

Elmer Bernstein unflappable as the music goes on and on

By Hillary Hauser
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"You're never as good as you are in your imagination," says the composer-pianist who once stomped on a pedal during a performance of Beethoven's "Appassionata" sonata, only to have the entire lyre of the pedal construction fall on the floor.

Composer Elmer Bernstein remembers that he finished that arpeggio-filled sonata without the pedal, relying instead on some sort of magical, improvised fingering to connect notes that needed to be connected.

It is this sort of improvisation that has made Bernstein one of America's foremost composers and performers. As he thought about it all one day in the living room of his Montecito home, he summed it up:

"In a performance, whatever is going to happen is going to happen — there's nothing you can do about it."

Music to Bernstein is not so much what happens by chance, it is more like breathing — nothing to get worked up over, but something to enjoy and celebrate, come what may.

He moves freely between classical and modern composition and performances, and Santa Barbarans will get an insight as to what he can do when he appears Wednesday evening in a recital with mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Mannion at the Lobero Theater.

(Mannion's illustrious vocal career has taken a teaching turn, and she is currently in residence at the UCSB music department.)

As the two artists recently prepared for their recital at Bernstein's piano, they stopped to figure out which edition of a Mahler song they should use. The choice might make a difference in the vocal part, Bernstein said.

Then, they wondered about bringing in a viola for two Brahms pieces — "but I don't know if we can just say (to the violist) — play two pieces and goodbye," he said.

Adding "a few classical things" written by Bernstein, the two organized their program in a manner amazing to musicians who need months to prepare just one piece for proper playing.

Bernstein's fluid talent and imagination have produced such musical masterpieces as "Man with the Golden Arm," "Walk on the Wild Side," "The Magnificent Seven" and "To Kill a Mockingbird," as well as about 170 other film scores. He received an Academy Award for "Thoroughly Modern Millie" and nine nominations for his other works.

He has also received an Emmy



News-Press photo by Jason Bleibtreau

Elmer Bernstein and Elizabeth Mannion will perform at the Lobero Theater Wednesday night.

("The Making of a President, 1960"), and two Golden Globes from the Foreign Press Association ("To Kill a Mockingbird" and "Hawaii").

Bernstein, 63, has lived in Santa Barbara since 1977, and does most of his composing at home. He works in a studio attached to his house, at a proper beat-up writing table set up next to a proper beat-up grand piano. To relax, he might play the elegant Boesendorfer in his living room, while his favorite dog plays at his feet.

For all the work he does, Bernstein is a relaxed man whose only apparent hurriedness may be the fast Porsche he drives. At the time he was preparing for the recital with Ms. Mannion, he was shuffling the duties, such as being a dad to his daughters, Emily, 17, and Elizabeth, 14, (his wife of 20 years, Eve, was in Europe), and trying to remember to call the piano tuner.

Currently, he is putting the finishing touches on a score for "Spies Like Us," starring Chevy Chase and Dan Aykroyd, and he is thinking about writing a guitar concerto for the classical guitarist Christopher Parkening.

Bernstein finds himself thinking more these days about classical composition — which in some ways represents a return to his origins.

He was a concert pianist between

1937 and 1950, and although he has performed in chamber music concerts since then, he is basically glad to have left an all-consuming concert career.

"It seemed to me — and this is just me — that being a concert pianist would be boring ultimately," Bernstein said. "I thought, at 22, I could be sitting around playing the same thing 50 years from now — like Schnabel playing Beethoven."

He said that today's concert pianists are much more involved in the whole of music-making, playing in chamber music recitals and other ensemble performances.

"If you were brought up as a concert pianist in my day, you did nothing else," Bernstein said.

Bernstein said his entry into film scoring came through the doors of wartime radio shows. During World War II, while he was stationed in North Carolina, he learned that a pianist was needed to play for Air Force shows on a local radio station, and he went right over to apply.

His piano accompaniments pleased his producers, because when they went to Yale to produce radio shows there, they remembered Bernstein's abilities with American folk music and called for him.

See Page C-43, Col. 1

Bernstein, Mannion in concert

Continued from Page C-8

"In those days, American folk music was exotic," Bernstein said. "Very little was known about it."

So, he started to do arrangements on folk songs for the broadcasting folks at Yale.

Then, the music director asked Bernstein if he could write a dramatic score.

"I had never done it," Bernstein said. "But I said, I suppose so, and I did it — and I've done it ever since."

After he got out of the Army in 1946, Bernstein went back to concertizing, but he also continued writing music for radio shows. A Hollywood producer heard his work, and in 1950, he was called west — to write music for a film called "Soccer Day Heroes."

Bernstein closed his eyes and laughed as he thought about it. "It was a film about football, of all things," he said.

He said his first big career breakthrough came with his score for "The Man with the Golden Arm" — "It created a lot of excitement because it was a jazz score" — and another important step was his score for "The Ten Command-

ments," starring Charlton Heston.

Bernstein said he has no favorites among the 170 scores he has done, but if he is forced to take a pick, he'll admit that he especially likes the delicate score of "To Kill a Mockingbird."

He said this score is different from his other works, typically characterized by strength rather than subtlety.

"I'm given to very strong musical statements," Bernstein said. "In creating music for film, you have to remember that people will hear it only once. You have to communicate it in a way that is effective. I'm a great believer in being very clear about what you're doing — strong and positive."

He said the role of music in a film is to "support the film's emotion."

"Music is not intellectual, it's emotional," Bernstein said. "You react to it — you either like it, or you don't like it."

Bernstein said he likes living in Santa Barbara, where his daughters are involved with riding and showing horses. He usually works early in the day, finishing by lunchtime.

Although his film work takes him away from home for more than half

the year, Bernstein said he looks forward to involvement in local musical events — including lectures at UCSB on music in the media and classical performances — like the one he will give Wednesday with Ms. Mannion.

"I haven't done a voice-piano recital in about 40 years," Bernstein said. "I think it will be a lot of fun."

Has Bernstein no terror when it comes to public performance?

Well, maybe once — like that time the pedals fell off the piano as he played the Beethoven "Appassionata."

But there was another time — and it was with the same sonata.

"I got messed up harmonically in the arpeggios," Bernstein recalled. "I didn't know where I was. I improvised and I improvised madly, and I thought, what am I going to do? How am I going to get out of this?"

Somehow, he did get out of it — with most people in the audience never knowing the difference — and that's just what an ingenious musician with natural composing talents can do.