

THE INTERPLAY OF INTERVALS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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When Alejandro and I decided to focus this service on music in general and Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* in particular, I had no idea how fortuitous the timing would be. We will get to Bernstein in due course, but first I want to focus on the guitarist Gary Clark Jr., one of my favorite blues artists. Clark's latest album, titled *This Land*, comes out later this week.

The title song from the album is a scathing indictment of the racism that Clark, a 35-year-old African American, endured while growing up in the South. In a recent video [interview with Rolling Stone magazine](#) (the video is down the page, below the podcast), Clark says simply, "I grew up black in Texas," as if that should serve as explanation enough. For those who need more, Clark goes on to describe finding dog poop in the mailbox, racial slurs scrawled on the fence outside his parents' home, and Confederate flags draped over his own fence. These were regular occurrences, Clark says.

He pauses, and then says, "I said I wasn't going to get into this because it makes me emotional." By "this," Clark means the problem of race in our nation. "We're sliding backwards," he says, referring to the resurgence of racism in the wake of Trump's election, the police shootings of young black men, and the deadly 2017 Charlottesville rally, among countless other provocations.

Previously in his career, Clark steered clear of these matters. Along the way, he became a highly successful blues guitarist, with a major-label contract and worldwide audience. He sometimes commutes to his sold-out concerts by private jet so he can spend more time with his wife, Nicole Trunfio and their two children on their 50-acre spread outside of Austin.

Then an encounter with one of his neighbors brought his anger about race to the surface. He says, "I'm doing all right, a young successful black man, and I'm gonna get myself some property and live the life that I've never had, something I've always wanted. If you're not going to give us 40 acres and a mule, I'm going to get myself 50 acres and a classic model A — that I earned."

"So my neighbor comes to me and says, 'Who owns this house? Who lives here?'"
I say, "I do."

"There no way you can live here," the neighbor responds. "Who's the owner?"
Clark responds again that he is the owner — he lives here.

Reflecting on that incident, Clark says, "Maybe it wasn't racial, but in my mind I was thinking of that. And I'm tired of having to think that way."

Clark's weariness made him emotional after all. His anger roils through the song "[This Land](#)," which is about his life on 50 acres in the middle of Trump country next to a neighbor who can't wait to call the police on him and wants him to go back where he came from. Clark's ferocious response repeats throughout the song: "I'm America's son. This is where I come from."

About the song, John Pareles of the *New York Times* observes, "The music isn't typical blues. It's a reggae vamp pumped up to rock volume, with blues licks spiraling between the vocal lines. Clark claims what he has earned: righteous, defensive and stand your ground belligerent."

It turns out that real music is what happens when you get emotional. If Leonard Bernstein were alive today, I have no doubt that he would be streaming Roy Clark, Jr. on his sound system. Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, the third movement of which we have heard beautifully performed today by Alejandro, Trent, and the All Souls Choir, emerged from Bernstein's conviction that unless music moves us emotionally, it isn't worth being called music.

In 1958, Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic performed a concert for young people titled "What Does Music Mean?" At one point in the program, Bernstein stands at the piano before the audience of children and teenagers, and asks, "Did you ever feel that you wanted something more than anything else in the world, and you said so, and they said no, you can't have it. And you said again, I want it, and again they said no. And again you said, louder and more excited, I want it, and again louder, I want it. Until it seemed that something would break in your head and there is nothing left to do but cry. Well, that's like this music. Listen."

At that moment, Bernstein begins playing on the piano that powerful and haunting crescendo about ten minutes into the first movement of Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony*. At the end of each rising phrase, Bernstein sings along: "I want it! I want it!" — first in single time, then as the music quickens in double time: "I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it!" As the musical crescendo rises both in pitch and in volume, Bernstein's voice cracks, then falls to a lower octave as he plays the piano with increasing frenzy, still moaning, "I want it, I want it!" Then he says abruptly, "And finally something breaks in your head" — more frenzy on the piano — "and you cry." Then he lifts his baton to conduct the Philharmonic in playing the same passage from the *Fourth Symphony*, and says to the audience, "See if you feel something like those emotions."

To Bernstein, that's what music means. Whether played on guitar or violin, music lives in that place deep within each of us where longing and tears hold sway. At its best, music enables us to feel deeply the emotions within our hearts and souls, and to sense through them our connection to — and sometimes our estrangement from — the people and world around us. Indeed, the only significant criticism of Bernstein as a conductor was his willingness to respond more to the emotion in a piece of music than to the tempo and volume markings of the composer.

But for Bernstein, if you don't discover the emotional energy in a composition, everything else is simply notes on a page. In other words, the emotion in a piece of music is not just the main thing, it's the only thing. "I want it! I want it! I want it!" Emotion! Passion! Beethoven! Mahler! Ella Fitzgerald! The Rolling Stones! Wherever there was passion, Bernstein found rhythm and melody, including in the percussive beat of street gangs and the rhythm of antiwar chants. All these elements found their way into his music.

As a composer, Bernstein was very much at odds with the trends of his day. Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and John Cage were writing music that was intentionally the antithesis of the music Bernstein and his audiences loved best. Some of their so-called avant-garde works were twelve-tone, others were serial, and many were non-tonal. These developments led Bernstein, in his Norton Lectures on the Future of Music at Harvard in 1976, to address the Unanswered Question posed by Charles Ives in the first decade of the twentieth century: whither music? Where is music going? Isn't non-tonal music an oxymoron, Bernstein wondered? What are modern composers thinking?

Bernstein put it this way in the preface to his book, *The Infinite Variety of Music*:

I am a fanatic music lover. I can't live one day without hearing music, playing it, studying it, or thinking about it. And all this is quite apart from my professional role as musician; I am a fan, a committed member of the musical public. And in this role of simple music lover, I confess, freely though unhappily, that at this moment, God forgive me, I have far more pleasure in following the musical adventures of Simon and Garfunkel or of The Association singing "Along Comes Mary" than I have in most of what is being written now by the whole community of avant-garde composers. Pop music seems to be the only area where there is to be found unabashed vitality, the fun of invention, the feeling of fresh air.

Bernstein himself composed a number of avant-garde works during a sabbatical year from conducting the Philharmonic. He had already achieved significant success as a conductor and as a Broadway composer. But he also wanted to be taken seriously as a classical composer, hence the avant-garde works. No sooner were they finished, however, than Bernstein threw them away. All that remains from that year's work are the *Chichester Psalms* — tuneful, melodious, and emotionally satisfying (the third movement begins at 9:25).

Bernstein once wrote that because human beings have a built-in sense of tonal relationships, we cannot hear two isolated tones without immediately imputing a meaning to them. "We may differ from one another in the tonal meaning we infer," Bernstein concludes, "but we infer it nonetheless." The interplay of intervals, and our emotional response to those intervals, is what Bernstein called the poetry of the earth.

Musically speaking, the intervals between tones have emotional import. It's like the intervals that span the other spaces in our lives — the spaces between siblings or spouses or lovers, the interval between what we long for and what we fear, the gap that separates our ambitions from our accomplishments, or the distance between what we have professed as a nation and what we have achieved.

The composer's art is to take all the notes in the repertoire, all the relationships, and with them make sounds — whether for blues band, symphony orchestra, or some other set of instruments — that honor the full range of musical and emotional possibilities. The art of living is to do the same. It is to listen to the music that resounds from the relationships of our lives.

In an interview published on Friday, *The Guardian* asked Gary Clark, Jr.: “In the last few years you've bought a 50-acre ranch and settled down with your family and kids. Has happiness been as creatively generative as other emotional states?”

Clark replies, “If you listen to the album, my emotional state is all over the place. Every human being goes through ups and downs, so I just put all that on record... As far as the song “This Land,” I immediately felt like I had this thing I needed to say. I didn't want to come across as angry because I don't think anger is positive. At the same time, I think holding back emotions is unhealthy. So I made a choice.”

Clark made a choice, Leonard Bernstein made a choice, and you and I also have choices to make. As Clark says, holding back emotions is unhealthy. The art of living is to express them constructively. Sometimes this happens through actions or words, and at other times it happens through music. At its best, music engages the intervals — between hope and fear, between joy and sorrow, between anger and love — in a way that's both satisfying and ultimately redemptive.

Today is a rainy day here in New York City, and it's going to get rainier and windier. It's a good time to listen to some music. Watch the video of Gary Clark Jr's song “This Land,” and see what emotions it brings up in you. Listen again to the third movement Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, and see what emotions it elicits. Then play whatever currently finds itself at the top of your playlist. Focus not so much on the music, but on your inner life. About what do you get emotional?

In the silence that follows, ask yourself what choices you need to make. What do you need to do so that the interplay of intervals within you and around you harmonize with the poetry of the earth?