



Jung-Ho Pak recalls time spent with Leonard Bernstein

By Keith Powers / Contributing writer

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If you know anything about the two musicians, you would assume they had to have met.

We’re talking about Cape Symphony music director Jung-Ho Pak, and the great American composer, pianist and conductor Leonard Bernstein.

It was 1983, at Tanglewood. Bernstein was there – as he had been for decades – an eminent member of the conducting faculty. Pak was there to study “as a seminarian,” he says, one of the invited fellows.

“I remember him being so un-maestrolike,” Pak says. “So many European conductors had an air of formality. Lenny almost went out of his way to be not only an average Joe, but a passionate fan of the art. He wanted to impart that infectious sense of freedom, that American way of expressing himself.”

That “American way,” as Pak puts it, forms part of the motivation behind the Cape Symphony’s next program, “American Mavericks.” The concerts, set for Saturday and May 6 at the Barnstable High School Performing Arts Center, not only pay tribute to Bernstein during the centennial anniversary of his birth, but include music from American modernists Philip Glass, John Adams and William Banfield.

“He was only interested in the meaning of music,” Pak says of Bernstein, something that others have often said about Pak himself. “It was hard to read Lenny. It wasn’t about his tempi, or his firm beat. It was his drive. It was his body, and how he slathered himself all over the music.

“I did conduct with him,” Pak remembers. “It was ‘Romeo and Juliet’ – Tchaikovsky. It’s funny, when you worked with him it wasn’t that illuminating. He was hard to read, but that was his style.

“In some ways I feel like I squandered that summer. Toward the end of it, I noticed that the students weren’t coming to his rehearsals. Everyone was busy, and we were getting stuff done. And Seiji (Ozawa) was there, and we all wanted to be with him.

“It seems like everyone missed things with Lenny. When he was conducting the New York Philharmonic, and doing Broadway at the same time. And that he was such a radical thinker, embracing the sexual revolution and pop music – it was hard to get a handle on him.

“It’s like the ‘Divertimento’ that we’re doing on this program. It’s left, right and center of Bernstein. It can be raucous and carousing, but thoughtful and gentle, too, and show the thorny side as well. He was gifted intellectually, but his soul was in the streets, in the bars.”

Besides the ‘Divertimento,’ which Bernstein wrote in 1980 for the centennial of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, this season-ending Cape Symphony program also includes his “Symphonic Dances” from “West Side Story,” the brilliant 1957 adaptation of “Romeo and Juliet,” created with choreographer Jerome Robbins and lyricist Stephen Sondheim.

Bernstein was not the only American maverick, as the music of Adams and Glass will attest. The concert also features Glass’ “Anniversary Overture,” written as a companion piece to Tchaikovsky’s “1812 Overture,” and commemorating the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, as well as Adams’ “The Chairman Dances,” an outtake from his opera “Nixon in China.”

“It’s an almost surreal moment in the opera,” Pak says of the latter. “What I like about Adams, unlike other minimalist composers, is the strongly identifiable emotional context in the music. He’s just always challenging you.”

Pak also has included two movements from Banfield’s Sixth Symphony, one entitled “If Bernstein Wrote It,” a personal remembrance of the composer. Banfield, a composer and jazz musician, and professor at Berklee, also met Bernstein as a student and was influenced by his life and thought.

“Bernstein helped us all think outside the box,” Pak says. “He had a hunger to be understood, and to be loved by the broad public.”

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