Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta (1936)
by Béla Bartók (Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary [now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania], 1881 - New York, 1945)

Our work is modelled after Nature”—Béla Bartók once remarked, referring to his own music and that of his friend and compatriot Zoltán Kodály. (Although they often presented a united front on the outside, their styles were actually quite different.) What did he mean, exactly? Nature has stood for so many different things to so many people; the relationship between art and nature has occupied many great minds for centuries.

For Bartók, nature was important on several different levels. He loved being outdoors all his life, and enjoyed collecting and studying plants. But nature also became the basis of Bartók’s artistic philosophy. He sought to expand the classical harmonic system in a natural,” organic way, using natural” ratios and finding new connections among the degrees of the chromatic scale that nevertheless fit in with the natural” circle of fifths. Some scholars believe that Bartók applied the Golden Section* and the Fibonacci series** in his works, and while there is no evidence that Bartók actually composed this way, the fact that these natural” ratios do appear in his works suggests that he was instinctively drawn to such symmetrical structures.

The work on which most scholars base their theories is the first movement of Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta which is, without a doubt, one of Bartók’s most strictly organized compositions. It is a fugue in slow tempo, sometimes referred to as a funnel fugue” because of the gradual broadening of the orchestral texture. The violas, in the middle of the spectrum, introduce the theme followed by the violins on top and the cellos at the bottom. The tonal plan of the various entrances also expands gradually. Each of the first twelve entrances is on a different pitch, arranged according to a precise scheme based on the circle of fifths. The climax of the movement occurs at the entrance furthest removed from the initial A: the note E-flat, exactly halfway around the circle. It is marked by a triple fortissimo and a blow on the bass drum. After this moment, the music begins to move backwards. The mutes, used at the beginning and then removed, come back on the strings. It is a compressed sort of recapitulation, with the theme inverted (turned upside down). There is a magical moment where the original and inverted forms of the theme appear at the same time, surrounded by exquisite celesta figurations. The movement ends quietly on a unison A played by the violins.

All this may sound extremely intricate and cerebral, but is really no more so than a Bach fugue or a piece of Renaissance choral polyphony; and as in those earlier examples, the very intellectual precision of the structure becomes a sensual experience.

The second-movement Allegro is in complete contrast to the opening fugue (which is like a sculpture carved out of a single piece of stone). Here Bartók uses a variety of ideas, shaped into a classical sonata form, with second theme, development and recapitulation. The first idea is similar to the piano piece Village Joke from the fifth volume of Mikrokosmos. It is the starting point for an eventful movement whose high points include some lively piano solos and an extended passage for pizzicato (plucked) strings. At one point, Bartók asks for what has become known as the Bartók pizzicato,” with the plucked string rebounding against the fingerboard with a slap. The recapitulation is preceded by a mysterious pianissimo section where the strings develop the main theme (with its melodic steps all compressed into half-tones) in a contrapuntal way, somewhat in the manner of the first movement. The fugue theme is hinted at a little later, as a reminder: we will in fact do well not to forget that melody.
The third-movement Adagio is connected to nature in a different way from the first two. It belongs to a series of Bartókian slow movements evoking the mysterious sounds of nature as heard by a solitary observer at night. The tone is set by a series of high F’s on the xylophone, getting gradually louder and faster and then softer and slower again. Then we hear three distinct thematic groups in succession; in another example of Bartókian symmetry, the third theme is followed by a return of the second, then of the first, and the movement ends with the same high F’s with which it began.

Many of Bartók’s finales incorporate dance motives of more than one nationality. In the case of Music for Strings, the finale’s first dance is in what Bartók called the “Bulgarian” rhythm: an asymmetrical alternation of units of two and three eighth-notes. Once more, there are three separate dance melodies, but then we’re in for a major surprise: the first movement’s fugue theme returns in its entirety, although in a new melodic shape, as the narrow half-steps of its first appearance are all replaced by broader intervals. This particular transformation, which occurs in numerous works of Bartók, always symbolizes a move from darkness to light, from complexity to simplicity, or from a problem to its solution. In the coda, the irregular Bulgarian rhythm is similarly smoothed out to an even 2/2 time, and the harmonies suddenly assume a more traditional character. Clearly, we have reached the end of our musical journey happy and free from cares.

* The Golden Section is a ratio between two segments where the second is related to the first as the first is to the whole.
** The Fibonacci series is a mathematical series in which each number is equal to the sum of the preceding two: 1-2-3-5-8-13-21-34-55...

Adagio for Strings (1935)
by Samuel Barber (West Chester, PA, 1910 - New York, 1981)

Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings is one of those emblematic pieces without which American music in the 20th century would never be what it is. It became known far beyond the classical music world when Oliver Stone used it in his 1986 movie Platoon about the Vietnam War, as a musical symbol of the homes the soldiers had left behind. It was a most appropriate symbol as Barber -- who would have turned 100 this year -- managed to capture a sense of peaceful beauty, combining great simplicity with great expressive power.

A quietly meandering melody gradually grows in volume and intensity until it reaches a passionate climax and then fades back again to a whispered conclusion. All transitions are perfectly seamless and arrive with a sense of complete inevitability; yet the emotional effect is not diminished even after hundreds of hearings.

Originally, the Adagio was the slow movement in Barber’s String Quartet, Op. 11. The composer arranged it for string orchestra at the request of Arturo Toscanini, who gave the premiere of the new version on November 5, 1938, with the NBC Symphony.

Serenade after Plato’s Symposium (1954)
by Leonard Bernstein (Lawrence, MA, 1918 - New York, 1990)

What is love? We may hardly presume to be any closer to an answer than Plato was 2,400 years ago, when he recorded the memorable conversations his teacher Socrates had had with his disciples on the subject at a drinking party (the original meaning of the Greek word symposium, the title of Plato’s dialogue, is “drinking together”). Plato’s ideas about love are
by no means restricted to the “Platonic,” but encompass the spiritual, the emotional, and the sexual, the love between men and women, and (above all) the love between men and boys, of which a modern commentator, John M. Cooper, says: “the focus [was] on the adult male’s role as ethical and intellectual educator of the adolescent...whether accompanied by sex or not.”

In composing his *Serenade* after the *Symposium*, Leonard Bernstein didn’t mean to express or illustrate Plato, but rather to offer a musical reaction to his reading of the text. People have been speculating about the attraction Plato’s frank description of homosexuality may have held for Bernstein (whose own homosexuality is no secret); but such speculations only impose another kind of “literal program” that is really not necessary for an appreciation of the work.

Bernstein spent the summer of 1954 on Martha’s Vineyard with his wife Felicia Montealegre and their young daughter. Isaac Stern had asked him for a work for violin and orchestra, supported by a commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation. Instead of a regular three-movement concerto, Bernstein wrote a five-movement, 30-minute work that became, according to many critics, one of his finest compositions for the concert hall.

**Leonard Bernstein on his *Serenade***

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. *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 see 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 revellers 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.