

Washington Chorus offers a Bernstein program with an LGBTQ twist



The Washington Chorus toasts Leonard Bernstein with a program focused on his friends and fellow LGBTQ composers

By Doug Rule

Published: May 31, 2018

A classical music concert where LGBTQ people and themes are openly acknowledged isn't an everyday thing, even in a year filled with centennial tributes to Leonard Bernstein.

"It's an interesting conversation to have," says Christopher Bell. "Whether Bernstein's sexuality was conflictive, or whether he was basically a gay man who also married [a woman] and had a family. Or whether he was bisexual. Or whether he was polyamorous."

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The Bernstein-focused program Bell has assembled for the Washington Chorus doesn’t have that exact conversation. Instead, the focus is on the connections Bernstein had to others on the LGBTQ spectrum as well as on strong choral compositions, performed unaccompanied.

“I started by looking at who his friends were, and then started to program around that — pieces that would go well together,” Bell says. “As I was doing it, I began to realize that actually, as well as the friendship thread, there was this sexuality aspect as well.” As it happens, four of the five composers represented fall somewhere on the LGBTQ spectrum: Aaron Copland, Louisa Talma, Michael Tippett, and Bernstein himself. (Randall Thompson is the straight man out, as it were.)

“The music needs to speak for itself, and I believe it will,” says Bell, currently completing his first season as artistic director of the world-renowned chorus. “But [with] this program, we’re acknowledging the contributions of 20th century gay and lesbian composers [who are] intrinsically linked to Bernstein — musically, personally, socially. They were his friends. We have photographs of them working together, we have photographs of them being on holiday together.”

All of them struggled, to varying degrees both personally and professionally, living in an era, “when LGBTQ support and understanding was not as strong,” says Bell. Yet even in our more queer-friendly era, there are still struggles and hurdles to face when focusing on this topic. Take Bell, for instance, who was born in Northern Ireland and has spent most of his career juggling work with orchestras and choral ensembles in Scotland and the United States.

“A decade ago, I wouldn’t be wanting to have this conversation with you as a gay man,” he says. “I suppose I didn’t want to be identified as a gay musician. I

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wanted to be identified as a musician. This, to me, also marks a very interesting rite of passage, that I feel comfortable to knit this together in this particular way. I have performed a number of these pieces so many times throughout my career, individually. They’re pieces I’ve known and loved for a long time. And to be able to knit them together in a single program, with the link of the friendship, with Bernstein and the LGBTQ artists link as well, that’s just extraordinary.”