

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Born August 25, 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts; died October 14, 1990 in New York City.

Serenade after Plato's "Symposium" (1954)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Venice, Italy, September 12, 1954

Teatro La Fenice

Leonard Bernstein, conductor

Isaac Stern, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 30 minutes

By 1954, when the *Serenade* was written, Leonard Bernstein had firmly established himself on the American musical scene as both conductor and composer. He had served as assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Music Director of the New York City Symphony and Musical Advisor to the Israel Philharmonic. As a composer, he had won the New York Music Critics Circle Award for his "Jeremiah" Symphony, and had completed his Second Symphony (*The Age of Anxiety*), the ballets *Fancy Free* and *Facsimile*, and the scores for two Broadway shows (*On the Town* and *Wonderful Town*). During the mid-1950s, he was on the staffs of Brandeis University and the Tanglewood Music Festival, and much in demand as a guest conductor in Europe and America, having created a sensation in December 1953 when he became the first American to conduct at La Scala.

Bernstein's *Serenade*, commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation, was dedicated "To the Beloved Memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky." On August 8, 1954, the day after he completed the score, Bernstein wrote the following description of its literary origin:

"There is no literal program for this *Serenade*, despite the fact that it resulted from a re-reading of Plato's charming dialogue, *The Symposium*. The music, like the dialogue, is a series of related statements in praise of love, and generally follows the Platonic form through the succession of speakers at the banquet. The 'relatedness' of the movements does not depend on common thematic material, but rather on a system whereby each movement evolves out of elements in the preceding one.

"I. *Phaedrus — Pausanias (Lento — Allegro)*. Phaedrus opens the symposium with a lyrical oration in praise of Eros, the god of love. (Fugato, begun by the solo violin.) Pausanias continues by describing the duality of lover and beloved. This is expressed in a classical sonata form, based on material of the opening fugato.

"II. *Aristophanes (Allegretto)*. Aristophanes does not play the role of clown in this dialogue, but instead that of bedtime storyteller, invoking the fairytale mythology of love.

"III. *Eryximachus (Presto)*. The physician speaks of bodily harmony as a scientific model for the workings of love-patterns. This is an extremely short fugato scherzo, born of a blend of mystery and humor.

"IV. *Agathon (Adagio)*. Perhaps the most moving speech of the dialogue, Agathon's panegyric embraces all aspects of love's powers, charms and functions. This movement is a simple three-part song.

"V. *Socrates — Alcibiades (Molto tenuto — Allegro molto vivace)*. Socrates describes his visit to the seer Diotima, quoting her speech on the demonology of love. This is a slow introduction of greater weight than any of the preceding movements; and serves as a highly developed reprise of the middle section of the *Agathon* movement, thus suggesting a hidden sonata-form. The famous interruption by Alcibiades and his band of drunken revelers ushers in the *Allegro*, which is an extended Rondo ranging in spirit from agitation through jig-like dance music to joyful celebration. If there is a hint of jazz in the celebration, I hope it will not be taken as anachronistic Greek party-music, but rather the natural expression of a contemporary American composer imbued with the spirit of that timeless dinner-party."

The musical processes of the *Serenade* seem a bit abstruse in Bernstein's above description, but they are really a logical counterpart to the spoken conversation they represent. An initial theme is given out, just as an idea, spoken, opens a conversation. The first speaker pursues his thought until another converser puts forth his own idea prompted by what he has just heard. The conversation goes on, unwinding, fueled by the interchange and development of its basic ideas — in the case of Plato's *Symposium*, the aspects of love. In Bernstein's *Serenade*, one theme gives rise to another, to which the first may, for example, then become an accompaniment. Each musical idea, like each conversational statement, leads logically to another, related to it, yet different according to the thought and the speaker. Bernstein's "conversational" composition is brought round full circle when the opening theme from the first movement reappears in the closing pages.