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Is Love a Ladder? Reading Plato with Leonard Bernstein

By Joshua T. Parks

ABSTRACT: This paper reads Leonard Bernstein's *Serenade after Plato's "Symposium"* as a careful interpretation of and commentary on Plato's text. While a straightforward reading of Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium* suggests that human relationships are merely an instrumental step toward higher loves, Bernstein's music emphasizes the intrinsic goodness of interpersonal love. The connections between the two works have been dismissed as superficial by critics, but Bernstein's piece is actually carefully engaged with the narrative structure of Plato's text. It therefore encourages a re-reading of Plato's dialogue in which its form shapes and complicates its meaning. By depicting in music the interpersonal relationships in both the *Symposium* and his own life, Bernstein inspires the careful listener to see those relationships as an necessary component of the philosophical life.

Music history is full of adaptations of literature, but music and philosophy meet more rarely, perhaps because the narrative power of music is better suited to stories than syllogisms. The most famous exception is likely Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, while Richard Wagner was heavily influenced by Nietzsche. But classical philosophy is especially absent, which makes American composer Leonard Bernstein's choice to write a piece based on Plato's *Symposium* a remarkable one. In this paper, I will argue that Bernstein's *Serenade after Plato's "Symposium"* may be understood as a careful adaptation of the Platonic material to present Bernstein's own view of the nature and purpose of love, a view very different from that of the *Symposium's* "ascent of love" passage. For Plato, speaking through his characters Socrates and Diotima, reaching the top of the ascent requires the lover to forsake all earthly loves and activities for the sake of intellectual contemplation of the Good. Bernstein's *Serenade*, however, gives a very different account of love using the same characters and structure as Plato's dialogue—an account that emphasizes the intrinsic value of interpersonal relationships and social gatherings. But while Bernstein's adaptation is a philosophical departure from Plato, it engages closely with the dialogue's form and narrative details and should therefore be read not as a misinformed appropriation of Plato but as a thoughtful response to him.

The core of the *Symposium* (that is, the section most often taught in intro philosophy classes and most commonly identified with Plato's own view¹) is the "ascent of love" passage in Diotima's speech. Socrates, clearly the wisest participant in the dialogue, credits Diotima with teaching him "the art of love."² After defining "love" as "wanting to possess the good forever," Diotima goes on to describe the process of education in love. At the bottom of the ascent is the love of beautiful bodies, which soon leads the lover to realize that these bodies have something in common, some immaterial form of bodily beauty that transcends the individual. Next, the lover discovers "that the beauty of people's souls is more valuable than the beauty of their bodies," and they eventually make an analogous transition from loving individual souls to loving the kind of beauty which they have in common.³ The lover continues moving from more specific to more universal loves, reaching first customs, then knowledge, and finally the "great sea of beauty" that is the form of the Good itself insofar as it is an object of desire.⁴ Unlike all of the previous steps on the ascent, this ultimate beauty is eternal and unchangeable, and it is an intrinsic good because it is "itself by itself with itself" rather than

¹ See Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, introduction to the *Symposium* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), xixff.

² Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 201c.

³ Plato, *Symposium*, 210b.

⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 210d.

pointing a lover toward something else.⁵ The ultimate fulfillment of erotic desire, which appears first as something physical and emotional, “turns out to be a desire for immortality, for wisdom, and for the contemplation of an object which is not in any way bodily or physical.”⁶ The human desire for loving relationships with other people is only instrumental, a step on the road toward an appreciation of the true beauty that cannot be found in people. Once the lover reaches this stage, Diotima says, “it won’t occur to [them] to measure beauty by gold or clothing or beautiful boys or youths.”⁷ Access to true beauty means that the lover doesn’t even need to recognize the beauty in lesser things anymore, and that includes human interpersonal relationships. Ultimate love is contemplative, abstract, eternal.

This means that Alcibiades’ interruption and the further partying at the end of the dialogue is a distraction, a misunderstanding of love just like the other speeches before Socrates’s, and the real truth is trapped between shadowy falsehoods just as the soul is trapped in the body. The party is a stage for truth-telling, but the truth Diotima speaks through Socrates undermines the purpose and value of the party itself. Reading the “ascent of love” as the core of the dialogue suggests an interpretation that instrumentalizes human relationships in order to reach a solitary, purely intellectual state of *eros* for ultimate beauty.

While this reading emphasizes a central philosophical argument of the *Symposium*, Leonard Bernstein, in his *Serenade after Plato’s “Symposium,”* is much more interested in the dialogue’s literary features. The piece is roughly in the form of a violin concerto, featuring a violin soloist, a string orchestra, and percussion. Each of its five movements represents one or two of the speeches from the *Symposium*, though most of them follow standard classical forms. “The music, like the dialogue,” the composer writes, “is a series of related statements in praise of love, and generally follows the Platonic form through the succession of speakers at the banquet.”⁸ Bernstein completed the piece in 1954, around the same time that he was also working on his two most famous musical dramas—the operetta *Candide* (1956) and the musical *West Side Story* (1957). In these compositions, Bernstein acts as a kind of intellectual historian and communicator, giving new life, new forms, and new meanings to old literary works.

Critics and program annotators have often dismissed the *Serenade’s* Platonic conceit as elitist, unhelpful, and shallow—not to mention inaccurate. In his biography of Bernstein, Humphrey Burton writes that “exactly when the idea to base it on Plato occurred is unknown, but it was possibly not long before the completion of the work, since a glance at Plato reveals obvious discrepancies

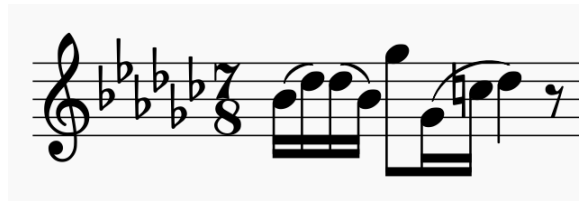
⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 211b.

⁶ Nehamas and Woodruff, xxii.

⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 211d.

⁸ Leonard Bernstein, *Serenade after Plato’s “Symposium”* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1988), program note.

between Bernstein’s adaptation and the original.”⁹ Edward Downes characterizes Bernstein’s descriptions of the piece’s musical form and connections to Plato as “misleading.”¹⁰ However, even the title of the piece suggests that the connection with Plato is not merely arbitrary. The word “serenade” evokes both the “sophisticated entertainment music” of similarly-titled pieces by Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, and Mozart as well as “love songs delivered beneath the balconies of fair ladies.”¹¹ Depending on the context, a serenade can be either party music or a song of love, and here, just like Plato’s dialogue, it is both. And the fact that Bernstein chose to use the Platonic names and structure to organize his musical statements about love, even if the choice was spontaneous, prompts a careful listener to investigate the relationship between the elements Bernstein borrows from Plato and the meaning with which he imbues them.



Example 1: the *love* motif as first played by the solo violin (I. m. 1)¹²

The *Serenade*’s opening movement consists of a slow, canonic introduction representing Phaedrus’s speech and a sonata-form section based on Pausanius’s. Bernstein calls the “Phaedrus” section a “lyrical oration in praise of Eros.”¹³ It opens with a long melody played by the violin and then imitated in canon by the first violins and violas. The first eight notes of this melody (see Example 1) are especially important, because they return so frequently and recognizably throughout the rest of this piece. Since this motif becomes the material for much discussion and development throughout the *Serenade*, I will call it the *love* motif. The melody begins by spelling out the tonic chord (here G-flat major: G-flat, B-flat, and D-flat) with an ascending and descending third and then an ascending sixth. The next three notes (G-flat, C, and D-flat) are exactly the same as the first three notes of “Maria” from *West Side Story*: scale degrees 1,

⁹ Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 239.

¹⁰ Edward Downes, review of Isaac Stern’s recording of the *Serenade* (*The Musical Quarterly* vol. 43 no. 2), 268.

¹¹ Burton, 239-240.

¹² Measure numbers and rehearsal letters are as printed in the Boosey & Hawkes full score: Leonard Bernstein, *Serenade - study score*, (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1954).

¹³ Bernstein program note.

#4, and 5. Though the original 1954 audience of the *Serenade* would not have been familiar with *West Side Story* yet, the fact that Bernstein was working on the two compositions simultaneously and that he unambiguously quotes other works of his own later in the *Serenade* makes this a plausible connection. “Maria” is a song about desire and love for a specific person, and the melody mirrors this as the #4 scale degree longs to resolve upward to 5. The rest of the “Phaedrus” melody is sweet and long-lined, echoing the optimistic view of love expressed in this section of the dialogue, in which “love has no dark side ... and [Phaedrus’s] praise of its effects is indiscriminate.”¹⁴ After more voices join in with the same melody, a dramatic crescendo helps us transition, like Plato’s narrator Aristodemus, “directly to the speech of Pausanias.”¹⁵ (This imitation on the level of stage directions is another hint that Bernstein may have been paying more attention to the formal details of Plato’s dialogue that critics give him credit for.)



Example 2: the fast version of the *love* motif in the cellos (I. reh. E)



Example 3: the *Candide* quote as played by the 1st violins (I. reh. G)

Bernstein calls the “Pausanias” section a “classical sonata-allegro” that describes “the duality of the lover and beloved.”¹⁶ Actually, the form is missing the central development section that a sonata-allegro would typically have and instead consists of two alternating themes and a coda that combines them. The effect of skipping the development section is to separate the two themes more discreetly—

¹⁴ Nehamas and Woodruff, xvi.

¹⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 180c.

¹⁶ Bernstein program note.

they do not mingle until the very end. The first theme, apparently representing the “lover,” opens with a fast, accented version of the *love* and *Maria* motifs (see Example 2) and continues with a descending scalar melody that also appears in the duet “O Happy We” from Bernstein’s operetta *Candide* (see Example 3). “O Happy We” is near the beginning of *Candide*, and it is the first thing Candide and his lover Cunégonde sing together. The song describes a love based on sharing an unrealistic fairy-tale life, and whether or not Bernstein had conceived the song before composing the *Serenade*, it is telling that he thought this melody suitable for Candide and Cunégonde’s shallow love.

The second theme, standing for the “lover,” is a playful, coquettish melody lifted straight from a short piano piece Bernstein dedicated to Sandy Gellhorn, adopted son of writer Martha Gellhorn, with whom Bernstein had lived in Mexico for a while in the early 1950s.¹⁷ This piece is one of the *Five Anniversaries*, written from 1949 to 1951. Using music written to a young man for the “lover” section is consistent with the homosexual love and pederasty that is the subject of the Platonic Pausanius’s speech. And the form of the movement, in which the separate sections alternate and then combine at the very end, is reminiscent of Pausanius’s description of the ideal kind of love: “When an older lover and a young man come together and each obeys the principle appropriate to him ... then and only then, when these two principles combine absolutely is it ever honorable for a young man to accept a lover.”¹⁸ Bernstein’s form implies that he agrees with the rule that love should involve each participant obeying “the principle appropriate to [them],” but the shallowness and playfulness of both sections suggests that those principles do not need to be particularly intellectual or profound. This is a celebration of the winking silliness of love, reminiscent of Pausanius’s claim that men motivated by love may do any number of silly or shameful things “and everyone will immediately say what a charming man he is!”¹⁹ But while Pausanius goes on to say that the behavior-altering effects of love should eventually be directed toward virtue, Bernstein is happy to revel in mere charm, at least for now.

Bernstein shifts the order of the dialogue and puts Aristophanes’s speech next rather than Eryximachus’s. This entire movement is made up of material from two more of the *Five Anniversaries*: an elegant, dance-like piece dedicated to Elizabeth Rudolf and a more agitated one dedicated to Lukas Foss. Rudolf was the mother of a Tanglewood Institute student whom Bernstein knew, and Foss was a fellow American composer.²⁰ Bernstein reads Aristophanes’s tale of separated soul-mates as part of the “fairy-tale mythology of love,” rather than any kind of serious

¹⁷ Burton, 206-207.

¹⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, 184d-e.

¹⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 183b.

²⁰ Kenneth LaFave, *Experiencing Leonard Bernstein: A Listener’s Companion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 19.

explanation.²¹ In Plato’s dialogue, Aristophanes’ version of the mythology of love is that humans long ago had their original form cut in two, so that humans now are only half what they used to be. The desire to unite with another person in love is the desire to bring back “the halves of our original nature together,” and *love* is “the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete.”²²

While the opening and closing sections of this movement—the ones based on the piece dedicated to Rudolf—are primarily occupied with conveying a light-hearted mood of “fairy-tale” innocence, the melodic structure of the inner section mirrors Aristophanes’ story. Just as Aristophanes’ lovers are seeking a counterpart with whom to once again form a full person, Bernstein divides melodies between two sections of the orchestra and has them play as counterparts to each other. For example, when this section starts at rehearsal G, the violas and cellos play alternating eighth-note and dotted-quarter figures, each moving while the other section’s note is static (see Example 4). The two sections fill in the gaps in each other’s portion of the melody, just as two lovers in Aristophanes’ tale fill in the gaps created when they were split from each other. Bernstein pulls this same trick several more times in this section, from the alternating *pizzicato* figures in the strings at rehearsal I to the dialogue between the viola section and the solo violin at rehearsal K. In this movement, Bernstein’s musicians are searching for and finding partners, just as Aristophanes would say they should. And, on a larger scale, in quoting from the *Anniversaries*, the movement suggests a focus on love for individual people that echoes Aristophanes’ talk of soul-mates.

The image shows a musical score for Viola and Violoncello. The Viola part is in the upper staff, and the Violoncello part is in the lower staff. Both parts are in 4/4 time. The Viola part starts with a blue '7' above the first measure, indicating a rehearsal mark. The music consists of alternating eighth-note and dotted-quarter figures between the two instruments. The Viola part has a blue '7' above the first measure, and the Violoncello part has a blue '7' below the first measure. The score is divided into two measures by a double bar line. The first measure is in 4/4 time, and the second measure is in 3/4 time. The Viola part has a blue '7' above the first measure, and the Violoncello part has a blue '7' below the first measure. The music consists of alternating eighth-note and dotted-quarter figures between the two instruments.

Example 4: Cello/viola alternation in the middle section of *Aristophanes* (III. reh. G)

²¹ Bernstein program note.

²² Plato, *Symposium*, 191d, 193a.

The third movement of the *Serenade*, “Eryximachus,” is an extremely short, face-paced scherzo. Nehamas and Woodruff write that Eryximachus’s speech in the dialogue, “like his manner throughout the *Symposium*, is extremely pedantic.”²³ Bernstein spins the speaker’s ramblings about the effects of love on medicine and science into a mechanical-sounding frenzy that lacks much of the emotional pull of the piece’s other movements. This is also one of two movements not to include a quote from the *Five Anniversaries*, and the combination of this and its musical style makes it sound less human-oriented than the rest of the piece. As Bernstein represents it musically, Eryximachus’s contribution to the discussion is complex, impressive, and virtuosic, but only tangentially related to the real topic of discussion—the *love* motif is less readily apparent here than in any of the other movements. Downes calls this movement “an attractive compound of the spirits of Mendelssohn and Prokofiev,” two composers popularly known more for non-human, fairy-tale playfulness than for deep explorations of human emotion. (Though certainly they were both capable of the latter, they are most well-known for the former—see works like the “Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” and “Peter and the Wolf.”)



Example 5: the *love* motif accompaniment and new violin melody (IV. mm. 1-3)

Perhaps the most significant discrepancy between Plato’s and Bernstein’s works is the treatment of Agathon, which makes up the fourth movement of the *Serenade*. His speech in Plato is mainly a joke, but in Bernstein, at least according to Burton, it becomes the “emotional center of gravity” of the whole narrative.²⁴ Musically, it features a new aria-like melody played by the violin overtop a string accompaniment directly derived from the *love* motif (see Example 5). As this motif, which held the leading role in the first movement, descends into the background,

²³ Nehamas and Woodruff, xvi.

²⁴ Burton, 239.

the piece illustrates one kind of love becoming the basis for another, more moving, more intense kind. And yet the violin's melody is not wholly separate from the *love* motif, for it begins with an ascending third and then an ascending sixth, two of the motif's three intervals. While Agathon's dialogue in Plato is a cartoonish list of all the absurdly unrealistic things that love can do, we might read Bernstein's adaptation as insisting that, when one is experiencing love, it really does seem that it "gives peace to men and stillness to the sea, / lays winds to rest, and careworn men to sleep."²⁵ In Bernstein's piece, this is a personal confession, emphasized by the cadenza in which the solo violinist speaks to the audience alone for the first time since Phaedrus's opening statements about love's primacy and ancientness. In turning Agathon's public performance into a private conversation, Bernstein again signals his preference for intimate connection between human beings as the ideal form of love.

Finally, the *Serenade*'s fifth movement is based on both Socrates's and Alcibiades's speeches. While Burton sees the work's emotional center in Agathon, Bernstein insists that he saved it for Socrates, writing, "this is a slow introduction of greater weight than any of the preceding movements."²⁶ That weight comes from more complex harmonies, a slow tempo, and loud dynamics, all of which sounds like the interruption of a somewhat elderly man. After a short dialogue between the violin and cello (perhaps Socrates and Diotima conversing?) we get a variation of the Agathon music again, an indication that perhaps Bernstein's Socrates agrees with Agathon more than Plato's does. But instead of getting a long speech full of philosophical content, Socrates is cut short by the interruption of Alcibiades, and the rest of the piece is essentially party music, with rhythms and harmonies borrowed from jazz. One of the new melodies that appears is yet another quote from the *Five Anniversaries*, this one dedicated to Elizabeth B. Ehrman, the mother of one of Bernstein's Harvard friends. But this party music is also filled with quotes from the other movements, and the *love* motif appears everywhere—it is as if the formal speeches have given way to scattered (and perhaps drunken) discussion, but the topic is still love. One of the last melodies to return is the *Candide* "O Happy We" motif, which implies that it is not even a particularly high or virtuous kind of love that is being celebrated by the end of the party. The sense a listener gets from the entire *Serenade* is that these high and virtuous kinds of love are not the only kinds that matter, which is very different from the ascent story of our initial reading of Plato.

²⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 197d.

²⁶ Bernstein program note.

In a radio talk in 1954, the same year in which Bernstein completed the *Serenade*, he described his own convictions about the importance of human relationships above all else:

I believe in people. I feel, love, need and respect people above all else ... One human figure on the slope of an Alp can make the Alp disappear for me ... I believe in Man's unconscious, the deep spring from which comes his power to communicate and to love. For me, all art's a combination of these powers; art is nothing to me if it does not make contact between the creator and the perceiver on an unconscious level.²⁷

Burton interprets this quote for us: "What Bernstein surely meant for us to understand was that his *Serenade* embodied all his loving feelings toward all his fellow human beings."²⁸ Later in his life, the work took on an even more specific personal meaning for Bernstein. In 1989, he had fallen in love with Mark Adams Taylor, a 28-year-old novelist and speechwriter and "the last love of [Bernstein's] life."²⁹ As Bernstein was driving Taylor somewhere, the *Serenade* began playing on the car radio, and Bernstein asked Taylor if he knew the piece. Taylor replied, "I was never one of your fans," but added that the piece was "like voices you hear when you're in love, but alone." Burton reads this exchange as Bernstein playing the role of Socrates, teaching a young man the arts of life and love.³⁰ In this story, Bernstein is explicitly connecting his *Serenade* with a personal feeling of love toward another human.

But all of this is vastly different from the picture of love we first derived from Diotima's speech. Is Bernstein simply misrepresenting Plato, making a secular humanist out of an idealist philosopher? Or, perhaps worse, is he merely tacking a philosophical label on the work to give it intellectual "street cred," ignorant of the fact that his music and ideas are incommensurate with Plato's? Musicologists, biographers, and reviewers are all over the map on this. I would argue that, while there are drastic differences in tone and content between the dialogue and Bernstein's adaptation at some points (such as Agathon's speech), there are enough intricately placed similarities to read the *Serenade* as a careful and thoughtful adaptation rather than an irresponsible or lazy one. When Bernstein departs from Plato, he apparently wants his listeners to notice. In addition, in crafting this piece, Bernstein is consciously picking up and emphasizing aspects

²⁷ quoted in Burton, 240.

²⁸ Burton, 240.

²⁹ Burton, 506.

³⁰ Burton, 506

that are *already in Plato's dialogue* in order to make his case for a human-oriented description of love. The entire structure of the musical work is based on the same idea (represented by the *love* motif) appearing in different forms and guises—it is development through dialectic, which is exactly what happens in Plato. Bernstein builds his concept of what love is by referencing stories like *Candide* and *West Side Story* as well as his own relationships and friendships with the dedicatees of the *Five Anniversaries*. This is the same thing Plato does—we gradually learn what love is through discussions between friends and through stories, from Aristophanes's mythological story to Socrates's tale of his meeting with Diotima. And Socrates himself, the one who understands and transmits Diotima's story about the ascent of love, is at this party to begin with, sharing with his friends not only his wisdom but also a drink and a couch. Bernstein's *Serenade* is entirely pleasant music—nowhere is there a painful dissonance or the kind of soul-searching pathos that would make us question whether any of the emotions being presented are anything other than good. The party music affirms this—all the speeches, both the silly and the profound, find their fulfillment, not their negation, in the party.

In essence, Bernstein thinks Plato's category of "true love" is too small. Never in the *Serenade* is there transcendent music that sounds like the contemplation of pure beauty, and there is no doubt that a composer as talented as Bernstein would have been capable of such a feat. Instead, the beauty of the *Serenade* is human beauty, and it prompts us to search for—and perhaps find—that same kind of human beauty in the *Symposium*. If a straightforward reading of Plato leads us to dismiss the friendly gathering as instrumental, Bernstein counters that there is actually something *intrinsically* good here. Bernstein uses the dialogue's sociality, physicality, and playfulness to argue that these are all valuable aspects of human love, even though the dialogue's philosophical arguments leads the reader to dismiss them. Far from being superficial, his adaptation is idiosyncratically personal, intellectually sophisticated, and wickedly clever.