

SD Union 3/18/91

# All-Bernstein program makes outstanding tribute

By David Gregson

The San Diego Symphony's all-Leonard Bernstein program offered Friday and repeated Saturday and yesterday in Copley Symphony Hall turned out to be something really very special.

Full-length orchestra concerts of American music are all too rare. And while Bernstein wrote a number of theater pieces that take up an entire evening, a program made up wholly of his symphonic works is virtually unheard of.

Conducted by Robert Shaw, the concert also was unusual in that it employed extremely large forces — including at times an expanded percussion section, an organ, a 114-voice choir, a boy soprano and an import-

---

## Music review

---

ant young American piano virtuoso (Jeffrey Kahane) — in a program lasting a healthy 2½ hours.

Originally planned as a tribute for Bernstein's birthday, the concert came too late. It was instead a memorial for the composer who died in New York last October at age 71. Shaw, introducing the program in reverential tones, compared Bernstein to Verdi — another composer with a deep national identity and wide popular following.

The program included Bernstein's visceral "Symphonic Dances from 'West Side Story'"; the seldom-played "Age of Anxiety" (Symphony

No. 2), with Kahane dazzling as soloist in the difficult piano part; Two Meditations from "Mass,"; and the luxuriously melodic "Chichester Psalms" featuring the La Jolla Civic-University Symphony Chorus.

Although the tunes from the 1957 hit Broadway musical "West Side Story" are familiar to almost everyone, the impact of Bernstein's huge orchestral scoring of certain dances is considerable — even, as it turned out, under Shaw's slightly sluggish leadership.

Based on a poem by W.H. Auden, "The Age of Anxiety" is a shifting, programmatic musical canvas, rich in orchestral textures, and full of opportunities for various sections to

shine.

With the "Chichester Psalms" the "special" quality of the evening reached its peak. Here was Shaw, the great choral conductor, back in his element. From the sock-in-the-jaw attacks to meltingly ethereal lyricism, this performance had it all.

Shaw cannot take all the credit, however. David Chase is the director of the excellent guest choral group — and a little boy with a name bigger than anyone else's — Christopher Warren Taber Johnson — sounded appropriately angelic in his featured solo.

**Gregson is a free-lance writer on classical music.**