



Listening Guide: “Modern and Melodious”
Composer: Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)
Title: “Symphonic Dances” from *West Side Story*

Recording: Houston Symphony Orchestra, Andrés Orozco-Estrada conductor
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUSPzL7IsY8>

Orchestration: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, traps, four pitched drums, three bongos, tomtom, timbales, tenor drum, cymbals, triangle, gourd, three cowbells, congas, police whistle, two suspended cymbals, finger cymbals, castanets, small and large maracas, tambourine, chimes, wood block, claves, temple blocks, slide whistle, ratchet, gourd, glockenspiel, vibraphone, xylophone, piano/celesta, harp, and strings.

1. Prologue

Time	Musical Elements	Discussion and Definitions
00:00	In unison, the orchestra plays two opening leaps. The second leap establishes the interval of the augmented fourth/tritone, highlighting it by playing it short and <i>sforzato</i> . A rapid three-note motif follows. Together, the leaps and three-note motif comprise the Discord theme.	<p>The Discord motif, and the interval of the tritone more generally, will both recur throughout the musical and the suite, indicating the constant conflict underlying the plot.</p> <p>Augmented fourth/tritone: an interval between two notes historically known as “the devil’s tone” due to its striking dissonance.</p> <p><i>Sforzato</i>: suddenly loud and with emphasis</p>
0:16	Snaps lead into the Jets’ theme, a jaunty descending line performed on alto sax and vibraphone. The theme ends with a tritone.	<p>The return of the tritone provides continuity from opening discord to first character group.</p> <p>In a performance of the musical the Jets (American gang) would be onstage snapping, so for the Symphonic Dances the orchestral musicians must instead perform the snaps.</p>
0:28	The motif’s accompaniment shifts to a waltz feel with a key change, with clarinets and later flute/violin taking over the waltz motif.	Waltz: a functional, formal European dance in triple time



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0:41	Jets theme buoyantly returns in flute, oboe, and violins with jagged brass response.	Leitmotifs, or themes that return and change in response to shifts in plot, location, and character, are an important element of <i>WSS</i> 's structure, highlighting Bernstein's familiarity with European stage traditions.
0:48	Solo trombone and solo percussion signal a brief reminder of "Discord" before the "Jets" theme returns in solo trumpet and the waltz returns in the accompaniment.	
1:13	Woodwinds and trumpet play "Jets."	
1:26	Solo percussion returns, interrupting the energy buildup. The brass pass the three-note motif from "Discord" and motifs from "Jets" in imitation.	Imitation: a technique common in canons and fugues in which different instruments begin the same musical idea in staggered entrances.
1:38	Strings and winds play a more lyrical melody related to the waltz-like accompaniment. Winds, xylophone, and piano briefly play the "Discord" leaps in imitation. Snippets of the waltz, "Discord," and "Jets" continue to swirl around one another.	
2:30	Piano, low strings, and drum set begin a new rhythmic pattern, evocative of bebop in its instrumentation, speed, and "straight" ride and bass pulse against syncopated melodic instruments. Brass and winds play short accented fragments of previous themes with a gradual build in orchestral texture.	<p>Bebop (bop): a jazz style pioneered in the 1940s that favored blistering speeds, elaborate solos, and small ensembles. The incorporation throughout the musical and suite of US and Latin jazz fuse with Bernstein's European training to produce a uniquely American sound.</p> <p>Syncopation: a rhythmic technique in which a normally weak beat is deliberately emphasized, creating a sense of tension and excitement with the underlying pulse.</p>
2:53	"Cool" theme returns, but very quickly and with a full texture.	Even in just this opening section, Bernstein employs stark contrasts in dynamics, style, and instrumentation.
3:20	Solo xylophone and bongo in call and response	Call and response: a style of interaction in



	drastically reduce texture. Repeated with xylophone, piano, trumpet, and piccolo.	which one instrument or group states an idea and another then responds
2:30	New idea with rapid string bass	Rival gangs gradually gather onstage (“discord”)
3:41	The piece drives to the ending by layering a heavily syncopated bass line. The tempo/speed increases with the “Jets” theme, increasing dissonance, and slashing accents.	The youthful momentum is overwhelming—even a police whistle can’t even stop the momentum right away.
4:22	The energy drains; vibraphone and harp bring back “Jets” theme in original texture and key. The section ends on a long string tone that leads directly into “Somewhere.”	Each section must transition into the next, often through a held tone.

2. “Somewhere”

Time	Musical Elements	Discussion and Definitions
00:00	Solo viola, doubled by harp, introduces the A section of the “Somewhere” theme. Flute and violin play a countermelody.	<p>“Somewhere” is a theme sung by the ill-fated romantic couple at the center of <i>WSS</i>. “There’s a place for us/somewhere a place for us/Peace and quiet and open air/wait for us/somewhere.”</p> <p>“Somewhere” occurs much later in the musical; the suite does not introduce themes in the order of the show.</p> <p>The melody’s opening is a minor seventh, a large, distinctive interval whose reaching easily represents longing, especially when it sighs downward, as this one does. This recognizable interval will recur throughout the suite.</p>
:32	The horn restates the theme with oboe and countermelody. The counter-melody builds intensity into the B section of “Somewhere.”	Counter-melody: a secondary melody that compliments the primary melody. Here, the counter-melody alternates between playing longer notes simultaneously with the primary melody and being more rhythmically active while the primary melody holds longer notes.



1:02	String section takes over the B section of the melody, characterized by a short-long rhythm and stepwise movement. The orchestral texture builds before slowing and softening.	<p>“Somewhere/we’ll find a new way of living/we’ll find a way of forgiving/somewhere.”</p> <p>Strings are a tried-and-true instrumentation to suggest romance. While this theme is prominently placed in the suite, there is overwhelmingly more music associated with the gangs throughout the suite, shifting the balance to energetic dance music rather than the central love story.</p>
1:36	Second verse in strings and clarinet, countermelody in flute and violin.	<p>“There’s a place for us/A time and place for us/Hold my hand/And we’re halfway there/Hold my hand/And I’ll take you there.”</p>
2:08	Full strings, brass, and timpani join with fragments of “Somewhere,” climaxing with cymbals.	
2:32	The climax quiets and stills with a low pedal tone, and flute leads fragments of “Somewhere.”	Pedal tone: a pitch held in the bass no matter what is happening above it
3:02	Solo trumpet sounds “Somewhere” in imitation with strings. A pause, with gentle, high fragments of “Somewhere.”	
3:38	A sudden percussion hit sounds, with “Somewhere” fragments transitioning toward the Scherzo.	

3. Scherzo

Discussion and Definitions
<p>Scherzo comes from Italian for “joke,” and often designates a more lighthearted or playful section of music, and this brief movement allows for a transition to an idealized world. In <i>WSS</i>, the music accompanies a dream ballet, an extended fantasy dance sequence: Tony imagines taking Maria to a beautiful, sunny, safe place. This movement develops motifs from “Somewhere,” incorporates light percussion and snaps, shifts meter frequently—you’ll feel a change in the underlying pulse that feels like it interrupts easy foot-tapping—and alternates bowing and <i>pizzicato</i> (plucking) in strings.</p>



4. Mambo

Time	Musical Elements	Discussion and Definitions
00:00	A sudden change of speed and attitude with a brass introduction. We have left the dream sequence for reality.	The mambo is a Cuban dance in 4/4 meter and was the most popular Latin dance in the United States during the 1940s. Despite being a Cuban dance, in <i>WSS</i> this music highlights the enthusiastic dancing of Puerto Rican characters.
0:03	A loud, dissonant, strongly accented and syncopated melody plays over driving, Latin-inspired rhythms in timbales (shallow drums), bongo, and cowbell.	Bernstein was likely inspired by Latin jazz bands, for example those led by trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and bongo player Chano Pozo. By titling this set of pieces a dance suite, Bernstein both connects with <i>West Side Story's</i> unique success—choreography is critical for character development in the musical—and with a long European tradition of stylized dances.
0:09	A second melody comprised of short ascending arpeggios answers the opening; even melodic content feels percussive in this movement. Muted trumpets play fragments of the opening melody.	Arpeggio: the notes in a chord, played in succession rather than simultaneously. Can be ascending or descending.
0:37	Original melody returns with the opening texture, creating call and response with a shout of “Mambo!”	The orchestra again must stand-in for onstage characters to shout “Mambo!”
1:05	A solo trumpet with a secondary theme alternates with dance breaks and short orchestral glissandi. The opening theme plays at times as the percussion continues to drive. Trumpet trills in a high register cut through the dense symphonic texture.	Glissando: a slide between pitches
2:05	We move through multiple keys as we reach the section’s close, heralded by a rallentando and a long held string tone, a calming before Maria and Tony’s first dance.	Rallentando: dramatic slowing



5. Cha-Cha

Discussion and Definitions

This short section occurs when Maria and Tony see each other for the first time, dance, instantly fall in love, a 20th-century Romeo and Juliet. The melodic material is from the song “Maria,” dreamily sung by Tony when he learns the name of the woman he had just fallen in love with. “Maria” opens with an augmented fourth/tritone, but the effect here is very different than in the opening “Discord” motif; the melody moves quickly through the tritone, resolving upward. The effect is more to mark Tony’s stunned infatuation, though the tritone could also foreshadow Tony’s fate despite his moment of happiness. The movement progresses in a simple meter, with a solo bass clarinet, pizzicato strings, and flute trio creating a light, dream-like mood.

6. Meeting Scene

Discussion and Definitions

This interlude, the shortest of the suite, represents both the lovers’ first spoken words and a meeting of the two gangs to establish ground rules of a street fight. It emerges from the “Maria” theme in strings, celeste, and vibraphone. Viola and cello play Maria’s augmented fourth/tritone as a bridge into the “Cool” theme.

7. Cool Fugue (7a and 7b)

Time	Musical Elements	Discussion and Definitions
7a	The melody begins with <i>pizzicato</i> viola and cello and <i>staccato</i> bass clarinet and piano, and it is built from ascending and descending tritones. A descending syncopated melody answers. The solo flute presents the “Cool” theme, with syncopated response from vibraphone, celeste, and cello; theme and response continue throughout opening.	This section is built on a musical pun: the Jets are practicing controlling their tempers (“Keep coolly cool, boy”), and “cool” simultaneously references cool jazz, a style that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. While still embracing the small combo, the style is less driving than bop and characterized by light playing. The popularity of the Modern Jazz Quartet, led by vibraphonist Milt Jackson, also made the vibraphone, heard throughout this section of <i>WSS</i> , a key element of the cool jazz sound.
7b 00:00	Brushes introduce the fugue section in swing rhythm.	Brushes are a useful means of changing timbre on a drum set, providing more of a swish than a hit. Here they are played on the cymbal. Swing rhythm is incredibly difficult to define definitively, but is a characteristic rhythmic trait of jazz in which the underlying pulse is subtly



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		unevenly divided, resulting in a long-short “swung” sound.
7b 00:00	The melody sounds like it begins with the opening motif of “Somewhere” but progresses with 12-tone technique.	12-tone technique: a modernist style of composition in which all 12 notes in an octave are used once before returning to any given note. Listen for how the melody appears unpredictable from note to note.
	The fugal writing creates tension, as multiple melodies and countermelodies in various instruments are vying for equal attention.	Fugue: a technique in which various voices introduce and develop/expand on one or more melodic ideas, also called subjects. Here, the primary melodic idea is the 12-tone theme that begins with “Somewhere,” and the secondary theme is a jauntier melody introduced by the flute.
00:36	A secondary syncopated theme with blue notes emerges in flute with elements of the 12-tone theme in the bass accompaniment.	No one line is more important than another.
1:10	Wailing trumpets and strong dissonant accents add to the texture and increasing tension, and ultimately help transition to the next section.	
1:24	A unison melody alternating with short drum breaks provides some relief from the previous dense texture. Unison movement continues, gradually descending.	Unison playing in jazz was common at the beginning of a piece, announcing the “head” or main tune, as well as toward the end for emphasis and to signify a union of the group after solos.
1:54	The “Cool theme” returns with full orchestration, including drum set and wailing brass.	The theme now sounds more like a big band than a small combo.
2:18	A unison descent triggers a volume decrease before a light restatement of “Cool,” punctuated by occasional “big band” commentary.	Contrast is again a key element of Bernstein’s musical structure.
2:45	Vibraphone and the original swing rhythm play out the movement.	



8. Rumble

Discussion and Definitions

A rush of energy, new material, and tritones opens the *Molto Allegro* movement before themes and motifs from “Prologue” and “Cool Fugue” combine to represent the rumble between the Sharks and Jets. During this battle two gang members are killed; Tony, only present to try and stop the rumble, ultimately kills Maria’s brother Bernardo after Bernardo kills his friend. The frenetic energy of the movement representing fighting ultimately gives way to a low flute *cadenza* (solo), with one hint of “Somewhere” commenting on the fight’s tragic ending.

9. Finale

Discussion and Definitions

Strings open the *Adagio* movement, suggesting the energy of love rather than the energy of dancing or fighting. The music in this movement is reminiscent of “Somewhere,” with instruments at times playing high in their ranges, perhaps suggesting the choice of optimism and reconciliation. A low, insistent pedal tone, a note that persists regardless of what happens above it harmonically, evokes a funeral procession, darkening this optimism, or at least reminding us that it was born of tragedy.