

LIVE

FROM LINCOLN CENTER



New York Philharmonic Music Director Alan Gilbert has gone on record as believing George Gershwin may be the greatest composer yet produced by the United States. A man of his word, Gilbert has put together a gala New Year's Eve concert by the Philharmonic that revolves around Gershwin's two most popular works for piano and orchestra, the Concerto in F and the "Rhapsody in Blue". Soloist in the two works will be the renowned French pianist, Jean-Yves Thibaudet. Coupled with the Gershwin works Gilbert has scheduled music by the American composer who most closely followed in Gershwin's footsteps, straddling the worlds of the concert hall, Broadway and jazz---Leonard Bernstein. And Bernstein, of course, was also one of Gilbert's predecessors as Music Director of the Philharmonic. It will be the Bernstein of Broadway who will be heard on New Year's Eve: the Overture to *Candide* and the Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*. And following our long-standing tradition we'll bring our cameras and microphones in to Avery Fisher Hall to bring all the New Year's Eve festivities to you on Saturday evening, December 31.

Leonard Bernstein once told me he had created his Overture to "Candide" in hours during the last days before the scheduled opening of the show in 1956. As with Mozart's Overture to "The Marriage of Figaro", Bernstein's *Candide* Overture is a merry romp of high spirits with an irresistible forward propulsion. *Candide* itself has had something of a checkered history, but worldwide the Overture may well be the single most-performed work by an American composer.

It was in February, 1924 that Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" was given its world premiere. Shortly afterwards Gershwin was invited by Walter Damrosch to compose a piano concerto. Damrosch was then conductor of the Symphony Society of New York which a few years later was amalgamated with the Philharmonic Society of New York to create the present day New York Philharmonic. Gershwin accepted the commission eagerly, working on the Concerto over the next year-and-a-half while also pursuing his Broadway career. It was in December, 1925 that the Concerto received its world premiere, Gershwin as soloist and Damrosch conducting. Damrosch was enthusiastic about Gershwin's incorporation of jazz elements in the Concerto. "He has done it boldly," he wrote, "by dressing this extremely independent and up-to-date young lady in the classic garb of a Concerto. Yet he has detracted not one whit from her fascinating personality. He is the Prince who has taken Cinderella by the hand and openly proclaimed her a princess to the astonished world, no doubt to the fury of her envious sisters."

One of Leonard Bernstein's unfulfilled ambitions was to create a great American opera. I am not alone in feeling that he had done just that in 1957 with his music for "West Side Story", the glorious work conceived and directed in its initial run on Broadway by choreographer, Jerome Robbins. In place of the Montagues and the Capulets, the warring families in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Arthur Laurents' book for *West Side Story* pits two New York Street gangs against each other in mortal conflict. And Stephen Sondheim's lyrics and Bernstein's music are as perfect for the purpose as, for example, are Boito's book and lyrics for Verdi's *Otello*. One other element contributed to the glow of *West Side Story*: Robbins created Dances that are kinetic in their impact. Four years later, in 1961, the New York Philharmonic

premiered a Suite of nine Symphonic Dances from Bernstein's score. Here again is one of the most frequently-played works in the American symphonic repertory.

There is probably no more appropriate Finale for this New Year's Eve celebration than the "Rhapsody in Blue", itself the product of a concert imposingly titled "What is American Music?" Gershwin had casually consented to write a piece for the Paul Whiteman Jazz Orchestra for the event, but had quickly turned his attention to other matters. It was on the train to Boston en route to the out-of-town tryout of his Broadway-bound musical, *Sweet Little Devil*, that Gershwin read a newspaper account of the forthcoming Whiteman concert which would include a new work specially composed for the occasion by George Gershwin. The date was January 4, 1924; the Whiteman concert was to take place on February 12! Because there was so little time for composition Whiteman agreed that Gershwin had only to provide a piano score, details of the orchestration would be handled by Whiteman's chief arranger, the best man in the business, Ferde Grofe. Thus was born one of the fundamentally revolutionary works in all music.

A joyous New Year's Eve concert awaits us then on PBS: Alan Gilbert and the New York Philharmonic, with pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet and music by Gershwin and Bernstein. Please remember to check the schedule of your local station for the exact date and time of the telecast in your area.

Happy New Year everyone!!