Williams Violin Concerto No. 1
Bernstein Serenade

JAMES EHNES
ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
STÉPHANE DENÈVE

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

	Serenade after Plato's *Symposium*	
1	I. Phaedrus: Pausanias. Lento - Allegro marcato	6. 27
2	II. Aristophanes. Allegretto	4. 23
3	III. Eryximachus. Presto	1. 32
4	IV. Agathon. Adagio	7. 36
5	V. Socrates: Alcibiades. Molto tenuto - Allegro molto vivace	11. 00

John Williams (1932)

	Violin Concerto No. 1	
6	I. Moderato	10. 58
7	II. Slowly. In peaceful contemplation	9. 35
8	III. Broadly. Maestoso - Quickly	9. 57
	Total playing time:	61. 31

James Ehnes, violin
St. Louis Symphony Orchestra
Stéphane Denève, music director

James Ehnes, John Williams, Stéphane Denève
at Powell Hall in November 2019
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It has been a true joy making this recording with the wonderful St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and my dear friend Stéphane Denève.

It was Stéphane who introduced me to the John Williams concerto, about a decade ago. Our shared experience with the work has been greatly enriched by having the opportunity to work on it with John himself on multiple occasions.

John Williams' artistry occupies a unique place in musical history, especially in terms of the breadth of his compositional output and the way his music has transcended boundaries of both genre and audience. Stéphane and I felt that a natural musical companion for this recording would be Leonard Bernstein, probably the only other American composer whose music has reached a similarly wide and varied audience.

Bernstein's delightful Serenade is, for me, perhaps the most successful musical marriage of his various artistic personalities. It is a work of great profundity, but also of the most raucous merriment!

Working with such wonderful friends as Stéphane and the artists of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, on music that means so much to me, has been a dream come true. I hope listeners will enjoy the experience of listening as much as we enjoyed the experience of recording these two timeless masterpieces.

James Ehnes

I was just 10 years old — the same age as Elliott in the movie — when I saw E.T. and discovered the music of John Williams for the first time. I never could have imagined that one day I'd have the privilege of getting to know him personally, or of recording his first Violin Concerto with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, the very orchestra that premiered the work in 1981. This is a concerto very dear to my heart. Composed during a tragic time in this genius composer's personal life, its long introductory violin solo, its many extensive cadenzas, and also the elegiac and nocturnal melody which begins the second movement all seem to express a devastatingly perplexed solitude. The orchestra often counterbalances this spirit with richly orchestrated compassion. Some cathartic climaxes can be surprisingly intricate for those who are not used to John Williams' concert scores. But there is no rose without thorns and multiple listenings will for sure reveal the inner logic of these vast musical structures… I can never thank John adequately, not only for his wondrous music, but furthermore for attending our rehearsals and enlightening the orchestra musicians, James and me with his precious remarks.

A perfect musical companion, Leonard Bernstein's Serenade is also a masterwork offering a vast array of emotions. It was particularly fascinating to explore the narrativity implied by the different characters depicted in it, while keeping the melodic quality salient. James inspired me greatly with his discursive, virtuosic, colorful yet always lyrical violin playing.

I could not dream better partners for this recording of two classic American violin concertos than my dear friend James Ehnes and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. I would like to thank them *du fond du coeur*.

Stéphane Denève

Stéphane Denève
© Jay Fram

James Ehnes
© Ben Ealovega

Leonard Bernstein
Serenade (after Plato's *Symposium*)

Leonard Bernstein's Serenade for solo violin with strings and percussion is widely regarded as the late composer and conductor's finest concert piece. Bernstein wrote it, in 1954, after re-reading Plato's *Symposium*, one of the Greek thinker's famous philosophical dialogues. In that work, Plato recounts a conversation among a group of inquiring minds that has gathered over dinner in ancient Athens to consider the nature of love. Although the titles of the five movements that comprise Serenade clearly refer to the *Symposium*, Bernstein denied a literal correspondence between Plato's work and his own. He admitted only that "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." Each movement grows out of musical ideas presented in the previous one, and each is dominated by the solo violin.

Bernstein identified Plato's speakers in the headings of each movement. The opening presents Phaedrus, who begins the proceedings with a lyrical ode to Eros, and then Pausanias, whose description of the dualistic quality of love — earthly and celestial, physical and spiritual — is mirrored in a movement based on two contrasting themes. In the second movement, the playwright Aristophanes invokes the mythology of love.

Next comes the physician Eryximachus, who proposes bodily harmony as a model for lovers' compatibilities. Bernstein described the music for this third movement as "an extremely short fugato scherzo, born of a blend of mystery and humor." By contrast, the ensuing movement, inspired by Agathon's speech praising love's charms, is a simple aria in slow tempo.

The finale begins with a weighty prologue, representing Socrates's speech on the demonic power of love. This is interrupted, however, by the entrance of Alcibiades, who leads a band of drunken followers. They turn the gathering into a hedonistic revel that Plato seems to suggest is as true to the spirit of love as any of the sober discourses that have gone before. "If there is a hint of jazz in the celebration," Bernstein wrote of this final part of his score, "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."

Paul Schiavo

John Williams
Violin Concerto No. 1

Composed in 1974, John Williams' first Violin Concerto premiered on January 29, 1981 with violinist Mark Peskanov and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra conducted by Leonard Slatkin.

While Williams himself may have lost count of the numerous awards he has received for his distinguished film scores, those scores represent only one facet of his remarkably productive career. It was, in fact, for the exceptional breadth of his contributions to our musical life that he was among those who received the Kennedy Center Honors in 2004.

He was composing chamber music and concert works before he began writing for the movies, receiving as many commissions as he can handle from major orchestras and outstanding soloists while at the same time accepting further assignments from filmmakers. Unlike Williams' other concertos for various instruments, however, his first Violin Concerto was neither composed under a commission, nor with any specific soloist in mind, let alone a performance scheduled.

This work came from a genuine "inner impulse," and the romantic lyricism that characterizes it bespeaks further the personal nature of that impulse. Williams' wife, the actress Barbara Ruick, had for some time asked him for a violin concerto; he began composing one shortly before her death in 1974, and completed it as a memorial to her.

The composer provided the following background in a note of his own for the work's premiere in 1981: "I set to work laying out my Concerto in three movements, each with expansive themes and featuring virtuosic passage work used both for effective contrast and display. The pattern of movements is fast, slow, fast, with a cadenza at the end of the first movement. Although atonal in style and technique, I think of the piece as lying within the romantic tradition.

The first movement begins with an unaccompanied presentation, by the solo violin, of the principal theme, which is composed of broad melodic intervals and rhythmic contour, in contrast with the jauntier second subject. Orchestra and soloist share the exploitation of this material, and after the solo cadenza the movement is brought to a quiet conclusion.

The second movement features an elegiac melodic subject. While this melody is the central feature of the movement, there is, by way of contrast, a brisk middle section based on rushing 'tetrachordal' figures that are tossed back and forth between soloist and orchestra. The mood of the opening is always present; however, the rushing and playing about continue to

be accompanied by hints of a return to the movement's more introspective opening.

The finale opens with chiming chords of great dissonance from the orchestra, all of which pivot around a G being constantly sounded by the trumpet. The solo part begins immediately on a journey of passagework in triple time that forms a kind of moto perpetuo, which propels the movement. In rondo-like fashion, several melodies emerge until insistent intervals, borrowed from the first movement, form to make up the final lyrical passage 'sung' by the solo violin. An excited coda, based on the triple-time figure, concludes the work."

Richard Freed (1928-2022), used with permission from the Freed family.

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

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^ tracks 1-5 (Bernstein)
***** tracks 6-8 (Williams)

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Stéphane Denève : Music Director

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