

Chichester Psalms
By Leonard Bernstein
Analysis by David Mitchell

Leonard Bernstein uses traditional composition practices of early church music, his own previously written material, and the Hebrew language in *Chichester Psalms*. The musical language of this piece symbolizes Israel and alludes to Thomas Weelkes and early church polyphony. There are non-traditional chords comprised of octaves and sevenths and modulations to key areas that are related by an interval of a seventh. The rhythmic language is complex and features changing time signatures, changing tempos, and an extended 7/4 rhythm in the first movement. Melodically, Leonard Bernstein uses diminution, text painting, imitation, and he allows the psalm text to dictate the mood and character of the melody. Leonard Bernstein uses these varied elements to create an ecumenical piece that draws together two religions in a plea for peace with Israel and its neighbors.

Walter Hussey commissioned this piece in 1965 for Chichester Cathedral's music festival in Sussex, England. Chichester Cathedral's most famous music director was Thomas Weelkes. During the time of Thomas Weelkes, European composers wrote music that was primarily polyphonic, while English composers pioneered the use of homophonic writing. Consequently, *Chichester Psalms* contains many examples of imitative and homophonic writing, but it does not contain many examples of polyphonic writing. The most obvious example of homophony is the choral introduction in measures 2-10. All of the voices are moving in unison. Measure 15 is the first example of imitation. The bass voices enter with a melodic figure that is picked up by the tenor

voices in measure 16. This imitation continues until measure 22 where a new homophonic section starts. There is another example of imitation in the second movement that starts in measure 32.

Leonard Bernstein's choice to use the Hebrew language in *Chichester Psalms* is significant. When this piece was performed on July 31, 1965 in Chichester Cathedral, it brought together the Jewish language and Christian faith in an ecumenical plea for peace in Israel. The 1960's were a turbulent time for Israel. In 1964, Jordan threatened to cut off much of the water that supplied parts of Israel by erecting a dam across the Jordan River. This crisis was known as the Israeli water crisis of 1964, and it created tension between Israel and its neighbors. This tension eventually led to the 1967 six-day war. As he composed this piece, the water crisis in Israel, and resulting tensions, must have weighed heavily upon Leonard Bernstein's mind. The last movement concludes with " Let Israel hope in the Lord From henceforth and forever. Behold how good, And how pleasant it is, For brethren to dwell together in unity".

In *Chichester Psalms*, the number seven plays an important role. Seven represents the seven tribes of Israel. And the number seven is represent in the time signature, intervals, and modulations of *Chichester Psalms*. In measure 2, there is a major seventh interval between the bass and tenor parts. The major seventh interval recurs throughout the first movement in the voice parts. The time signature changes to 7/4 in measure 11 and it lasts until the end of the movement. That is a total of 108 measure of unbroken 7/4 meter. The key signature changes from B flat to C in measure 17, from C to B flat in measure 32, from B flat to C flat in measure 93, and it becomes C at measure 100. The first movement key signature starts out as B flat and the second

movement starts out as A major. All of the key signature changes are sevenths apart.

Melodically, Leonard Bernstein uses diminution as a thematic development tool. In the first movement, the opening two measure vocal melody is repeated by the horns in diminution (the repetition includes the seventh interval). There is diminution in measure 12 of the theme from measure 11 in the strings.

This piece would be wonderful in a cathedral and the performance on July 31, 1965 must have been great. It would be interesting to hear Hebrew words sung in a cathedral in rainy England. Leonard Bernstein brings these contrasting elements together in *Chichester Psalms* and makes a plea for unity among religions and peace with Israel. Additionally, he incorporates imitation and homophony to pay homage to Chichester's most famous musical director, Thomas Weelkes.

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