Symphonic Dance, West Side [659]

Transposition Inquisition No. 80

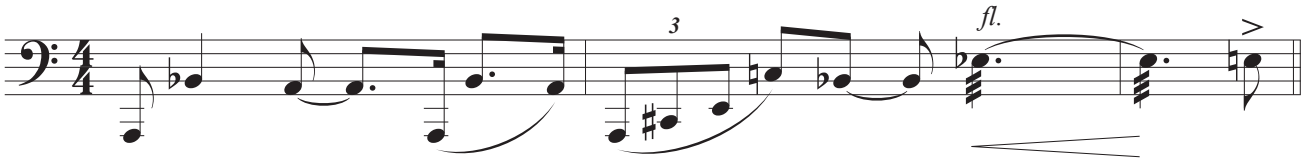
Leonard Bernstein

arr. Martorano

About the Composer:

"American conductor and composer. His accomplishments as a conductor, composer of musical theater and concert works, and musical educator through television mark Bernstein as an unusually versatile figure. Among his most lasting contributions are his tenure as music director of the New York Philharmonic and the score to the Broadway musical West Side Story.

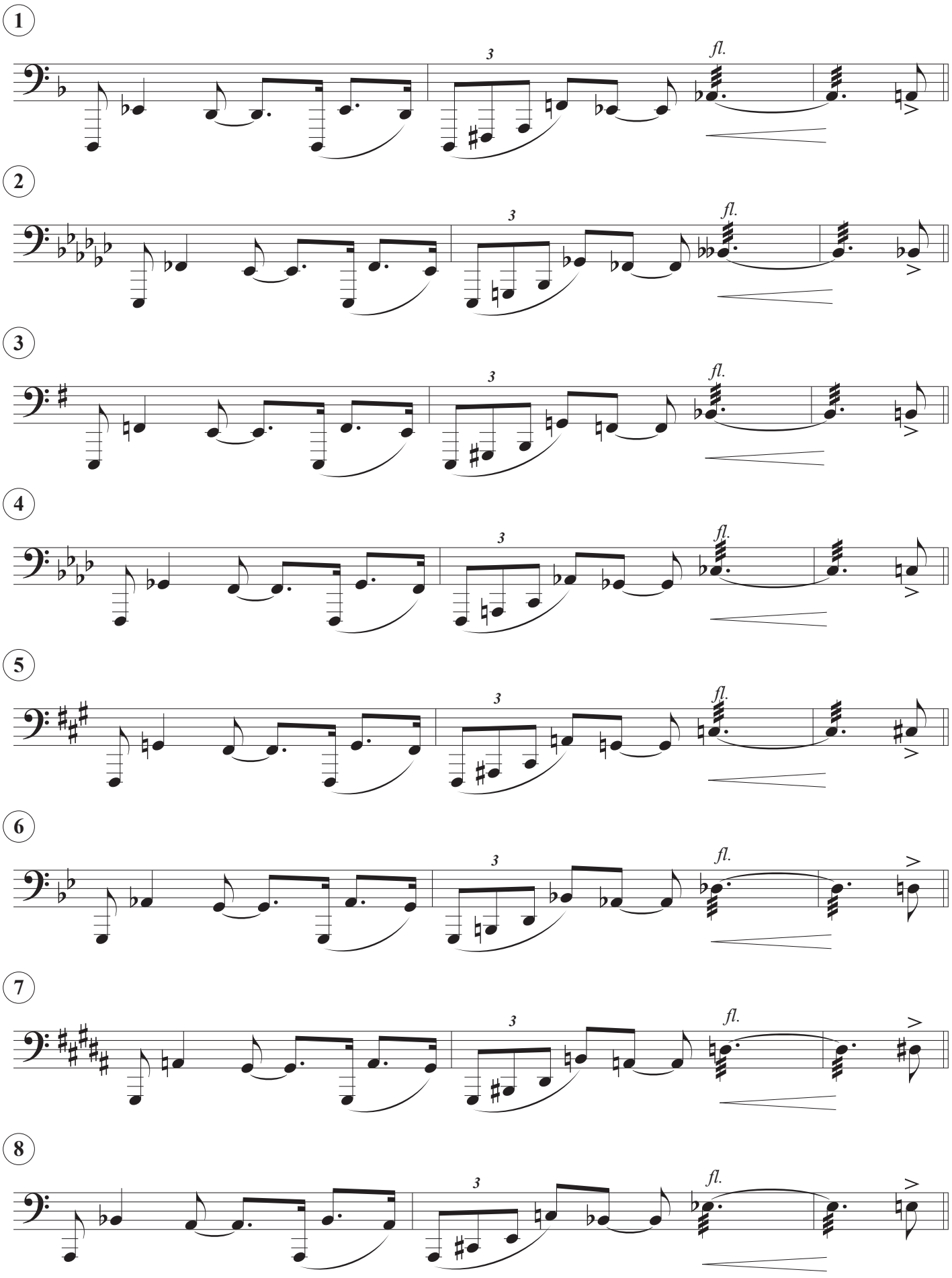
Bernstein's parents, Samuel Bernstein and Jennie Resnick, were Russian Jewish immigrants. Their family's faith played a major role in the young Bernstein's personal development and as a cultural and religious influence throughout his life. His father prospered in the barber and beauty supply business. Leonard was the eldest child; a sister and brother followed. (His mother's family insisted upon the name "Louis" after a recently-deceased grandfather, but his parents called him "Leonard" from the beginning, and he legally changed his name at 16.) There was little music in the background of either family; an aunt placed her piano in the Bernstein family home when Leonard was ten, piquing his interest. He began to study and made rapid progress, alternately arousing his father's pride (including playing piano on a radio show advertising his father's business) and concern as he saw his son drawn headlong into an uncertain career choice. Bernstein's first piano teacher of note was Helen Coates (assistant to Heinrich Gebhard, one of Boston's leading teachers), with whom he started to study at age 14; she later served as his assistant for most of his adult life.



About the Composition:

"Like many composers before him – Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Gounod, Berlioz and Bellini (to name some of the more famous) – Shakespeare's tale of tragedy, Romeo and Juliet, also attracted the American composer Leonard Bernstein. Like it was to Tchaikovsky, [. . .] the famed choreographer Jerome Robbins in 1957. But in this case, the piece was envisioned as a Broadway musical. In fact, the idea first began by imagining the feuding parties as Catholics and Jews in the lower East side of New York's Manhattan during Passover and Easter; it then morphed into something called Gangway! portraying New York's gang warfare there. Eventually, and due much to Bernstein's lifelong passion for humanitarianism and peace, the musical focused on Puerto Rican and Anglo street gangs in New York's upper West Side. This contemporary scenario couldn't have been better suited for Shakespeare's star-cross'd lovers story, and Bernstein was not only very excited about it, but hoped it would awaken a peaceful awareness in what some called the City's "War zone."

-Max Derrickson (www.musicprogramnotes.com)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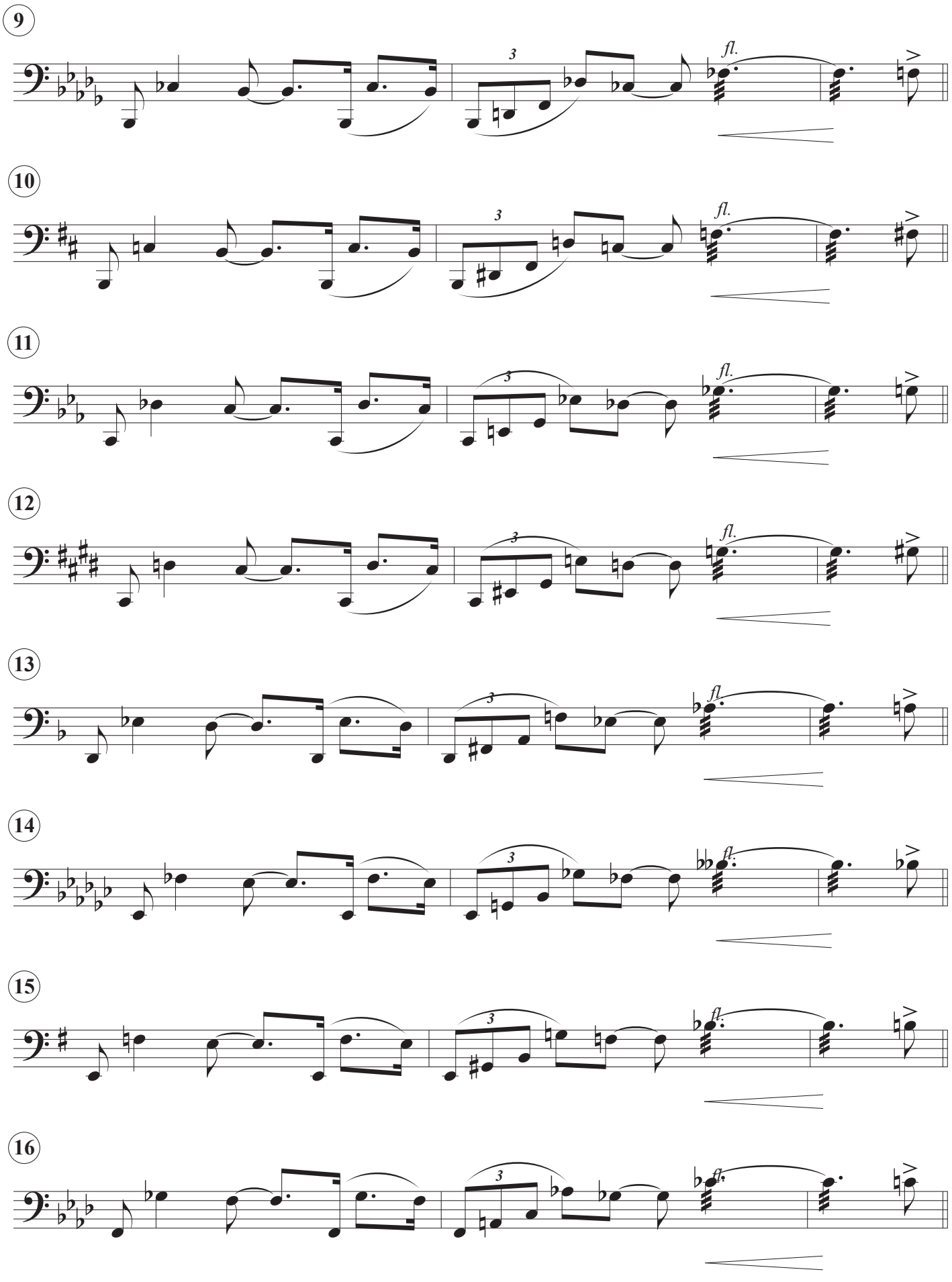
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