C livest the Celeb rant
of Bernstein’s Mass

By Dr. John Wesley Wright, Assistant Professor of Voice, Department of Music

A member of the acclaimed American Spiritual Ensemble, Dr. John Wesley Wright is coordinator of SU’s voice and opera workshop programs and co-director of the Broadway program for the Maryland Summer Center for the Arts. He regularly tours as a soloist and with professional ensembles throughout the United States, Japan and Europe, including a concert last year to celebrate the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy’s visit to Ireland.

As a concert artist, I tend to weave in personal commentary for audiences. I often share my story of taking part in the American Traditions Vocal Competition in 2000, and of how I resisted doing that competition because of a prevalent mindset that valued “classical music only” — something still taught in many vocal programs throughout the country. I proceeded to do the competition, nevertheless, and prepared three levels of required repertoire. The songs I chose encompassed a breadth of American traditions, including American opera, American art songs, operetta, blues, jazz, musical theatre, gospels, spirituals and folk songs. (America has been busy!) Audiences usually cheer when I get to the part of having won the competition (go ahead, you may cheer); but the poignant part of the story is that it took something as extraordinary as a medal around my neck to awaken in me the joy and importance of embracing many styles. This has become an indispensable part of my professional life.

This eclectic musical direction bore fruit when I performed the role of the Celebrant for the 40th anniversary performances of Leonard Bernstein’s theatre piece, Mass, held in Dayton, OH, in 2011. It was during the curtain call of the final performance of Mass – 2,200 people on their feet applauding – that I realized this work by Bernstein, with its schizophrenic juxtaposition of styles, had profound implications. That moment ignited an intense curiosity about the Celebrant’s radically diverse music and its potential to forge connections between disparate groups of people.

Bernstein composed Mass for the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Subtitled A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers, the work premiered on September 8, 1971. Its combination of Roman Catholic liturgy as backdrop, stirring theatrical interpolations and daring, even “blasphemous” originality – some “blasphemy” uttered even by the officiating Celebrant himself – made for a bizarre spectacle indeed, one that continues to shock and puzzle audiences while also moving them. Challenging and provocative, the work does not lend itself to easy, simple analysis. What does one make of a work self-identified as a celebration of the Catholic rite, yet replete with sacrilegious

turns of plot, profanities and other excesses of theatrical artistic license?

Perhaps only Bernstein himself was capable of producing such a conglomeration, bridging so many different worlds, audaciously synthesizing irreverent stage spectacle with Christian sacred ritual. However, Mass's inclusiveness does not end there: it also references Judaism, religious doubt and the abandonment of religion.

My research focuses on the Celebrant – his musical and dramatic journey, and particularly musical borrowing. Musical borrowing, simply put, is a composer's use of existing musical material to compose new music.

My findings examine how Bernstein chose and manipulated his borrowings in view of several objectives crucial to this work's composition and its function of opening the Kennedy Center. I consider these objectives in light of the work's controversial reception and the types of values ascribed to it – objectives, such as 1) the "reaffirmation of faith;" 2) defiance of political and religious dogma as existed at the time of the Nixon administration and the war in Vietnam; 3) use of his own personalized faith symbolism; and, 4) above all, a creative synthesis of vernacular and classical influences, something for which Bernstein remains celebrated. I have taken the music of the Celebrant as a linchpin for understanding Bernstein's eclecticism as indeed something carefully and strategically managed.

By considering the Celebrant's music and Bernstein's manipulation of it, the Celebrant and his centrality to the work gain significant clarity. Styles range from traditional Judaic chant to evocations of such contemporary figures as Aaron Copland, to allusions to the popular music of Broadway and film.

My research demonstrates that Bernstein's compositional choices concerning his diverse borrowed sources and their compositional manipulation closely and revealingly align with his professed aims in composing the work – goals including 1) christening a new national performance hall; 2) paying homage to the Kennedy family and its legacy of liberalism; and 3) reaffirming a "faith" free of religious dogma. Finally, Bernstein aims in Mass to restore the traditional values of tonality, accessibility and cathartic emotional expression – values long besieged by the musical avant-garde of the time.

Through focusing on the Celebrant and the musical borrowings used to create the character, I highlight the rich array of influences and resources in the work. As scholar, I see the role as affording entry into the crux of Bernstein's eclecticism, perhaps matchless in scope. Such knowledge about the construction of the Celebrant affords insight into how and why Mass arose at the tense crossroads of national public ritual and illuminates the viability of a tradition-based, tonal language and the importance of faith. The Celebrant's music emerges as the key to unlocking a theatrical work in some ways quasi-religious but at the same time over-the-top, even profane, though with proven potential for genuinely moving audiences and participants alike.

Long after Mass premiered, many still condemn it as hopelessly conflated, vulgar, empty of substance, showy and so on. Such dismissals often cite the work's hodgepodge of eclectic influences and juxtapositions of popular and classical music as principal culprits. Having survived into its fifth decade, perhaps Mass has managed to outlast at least some of its original critics, for it has survived long enough to witness a veritable sea change within the "classical music" scene. Stylistic diversity has now become the norm in musical performance. Today's opera companies, orchestras and concert artists are actively integrating popular, vernacular works into their programming. In light of this relatively new acceptance crossover repertoire, Bernstein's Mass and the music of the Celebrant seem nothing less than prophetic, celebrating the diversity of musical language, philosophy, style, ritual and belief, and demonstrating their persistence through Earth's troubled times.