Overview And Context: Romeo And Juliet And West Side Story

Sergei Prokofiev, born 23 April 1891 in Krasne, Ukraine, was an incredibly influential Russian pianist, composer, and conductor of the 20th century. His father, also Sergei Prokofiev, was an agronomist (soil engineer) while Maria Prokofieva, his mother, was an accomplished pianist. Thus, by age five, Prokofiev had composed his first work. At age thirteen, he was admitted to the St Petersburg Conservatory and performed in public for the first time at seventeen. As he began to become well known, he fell in and out of favour with Stalin and those in power at the time, having compositions banned, then awarded; threats of exile, then commissions granted. He solidified aspects of the neoclassical style and thus, 20th-century music, not wanting to compose or perform anything hackneyed, repeated or imitating anyone else. He is said to have had five major elements of his music; classical lines, innovation, lyrical lines, toccata and the grotesque. He died 5 March 1953, at age 61, on the very same day as Stalin. Because of this, his death was kept from the public until the next day so as to not take away from mourning the loss of Stalin.

Leonard Bernstein, born 25 August 1918 in Laurence, Massachusetts, was a great American composer, pianist, conductor, author and music lecturer. One of the first US-born conductors to receive acclaim worldwide, being born to Ukrainian and Jewish parents. His father, Sam Bernstein, was a businessman who owned a store for hair products. He was opposed to his son's musical interest at first but later was encouraging and supportive. He studied at Harvard between 1935 and 1939 and then at the Curtis Institute of Music on a scholarship, before becoming the long-serving music director of the New York Philharmonic. He composed many major scores such as Candide, Peter Pan, On the Waterfront, Wonderful Town and of course, his most renowned work, West Side Story. Bernstein was known for his incredible chordal progressions and arrangement and his major elements are dissonance, unease and use of the tritone. He had a wide range of musical tastes, enjoying anything from classical to jazz, as long as it was music. His wife, Felicia Montealegre, was South American-born and they had two children. He died 14 October 1990, at age 72, in New York.

Contextual Issues – Eras

20th Century Russia was a part of the time commonly referred to as the 'Great Purge'. Joseph Stalin came into power in Russia and began an oppressive dictatorship, ruling with fear. Despite his rule also being known as a reign of terror, Stalin wanted Russia to seem like the perfect, happy country from an outsider's perspective. This meant that everything had to depict Russia as the best country, especially art. Anything too Western could send the creator, or their family, to forced-work camps known as gulags. Each camp would hold between 2,000 and 10,000 people in brutal conditions. Working for up to 14 hours a day, most often in extreme weather conditions, many died from starvation, exhaustion, disease or execution. Stalin's general rule was that all art had to fit social realism. However, he seemed to pick and choose how this worked and what was good enough. Artists would attempt to stick with social realism and Stalin would deem it unacceptable, yet changing it would seem to contradict this idea of happy Russia. This was the time that Stalin's close, personal friend, Sergei Kirov, was mysteriously

assassinated. It is uncertain who exactly was the culprit but it is now speculated to have been Stalin himself who planned the crime. Though, because Stalin was who he was, and the one in power, he did not actually murder Kirov himself, getting someone else to do the dirty work for him. Thus began the artist witch-hunts of the Great Purge – part of what gave the time this name. These witch-hunts were, ironically, to investigate any conspirers against Kirov. Though Stalin was responsible for his death, nobody could know. In 1952, 400 artists were arrested.

20th Century America was a part of the time commonly referred to as the ‘Red Scare’. Joseph McCarthy came into power in America and, much like Stalin in Russia, ruled his country with fear. McCarthy thought that communism was wrong, bad and evil. He set out to conduct witch-hunts to find communist sympathisers, who could either risk losing their jobs if they did not testify, or accuse and name colleagues, friends or any other person of being a communist sympathiser. Many women were accused of being witches and were put to a test to determine whether they were or weren’t. This test involved being tied to bricks and thrown in the sea. Floating meant they were a witch and therefore sentenced to death, and sinking meant they were dead. There were no options during McCarthy’s reign. Many artists were blacklisted or named as communist sympathisers during the Red Scare for numerous reasons. Some spoke out against the cruelness of the paranoia-fuelled witch-hunts, some were named by others in order to get off, some did not have a reason to be singled out; they just were. If an individual was named a communist sympathiser or blacklisted, they immediately lost their jobs and much more often than not, lost all their friends and any contact with their family. Nobody else could risk being associated with such individuals for fear of being named or exiled themselves. Once named a communist sympathiser, there was no choice but to follow orders quietly.

The 20th century was a time of huge innovation. New forms of music and sounds were explored, challenging and conflicting the rules that were accepted beforehand. It was an era of exploration, with polyrhythms, irregular lengthed phrases, hard to classify music, themes recurring out of sync of structure and no strict rules, becoming the norm. There was huge variety seen and some instruments were often played in their very top or very bottom octave. There was more percussion used and unusual rhythms. Instruments were not played in their conventional manner; pianos added a percussive edge rather than melodic and strings were struck rather than drawn across. Unconventional groupings of instruments were seen more and more, tonality was no longer so blended, with polytonality, bitonality and atonality becoming more common and tonal centres were not used so much. The 12 tone system developed, time signatures varied, metres changed rapidly and the emphasis became on irregularity and unpredictability, bringing in more syncopation.

Overview and context – Romeo and Juliet

Prokofiev’s ballet, Romeo and Juliet, presents a balletic adaptation of Shakespeare’s classic play. The score was composed in 1934 and it was first staged in 1938, in Czechoslovakia. However, in order to try and fit with Stalin’s rule of social realism, Prokofiev altered the story of his ballet from the original to make the ending happy, rather than tragic. Stalin, picking and choosing how he wanted this rule followed, did not like this change because he decided that Shakespeare was not to be messed with and therefore, his stories were not to be changed. The ballet was restaged in 1940, at the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad, with this switch back to the original, tragic ending. This was Prokofiev’s first real Russian ballet. A Soviet director came up with the idea for a Romeo and Juliet ballet and wanted to work on it with Prokofiev. It was to be

for the Kirov ballet and so was also worked on with Kirov. When he was assassinated, it greatly affected Prokofiev and the ballet. Kirov was replaced by Zhdanov who did not get along as well with Prokofiev as Kirov had. At one point, the Kirov ballet cancelled Prokofiev's commission. There was a lot of creative tension, especially between Prokofiev and the dancers. They felt that his music was impossible to count and he did not want to change his score. Eventually, after much protest from both, Prokofiev agreed to change his score. Being stubborn as he was, he kept everything the same but added a baseline so the dancers were able to count using that. The original score had 58 episodes but ended up being shortened to 52.

Overview and Context – West Side Story

Bernstein's musical, West Side Story, is a Broadway musical, inspired by and loosely based on Shakespeare's play, Romeo and Juliet. It tells the story of two street gangs the Jets and the Sharks. The Jets are second-generation American immigrants. Their parents immigrated from various countries, but they themselves were born in America so they consider themselves to be true Americans. The Sharks are Puerto Rican immigrants and victims of the massive cyclone. They have a strong rivalry, fighting over who is best and sections of the street. The Jets feel threatened by the Sharks "invading" their land and territory. The two gangs are constantly fighting and running in with the police. At a dance where both gangs are present, Tony, a former member of the Jets, and Maria, the younger sister of Bernardo (leader of the Sharks), meet. They fall in love at first sight and continue to see each other in secret despite the conflict between their backgrounds and the hatred they are supposed to have for one another.

The score was composed by Leonard Bernstein, the lyrics written by Stephen Sondheim, choreography by Jerome Robbins, with Arthur Laurents as the playwright. The four came to be working on the piece together due to unfortunate circumstances that resulted from the Red Scare. Jerome Robbins had been named a communist sympathiser. In order to save himself, he named 10 others as sympathisers, including those who would work on West Side Story with him. It was because of this that they all came to be working together on it. Though they had to put on appearances for their own sakes, the rest of the men hated Robbins for what he had done to their lives. It was first performed at the Winter Garden Theatre on Broadway in 1957.

As it is also set in the mid-1950s, it was extremely relevant to society at the time. There was a lot of turmoil worldwide during the 50s and everyone was rather unsettled. Puerto Rico was owned by America and therefore had to be grateful to the country. It was a part of America, but without any benefits. Puerto Ricans were called to join the American army, but then never given any of the benefits that American soldiers received. Spanish was the main language spoken there. Right before West Side Story was written, a huge cyclone occurred in Puerto Rico. Much of the island was damaged and this lead to a mass migration of Puerto Ricans to America. New York was the centre of immigration at the time, so once Puerto Ricans had their immigration approved, they arrived directly to New York City. This created quite the conflict between Americans and Puerto Ricans, similar to any other city that has had mass immigration occur.

The musical was originally called East Side Story, telling the forbidden love story of a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy. Robbins thought it might be more popular and well-received if the story was more relevant to what was going on in society right at that moment. Bernstein and Laurents then came up with the idea for the storyline to include and revolve around Puerto Rican immigrants. Bernstein's wife, Felicia Montealegre, was originally from South America which

could have had an impact on his decision to use this new storyline and also on how he would portray the South American characters in the story.

As a Broadway musical, it combines song, dance and acting in a lighter version of an Opera. It has many Broadway and thus, American conventions and was of a very high standard to be performed where it was. It was created in the era of Jazz, seeing more of this style throughout. An orchestra accompanied singers and played the incidental music (underscored). It took on new ideas of the time and was made into a film in 1961. While it is widely debated about the initial success of the musical, the play was certainly an immediate hit. All in all, a very well-received, revolutionary and impactful musical that is still thoroughly enjoyed today.