

MASS
By Leonard Bernstein
Virginia Arts Festival
Chrysler Hall
April 23 & 24
For tickets: (757)282-2819

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

Bernstein subtitled his monumental opus "A Theater Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers". He wanted Broadway and the concert hall to come together. With a love for all styles of music, Bernstein utilized various choruses, a rock band, a brass band, soloists, singing actors, dancers and a brief interlude of kazoos plus a full symphony orchestra. MASS was commissioned by Jacqueline Kennedy who did not attend the opening performance even though Richard Nixon offered her the presidential box. He did not attend for political reasons. She declined Mr. Nixon's offer saying she did not want her presence to be a distraction to the somber occasion. The fact that her church opposed the work may have also been a factor.

Major purist musical critics were underwhelmed and did not understand the stew pot of musical styles. The wonderful Virginia Arts Festival's excellent production makes clear how stodgy, narrow minded and wrong they were. The audience that filled every seat in Chrysler Hall was in a state of rapture during the entire two hour performance sans intermission. They were frozen in awe and lost in the emotional force of what is essentially a non-traditional requiem.

A young priest, the celebrant of the mass, loses his faith. As sung by internationally acclaimed John McVeigh, who has a soaring tenor voice of many colors and is an actor with great range, his sensitive, dramatically rich portrayal attains tragic dimension. In the beginning his faith is as pure and simple as birdsong. The innocence gradually goes away as the weight of human corruption and misery, war and death and the burden of his own clerical ritual drive him to destroy the monstrosity in his state of madness. He is bombarded by the street people who are doubtful and suspicious lamenting that people of power never do what they could, and that the half the world is stoned and the other half is waiting for the next election. They also bemoan local yokels who know how to collect a crowd. Sounds very today, doesn't it, even though it was written 40 years ago.

Mr. McVeigh is surrounded by an exceptionally talented ensemble of actors and singers that time does not allow me to praise individually. Director Pamela Berlin has staged the production with simple clarity that makes painfully clear what is happening. Conductor JoAnn Falletta captures the dramatic bombastic excitement of the work and she enhances its beautiful quiet voices as well. Robert Shoup's multiple choirs and choruses are powerful and effective. Todd Rosenleib's choreography is too refined and has a couple of Virginia reel type sequences that seem out of place.

Producer Robert W. Cross' Virginia Arts Festival has attained a new level of artistic maturity in this masterful production. It's a giant step toward gaining the international recognition the Festival deserves. The next goal should be to commission new works by major artists to premier in Hampton Roads.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.