America in 1918
- He was a highly skilled musician, pianist, conductor, broadcaster and composer.
- Bernstein’s first musical was *On The Town*.
- Bernstein had a wide range of musical tastes, but particularly Jazz (which is evident in *West Side Story*, as well as Latin American rhythms, as his wife was from South America)

## Context – West Side Story

- West Side Story was composed in 1957 and made into an award winning film in 1961.
- Stephen Sondheim wrote the lyrics for the musical (librettist/lyricist/composer – Sweeney Todd)
- Based on the tragic love story of Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet
- Maria (Juliet) and Tony (Romeo)
- Jets (Capulets) and Sharks (Montagues)
- Famous balcony scene is mirrored on the stairs of a New York apartment fire escape
- The themes (racism, immigration, love, tragedy, rivalry) are still as relevant today as they were when Bernstein composed the musical.
- Revolutionary – story of doomed love, extended dance scenes, underscoring, use of tritone
- Something's Coming is sung by Tony – solo character song sung quite early on in the musical
- Excited about the future and sings it before he meets Maria – dramatic irony

## Lyrics

### Melody & Vocal Line

- Tony: Tenor (vocal line is sung/sounds an octave lower than the notated music)
- First melody note of the piece: D
- Vocal range = E to top G (range of a 10<sup>th</sup>)
- Entirely syllabic
- Diatonic melody
- Prominent use of tritones = 'diabolus in musica' (interval spanning 3 whole tones – augmented 4<sup>th</sup>/diminished 5<sup>th</sup>)
- Strong opening melody (questions) falling from tonic to dominant (D to A)
- **Bar 8-9:** first melodic tritone heard in the melody line (D to G# - the tritone has so far been heard harmonically in the accompanying riff pattern)
- **Bar 17:** Melodic tritone "soon as it shows"
- **Bar 17-18:** "shows" sung on a blue note, C natural (flattened 7<sup>th</sup> in D Major)
- **Melody up until bar 20** is based on the opening riff (melodically and rhythmically)
- Word painting – **bars 21-24** (repetitive, quick melody - "It may come cannonballing down through the sky") and **bars 128-136** (long sustained notes and leap on "the air is humming" reinforced by tremolo and harmonic strings in accompaniment)
- **Bar 31-39:** "Me" sung on sustained E – highest and longest note of the piece so far
- **Bars 44 & 48:** Melodic Tritones (now F# to C – music has modulated to C Major)

- **Bar 48:** B flat – blue note (flattened 7<sup>th</sup> in C Major)
- **Bars 72-105:** Lyrical melody – sustained notes (minims and crotchets, triplets add to free, speech-like quality of the lyrical line) – contrast to the syncopated, syllabic and driving rhythms heard in the piece up until the point
- **Bar 83:** “Down” highest note of the piece (top G) – irony that the highest note of the piece is sung on the word “down”
- **Bar 89:** C natural – blue note (flattened 7<sup>th</sup> in D major)
- **Bar 144:** Melody returns to the opening melody, giving a sense of returning back to the beginning of the piece
- **Bar 144-145:** Tritone (D to G#)
- **Bar 153:** Tritone – last time we heard the tritone melodically in the piece
- **Bar 153-end:** Tony’s last note is a C natural “Blue note” (flattened 7<sup>th</sup> in D Major) – the vocal melody ends in the air, unfinished, suspended and open (like Tony’s future)

Three melodic themes:

Theme A – opening melody based on the riff

Theme B – “it may come cannonballing...” etc bar 21

Theme C – “Around the corner...” bar 73

### Structure

Broadly, the structure of the piece is:

- **Introduction:** Bars 1-3 (bar 3 is repeated ad lib)
- **Section A:** Bars 4-39
- **Section B:** Bars 40-105
- **Section B1:** Bars 106-140 (shortened version of B)
- **Section A1:** Bars 141-157 (shortened version of A)
- **Outro:** Bar 158 (slow fade out)

Structure in terms of melodic themes (although the themes reoccur in slightly transformed versions throughout the piece):

**Theme A** (up until bar 20)

**Theme B** (from bar 21)

**Repeat Bars 9-25**

**Theme A** (Bars 40-51) – simplest form of theme A - 2 bar motif – heard 4 times with rising or falling ending – syncopated 3<sup>rd</sup> note (urgency)

**Theme B** (Bars 52-62) – four accented crotchets, then syncopated – the melody of theme B only uses different pitches in total - allows the words to be expressed clearly (Bernstein builds up the tension by making theme B shorter than theme A)

***Repeat Bars 40-51 (Theme A)***

**Theme B** (Bars 63-72)

**Theme C** (Bars 72-105 – bridge like section) – contrasting section in comparison to the other two themes – lyrical and expansive, higher in range, more legato – however same accompaniment for the themes and also ends on a long sustained note like the other two themes.

**Theme A** (Bars 106-117)

**Theme B** (Bars 118-127)

**Theme C** (Bars 128-143)

**Theme A** (Bars 144-end)

- Bar 141: Back to  $\frac{3}{4}$  - sense of going back to the beginning, also bringing in the music from the opening bars 4-20, balances the structure of the piece.

**Texture**

- The texture of the accompaniment is mainly **homophonic**, no **counterpoint** to distract from vocal line – no radio mics for the singers, so the music had to be simple and soft in order for the vocalists to be heard.
- Solo and accompaniment
- Bars 32-39 – new minim **riff** in bass changes to a **broken chord** texture ('um-pah' style accompaniment)
- **Alternating quaver bass** dominates the piece

**Instrumentation / Orchestration**

Tony: Tenor Voice

Maria: Soprano Voice

WESTERN INSTRUMENTS: Strings, Brass, Wind (traditional), saxophone, piano, electric guitar, mandolin, celeste, percussion including timpani, glockenspiel, police whistle and drum kit

LATIN AMERICAN INSTRUMENTS: castanets, guiro, maracas

- Instrumentalists double up instruments (play more than one instrument throughout the musical)

- Instruments are not marked in the score, but note the following:
- **First 15 bars:** clarinets, bass clarinet, pizzicato strings, bass drum (wire brushes on snare and hi hat)
- **End of Bar 17 to Bar 28:** Muted trumpets
- **From Bar 32:** Minims in accompaniment played by clarinets, and brass added for louder section at bar 52
- **Bridge \*Theme C\*:** Sustained accompaniment played by high strings and flutes join in “whistling” in bar 82
- **Second bridge \*Theme C\* :** high violins tremolo and sustained harmonics on “the air is humming”
- Soft dynamics in the accompaniment – very important as there were no radio mics in the 1950s for the stage performers so the accompaniment had to be soft in order for the vocalists to be heard over the music.
- For the same reason as above (not to over balance the singer):
  - Wire brushes on drums
  - Mutes on trumpets

### **Tonality & Harmony**

- The piece starts in D Major, but it does modulate to C Major and back to D Major
- Harmonic tritones in the accompaniment
- Jazz Harmony (i.e. bar 1, beat 3 B minor with 11<sup>th</sup> – B, D, F#, A C#, E – bar 2 beat 4, D major with added 9<sup>th</sup> – D, F#, A, C#, E)
- First chord in accompaniment = harmonic triton (G# enharmonically A flat, flattened 5<sup>th</sup> in D major, ‘Blue’ note)
- Ostinato Bass (2 riffs working at the same time in accompaniment)
- Bars 21-26: Orchestra chords punctuate the recitative like, punchy phrase
- Bar 32: Piece modulates to C Major
- Bars 32-39: C & G in bass (with E, F# and G minims – F#s suggesting D major, tritones and ‘blue’ note (enharmonic G flat) in C major)
- Bars 52-72: C Major (52-58), G Major (59-62) (repeated a tone higher at bars 63-73)
- Bars 52-58: F major 6 chord
- Bars 59-62: Minim riff in G Major this time (takes the music back for a repeat “with a click”)
- Bar 63 (second time bar) music one tone higher in G Major
- Bars 63-67:

- Bar 70: Music modulates back to D Major
- Bar 70 onwards: Quaver beats in bassline outline chords of D Major, A major and G major but middle parts of harmony are chromatic (including parallel 4ths) (bars 77-81 etc)
- Bar 95: Neapolitan chord (flattened supertonic (E flat in D) in first inversion) – dramatic chord, temporarily out of key
- Bars 97-98: Shift to C Major with a perfect cadence (G-C)
- Bar 98: C major alternating quaver bass against four note minim riff in G major (F sharps) – bitonality (also at bar 106)

### **Rhythm, Metre & Tempo**

- The piece starts in 3 / 4 but fleets back and forth into 2 / 4 - starts and ends in 3 / 4  
(**bar 1: 3 / 4, bar 21: 2 / 4, bar 58: 3 / 4, bar 59: 2 / 4, bar 69: 3 / 4, bar 70: 2 / 4, bar 124: 3 / 4, bar 125: 2 / 4, bar 141: 3 / 4**)
- Driving rhythms – sense of urgency and excitement
- Syncopated “push” rhythms – accompaniment and riff ‘push’ on third beat of the bar (Tony’s first note comes in with a syncopated push on the 3<sup>rd</sup> beat)
- Bars 23-25: syncopated push on “sky” and “eye” and “due” and “true”
- Bars 52-72: mixture of straight rhythms (something’s coming) and syncopated rhythms (I don’t know what it is)
- On beat crotchets add to surety that “something” is going to happen at the dance – push rhythms indicate an uncertainty
- Bars 72-105: fluidity of the melody line is achieved through the use of triplets and free of 2 beat harmony of accompaniment. Bass plays on beat quavers throughout this section.
- Bar 141: Back to ¾ - sense of going back to the beginning, also bringing in the music from the opening bars 4-20

### **Example Questions:**

1. How does Bernstein create a sense of excitement and expectancy in the song?
2. Mention two techniques or devices that the composer uses in this song and throughout the musical itself?
3. Describe the harmony used in the song.
4. What is a 'push' rhythm and give an example?
5. What is a 'blue' note and give an example?
6. Describe the orchestration of the piece.
7. How are the words "the air is humming" depicted by the orchestral accompaniment?
8. How does the piece end?
9. This is a solo song or aria. Name two other types of vocal forms used in a musical.
10. What makes the subject matter of West Side Story different and new from other Broadway Musicals up to this time?
11. What is a hook?
12. What are the four basic types of musical song?
13. When did Leonard Bernstein write "West Side Story"?
14. Write down the simple plot of West Side Story?
15. What kind of voice is Tony's part written for?
16. What is Tony singing about in Something's Coming?
17. What is the effect of pianissimo (pp) at the beginning of Something's Coming?
18. What time signature is used in Something's Coming? What time signature does it sometimes feel like and why?
19. What key is used in Something's Coming?
20. What is a tritone, and why does Bernstein use it in Something's Coming?
21. The lyrics of the song are by Stephen Sondheim. What is meant by the term lyrics, and for what else did Sondheim later become famous?
22. What musical term describes the texture of this song?
23. The accompaniment at the start features cross rhythm. What does the term mean?
24. Explain how the bridge is both similar to, and yet different from, the other sections.
25. "Something's Coming" begins and ends in D Major. Which other key is used in the song?
26. On what note does Tony finish?
27. How does the music reflect Tony's gradually increasing sense of excitement and expectation?
28. Why did Bernstein have to take special care that the band didn't over-balance the soloist in this song?