

ONLINE AUDIO GUIDE 6.8

CHOREOGRAPHED DANCE

title: “America” (*West Side Story*)

composer: Leonard Bernstein

lyricist: Stephen Sondheim

choreographer: Jerome Robbins

language: English

performing forces: voices (Rita Moreno as Anita; George Chakiris as Bernardo), piccolo, flute, oboe, English horn, bassoon, various saxophones, various clarinets, French horns, trumpets, trombones, timpani, piano, celesta, electric guitar, Spanish guitar, violins, cellos, upright bass [no violas], claves, vibraphone, pitched drums, xylophone, bongos, cowbells, conga, timbales, snare drum, güiro, cymbals, maracas, marimba, woodblock, clapping

form: multisectional, with alternation of chorus and voices, extended introduction, and several dance interludes

function: performance on Broadway, later in film

source: *West Side Story: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Sony Masterworks, 1965).

Listen for:

- 3-2 son clave (opening)
- close harmony
- sesquiáltera throughout
- multisectional form, with alternation of chorus and verses
- changes of tonal center

Timing	Structure and text	What happens
00:00	Introduction	three-two clave
00:05		maracas enter in triplets, “out of clave”
		Bernardo grabs Anita, whose manner contrasts with the modest demeanor of his sister María
00:10		Spanish guitar and marimba enter
00:16		As Anita sings the others look on, and occasionally comment
	Puerto Rico, my heart’s devotion, let it sink back in the ocean! Always the hurricanes blowing Always the population growing! And the money owing	rhythm common in tango inserted
	And the sunlight streaming and the natives steaming	Anita’s movements become more animated, the Puerto Rican women respond affirmatively
	I like the isle of Manhattan	sustained chords in orchestra
	Smoke on your pipe and put that in!*	Puerto Rican woman interjects, “I know you do!”
		Cadence enhanced by a roll on the bongo drum, with sticks leads to . . .

1:01	A I want to be in America Okay by me in America Everything free in America	hand claps led by Anita singing in close harmony, the Puerto Rican women stand together and confront the men
1:10	For a small fee in America!	Bernardo interjects women begin walking around, as if starting to think about dancing
1:15	B Buying on credit is so nice One look at us and they charge twice I have my own washing machine What will you have though to keep clean?	quartet Anita Bernardo Rosalía (another Puerto Rican woman) Puerto Rican man
1:26	A Skyscrapers bloom in America Cadillacs zoom in America Industry boom in America Twelve in a room in America!	Anita Rosalía Puerto Rican woman Sharks, in chorus
1:40	B Lots of new housing with more space Lots of doors slamming in our face I'll get a terrace apartment Better get rid of your accent	Duet Anita, bright woodwind timbre Bernardo, punctuated with tambourine Anita Bernardo, speaking exaggeratedly
1:52	A Life can be bright in America If you can fight in America Life is all right in America If you're a white in America!	the men and the women divide more clearly into two groups and confront one another Anita Sharks Puerto Rican women in harmony Sharks
2:05	C (extended instrumental interlude and beginning of the actual dance)	new melodic material shouts brass, strings, and percussion prominent the groups remain separated: men dance first, then Anita Anita manipulates her skirt and does

2:31	music of A section returns Lalalala America, lalala ... etc.	several high kicks men dance in couples, as if mocking social norms, but then slap one another men initiate the women, singing in close harmony
2: 45	B Here you are free and you have pride Long as you stay on your own side Free to be anything you chose Free to wait tables and shine shoes!	change of tonal center (to C major) Anita and another Puerto Rican woman, confront the Sharks, in unison Sharks Anita and other Puerto Rican women Sharks
2:57	A Everywhere grime in America Organized crime in America Terrible time in America You forget <i>I'm</i> in America!	Duet Bernardo Bernardo Bernardo Anita
3:11	C (extended instrumental interlude and dance)	women now dominate the dance interlude, join Anita with zapateado, manipulation of their skirts, leaping
3:36	music of A returns	brass prominent
3:50	B I think I go back to San Juan I know a boat you can get on! Everyone there will give big cheer Everyone there will have moved here.	Duet Bernardo Anita Bernardo Anita (spoken)
4:00	A	higher-pitched instruments dominate (flute, higher range of xylophone) No words, just barking like dogs
4: 10	C (instrumental and dance interlude)	men begin the dance brass instruments return, cadences marked with percussion shouts of “go, go”

4:35	music of A returns	women join clapping on offbeats
4:44	Coda	full orchestra women lifted off the floor by their male partners

Note: Here Anita mangles—or plays with—the idiomatic expression in English, “put that in your pipe and smoke it” (i.e. “that’s just the way it is” or “so there”).

Consider:

- Watch again the first C section (2:05), in which Anita dances alone to the approbation of the women. What might be the significance of her numerous high kicks and her raising her skirt, which accentuate her pelvic area? How does the men’s brief but mocking couple dance comment on Anita’s lack of inhibition?
- What do the shouts of “go, go!” in the third C section (4:10) suggest to you?
- Compare “America” to other numbers in the show, such as “Cool.” Which gang, the Jets or the Sharks, seems to have the greater gift for irony?
- In the 1957 stage version of *West Side Story*, “America” portrayed a conflict between the Puerto Rican women, all of whom wanted to go back home except for Anita, who defended the United States. How has the film version, which we’ve studied here, change this situation? How are the gender roles outlined? Does the music or the choreography comment on these adjustments in any way?
- For both sides, the dance not only complements the music, but simulates fighting, intimidation, and the exuberance of power. Just as the Puerto Rican women recognize the virtues of “America,” the men complain about being excluded. Is the choreography substantially different for the two groups or do the two sides have many movements in common?