

Copland

Aaron Copland (1900 - 1990) is arguably one of the pre-eminent American musicians of the 20th century.

Clarinet Concerto, Four Dances from Rodeo and Old American Songs

Aaron Copland was the first of many young American composers who studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger in the 1920s and 1930s. He was determined to break free of the Austro-German musical tradition that dominated America at the time (although Charles Ives had already done this in spectacular style, his music was rarely performed and was relatively unknown even in musical circles).

Copland rapidly established a reputation as a “modern” composer, with dissonant and striking works such as his **Organ Symphony** and **Piano Variations**. Within a very short time he was the leading American composer of his generation and he acted as mentor to many up-and-coming composers, including the young Leonard Bernstein. Gradually, his musical language developed, as he sought to reach out to a wider public; in so doing, he created a sound-world that is at once unique and much copied, evoking both the metropolitan and prairie aspects of America. In 1942, he produced his famous and now ubiquitous **Fanfare for the Common Man**, and two years later, he incorporated this music into the final movement of his **Third Symphony**, a fine work. If this symphony (and much of Copland’s work) is redolent of his country of birth, he was also drawn to the music of Latin America, primarily through his friendship with the Mexican conductor and composer Carlos Chavez. Products of this influence include the **Three Latin American Sketches**, **Danzon Cubano** and, undoubtedly best known of all, **El Salon Mexico**. In the early 1950s Copland was summoned before Senator McCarthy’s Committee on Un-American Activities, which led to cancellations of performances of his **Lincoln Portrait**, a work (for orchestra and narrator) which had hitherto been regarded as patriotic. He lived under the shadow of this committee for two years, and at one point wondered whether he would ever be able to travel abroad. Copland’s recollections of this period, in his autobiography, are phlegmatic and even humorous, but there is little doubt that the experience unnerved him, although somehow he managed to continue working on his opera, **The Tender Land**. Towards the end of his composing life, he became more introspective and turned to serialism, producing two fine orchestral works, **Connotations (1962)** and **Inscape (1967)**. It is a mark of Copland’s genius that, in changing fundamentally from tonality to serialism, he produced works that remain clearly recognisable as his own.

Copland was both a friend and an admirer of Stravinsky and, like Stravinsky, he seems destined to be remembered chiefly for orchestral suites taken from three ballets. Although **Appalachian Spring** is the best-known of the three, but regular concert-goers are likely to be familiar with the other two: **Billy The Kid** and **Rodeo**. In these works, we encounter Copland finding a new musical language, moving away from the acerbic dissonance of his earlier works. The music is unashamedly tonal, but at the same time it is obviously modern; it could only have been written in the twentieth century. More importantly, Copland produced music which is unmistakably American. It is a natural, national style, although in no way nationalistic.

Rodeo was written in 1942 for the choreographer Agnes de Mille, who wrote, “The theme of the ballet was basic. It deals with the problem that has confronted all American women, from earliest pioneer times, and which has never ceased to occupy them throughout the history of the building of our country: how to get a suitable man”. The ballet was a great success and, shortly afterwards, Copland extracted a suite of four “episodes”, three of which are being played in this concert.

Buckaroo Holiday is the longest of the episodes. It starts with an insistent, syncopated theme which falls through an octave, answered by brassy syncopated chords. This alternation dominates the movement, although there is other material. A gentle, pastoral episode (with harmonies which clearly lead towards **Appalachian Spring**) has melodic fragments played in

octaves by the woodwind. This is followed by an extended rhythmic passage which has a number of solo passages (notably those on trombone and trumpet) which the composer indicates should be played variously “with humour” or “perky”. After a further, short gentle passage underpinned by celesta and harp ostinati, the music once again becomes boisterous, restating and developing earlier material, ending with a loud, rapid volley of repeated notes

Corral Nocturne is in the nature of a quiet interlude, After a short introductory passage, the music settles into a routine of melodic fragments, based on a falling triad, played by the woodwind over discreet string accompaniment.

Hoe-Down is probably the best-known of the episodes, and is often played as a concert piece in its own right. It starts with a loud, folksy theme played by the full orchestra, which re-occurs throughout the movement. The characteristic hoe-down rhythm is omnipresent, whether in *tutti* sections or in the recurring “piano vamping” passages. This is neither profound nor serious music, just rollicking fun, brilliantly conceived and expertly orchestrated, ending even more loudly than it begins.

In 1950, experiencing problems with the composition of his *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Copland decided to set 5 *Old American Songs* for male voice and piano. These settings of traditional American melodies (often anonymous) were such a success that he rapidly created a second set of five songs. Copland subsequently orchestrated both sets, with equal success. Other composers have since made choral arrangements of the songs, often with Copland’s blessing, and it is these that are heard in tonight’s concert. There are three songs each from the two sets

Ching-A-Ring Chaw (set 2) is a minstrel song found in the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays. Seemingly simple, it requires considerable concentration by the choir, who doubtless shout its final “Chaw” with great relief. The arrangement is by Irving Fine, a noted American symphonist and former Copland pupil.

Long Time Ago (set 1) was also arranged by Irvine Fine.

Simple Gifts (set 1) is a Shaker song previously used by Copland in *Appalachian Spring*; the tune may also be known to some as *Lord of the Dance*. The arrangement is by David L. Brunner (who is currently Director of Choral Activities at the University of Central Florida).

The Little Horses (set 2) is arranged for women’s voices only and is a lullaby “originating in the Southern States”. This arrangement is by Raymond Wilding-White, who also studied with Copland.

At The River (set 2) has a revivalist feel and is the only one of tonight’s selection which can be positively attributed, having been written by Rev. Robert Lowry in 1865. Once more, the arrangement is by Raymond Wilding-White.

I Bought Me A Cat (Set 1), described as “a children’s nonsense song” (complete with animal noises), is another arrangement by Irving Fine.

The *Clarinet Concerto* was commissioned by Benny Goodman, the jazz clarinettist. This, however, was no early attempt at crossover. Goodman was an academy-trained musician who often played the classical concerto repertoire (he was said to be a fine interpreter of Mozart’s concerto) and he had already commissioned works from other contemporary composers, including Bela Bartok. Although Copland’s concerto has a number of jazz-like passages, Copland has stated that he did not consciously take into account Goodman’s jazz background, although his autobiography seemingly contradicts this, referring to the second movement as “stark, severe and jazzy”. He also describes this movement as representing an “unconscious fusion of...Charleston rhythms, boogie woogie and Brazilian folk tunes”.

The work is scored for strings, piano and harp, and is continuous (although there are two distinct movements, separated by a cadenza). It starts simply and magically. A gentle, rising figure on the harp is answered by a falling figure (just two notes, a major second apart) on the clarinet. From this simple introduction, the entire first section, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time throughout, is built. The clarinet plays an almost unbroken melody as the strings enter gradually and the accompaniment gradually broadens (introducing a counterpoint which is almost, but not quite, imitative), with the violins at one point taking over the theme. This beautiful, quiet, reflective opening ends leads into the cadenza. After a brief restatement of the opening falling motif, the soloist becomes increasingly animated, gradually getting faster and louder, with syncopated arpeggios (prefiguring the next section) dominating the musical material.

The cadenza finishes with an upward rush over three octaves, at which point the orchestra returns with a rhythmic, insistent yet delicately scored idea. High violins introduce a melodic fragment clearly derived from the opening material, and this fragment is tossed around the entire string section until the clarinet enters jauntily with the same idea, seeming to be more an ensemble player than a soloist. There are rhythmic twists, with the time signature changing into $\frac{3}{4}$ and back into $\frac{4}{4}$, and the material becomes more brash and effervescent as the musical development unfolds, becoming progressively more unstable, with increasingly frequent changes of time signature. The soloist then introduces a new idea, a sinuous, seductive melody with obvious jazz influence, underpinned by the double basses who are directed to play their syncopated line in "slap bass style". After repetition with slight rhythmic variation, the music becomes increasingly frenetic, leading to the seven stabbing chords which precede the clarinet's final flourish, an upwards glissando which pays obvious homage to the opening of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.