

Introduction/Overview

Leonard Bernstein wrote the Serenade for violin based on Plato's Symposium, one of the first books about love written 2,500 years ago. The music doesn't try to tell the story word for word but it does help to know what the book is about, because it gives you an insight into Bernstein's heart. The Serenade is dedicated to Serge Koussevitsky who was one of Bernstein's most important teachers. I'm going to try to summarize Plato's Symposium briefly. Disclaimer: this is my own interpretation and it's highly simplified based on why I think Bernstein loved this text and used it for a piece dedicated to his mentor.

First of all, a symposium in ancient Greece was simply a party where people hung out, drank and talked. "Symposium" literally means, "drinking together." That alone I imagine attracted Bernstein. By all accounts drinking and philosophizing with people were his favorite activities. Love is the overall subject of this particular Symposium. It starts with one guy, Phaedrus, who laments that no one has ever talked about how great love is. He said, he read a whole book about how useful *salt* is but never anything about love! So everyone at the party decides that they will each give a speech celebrating love. Phaedrus starts and says basically that Eros, the god of Love, is the greatest of all gods because Love makes men more virtuous and selfless. He says that a man would be more ashamed to be caught doing something bad in front of a loved one than an acquaintance. He also says "the lover is more divine than the beloved: the god is in him and he is inspired," which I find interesting because in our society we tend to think in the opposite way – we often perceive being loved as more important than loving; unrequited love for example is seen as a weakness, whereas here Phaedrus is saying that the act of loving someone in and of itself is divine and powerful, even more so than the passive state of being loved. I think that must have appealed on some level to Bernstein who, from everything we know about him loved to love.

Then Pausanius speaks and he says basically that there are two kinds of love, "Vulgar" love based on beauty and superficial attraction and "Heavenly" love which is based on appreciating someone's "worthy character" and involves an exchange of ideas, i.e. someone who you could learn from. The idea is introduced that love and learning are related.

Aristophanes is supposed to speak next but gets the hiccups so Eryximachus speaks instead. His speech is short; he says all life is made of opposing forces and love is the moderation and balance between them; he specifically mentions music – it is love that brings highs and lows, slows and fasts together in agreement. Love, Eryximachus suggests, is ultimately a source of harmony.

Aristophanes speaks then and recounts an ancient myth that humans were once round creatures with four legs, four arms and two faces, and they came in three genders; male, female and androgynous. They were powerful and intelligent and Zeus started to feel threatened, so he cut them in half. From then on, people rushed

around trying to find their other half. The round men who were cut in half, looked for their other half in men; the round women looked for women; and the androgynous people looked for the opposite sex. So the idea of soul mates was born and for Aristophanes, love was a name “for the desire and pursuit of wholeness.” This myth may have appealed to Bernstein because he struggled, especially as a younger man, to come to terms with his attraction to both men and women. But interestingly, he also mentions this myth in a documentary about teaching and teachers, while speaking about Koussevitzky and Fritz Reiner, his two conducting teachers who were extraordinarily different in style. Bernstein said that he learned opposite and necessary things from each and that one completely complemented the other, “like in the Symposium, the idea of the half that seeks the other half of the self, and that’s what makes love.” (Teachers and Teaching youtube video 18:20)

Agathon’s speech comes next and Bernstein calls it “perhaps the most moving speech of the dialogue.” Agathon says that Eros, the god of love, brings peace, gentleness, community, generosity, and creativity. He “softens hearts,” is “not touched by violence” and “all whom he touches become poets even if he was without music before.” I imagine that this definition of love really resonated with Bernstein, who spoke often of his love for people, his hatred of violence, and the power of art to communicate and connect people.

Finally Socrates reports a conversation he’s had with a fictional priestess named Diotima, and takes the definition of love to its furthest point. Love, Socrates reports, is the desire perpetually to possess beauty, in fact to procreate in beauty. Because of this yearning to procreate, love seeks immortality. This immortality isn’t about living forever. It’s about creating things that will outlive us: for example, another human being, art, writing, poetry, new ideas...which means essentially that love involves passion for knowledge and learning. And learning was a central theme in Leonard Bernstein’s life from his youth. He was a voracious learner and passionate teacher...Read or watch his lectures, Young People’s Concerts or rehearsal videos and you will viscerally feel his excitement to learn. So it seems completely logical that he would be inspired by Plato’s Symposium to compose a piece, especially dedicated to one of his most revered mentors. And not only that, but the *way* he composes the piece from start to finish builds on everything he has ever learned – it is almost an homage to the history of music, but in his own unique voice.

After Socrates speaks (by this time it is almost morning) the party is interrupted by drunk and playful Alcibiades, and then again by a mob of partiers. According to Plato, “everything was in an uproar, there was no longer any order, and everyone was compelled to drink a great deal of wine.” Without a doubt, this appealed to Bernstein’s party-animal side – apparently he was usually the last to leave a party! In the Serenade, Bernstein’s Alcibiades is all jazz and party music and brings us to a joyous musical conclusion.

So that is Plato's symposium in a nutshell, and since the subject of the symposium is love, I'll leave you with a final quote from Bernstein. Speaking of conducting an orchestra, he said, "When one hundred men share his feelings, exactly, simultaneously, responding as one to each rise and fall of the music, to each point of arrival and departure, to each little inner pulse – then there is a human identity of feeling that has no equal elsewhere. It is the closest thing I know to love itself."