Heritage and Innovation of Harmony:
A Study of *West Side Story*
By Nathan Miller
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Gloria Cox
Dr. Cho
Nathan Miller, Senior
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What I’m Trying to Say

There are two ideas being explored in this paper: one is the state of music and musical theater in the Western world at the time that *West Side Story* was written. The other is how the music of *West Side Story* fits into that timeline, and more specifically, how it answers the proposed questions of the day.

There are really two parallel universes being considered: one is the world of musical theater, and the other is the world of serious art music. I feel certain that one of these must be more important than the other for this topic, but I cannot determine which. Personally, I see the events and ideas in the world of serious art music as “setting the stage” for a tremendously exciting drama within the twentieth century—a drama in which *West Side Story* and its composer Leonard Bernstein were active participants. That issue is also more interesting to me as a musician. However, in my research, most literature and commentary on *West Side Story* views it in the context of what was happening in the musical theater world, where regardless of my personal feelings, *West Side Story* certainly made a bigger sensation.

And so, in this paper, I have included both. Let me now state my opinion bluntly. I believe that the past and future of harmony in Western music, as it would have been perceived in 1957 and still is to this day somewhat, is encapsulated in the music of *West Side Story*. The specific conclusion that I have drawn is that tonal harmony can find new relevance and ways of incarnation as new popular idioms emerge, and I present *West Side Story* as my case study. I stress “popular” because it is unlikely that a listener will be able to digest innovative music if it has not been in some connected form or lesser
manifestation been presented before. This is a large part of why I must necessarily address the topic of musical theater as part of my larger study.

And so I will say this: if you know even moderately well the kind of music that was being written for musical theater in 1957—where it came from and whether it was taken seriously—than you need not bother with my brief attempt at covering the subject. Likewise, if you know very well the theories promoting the use of atonality and twelve-tone serialism in the twentieth century, then you need not bother with my somewhat more comprehensive study of them, either. The heart of my work is rather in how *West Side Story* contributes to the debate.

A word: I have chosen to write this paper from my own personal perspective. This is not from a desire to be carelessly informal, or to be disarming. The fact is that I chose this subject matter because it first appealed to me musically long before I began my formal musical training. Thus, I can state with all intellectual honesty that all musical inferences made in this paper, whether about atonality or popular theater, can be traced back to a deeply-held personal affection and sensibility I had about them before my academic and theoretical interests followed. Also, one might show the exact same historical and theoretical evidence presented in this paper to a hundred different musicians and they would arrive at a hundred different conclusions. No musician is without bias: he or she became a musician because of an impartial love for some facet or another of music. And I feel vindicated in that almost every scholarly work I have encountered on *West Side Story*, atonality, and musical theater, was written from a personal perspective. This is a case study of a very special relationship between me, *West Side Story*, and the twentieth century Western world.
The Work Itself

"At this very moment I have just ended a performing period and started a creative one again. Now the conducting's over and will be over for seven months while I write another show, a rather serious and tragic musical comedy for Broadway—figure that one out..."

-Leonard Bernstein, 1957

*West Side Story* opened on September 26, 1957, at New York's Winter Garden Theater. Since that time it has become one of the most enduring works the musical theater genre has ever produced. It bridged the gap between ballet and drama, opera and musical theater, art music and popular music, Shakespearean tragedy and musical comedy, and Broadway and true New York. It opened to critical acclaim by some and to harsh criticism by others (Garebian 125). Its music is well-known by musicians, and the movie made in 1961 by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is known and loved by millions around the world. Yet many are unaware of the twentieth century's highly tense music world and of *West Side Story*’s involvement in it.

*West Side Story* was written by four men. Arthur Laurents wrote the book, and the idea for *West Side Story* was a very ambitious one. Its creators wanted to incorporate dance and music into the very marrow of the story, making *West Side Story* a sort of operatic ballet. Laurents’ work was therefore that of a librettist, “dummy” lyricist,
author, and script-writer (Laurents 349). Jerome Robbins was the choreographer, and
would also direct the show. The idea of a modern-day *Romeo and Juliet* originated with
Robbins (Jowitt 266). Leonard Bernstein wrote the music and some of the lyrics: these
three worked together from the very outset. When it became clear that there was going to
be more music than anticipated, Stephen Sondheim was grafted into the team to help with
the burden of lyrics writing (Garebian 39).

An interesting thing about how *West Side Story* is now billed: when the show had
its road-debut in Washington, billing gave credit to Robbins for the direction,
choreographing, staging and conception, to Bernstein for the music and lyrics, to
Laurents for the book, and to Sondheim for additional lyrics. The show was a smash and
a sensation. However, critics praised only the original three and completely ignored
Sondheim. Bernstein, in what Laurents considered the most magnanimous act he had
ever seen in the history of theater, relinquished co-lyricist credit in order that Sondheim
could get the credit he deserved as the fourth collaborator. Thus all subsequent *West Side
Story* shows were billed as follows:

![Image of a poster for the Broadway Theatre production of *West Side Story*]
"West Side Story" ran for 732 performances, and not until the success of the cast album, a successful West coast tour, a successful London run in 1958, and a return to Broadway in 1960, did "West Side Story" begin to receive the sweeping acclaim by American critics and audiences that it still enjoys today (Garebian 141). But to better understand why its acceptance came so gradually, it is imperative to look back decades before 1957.
Twentieth Century Musical Theater

"The best music always follows a theater period. It grows up in the theater. Once a musical idea is firmly established, it starts in the theater, the public hears it and from then on it can be detached from its theatrical form."

-Leonard Bernstein

American musical theater music evolved from the black minstrelsy, vaudeville, and Tin Pan Alley music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As dramas, early American musicals were little more than showcases for popular singers and parlor songs with flimsy plots to tie them together. The evolution of the genre into something resembling an art form (in the traditional sense) was slow but persistent. The earliest songwriter (composer of both music and lyrics) to have a truly lasting effect on American musicals was Irving Berlin, a Jewish-American born in 1888. His songs, such as *White Christmas* and *Alexander’s Ragtime Band* are well-known to this day. His music is notable mostly because of its popularity and abundance, and his use of ragtime and jazz harmonies and rhythms, despite his being basically musically illiterate (he had a special piano built for him so that he could transpose songs without having to play them in new keys). He composed such successful musicals as *Annie Get Your Gun* and the movie musical *Holiday Inn*. Berlin’s influence on musical theater cannot be underestimated: his songs were contemporary, and people remembered them. Bernstein’s ability to go further than anyone before him using jazz harmonies and vernacular rhythms owed much to the legacy of Irving Berlin (Irving 1).
Born in 1891, Cole Porter was a contemporary of Berlin. In fact, Irving Berlin inspired his friend Cole to go to New York and begin a career there. Porter was a musical prodigy from an early age and had a formal music education at Yale University. Many of Porter's early musicals, such as *Anything Goes*, were very successful, as was his last triumph *Kiss Me Kate*. Porter's contribution to musical theater was a repertoire of songs not quite as large or popular as Berlin's—but his songs were much more refined, with complicated structures and often less predictable harmonic progressions. Porter was a fine and clever lyricist. This, coupled with his somewhat respected musicality, made him a model which was probably a huge influence on Bernstein's musical theater aspirations. In addition, Porter's work was undoubtedly a contributor to the way critics and musicians listened and responded to musicals (Bell 1).

George Gershwin, a young Jewish-American composer born in 1898, studied with Nadia Boulanger and had an ear for jazz. He wrote some of the most interesting music ever heard in musical theater in the 1920's and 30's, before his premature death in 1938. His famous *I Got Rhythm* was the first song of its genre to syncopate the very first sung rhythm. His "folk opera" *Porgy and Bess* was not initially digested well by the public,
despite being a work of great vision and mastery. It was eventually staged sans recitatives as a somewhat tragic, decidedly-operatic musical. Its use of dark subject matter, as well as an all-black cast, made it an icon of what could be done (but probably would not be well received) in musical theater in the 1930s. Gershwin’s use of melody, harmony, rhythm, musical form, and genre were all of undoubted influence on any who presumed to be innovative in his wake. Gershwin, like Bernstein later, sometimes had an attitude that musical theater was beneath him, and did not focus entirely on songwriting. His use of jazz harmonies in such compositions as *Rhapsody in Blue* earned him respect in the music world that was quite unknown to other musical theater composers. He was a prophetic symbol of what musicals could and could not be on the American stage, and little was done between his death and the debut of *West Side Story* in the way of serious advancement of the composed music in musical theater (Pinwheel 1).

Nonetheless, changes of another kind occurred in musical theater before it was Bernstein’s turn. Story-telling in musical theater was somewhat revolutionized by the songwriting team of composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein III. Their debut musical *Oklahoma!* appeared in 1943 and would become the longest running
musical in Broadway history. It was termed a “musical play” due partly to its dramatic and involved subject matter, and partly to its use of dance and music to advance the plot (as opposed to the earlier norm of simply using these devices as diversion for the audience or a chance to show off a star). Perhaps it is not surprising that Hammerstein had been more of a librettist previously than a lyricist: his works included a revision of Bizet’s *Carmen* for an all black cast entitled *Carmen Jones*, the somewhat tragic and very influential musical *Showboat*, and a few operettas (a musical form thought to be mostly extinct by this time). His background in opera explains his tendency toward more refined literature: a characteristic shared and taken to a new level by the makers of *West Side Story* (Rodgers 1). But someone else would do it before them.

To this day, one musical stands out as a historical rival to *West Side Story* in terms of universal popularity, critical acclaim, longevity, and artistic brilliance. It is not Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The Sound of Music* (which excels and even surpasses in all but perhaps the last category). It is Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe’s *My Fair Lady*. Debuting in 1956, *My Fair Lady* is a musical setting of George Bernard Shaw’s acclaimed play *Pygmalion*. Having a fairly interesting history of its own, including the daunting task the composers faced of having to set to music a popular play perceived to already be perfect, *My Fair Lady* was adored by the public and in 1961 surpassed *Oklahoma!* as the longest running musical in history. *My Fair Lady* was hailed by critics as the crowning achievement of the musical theater genre: it was funny, witty, intellectual, exciting, and moving. It was a favorite at the Tony Awards, and again at the Oscars in 1965, and the songs of *My Fair Lady* have been loved and remembered as much as those of any other musical (Harris 1).
After *My Fair Lady*, many felt that nothing better could be done with musical theater. The funny plot, catchy songs, feel-good ending, comic characters, roguish leading man, loveable leading lady, and elusive romance were all trademarks of Broadway productions, and *My Fair Lady* used them all with style and appeal (Harris 1).

It was 1956: the year before the release of *West Side Story*, and the prevailing thought was that musicals could go nowhere but backward. And to compound real-life drama for Leonard Bernstein, a similar and much more emphatic opinion on art music composition had really begun to gain academic acceptance. Unbeknownst to the average theatergoer, twelve-tone serialists were making their own apocalyptic statements about the future of music in the Western world.
Atonality, Serialism, and Twentieth Century Composers

“Perhaps there is something innate in our ears that craves tonal grounding. If so, then the many wondrous works written with various 12-tone procedures succeed because the music violates that craving – it titillates, discombobulates, engages the ear.”

-Anthony Tommassini

To recount the history of Western music and harmony would be too much to attempt in this paper. It will suffice to say that what one generally hears referred to as “classical music” by the layman (everything from Bach to Chopin) is actually a long, very exciting movement that began with chants in Western music hundreds and hundreds of years ago, and slowly progressed toward greater and greater complexity of melody, harmony, and rhythm to what some consider to be the climax of Western music: romanticism and then the impressionists. These latter-day composers, ranging from Wagner to Debussy, pushed the envelope of harmony to incredibly dense chromaticism, sometimes leaving analysts mystified as to what was really happening harmonically in their works.

A belief that the tonal language was then exhausted of any interest or expansion led some composers in the early twentieth century, most notably a young Austrian composer named Arnold Schoenberg, to believe that music should break away from tonality completely (Boynick 1). Similar beliefs belying Separatism were popular in all of the arts at this time, due in large part to the belief that the failure of established order in the Western world was evidenced by the horror and carnage of World War I.
The word "tonality" refers to the pitch hierarchy of the diatonic system and the use of major and minor modes. A tonal composition tends toward a "tonic note" giving it a sense of anchoring and stability. The use of various techniques to complicate, alter, deceive, transpose, and even ignore this tonal center have been common in music composition throughout Western music and have guided most of its innovation. The idea that music became increasingly harmonically complex as time passed is not entirely accurate, however. The *Ars nova* composers of the late Renaissance, and even more their immediate successors, did some of the strangest vertical alignments of pitches that have ever been heard in Western music. The idea that our system of "harmony" did not occur until the onset of J.S. Bach and the Baroque period is a somewhat artificial delineation which really amounts to saying that the composers prior to this period were not listening for how vertical pitch alignments sounded with one another, nor to the direction that they led one another, nor to the similar use of similar sonorities in their various works. What we consider "harmony" is really just the ingathering, almost the "taming," of vertical pitch relation into a system that was more easily identifiable to the ear and more easily theorized about. These sentiments however, are not shared by all music historians or theorists, and they did not seem to be shared by the atonalists either.

Abolishing the system of tonality occurred for some around 1908, and as Schoenberg and his prime pupils, Alban Berg and Anton von Webern, attempted to write music in the newly liberated style, they found it difficult and cumbersome. It is easy to see why. The style, which seemed to them a natural progression in the history of composition, was in fact the result of a carefully calculated rebellion, which made them practically anarchists: rebels against a hierarchical government, but without a new
government to ensure equality among the pitches. Thus in the early 1920's Schoenberg began developing a system which he felt would “ensure the supremacy of German music for the next two-hundred years.” He developed the idea of the twelve-tone matrix (Boynick 1).

In order to keep any pitch from commandeering a passage of music and making it sound tonal—a very interesting problem encountered in atonal composition—Schoenberg developed a system in which one would make a specific order of the twelve pitch-classes (for example, A C# D B F# Ab Bb D Eb F G E) and then one would simply use them in this order over and over again. This system allowed for inversions, retro-grades, and retrograde inversions, which are basically the atonal equivalents of diatonic keys. The method of composition using strict constructs in order to compose is known as serialism. This particular method is known as twelve-tone serialism (Boynick 1).

At the end of the serialists’ first decade, many people were still confused about what atonality really meant, and where it came from. In a 1930 interview, Berg attempted to clarify, as well as make some personal observations. Alban Berg believed that atonal music derived its place from its continued use of the standard musical forms, and more particularly, to the ideas that have been long present in composed Western music: melody and counterpart. His belief was that the progression of music had logically led us first to transpose, then stray increasingly farther from, and then finally abandon the tonal center, and that music had not in this way nor in any other way made any sudden or unexpected leaps forward. He felt that the atonalists had a function: to carry on the torch of Western music, passed to them from Beethoven and Wagner with a few suggestions by Chopin, Debussy, and Ravel (Berg 1).
Personally, I agree very much that the old idioms should not be discredited or abandoned at any point, and likewise that new ones should be considered and pondered with artistic scrutiny and intellectual honesty. An approach to atonality which does not discredit it, but rather hears it for what it is to the ear, the musical memory, and the palate of one's own musical expression, is what I have taken—ironically, in large part due to the influence of Berg's own music. Berg's atonal opera *Wozzeck* is an astoundingly popular work. It presents the story of the demise of a pathetic and psychotic man, his manipulative and unsavory peers, his wife whom he murders on suspicion of infidelity, and his son who is made fun of in the end for being, in essence, the incarnation of his father. It is dark, haunting, and heavy subject matter, and the music accentuates it perfectly. This work is a testimony to the power of unresolved dissonance (which is how a tonalist would hear atonality) in complementing unresolved tension, pain, death, anger, malice, psychosis, etc. Many of Berg's other works synthesize strict serialism, liberal serialism, chromatic harmony, and/or outright tonality. He illustrates with his work the idea that atonality must be heard in a tonal context, if not by everyone at least by tonal listeners, and that it can be both evocative (in a way that Schoenberg and Webern are not to me) and marketable (in a way that Schoenberg and Webern are not at all). His music corroborates my beliefs on atonality beautifully, and this paper could have just as easily been written on his music as on that of Bernstein. However, his dogma was somewhat more faithful to the tenets of his teacher Schoenberg.

Schoenberg, only a decade prior to *West Side Story*, had to face the uncomfortable reality that his music was perceived as cold and academic. In his writing "Heart and Brain and Music" in 1946, he expressed his opinion that a true artist could create
cerebrally what pleases him emotionally, and with ease. He stated that a true artist does not care if he has an audience (perhaps because the meaning of the word “art” is vague—in this case conveniently so), and that a true artist would write only what pleases him (Schoenberg 1). I find it interesting that Schoenberg would thus defend his own artistic integrity: to state that his own work pleases him as much as it interests him academically, though he in fact created an entirely academic system, which upon creation rather than upon long testing he prophetically deemed the most important musical discovery of the next two hundred years. How could a man in such a position possibly extricate in his own mind that which he objectively enjoys, from that which he created by a compositional technique which he also created, whose closest adherents are his own students, and whose greatest detractors are his enemies artistically, economically, academically, philosophically, and ideologically?

Schoenberg also felt that audiences associated emotional pleasure with “beautiful music” by which he surely meant tonal music, or some music which he considered hopelessly old-fashioned. However, audiences in 1946 had already shown that conventional beauty was not all they desired: dissonance, chromaticism, sharpness, and brusqueness were all components of much music which was publicly loved and accepted. If Schoenberg meant “beautiful” in the narrow sense of lovely, soothing, and feminine then he grossly undervalued his opponents in the audience, and if he meant “beautiful” in the broader sense of music having any kind of tonal harmonic language, which would include *West Side Story*, then he was still being ungenerous, and would also be faced with the uncomfortable proposition that it is primarily his music and that of his students which could safely be described otherwise.
Schoenberg also lamented the tendency of an audience to separate that which is loveable from that which interesting, and those from that which is purely academic. This is his response to the prevailing criticism that his music falls into each category respectively more than the last. Schoenberg claimed that his music was emotionally pleasurable to him, thereby establishing his artistic integrity, and that it was intuitive to him, thereby contradicting the idea that his work is purely academic. Though Schoenberg was undoubtedly aware of the fact that they were reacting to his music and not to him, he nonetheless basically painted a picture of an ideal artist, in his mind and for the world, which happened to be himself (Schoenberg 2). West Side Story provides a differing idea for the twentieth century listening technique: if there is emotional response and pleasure, then maybe the stage will be set for interest and academic inquiry to follow in the layman’s mind.

Serialism would doubtlessly have garnered less acceptance, and therefore would have been less of an issue for Bernstein, had it not had the endorsement of a certain much-loved, highly respected tonal composer. Arnold Schoenberg was considered by some the greatest composer of the twentieth century. As a freshman music student, I quickly learned that the more conservative musicians would name another man: Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky did for symphonic music what Bernstein did for musical theater.
he shook it to its core, and produced some of the most exciting and interesting music it had ever seen. Stravinsky has been called Neo-classical by some, meaning perhaps that he carried on where Beethoven left off. Stravinsky naturally had much to say about atonality, being a premier composer in the world at the time of its conception, and having already decided that music was in and of itself objective, and did not come from or tend toward any outside objects. In an article written in 1952, Stravinsky showed that he felt that all that there was to say by means of harmonic relationship had already been said, and did not feel that the jazz idiom was useful to the composer: he saw it as strictly a performance medium. Furthermore, he felt that American listeners were too influenced by critics, and thus explained the seeming rejection of “new music.” He very much resented the idea that American composers were not trying to be a part of the “avant-garde” and felt that they were making fools of themselves, not producing music of any interest or lasting value (Stravinsky 2). All of these would be indirect jabs at Bernstein, which was doubtlessly painful to him coming from a composer he dearly loved. It is understandable, therefore, that Bernstein would answer some of these charges in *West Side Story*.

Stravinsky associated himself with Schoenberg, Berg, Webern and Bela Bartok, and made no attempt to set himself apart or above them. Stravinsky, like so many others, was appreciated less the more serial his music became. His opinions on music reflect a deep-rooted belief that the advancement of music had principally to do with innovations of composition technique (Stravinsky 3). However, history shows that often advancement in music comes with the introduction of new or altered performance mediums—for example the motet, or the opera, or the symphony. Such advancements
often facilitate new ideas in harmony, and more importantly, new ways of hearing it and
thinking about it. Such is the case with West Side Story. However, before we turn our
attention thither, we should look at one of the most influential and controversial ideas to
come along in the story of serialism in Western music: that it hadn’t gone far enough.

In 1952, Pierre Boulez made his infamous statement “Schoenberg is dead.” His
thought was that Schoenberg had spinelessly tried to keep serialism within the idioms,
tempi, timbres, forms, and even intervals of tonal music. He blamed such assimilation
for causing some composers to defect from serialism, and for the lack of direction, and
subsequently unsatisfactory repertoire, of serialism.

He claimed that serialism was an idea of such merit that after its invention, all
composers still composing tonal music were useless. However, he thought that serialism
demanded a complete break from all the baggage that tonality brought with it, and all the
forms in which tonality had been the centerpiece (pun intended). He evidently did not
see the timeline of music as a gradual evolution in which serialism was simply the next
step (and I agree with him), but rather that serialism represented a fresh new perspective
in which a composer might shuck off the old, irrelevant ideas, and create music in a new
way, or rather, the new way (and I will present the music of West Side Story in attempt to
show why I strongly disagree with him on this point).
A few notes on serialism: it never really captured the listening public. It prevailed in largely academic circles, and to an extent, still does. Serialism was used by Webern very strictly, and by Berg somewhat less strictly. Stravinsky used it often, and most serious composers in the twentieth century have had to face it some way or another (some composers still feel, like Boulez, that all new tonal music is void of any real interest or value). Serialism is disliked in various degrees by some musicians of great knowledge and skill, and is somewhat rarely performed outside academic or musically elite circles. Berg's idea—that atonality has a place in music and can be used effectively within the established styles—is one that I agree with him, though I would add that the effectiveness is limited. The Boulez idea—that serialism, as the truest and best form of atonality, ought to be carried forward by those composers unafraid to leave the atmosphere of previous Western forms altogether—is one that I cannot, by definition, disagree with: I simply wish him well as he leaves behind all that is music to the great majority of people in the Western world.
Leonard Bernstein was arguably the most well-known American musician of the twentieth century. He was a renowned conductor, composer, pianist, and lecturer. Leonard Bernstein was born Louis Bernstein in Lawrence, Massachusetts on Sunday, August 25, 1918. At an early age he began improvising on the piano and he became very desirous of piano lessons. His father Samuel refused to finance them, so he managed to scrape together the money by playing in bands and teaching children his own age and younger than him (Gradenwitz 25). His father was initially very opposed to his having a music career, but young Bernstein was determined.
At age sixteen he changed his name legally to Leonard, which he had been called from his youth anyway. He began studying music at Harvard in 1935, followed by a period at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He had several teachers, including Fritz Reiner, Isabella Vengerova and Heinrich Gebhard. It was during this time that Bernstein would have had his main exposure to modern music (Gradenwitz 27).

 Bernstein’s big career breakthrough came when he was serving as assistant conductor for the New York Philharmonic. Substituting for conductor Bruno Walter, his televised performance was met with great enthusiasm by the audience. No American-born musician had ever held the position of conductor in Philharmonic, and Bernstein would assume that post in 1958 (Gradenwitz 35).

 As a composer, Bernstein considered himself a maker of serious music who sometimes wrote songs. His repertoire includes symphonies, piano music, operas, song cycles, and oratorios. Bernstein’s flair for musical theater was first showcased in On the Town which debuted in 1944, and then 1953’s Wonderful Town. These musicals showed an unprecedented synthesis of text, music, and movement. Unusually chromatic, jazzy melodies pervaded the scores, as well as relatively sparse and edgy orchestrations. These works were successful, and were written around the same period of time that he wrote his I Hate Music song cycles, his Peter Pan vocal selections, his one-act opera Trouble in Tahiti, and his comic operetta Candide! (Grandenwitz 140). These were the types of music he was writing immediately preceding the composition of West Side Story, which took place on a break from his career as conductor of the Philharmonic. Bernstein continued to be a huge musical celebrity throughout the world until his death in 1990.
Throughout his life, Bernstein exhibited a great interest in the place of tonality in music. He is known as a conductor, among other things, for being a champion of Gustav Mahler and Charles Ives—both of them composers who were unknown for most of their lives, and both them strikingly innovative. Ives was admired for being ahead of his time in numerous ways, particularly his vision and composition techniques. Ives was an American, making him a particular hero for Bernstein and other serious American composers.

Bernstein’s own thoughts on atonality and the serialist movement are not entirely one-sided. The most that can be said is that though he craved intellectual respect, he still gave the Norton Lectures in 1973, explaining why he thought that tonality was a part of every musical culture in the world, and that humans would never be able to hear music outside of its leanings. His use of dissonance, romantic harmonies, jazz harmonies, and Latin rhythms in West Side Story shows what he believed whether he would have been willing to say it in 1957 or not.
The Music

“We have been writing music in this country for only fifty years, and half of that fifty years the music has been borrowed clean out of the pockets of Brahms and company.”

-Leonard Bernstein, 1954

“In the astounding variety of its music—songs, ensembles, accompaniments of speech, ballets—created out of a basic motif cell, West Side Story, leaning towards operatic music drama, is far in advance of other Broadway shows.”

-Peter Gradenwitz, 1987

A note: my intent in writing this thesis is not purely musical analysis, but rather, some musical analysis with the intention to make historical inferences and draw conclusions. I have chosen to include in this section a general summary of the music, including some harmonic ideas. Further explorations of ideas with accompanying illustrations appear in the next two sections.

Leonard Bernstein’s West Side Story score has been a point of fascination for me since I was sixteen years old. After a summer of watching the film nearly every day, I was struck by a very odd fact: I was not tired of the music. My previous fascinations with punk-rock, hip-hop, Grease and even My Fair Lady had all left me somewhat bored after months of repeated exposure to the same music. Not so with West Side Story. The music was interesting, uncomfortable, exciting, beautiful, strange, difficult to pick out on
the piano, and sometimes impossible to reduce to basic chord structures. I knew little then of formal musical analysis. But even when I began to learn, *West Side Story* continued to hold my attention and in fact became more interesting to me. It is very important that I loved it *before* I knew that it was a masterpiece: it enables me to look with greater confidence at what I know now.

The music of *West Side Story* has always been noticed, and usually praised, since the show’s debut. It was, however, undeniably different, as most potential producers and investors noticed when the four collaborators begun shopping the show around. George Abbot, an investor, refused to take a chance on *West Side Story*, saying the score sounded “avant-garde” in the vein of Prokofiev (Secrest 120). At the show’s debut, music critics seemed to think that the music was interesting, but not “hummable.” However, after four years of successful touring shows and huge popularity in London, a 1960 return of *West Side Story* to New York garnered unanimous praise from music critics. Nonetheless, theater-goers were still not “humming,” and the popularity of the music in America today is owed in large part to the surprisingly popular cast album and to the success of the 1961 film (Secrest 121). It seems that it took more exposure for the music of *West Side Story* to gain universal mandate.

As a freshman music student in 2002, I was given a sheet with some musical examples to help our Aural Skills class internalize basic intervals. Two of the most difficult intervals were taught using examples taken from *West Side Story*, the ascending tritone and the ascending minor seventh. The tritone was taken from the Eb to A-natural, the opening and continuing (Figure 1a) main interval of “Maria,” and the minor seventh from “Somewhere” (Fig 1b).
I've just met a girl named Ma-

Other selections on the sheet included “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” for the descending major third and “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” for the ascending major sixth. The idea was to use well-known songs as examples so that we could recall the intervals easily. I think it is no coincidence that some of the most difficult examples came from *West Side Story*. It is equally interesting to note that in my freshman study of rhythm, the only example of horizontal hemiola (music alternating between duple and triple meter) with which I was familiar was from “America” (Figure 2).
With *West Side Story*, Bernstein believed that he and his collaborators had achieved something momentous. Arthur Laurents stated that Bernstein had written the most electrifying music that had ever been heard on Broadway (Laurents 347). However, Laurents felt that the music was not used in any basically new way—all musical forms in the play were either standard musical fare, or extracted from opera, he thought. The music for the dances was undeniably exciting, however, and Laurents admitted that along with the basic story, the quality of the music itself was one of the distinctive characteristics about *West Side Story* (Laurents 348). Perhaps it is understandable that Arthur Laurents would remember the book and story as being just as important as the music (interestingly, hardly any perspective on *West Side Story* since 1960 ever presumes to say any element of the work is decidedly stronger than the music). Though Laurents felt strongly that *West Side Story* was truly notable in its time mainly because of the subject matter, it is undeniable that the music has been the most enduring aspect of the show.

*West Side Story* was a huge success world-wide, bigger than anything anyone connected with the show would ever be a part of again, and the music is universally acknowledged as a major factor.

*West Side Story* is replete with intervallic and melodic motifs. Bernstein had a central preoccupation with certain intervals and pitches, and his score is full of them. It makes for a very exciting listen, even the hundredth time if you began as a layman. It opens with the Prologue, a scene of great importance to the story, choreography and music.
*West Side Story* sets a tone for breaking the traditions of musical theater from the beginning and continues throughout. There is neither a traditional overture (and the one which was eventually added for the film is hardly conventional), nor is there the standard opening song. One of the first sounds heard after the rise of the curtain is a single finger snap. Bernstein, far from being a minimalist composer, nonetheless used empty space in the music to illustrate foreboding and suspense: the quiet before the storm. Jerome Robbins staged the entire opening sequence in which casual movements suggest solidarity and wariness within the gangs. Gradually their walking becomes kicking and dancing, but only once their respective moods are established. There is minimal dialogue at the outset: only (musically cued) cries such as “Beat it!” or “Yeah!” are occasionally heard. The basic ideas for the music in the rest of the show are introduced in the Prologue. The “Jets Theme” (my own name for it) begins the music, with an ambiguous chord based on C. Chromatically, the chord contains the pitches for both C-major and C-minor. The same is true of the next chord, transposed down a minor third. It would seem that Bernstein was beginning his show with a question: tonality or not? Strictly speaking, in this case the ear would hear a tonal pitch (C), but not a specific mode (major or minor). This is true throughout the score if one listens critically, and we will later examine this phenomenon in closer detail, as it occurs here and in the number “Cool.” The “Jets Theme” forms the harmonic basis for the first proper song, “Jet Song,” and the Prologue music sets the stage again for the second song, “Something’s Coming.” Following the introduction of the Anglo-gang, The Jets, we hear “Bernardo’s Theme” (also my own name for it) which begins minimally, but slowly gains momentum, as an introduction to
the Puerto Rican Sharks. It is a terribly exciting thing to watch the tension mount and to wonder about the lives and personalities of these modern-day Montagues and Capulets, with no verbal exposition offered. And that is only the opening number (Jowitt 279).

"Jet Song" and "Something’s Coming" are both very interesting rhythmically, with the melody sounding like forced duplets over the accompaniment. Tension mounts in the score, even as the melodies seem to carelessly hint at standard musical theater fare. These pieces are somewhat harmonically complex, however, with "Jet Song" vacillating between the possibilities of Bb-major and G-minor, and "Something’s Coming" alternating between D-major and a C-major somewhat violated with a pervasive F-sharp.

Easily some of the most exciting music comes in the famous “Dance at the Gym” scene. It contains six musical numbers, several of them very exciting, and all of them important. "Blues" is energetic, dissonant, jazzy, sensual, and explosive. It relies heavily on blaring brass, cluster chords, emphatic beats, and usually an implied key. It introduces the kids at the dance, showing their energy and emotion. "Promenade" advances the plot by showing the Anglo kids and the Puerto Rican kids unwilling to dance with each other. It segues into "Mambo," a decidedly Latin-sounding dance number which rivals "Blues" for sheer energy, excitement, rhythmic emphasis, and sensuality. Here the rival groups vie for dominance on the dance floor, and it is during "Mambo" that Tony and Maria (the show's Romeo and Juliet) first see one another. Thus begins "Cha-Cha," a delicate,
I will look at some aspects of the song "Maria" in greater detail in the following section, but it should be mentioned in summary that the music evolves seamlessly from the gym set into the street (the creators of West Side Story wished for there to be no curtains or chances for applause within the two acts) as Tony expresses bewitchment over his newfound love. The song is mostly true to E-flat major, but becomes decidedly chromatic in some places, and from the outset ascends to greater and greater heights melodically. Intensity increases as the melody soars, and Bernstein ends his most tender ballad on a vocally difficult cadential figure: a minor sixth up to the tonic Eb (standard
musical writers would have tended melodically toward the Eb an octave lower, where the melody was already getting settled). Tony then sings again the line “the most beautiful sound I ever heard, Maria” getting higher and higher, finally ending on a high minor-second suspension and resolve with Bernstein’s chords approaching consonance.

“Balcony Scene” was a late-come to the score, written after “Somewhere” and “One Heart, One Hand” both failed to make the scene really soar. It beings with a sort of energetic, recitative-like conversation between Tony and Maria. Modulations are frequent throughout, mostly staying in keys relatable to the principal Bb. The accompaniment to “Balcony Scene” introduces the theme from “Somewhere,” as well as using chord structures from the Prologue.

Immediately thereafter, the Puerto Ricans get their principal chorus number: staged for the Puerto Rican girls in the stage play, and for the entire group in the movie, “America,” despite being very harmonically basic, does not even approach disposability. It is split between two Latin-American dances, the Seis and the Haupango. The rhythmic styling shows Bernstein’s comprehensive internalization of musical ideas: he is able to split between duple meter (6/8) and triple meter (3/4) without it sounding forced. He introduces an idea somewhat lost by the serialists: that certain rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ideas can be discovered by a composer (i.e. the musical ear) to be wonderfully compatible with one another. These musical ideas can become cultural standards, almost clichés, but that is not because they are inherently such. They simply become a new interpretation of the musical language we already speak, a foundation from which new works can, in turn, be created. Many poets, painters, and philosophers have all longed to immediately transport themselves into an utterly original realm where their ideas have no
preconceived standard or precedents. The same is true of musicians. These stand in self-proclaimed opposition to those who take what is already being done and further expound on it. Such works are frequently the result of love as opposed to study, and are too often mediocre. But nonetheless the best works of this kind connect to us because they connect to that which we came from, and Bernstein seizes on this inexplicable truth of expression by claiming the Latino dance number unashamedly and making it his own.

Such is also the case with the Jets’ number later in the story, the vaudevillian “Gee, Officer Krupke.” Arthur Laurents thought it was merely the “necessary Shakespearean comedic relief,” a piece that could have been written by anybody of moderate talent. How often Bernstein must have suffered this kind of injustice at the hands of critics, and even his own friends! It is too often the case that truly fine musicians write music of which the complexity is too artfully disguised to be noticed easily. Perhaps Laurents meant that the number would have been just as effective had it been written by a less artful composer. Whatever his intent, I disagree with him. The number is placed in the show immediately following the Rumble and involves very clever lyrics by Stephen Sondheim in which the Jet boys joke about how they will use pop-psychology terms and ideas to their advantage should they face trial. They mime at being judge, social worker, analyst, and policeman. In fact, the cabaret-style music is also a parody, complete with a dramatically slowed ending. Frequent modulations facilitate melodic surprises throughout the number. It consists of a series of skits with a verse and a refrain for each skit, and finally a brilliantly clever and explosive ending. Each verse begins with a descending tritone, a clear parody to the standard ascending fourth (“At Last,” “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” etc.). The tension at this point in the
story—the Jets’ leader has just been killed, and a retaliatory murder has just been committed by one of their own—is undoubtedly a determining factor for the song’s dissonance and angst. I do not believe that Bernstein was above using basic harmonies if it was appropriate (“One Heart, One Hand,” “America”), and must therefore conclude that he wrote this number in order to advance the plot: stretching modality and, within a well-known style, to show that all is not well.

The Jets’ other number is the astoundingly dissonant and engaging “Cool.” Here all four collaborators made their mark: Stephen Sondheim incorporates Arthur Laurents’ invented-street slang into the lyrics, Bernstein writes music lacking a clear modality and constantly based on the tritone, and Jerome Robbins did some of his best-loved choreography to show the boys’ pre-Rumble jitters. A summary of this piece is that it is rhythmically and melodically very jazzy, harmonically shifting between tonality and atonality, and dynamically subtle. I believe that this piece embodies a perfect use of dissonance, dense chromaticism, and atonality within performance music, and will explore this and greater detail in the next section.

“One Heart, One Hand” contributes perhaps the least of all the pieces toward a musical statement. It does not lack interest: dissonance exists, albeit softened. Bernstein leads into the song with yet another rendition of “Somewhere” (which could be seen as the theme song of the entire work) in the accompaniment. The song basically transports Tony and Maria from playing house in the bridal shop to something resembling an actual wedding vow. He makes no Wagnerian melodic leaps, and does not infiltrate the melody with non-diatonic tritones. The song is not foreboding, nor is it worrisome. It is not sensual; it is not angular; it is not energetic; it is not satirical. Here Bernstein exhibits
true bravery: he lets his characters truly believe in the holiness and sanctity of their love, and truly hope that they will be together until death parts them.

Following “One Heart, One Hand” is “The Quintet,” evoking the operatic quintet. This piece is based on the melody of “The Balcony Scene,” featuring Tony and Maria reprising the song with lyrics of longing for the wedding night to come. The Jets and Sharks, led by Riff and Bernardo, sing an alternate melody which modulates appropriately with Tony and Maria. Their subject matter is dominance in the coming fight. Anita sings her own sultry version of this melody, about sex with Bernardo after the fight. The gangs and Anita serve to complement Tony and Maria while they soar through the familiar strains of “Balcony Scene” when the number reaches five simultaneous parts. The number is gimmicky to be sure: but the wonderful dissonance in the accompaniment, along with the masterful intertwining of the lyrics, makes this number exceptional rather than merely impressive. Once again, the characteristics are: an acknowledgement of a previously used form, use of motives already introduced in the score, plot advancement, and meticulous musicality.

“The Rumble” is an instrumental accompaniment to the fatal fight between the Jets and the Sharks. It serves to complement the action perfectly (at this point in the score, no one should be surprised at this), and has a little bit of added interest: it combines the “Jets Theme” and “Bernardo’s Theme” in an energetic, unintelligible clash of dissonance and passion. In this I see Bernstein dabbling in serialism: not twelve-tone serialism, certainly, but rather the use of an external means not comprehensible to the ear to determine the use of pitches. This is the largest pitfall of serialism: that its theoretical intent does not translate to the ear of most listeners. Nonetheless, as with many other
atonal works such as Berg’s *Wozzeck* and Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Luniare*, the music 
*sounds* appropriate and I therefore not only condone it, but applaud it. Well done, 
Bernstein, for a piece of music well-written with a little nugget hidden within for the 
theorists to find! The music in “The Rumble” climaxes on a tritone for the stabbing of 
Riff, caesuras for Riff to hand his knife to Tony, and reaches an even greater climax 
when Tony stabs Bernardo. The music is interrupted by police sirens, cueing the 
confused exits of the gangs.

“I Feel Pretty” is a number for Maria and her friends, set in a very lively 3/8 time. 
It is sometimes considered Bernstein’s least interesting number in the show. It should be 
noted that the song, featuring many seamless modulations and clever playfulness in the 
lyrics, is a smart piece of music dramatically: the audience member knows that Maria’s 
lover has just killed her brother. The light-heartedness of the song is therefore 
foreboding and deceptive (interestingly, this deception-of-style would become a 
trademark of Stephen Sondheim’s later musicals). Maria is deceiving her friends into 
thinking she is either in love with her Puerto Rican beau, Chino, or simply having fun 
with them. This deception is a necessary ploy given the tense environment in which she 
lives. There is no attempt to be even remotely sensible: Maria is expressing nervous 
anxiety as much as she is pure elation. The darkly comical accompaniment sounds 
somewhat unstable and delirious, letting Maria go further and further into her short-lived 
delusional fantasy.

Maria and Tony’s final number is “Somewhere” in which he invites her into 
another fantasy: one that accepts the world of hatred in which they live, but hopes for a 
better one “somewhere.” The majority of the music is instrumental accompaniment for
the ballet sequence. This ballet shows two worlds: a world of harmony, and a world of hatred and prejudice. Bernstein’s music, of course, colors it all with appropriate accompaniment, finally releasing the theme that has been heard many times before: the minor-seventh of “there’s a place for us.” A new and whimsical melody allows the idea to grow “peace and quiet and open air wait for us somewhere.” A modulation occurs as the song develops (always returning gamely to E-major), and again for the final melodic idea: a move from E-major to the key of bVI, C-major, in which a breathtaking major-second melody ends on an E as Bernstein sneakily turns the third into the tonic pitch, returning to E-major for only the final chord. “Somewhere” is the ideological expression of Tony and Maria’s hopes for the future, and it embodies the spirit of the entire work. It is appropriate that its melodies appear earlier in the work, and this device gives “Somewhere” added continuity with the events preceding it.

The last musical number in the piece is a duet between Maria and Anita. The number would be strange had it occurred in Shakespeare’s play: the final song sung by Juliet and her nurse? Never! However, it was Jerome Robbins’ influence that made Laurents decide to write Anita as a peer of Maria’s, a decision which makes West Side Story’s plot additionally distinctive from Shakespeare. Added to the West Side Story deviation is Anita’s relationship with Maria’s brother, Bernardo. This makes her vendetta against Tony, Bernardo’s killer, extremely personal. Dissonant and angry accompaniment follows her as she sings “A boy like that who’d kill your brother.” It is interesting that Bernstein chose to have Maria answer Anita over the same accompaniment. She appeals to Anita’s perspective, rather than her own, reminding Anita that she loved Bernardo the same way Maria loves Tony. Anita retorts back that
Tony will only use her and then leave her. Anita and Maria argue simultaneously, singing counter melodies over the furiously dissonant harmonies, until finally Maria breaks off into her own miniature Aria, which Bernstein gave its own title “I Have Love.” This section does not leave dissonance behind, but it does have a simple, soaring tonal melody. The song has an aching climax which builds to the final measures, in which Maria and Anita sing in harmony that love is the true standard of morality. And thus Bernstein concludes the sung portion of West Side Story with an undeniably tonal melody: simple, diatonic harmony that only twice violates the ancient anhemitonic pentatonic mode. The accompaniment then meanders to an ominous ending with a B-F tritone in the upper-voicing, and a D# in the bass (for those without a theory background, this pitch-set has no obvious harmonic function: it could possibly be an F-half diminished seventh, or an augmented sixth in the key of B, but neither of these have a tonic function).

A few notes about the remaining music of the show: in a scene in which Anita is harassed by the Jets, a rather ironic juke-box plays the mambo music from the dance, and then as the scene gets more intense, the music contains the melody from Anita’s “America.” The final scene in which Tony dies has a reprise of “Somewhere” sung by Maria, and Tony tries to join in but ultimately perishes in his lover’s arms. Thus the by-now familiar melody is revealed to have contained, in all of its manifestations, the sad destiny of Tony and the ill-fated romance between him and Maria. The final notes in West Side Story are a C-major triad in the upper voice in a harmonic and melodic quotation of the bVI modulation of “Somewhere,” and is also the same tonic from the beginning of the show, except this time Bernstein makes the chord decidedly major. The
gesture is made three times, the first two with an F-sharp sounding in the bass on the off-beat. Bernstein could have made a great statement about the tonality by simply writing in the third F-sharp. But he did not. The melodic gesture of the final measure ends on an E, and the only other sustained pitches are C and G. Bernstein has taken us on a journey, perhaps farther from the simple C-major triad than any other Broadway musical to date, but he still brought it back, and that is what Bernstein wanted anyone who would listen to take notice of.

Tony dies in Maria's arms.
Tonality in *West Side Story*: A Case Study

"It's as though we have all had a vacation from tonality [and returned] in a refreshed state: fit, relaxed, and with a better perspective, which enables us to make the new synthesis, the new eclecticism."

*Leonard Bernstein, 1973*

If it needs to be reiterated, I will do it with joy and with increased intensity: tonality did not die with Beethoven. Bernstein, in *West Side Story*, did not as much begin going a new direction with tonality that no one had gone before, as he did show us what had been progressing and happening with tonality before and since the atonal revolution. Let us look at a selection from Cole Porter’s “In the Still of the Night” (Figure 3).

![Figure 3](image-url)
We see here a first inversion B-flat minor triad, followed by a second inversion F-major chord. This is minor four to tonic relationship very common in tonal works. Such plagal cadences can be seen in works dating all the way back to the Renaissance, such as Hans Leo Hassler’s “O admirable commercium.” The melodic motions of the harmonic progression have differed somewhat within the different genres (Hassler’s piece, for example, has the two chords as little more than stacked triads). The melody in Porter’s song begins on Fa, and then precipitates the return to tonic with a Do-Re motion, and finally arrives on the tonic with Mi in the melody. Such a melody is as obvious as it is effective, and Cole Porter was a master of the obvious.

Let us now look at a selection from *West Side Story* with the bass removed (Figure 4).
This a selection from “Maria.” The upper staff is the melody, and the lower staff is the right hand of a piano reduction of the accompaniment. Notice the last three measures. We see a first inversion A-flat minor triad in the first two, followed by a root-position E-flat major in the last. These would be analyzed in tonic key of E-flat as iv6 and I, harmonically identical to the Cole Porter piece. Now look at the transitional melody between the two chords. Again, it is Fa Do Re Mi. I point this out not to call Bernstein a copier, for blatant quotation (which this is not) is common throughout the history of Western music, nor out of exultation for having found a parallel between the two. I point it out because in West Side Story, I felt instinctively that I knew that sound. That familiar, haunting, gentle candelential gesture was something my ear knew, and I discovered it here with a freshness I embraced. I had certainly never heard Porter’s song in my life at the time: I was merely being called to in a language my ear understood.

Now let us look at the same selection with the bass in place (Figure 5).
I began the selection here because the piece has just tonicized E-flat major after a brief journey into B-flat major. The first two measures are basically A-flat major and G-minor triads. The third measure shows a B-flat minor triad, which my ear connects to the subsequent F-major triad as an iv-I relationship (harmonically identical to the Cole Porter selection, though that is of no real consequence here) in F-major. From there what appeared before to be an A-flat minor triad now is shown to have a D-flat, and then a B-flat in the bass. I stand by my analysis of the melody: I think Bernstein knew full well that the harmonic structure would tickle the ear with a familiar iv sonority in the upper register. But the ear always hears a chord from the bottom up, and something must be done with these two measures. If we take my word that the last measure of the first line
is a tonic chord in F major, then we could analyze the D-flat chord (of an ambiguous type) as a sort of $bVI$ which has a seventh and a ninth, but no third. If we then analyze the next measure as a B-flat chord with a seventh, a flat-ninth, and no third, we have a clear progression of tonicizing the key of $ii$ (F), followed by $V7$ (Bb) and $I$ (F). There is no simpler progression in tonal music than $ii-V-I$, yet Bernstein does it here with a drama, prolongation, and chromaticism heard mainly in works by Romantic composers.

And so we see a melodic styling of the musical theater genre under which a Romantic harmonic progression takes place, and one begins to get the sense that something new is happening: a synthesis of styles and ideas, and in a work so popular that it made my school’s list of memorable songs by which to learn basic intervals. And what’s more amazing is that one would never have to have heard Wagner or Porter to appreciate it.

It is in such a way the Bernstein’s *West Side Story* proves that tonality is not finished. He takes vernacular genres, such as opera, musical theater, and jazz, and fits them in with the most interesting and daring harmonic progressions that he can. The result is a very new sound: a beautiful and lofty idea expressed in a familiar language.

There are numerous examples of the relevance of tonality as portrayed in *West Side Story*. But I doubt they would have been convincing to Stravinsky or Boulez. And more importantly, the question is no longer really seriously debated. Since the appearance of minimalism, neo-Romanticism, and Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, few have entertained the idea that worthwhile tonal music stopped long ago. The question was still being posed at the time of *West Side Story*, which is why I deemed to
answer it all. However, a much more interesting question remains: what to do with atonality?
Atonality: What do we do with it?

“If one is trying to find optimism versus pessimism in my music; the closest musical equivalent is tonality versus non-tonality.”

-Leonard Bernstein, 1977

I find that West Side Story very adequately addresses the topic of what can be done with atonality. By this statement, I speak from the perspective of popular mandate. If one does not desire popularity or financial success (other than academic patronage), then the question of what to with atonality need not be asked. However, let us assume that the response to Berg’s Wozzeck is the sort of thing that we want. Where does this new and exciting trend of music lead?

You have heard me state before that atonal music cannot be heard outside of a tonal context. I say this from personal experience, from the words of others already mentioned in this paper, and from the similar laments I have personally heard from atonal composers. I believe this firmly. I enjoyed Schoenberg’s Opus 25 Suite for Piano, not in the same way that I enjoy Debussy, but in a way that is decidedly banal and free of the emotions usually accompanying an artistic experience. This sort of freedom is nice in the way that drinking Sprite © is nice when you have an upset stomach: it is good, and more importantly, lacks qualities that you usually enjoy, but would not suit the moment. However, I believe atonal works can do more than just give an objective “hearing” experience. Let us examine these sonorities which dominate in Berg’s opera Wozzeck (Figure 6).
These chords lack tonal implications of any kind, making *Wozzeck* a truly atonal work. There can be no question of *Wozzeck*’s success, either. In essence, one could point to *Wozzeck* as proof that atonality could replace tonality in popular music eventually. However, given the evidence to the contrary, I would make this alternative assertion: that atonality is an expression of the dissonance of the human experience, and that all this is chaotic, dark, aggressive, eerie, tense, indifferent, or evil about humanity might find a musical counterpart in atonality. The evidence for this idea is considerable. The success of *Wozzeck*, Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Luniare*, and Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, points to the fact the extreme chromaticism, atonality, and twelve-tone serialism are all the most effective when the music is meant to imply something essentially dark or savage. Juxtapose this with the relative lack of success met by Stravinsky’s *Mass*, Anton von Webern’s strictly serial compositions, and the greater body of Schoenberg’s work, and you start to see a trend.

Now let us go back to *West Side Story*. Consider this excerpt from “Cool” (Figure 9).
In this example, Bernstein's beloved tritone reigns supreme. It is obvious that a sort of old-fashioned fourths-heavy bass motion is being parodied, with the tritone (diminished fifth in this case) forming the outline of the bass instead. One could make an argument that the first three bars are in C (the mode is unclear) with the tritone serving as a leading tone to the fifth, just as it had in the "Maria," which is clearly in E-flat major. However, in this case the F-sharp is not connected to the G spatially, except in descending motion, and seeing a complete lack of definable tonal triads only adds to the idea that this song is not in any kind of known tonal mode. The case for C as a tonic note is strong through the first three measures, and the last two signify the same music transposed up a perfect fourth—a standard tonal modulation. However, a key based around the tritone, which is a completely even interval? Schoenberg would probably approve of such "tonality," though he would doubtless find it difficult to produce works without a clearer framework (interestingly, Berg was known for basing pieces around
specific tritones). Bernstein uses his ear as a framework, I believe, and the entire song has an undeniable jazz influence, which greatly affects it rhythmic stylings.

Let us look at another example from “Cool” (Figure 9).

These two lines in what might be termed the B-section of the song show a section lacking any obvious tonal leanings at all—modal or otherwise. Again, the transposition is that of a perfect fourth: the lines are close enough, and the melody is repetitive enough, that the transposition is clearly perceptible to the ear. The Western ear is probably most accustomed to hearing everything (key, melody, and harmony) transposed up a perfect fourth in basic 12-bar blues. This form, which could be classified under the larger category of American jazz, features four measures of the tonic chord, followed by four measures of the IV chord. Transpositions of a perfect fourth in “Cool” always take place after four measures, making a strong connection to the blues form.
So we can make a valid case that “Cool” is a piece with many atonal characteristics, despite having clearly emphasized pitches in some passages and transpositions at a “diatonic” interval. Also, “Cool” is not a song that slips through the cracks in West Side Story, nor does it make it only on by clinging to the coattails of the other works in major or minor keys. “Cool” is one of the most sensational and well-liked numbers in West Side Story, and was even featured in a GAP © commercial.

So what does this mean about atonality? I would say a few things. First, that lack of a key (which does not necessarily equate atonality, and Bernstein never used twelve-tone serialism in this West Side Story that I am aware of) gives the piece a freedom to be whatever the composer would like it to be. He makes it jazzy, light, and “cool” by standard connotations of the word. Tension is rampant in the piece, as is anger. The entire piece is based on the control of one’s violent emotions, which fits in nicely with my hypothesis that atonality best complements the darker side of human nature.

Throughout West Side Story, Bernstein uses musical gestures lacking tonal clarity or consonance, which illustrate this story of hatred, violence, and passion perfectly. Take “The Rumble,” which represents the most climactic of the story’s violent tendencies (Figure 9).
Here again, one might argue that C is the tonic pitch, but the tritone relationship of the bass, along with the decidedly chromatic melody, undermine any attempt to pigeon-hole this piece in the realm of comfortable tonality. I believe Bernstein was not trying, foremost, to make a statement about tonality in music (I could be wrong). I believe he was writing from his own musical vocabulary—meaning music that was internalized for him and made sense to his ear, not just music he was aware of or understood in a strictly academic sense. His musical vocabulary would have been vast, perhaps more so than most musicians alive at the time, given that he was a composer, conductor, student, and teacher. He was probably able to process and understand atonal music, especially if it affected him. He shared Stravinsky's idea that musical ideas were strictly musical, and therefore, no one can blame his lack of participation in the atonal movement on an external ideology. His foremost interest was in what the ear hears, not in form or theory, and that is why I think this work was successful.

It is interesting to note that Leonard Bernstein would eventually take a very outspoken interest in atonality and the progression of Western music. In a period of musical withdrawal in the 1960's, Bernstein wrestled with serialism, only to return to his essentially tonal roots. Studies of the universality of human languages by linguist Noam Chomsky gave Bernstein the idea that music was analogous to spoken language: that all musical ideas worldwide, past and present, had a characteristic connection to one another, through the overtone series. In his now-famous Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1973, Bernstein made an elaborate presentation on the function and artistic validity of tonality, serialism, and dissonance. Bernstein felt that the creative experience was "inextricably
rooted in the rich earth of our innate response, in those deep, conscious regions where the
universals of tonality and language reside.” Unlike Bela Bartok, who felt that we had
commandeered the natural overtone series with our even temperament long ago and that
serialism was the inevitable next step in composition (Bartok 2), Bernstein felt that
serialism would never—could never—completely replace tonality or even be heard or
understood outside of the context of tonal grounding (Tommasini 1). I quite agree with
him, and I believe that long before his profession at the Norton Lectures, Leonard
Bernstein illustrated this with soundly with *West Side Story.*
Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have seen the parallel history of two basically distinct worlds: the world of musical theater, and the world of serious art music. The former, following advancement in harmony by Berlin, structure by Porter, genre and artistry by Gershwin, subject matter by Rodgers and Hammerstein, and synthetic brilliance by Lerner and Loewe, was thought to have reached the apex of its existence with *My Fair Lady* in 1956. The latter, led by Arnold Schoenberg and his Viennese School, bolstered by Stravinsky, and spurred ever farther by Boulez, made the statement that serious music no longer used tonality, and that it would ultimately be replaced in music by twelve-tone serialism. These two statements, one of perfection, the other of exclusivity, begged a rebuttal. In *West Side Story*, Leonard Bernstein made a very timely argument that musical theater could be more than it ever had been before, and that tonality in Western music was alive and healthy.

I recently heard Cole Porter’s “Every Time We Say Good-bye” for the first time. I was struck by his cleverness in using an A-flat minor chord in the key of E-flat major to accompany the words “how strange the change from major to minor.” However, upon examination of the score, I realized that Porter had written the chord change before the lyrics actually got to the word minor. Undaunted, I chose not to show my findings to my musician friends, but rather, to my non-musician friends who I knew had a particularly acute ear. They all reacted to the chord change, every one of them, without having the necessary vocabulary to ascertain further information on the subject. The musical moment is hauntingly beautiful, and the ear understands immediately that something just
happened in conjunction with the obviously music-based text. And so, in this the twenty-first century, my faith in human ability to perceive and appreciate music is kept alive. Understanding music is unlike understanding anything else: it is purely musical. And so *West Side Story* still exists as a work to remind us who we are as Westerners and where we're going. It is, essentially, our West side story.