

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Leonard Bernstein

Born August 25, 1918, Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Died October 14, 1990, New York City.

Serenade, after Plato's *Symposium*

Bernstein completed this serenade on August 7, 1954, and conducted the first performance on September 12 of that year in Venice. The score calls for solo violin, harp, timpani, snare drum, tenor drum, bass drum, triangle, suspended cymbal, tambourine, chinese blocks, xylophone, glockenspiel, chimes, and string orchestra. The work lasts approximately thirty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first performance of Bernstein's Serenade was given at the Ravinia Festival on July 26, 1956, with Vladimir Spivakovsky as soloist and the composer conducting.

On November 14, 1943, Leonard Bernstein, the twenty-five-year-old assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic, stepped in for Bruno Walter. His debut, broadcast nationwide over the radio, was a triumph and made the front page of *The New York Times*. In the twelve months that followed, Bernstein continued to make news with the premieres of his First Symphony (*Jeremiah*); the ballet *Fancy Free*; and a Broadway musical, *On the Town*. Never before had an American succeeded so brilliantly both as a conductor and as a composer. In fact, the music world had never encountered a major talent of such startling diversity—"a department store of music," as Stravinsky later said.

From the start, Bernstein's work was not easy to pigeonhole, and, as his career exploded, it continued to ignore conventional boundaries. He was a conductor, a pianist, and a composer; at various times each of those interests took center stage, sometimes at the expense of the others. Bernstein complained of having to "flip the switch" from creator to performer and back again. He conducted at La Scala and the Metropolitan Opera, and in 1958 he was named music director of the New York Philharmonic. He became a lecturer and writer, and a television star (the Young People's Concerts designed for eight- to eighteen-year-olds captivated music lovers well into their eighties). He was, above all, a teacher—a "closet rabbi," as he put it.

As a composer, Leonard Bernstein was equally at home in the concert hall and the music theater. He wrote works for each venue and a great many pieces that combined stylistic traits from both traditions. Throughout his life, Bernstein championed the idea that a true American music, by definition, should be eclectic, and he never thought of that word as pejorative (though he often wondered why others did). But the way Bernstein regularly merged both popular and serious styles within the same work regularly drew fierce criticism. Nevertheless, he proudly persisted in his efforts to marry the high and the low, or the light and the serious. *Candide* was one of his greatest successes in this mission, and also one of his biggest flops.

Nearly two hundred years separate Voltaire's novel *Candide; or, Optimism* from the musical by Bernstein and Lillian Hellman, and by 1956 the concept of "the best of all possible worlds" had become particularly elusive. The show itself was troubled almost from the start, even though it inspired some of Bernstein's wisest and wittiest music. *Candide* ran for seventy-three performances—a serious failure by Broadway standards (for a new opera, on the other hand, the figure would be staggering). Hellman eventually called *Candide* her most unpleasant experience in the theater, and Tyron Guthrie, who directed, dismissed it as "an artistic and financial disaster." Still, the original cast album became a cult recording, and over the next few years a number of believers (including Stephen Sondheim) persisted in their attempts to rewrite, redecorate, and revive the show, sometimes as an operetta, sometimes as grand opera (and recently as a pure Broadway musical once again).

The brilliant overture, virtually alone among *Candide*'s many numbers, has emerged unscathed from the experience. It remains one of the most affecting of Bernstein's creations—a charming and sassy curtain raiser based on two of the show's best tunes, "Oh Happy We" and Cunegonde's jewel song, "Glitter and Be Gay." Bernstein himself once called it a valentine to European music. Above all, it is delightful evidence of Bernstein's belief that "man's capacity for laughter is nobler than his divine gift of suffering."

The Serenade, which is one of Bernstein's finest concert-hall works, follows *Wonderful Town*, which opened on Broadway in 1953, and the film score for *On the Waterfront*, and was composed while Bernstein's life was "all Lillian Hellman and *Candide*." In that context, Bernstein insisted on subtitled the serenade "after Plato's *Symposium*" to underline the seriousness of his intentions. Still, even with its use of fugato and sonata form, the serenade is above all a grand entertainment. On August 8, 1954, the day after he completed the score, Bernstein wrote the following comments.

Leonard Bernstein on the Serenade

There is no literal program for this serenade, despite the fact that it resulted from a rereading 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.

For the benefit of those interested in literary allusion, I might suggest the following points as guideposts:

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-allegro, based on the material of the opening fugato.

II. Aristophanes (Allegretto): Aristophanes does not play the role of clown in this dialogue, but instead that of the bedtime storyteller, invoking the fairy-tale mythology of love.

III. Erixymachus (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 jiglike 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.

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