

MAY
PROGRAM
NOTES
BY JON KOCHAVI



Aaron Copland
(1900-1990)

Aaron Copland characterized Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (which ended our previous subscription concerts last month) as the greatest musical achievement of his century. But while his own music never shocked the world as Stravinsky's did, Copland revolutionized the approach to composing music in America, establishing an American sound that exerted a profound impact on generations of composers and audiences. While Stravinsky employed adventurous dissonance, unprecedented orchestration, and angular rhythms to project a wholly new soundscape, Copland relied on simple musical building blocks (e.g., an interval of a fifth or fourth, an arpeggiated triad, a familiar dance rhythm) in order to construct intricate tapestries of motives and melodies.

No stranger to complex atonal composition, Copland turned to a more familiar diatonic style in the 1930s, using folk melodies and rhythms. The three works we hear this evening are sparkling examples of his new, more accessible style that came to define the American musical vernacular. He explains the motivation for shifting

his approach: "The change [that came over the musical scene in the late 1920s] was brought about, of course, by the introduction for the first time of the mass media of distribution in the field of music . . . One of the crucial questions of our times was injected: How are we to make contact with this enormously enlarged potential audience, without sacrificing in any way the highest musical standards?" Copland did not simply leave the old style behind, though, which continued to evolve through such works as his *Piano Sonata* (1941) and his *Piano Quartet* (1950). Remarkably, throughout all of his works, he maintained his own individual character. Copland himself said, "In my own mind there never was so sharp a dichotomy between the various works I have written. Different purposes produce different kinds of work; that is all."

"Hoe-Down" from *Rodeo* (1942)

Rodeo was Copland's second ballet score with a Wild West theme, the first being *Billy the Kid* from 1938. The work was written for Agnes de Mille, who danced the lead in the fantastically successful premiere of the production at the Met in October 1942. The action depicts lively cowboy dances in which the Cowgirl tries to rope herself a suitable mate. "Hoe-Down", the last of four dance episodes Copland's 1943 orchestral suite based on the ballet, is a rousing fiddler's dance. The familiar main theme comes from the folk tune "Bonaparte's Retreat" and the knee-slapping middle section also makes use of Western folk tunes (first in the trumpet and then in the oboe and solo violin).

Appalachian Spring (1943-44)

A few months after the premiere of *Rodeo*, Copland received a commission to compose a new ballet for Martha Graham. Copland had met Graham in the early 1930s at a concert featuring his thorny *Piano Variations*. Graham was taken with the work and remarked that she would love to choreograph a solo dance to it. Copland laughed, saying he couldn't imagine it would be possible with such unforgiving music. To his astonishment, Graham went ahead with the project, creating her piece *Dithyramb*. Impressed, Copland wrote, "Surely only an artist with an understanding of my work could have visualized dance material in so rhythmically complex and thematically abstruse a composition." The two looked for opportunities for a more direct collaboration but had to wait over ten years for the commission from Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge which called for a score for chamber orchestra to accompany Graham's choreography.

Copland composed the music based on a scenario by Graham, who choreographed the work after the music was complete. The story was summarized at the premiere in October 1944:

A pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the [19th] century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites. An older neighbor suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end, the couple is left quiet and strong in their new house.

After it was nearly complete, Graham entitled the work *Appalachian Spring* after a line from the iconic American poet Hart Crane's epic poem "The Bridge". Copland was always amused by frequent comments made to him about how he captured the essence of the Appalachian spirit in the piece he wrote without Appalachia in mind at all. In fact, it was Graham herself who provided the musical inspiration for the work, as Copland later wrote:

When I wrote Appalachian Spring I was thinking primarily about Martha and her unique choreographic style, which I knew well. Nobody else seems quite like Martha: she's so proud, so very much herself. And she's unquestionably very American: there's something prim and restrained, simple yet strong, about her which one tends to think of as American.

The orchestral suite (which Copland completed in 1945) follows the original ballet closely, with one extended scene excised towards the end. The simple introduction slowly unfolds an A Major triad, as the characters are introduced "in a suffused light" in Copland's words. A scampering outburst then mixes with a more sustained chorale, depicting "a sentiment both elated and religious." After a duo for the engaged couple, a series of country dances ensues with the arrival of the revivalist and his flock. An extended solo dance for the Bride expressing the "extremes of

joy and fear and wonder” leads into the final section featuring the now well-known Shaker melody, “A Gift to be Simple”. Copland had come across the tune in 1940 and felt that it perfectly matched “the kind of austere movements associated with [Graham’s] choreography.” The suite ends with a coda featuring a moving hymn in the strings and then the winds, as the serene music from the opening returns to bring the work full circle.

Third Symphony (1944-46)

Molto moderato – with simple expression

Allegro molto

Andantino quasi allegretto

Molto deliberato

At the turn of the 20th century, Serge Koussevitzky had been languishing in the double-bass section of the Bolshoi Opera Orchestra, unable to gain a foothold to launch his conducting career. Things would change after he met and won the affections of Natalie Ushkov, daughter of a fantastically wealthy tea magnate. The two married in 1905, and in 1908 with his new-found wealth, Koussevitzky hired and conducted the Berlin Philharmonic in a concert of all Russian music. This success brought him to international attention. A series of subsequent conducting posts led to his appointment as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1924. He would remain with the BSO until 1949, establishing it as the premiere orchestra for introducing important new symphonic works. Copland had met Koussevitzky in Paris while studying with Nadia Boulanger, and the two soon forged a close working relationship, with Koussevitzky championing the young composer’s works, and with Copland recommending other American composers for Koussevitzky to consider.

When his wife died in 1942, Koussevitzky established a foundation in her honor whose purpose was to commission new works by contemporary composers. The foundation, which is still active today, has commissioned hundreds of works, including Bartok’s *Concerto for Orchestra* and Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes*. Copland was among the first composers to receive a commission from the foundation, and he responded with what would be the largest orchestral work of his career, the *Third Symphony*. Just as Graham provided the inspiration for *Rodeo*, Koussevitzky himself (who would conduct the premiere in Boston in 1946) offered Copland the focus for his symphony:

I knew exactly the kind of music [Koussevitzky] enjoyed conducting and the sentiments he brought to it, and I knew the sound of his orchestra, so I had every reason to do my darndest to write a symphony in the grand manner.

Koussevitzky was indeed pleased, calling it the greatest American symphony to date, and it went on to become the most frequently programmed American symphony in the 20th century.

The beginning of the symphony is like a New World “chant”, Unison E’s and B’s open the work and form the pillars around which the rest of the moving chant glides, always returning to these two notes which are often paired to form melodic fourths and fifths, evoking the wide open spaces of the country. This chant builds to a new theme in the brass, intensely chromatic and unyielding, treated in a fugato. The tranquility of the first theme alternates with the powerful majesty of the second, but it is an extension of the chant that ends the journey, as serene a close to a symphonic first movement as there is in the literature.

The second movement is a kind of scherzo, with a highly energetic and rhythmic fanfare in the brass developed into birdsong by the winds. An expressive middle section provides a cantabile contrast before the piano reintroduces the original dance-like theme by gradually increasing the tempo.

The second theme from the first movement returns in the third, but now pianissimo in the high register of the violins. Metrically, it is recast in a combination of 5/4 and 3/4 meters (instead of the 4/4 of the first movement). The theme is developed in new ways, leading to the use of a quick up-down motion (first in the flute) that is derived from the opening first movement theme.

In 1942, Copland wrote a short fanfare as part of a commission from Eugene Goossens of the Cincinnati Symphony, who commissioned 17 other American composers to write similar works to honor the country during WWII. Certain that the work would fade into obscurity, Copland decided to use *Fanfare for the Common Man* as the main theme in the fourth movement of his symphony a few years later. Of course, his *Fanfare* went on to become one of the most popular works of the century.

The theme appears in various guises throughout the movement, at points understated, noble, pure, and ornamented. Copland mixes in a fleet contrapuntal theme based on motivic fragments of the fanfare and a richly harmonized dolce theme presented in an odd 7/8 meter that eventually normalizes to 4/4 and appears with the opening theme of the first movement. This last musical element is merged with the fanfare theme for a fantastic climax to close the piece.

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