

Aaron Copland and American Nationalist Music

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During the Romantic and 20th century eras of music, the culture surrounding, and intent behind the fine arts underwent a great deal of change. Music, visual art, and drama were no longer simply forms of entertainment, but were becoming a powerful force in social and political spheres. Composers starting in the Romantic era started to include a great deal of angst, among other strong emotions, in their work. This trend of heightened emotional content was often influenced by war, suppression, or tension. One of the great movements seeking to speak through music during this time period was the nationalist movement.

Nationalism is a movement in world culture which seeks to create a sense of national identity and celebrate the culture of individual nations. While this mindset influenced all aspects of society during its period of prominence (mid to late 19th century-early 20th century), it was particularly prevalent in the art of the period. Within music, there were numerous composers who reflected the nationalist style. The first notable composer of what would later be considered nationalist music was Fryderyk Chopin, a Polish composer of piano music (primarily), who lived from 1810-1849. From that point on, many composers intentionally began to compose music which reflected the culture of their home country. These composers include, but are not limited to: Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904, Czechoslovakia), Edvard Grieg (1843–1907, Norway), Jean Sibelius (1865–1957, Finland) Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958, U.K.), Charles Ives (1874–1954, U.S.A.) the “Might Five” Russian composers, including Rimsky-Korsakov and Modest

Mussorgsky, and the three “titans” of Modern Russian music, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), and Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978).¹

Each of these composers, while coming from different countries and backgrounds, had very similar reasons for writing the way they did. Chopin wrote in a distinctly Polish style because of his unsatisfied homesickness through his life upon being kept from returning home to Warsaw due to war. War and political unrest also heavily influenced the works of the “Mighty Five” and “Titans”, as there was a great deal of political tension in Russia leading up to, and during the Russian revolution. In order to preserve their culture, express their national pride, and in many cases, to make a political statement, these aforementioned composers used compositional techniques that reflected their native countries.²

These composers, while very different stylistically, are categorized as nationalists because their music reflected the style of their home country, and served to glorify their own cultural heritage, which is what nationalists were often seeking to accomplish. The nationalist era encompasses a great deal of the Romantic and Modern eras of music. The timeline of its prevalence varies from country to country, paired most directly with wartime in each country. Each region used its musical heritage as a sense of pride during trying times. For this reason, American Nationalism can most greatly be associated with early to mid-20th century music during the World Wars.

In American culture, the most notable composer of nationalist music (while there were many) was Aaron Copland. Copland exemplified the American nationalist style by drawing heavily from the “Americana Style”³. The Americana style was influenced by American folk

1 Haskins, Ann (August 14, 2008). "Terpsichorean Titan". LA Weekly. Retrieved March 24, 2013.

2 Kennedy, Michael. 2006. "Nationalism in Music". The Oxford Dictionary of Music, second edition, revised, Joyce Bourne Kennedy, associate editor. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

3 Funk and Wagnall's New World Encyclopedia. "Aaron Copland". 2002. Print.

songs, country, slave songs, jazz, and other forms of music which defined early American music, and influenced the development of later forms of American music. Copland's music not only imitated this style, but also transformed it, and created a widespread norm of what American classical music would become. Copland, having been born at the very beginning of the 20th century, lived through a number of troubling years in the United States, namely the World Wars, and the Great Depression. During these troubled times, Copland wrote a number of pieces intended specifically to boost the morale of Americans, and offer a sense of pride for the country. For this reason, he has been undoubtedly included as an influential nationalist composer, and the most notable of the American nationalists.⁴

Aaron Copland was born in New York City, NY on November 14, 1900. His composition teachers included Rubin Goldmark, an American composer, and Nadia Boulanger, a French composer, both of whom were renowned for their teaching in composition. Copland's time studying with Boulanger led to a deep interest in the work of French impressionists such as Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. In turn, Copland's early works imitated the impressionist style. As he continued his education, his music began to include a great deal of rhythmic complexity and dissonant tonicizations, likely due to his studies of Jazz towards the end of his early career.

During Copland's middle adulthood (1925-1950) he began writing in a simpler style. This era of compositional simplicity led to some of his most renowned works, and particular pieces of this era also became some of the staples of "American Music" due in part to the patriotic nature of these works in light of World War II. While he still used complex ideas, he began to combine

⁴Lister, Rodney. *Aaron Copland and His World/Music For The Common Man: Aaron Copland During The Depression and War/The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity*. Tempo 60, no. 236. April 2006).

them, again, with simpler ideas. In many pieces, especially his larger works, Copland will modulate from consonant homophonic textures to atonal polyphony and anywhere in between within the same piece.

During his later adulthood (1950+), Copland began to draw influences from other modern composers. He began to adopt tone rows into some of his pieces as expressionist Arnold Schönberg had in his pieces, and began experimenting with non-serial atonality as well. He had, however, maintained a steady habit of writing tonal works as well. During this time, he also arranged a number of folk songs and, from 1960 on, turned more to conducting than composing.

While these transitions between early, middle, and later adulthood saw a great deal of variation in Copland's style, his music through the decades is considered some of the most quintessential “Americana” music of all time.⁵ Copland has a few particular pieces in his repertoire which had a great deal of influence and impact upon the political and social atmosphere of the United States in the 20th century, and because of this, are some of his most successful pieces. These pieces include the *Old American Songs*, *Appalachian Spring*, *A Lincoln Portrait*, and *Fanfare for the Common Man*.

Aaron Copland arranged two sets of pieces based on American folk songs later in his career. The first set was written in 1950, and the second written in 1952. Each set contains five songs, a total of ten folksongs between the two. The first set includes the pieces “The Boatsman's Dance”, “The Dodger”, “Long Time Ago”, “Simple Gifts”, and “I Bought Me a Cat”. The second set includes the pieces “Little Horses”, “Zion's Walls”, “The Golden Willow Tree”, “The Golden Vanity”, “At the River”, and “Ching-a-Ring Chaw”. These two sets of American folk songs include minstrel show tunes, satirical political songs, blackface tunes, a Shaker melody,

5 Funk and Wagnall's New World Encyclopedia. “Aaron Copland”. 2002. Print.

children's songs, and American hymns.

One of the most famous songs from this set is “Simple Gifts”. This song is a traditional Shaker hymn, a melody that has been used by numerous American composers through history as a celebration of true American music. Copland includes this arrangement, among others, to highlight the simple nature of American life preceding the Industrial Revolution. Seeing as it is a simple tune, written in a colony which emphasizes simplicity, Copland wrote the arrangement with minimal accompaniment, as Shaker hymns are often sung. (figure 1)

Figure 1: “Simple Gifts” from Old American Songs

Simple Gifts

1

from *Old American Songs, First Set*
Shaker Song
original key: A Major

Arranged by
AARON COPLAND

Quietly flowing ($\text{♩} = 72$)

legato, simply
mp (2nd time f)

'Tis the gift to be sim-ple 'tis the

f (*very plain*)

mf

mp (2nd time f)

gift to be free 'Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be And

[2nd time play small notes]

p

hold back a trifle

when we find our-selves in the place just right 'Twill be in the val - ley of

hold back a trifle

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While this work is one of the most playful and , in some selections, the most satirical of his major works, the *Old American Songs* are held in high esteem amongst his most serious works in the American canon. This is because these song cycles “contain melodies of a simple, charming nature that characterizes the American style of composition in the mid-twentieth century” and “represent the core of American values, and could be described as celebratory of America's past, present, and future.”⁶ Each song from the two sets represents different regions or

6 Gentry, Jonathan. *Old American Songs* program notes. The Greater Dallas Youth Symphony Orchestra. Published Feb. 28, 2011. Accessed April 26, 2013.

<<http://gdyo.blogspot.com/2011/02/program-notes-for-upcoming-march-6.html>>

eras in American history. These pieces are a celebration of America, its past, and its traditions, which can be said for a number of Copland's works.

Appalachian Spring, written earlier in his career than the *Old American Songs*, was a ballet written by Copland which also celebrates the American tradition. However, it was not intended to be a celebration of the beauty of Appalachia until midway through its creation. Copland's working title for the piece was "Ballet for Martha", as dancer Martha Graham was commissioned to choreograph and dance the lead in the ballet. Graham had named the piece after Copland had written a sizable amount of the score. This name actually became a key part of the ballet's success, as it was said that the piece "[reflected] youthful aspiration in the American heartland"⁷. The piece's masterful composition, and its eventual standing as an homage to a great American landscape earned Copland a Pulitzer Prize among numerous other accolades.

Written in 1942, *Appalachian Spring* is a piece from Copland's middle adulthood. This, again, was a period where Copland wrote simple music. The opening theme of the ballet is based on a series of simple chords. These chord progressions create the "essence of the whole ballet"⁸. The beginning theme is also quite simple. The melody is a series of half notes moving between intervals of a fourth and fifth. The melody is accompanied by the same simple chords that comprised the first sixteen measures. (figures 2 and 3)

7 Kapilow, Robert and John Adams. "Appalachian Spring" by Aaron Copland: NPR Performance Today. 1999.

8 Ibid.

Figure 2: *Appalachian Spring* opening chord sequence, introduction of melody (flute).

The musical score for Figure 2 is divided into two systems. The top system includes parts for Flute I (Fl. I.), Oboe I and II (Ob. I, II), Clarinet in A I and II (Cl. (in A) I, II), Bassoon I and II (Fg. I, II), Horns in F I and II (Cor. (F) I, II), and Trumpets in Bb I and II (Tr. (Bb) I, II). The bottom system includes Violin I (Vi. I), Violin II (Vi. II), Viola (Via.), and Violoncello (Vc.).

Key performance instructions include:

- Fl. I.:** *a tempo*, *Solo* (circled 4), *mp espress.*
- Ob. I, II:** *I. Solo*, *pp*
- Fg. I, II:** *Solo I*, *pp*
- Cor. (F) I, II:** *I. senza sord.*, *mp*, *pp*
- Tr. (Bb) I, II:** *I. Solo*, *mp (sord.)*, *II.*, *pp (open)*
- Vi. I, II, Via., Vc.:** *a tempo*, *pp*

Figure 3: *Appalachian Spring*, completion of first statement of theme, restatement (oboe).

The musical score for Figure 3 shows the continuation of the orchestral parts from Figure 2. It includes parts for Flute I (Fl. I.), Oboe I and II (Ob. I, II), Bassoon I and II (Fg. I, II), Violin I (Vi. I), Violin II (Vi. II), and Viola (Via.).

Key performance instructions include:

- Ob. I, II:** *I. Solo*, *mp espress.*
- Fg. I, II:** *I. Solo*, *mp espress.*
- Vi. I, II, Via.:** *HALF (div.)*, *pp*

Later in the piece, Copland includes a reference to the Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts”, the same hymn from *Old American Songs*. *Appalachian Spring* was the first piece in which Copland used this theme, and its use familiarized the greater American population about the beauty and simplicity of Shaker music, and this melody became one of the most quoted themes in modern classical writing. He introduces this theme towards the end of the ballet. The theme is accompanied by a slightly altered version of the chords from the introduction. The chords are utilized here very sparsely. They are most often octave unisons, rather than the full chords, but they still follow the intervallic patterns from the introduction. (figure 4)

Figure 4: Introduction of Shaker Theme

[Appalachian Spring Shaker Theme Figure]

Appalachian Spring was an important work for Copland, because it became a work that celebrated the beautiful landscape of America. This sense of celebration of American culture and history is what established Copland as the “Dean of American Composers”.⁹ This piece, however, was a contrasting style of celebration from the two previous major works Copland had written. Two years before the composition of the ballet, Copland wrote two pieces which did not focus on the beauty of America, but rather the patriotism and pride of America. These pieces were *A Lincoln Portrait* and *Fanfare for the Common Man*.

A Lincoln Portrait is a piece for full orchestra with a narrator which Copland wrote in 1942. The piece is an homage to President Lincoln. Copland wrote this piece on a commission from conductor Andre Kostelanetz shortly following the beginning of U.S. activities in the Second World War which Kostelanetz wished to be “appropriate for Americans”.¹⁰ Copland, after

9 Funk and Wagnall

10 Child, Fred. *Abraham Lincoln: A Portrait in Words*: NPR. Retrieved April 21, 2013

a great deal of thought, decided to write a "portrait' of a great American".¹¹

After receiving the commission, Copland became inspired to write a piece about Lincoln upon seeing a biography of the president at a train station. Copland decided to write a triumphant orchestral work to accompany a text comprised of a number of Lincoln's speeches, both popular speeches, and lesser known speeches which had particular relevance for the modern era (figure 5). The text is also augmented with biographical information about the president.

Figure 5: Text – A Lincoln Portrait (Including sources of quotes in brackets)

"Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history." That is what he said. That is what Abraham Lincoln said.
 "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor to the latest generation. We, even we here, hold the power and bear the responsibility."

[Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862]

He was born in Kentucky, raised in Indiana, and lived in Illinois.

And this is what he said. This is what Abe Lincoln said:

"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves and then we shall save our country."

[Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862]

When standing erect he was six feet four inches tall, and this is what he said.

He said: "It is the eternal struggle between two principles, right and wrong, throughout the world. It is the same spirit that says 'you toil and work and earn bread, and I'll eat it.' No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation, and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle."

[Lincoln-Douglas debates, October 15, 1858]

Lincoln was a quiet man. Abe Lincoln was a quiet and a melancholy man.

But when he spoke of democracy, this is what he said.

He said: "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy.

Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth president of these United States, is everlasting in the memory of his countrymen.

For on the battleground at Gettysburg, this is what he said.

He said: "That from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion. That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. That this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

[Gettysburg Address]

A Lincoln Portrait is a standard in Copland's repertoire, and follows Copland's traditional

¹¹ Ibid.

“Americana” style, as he includes numerous open harmonizations, development through subtle chord alterations, and quotations of American folksongs, more specifically “Camp Town Races” and “Springfield Mountain”.¹² For as simple as the piece is in terms of thematic material, the piece is incredibly moving and intense. The open harmonies, similar to those in *Appalachian Spring*, and grandiose rhythmic material are triumphant, powerful, and inspiring. Seeing as this piece was written to encourage high morale amongst American citizens during the Second World War, these traits made the piece very successful. The marriage of the music and the text throughout the piece, however, is the truly masterful aspect of the 'portrait'. While the music inspires the heart with ebbing and flowing intensity, the music moves with it. The first moments of the piece are comprised mostly of pedal tones, and the melody either in octave unison, or with simple homophonic counterpoint under it. As it progresses into the introduction of the first quotation, it reaches a mini-climax with dense harmonizations of the original theme, and returns immediately to a simple texture for a long development section preceding the “Camptown Races” quote. This quotation follows a similar development, reaching a mini-climax before returning the original theme with which Copland began the piece. This introduction, quotation, and recapitulation makes up roughly half of the piece. The narration section makes up the second half of the piece. The brief biographical sections of the piece include very light accompaniment, with only one to four instrument carrying the theme. During the sections where the narrator directly quotes Lincoln, Copland uses either the chord progression from the introduction, restated with “Scottish snap” figures, or the melody from the introduction with light accompaniment. As the piece concludes, the final words from the Gettysburg Address are spoken, and the piece reaches a climax again using the main theme, but this time with a very dense texture.

12 Child, Fred. *Abraham Lincoln: A Portrait in Words*

A Lincoln Portrait received an incredibly successful premiere, and since its first performance, despite its uniquely American style, has been translated into numerous languages due to its universal message of patriotism, justice, and unity.

Copland, however, saw a new message that he wished to send concerning American morale in his next piece.

Fanfare for the Common Man is arguably the most famous composition in Copland's repertoire. The fanfare was written in the same year as *A Lincoln Portrait* (1942), and spoke a similar message of patriotism, but took a very different approach. Written on commission by Eugene Goossens for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, *Fanfare for the Common Man* was one of ten fanfares written to boost morale during World War II.

Copland's fanfare became more famous than any of the other composers' fanfares conceivably for two reasons. First, Copland's "Americana Style" was triumphant and inspiring, as patrons were inspired by *A Lincoln Portrait* earlier that same year. The other reason, however, simply has to do with the name of the piece. Copland, in the naming of his fanfare, had expressed that fanfares have always been dedicated to figures of power and authority, singular people with a great deal of influence. He had articulated that no one has ever written a fanfare for the common man, and thus he had named it as such, and dedicated the piece to those who had mobilized during the war effort to help the soldiers. The Second World War "would become the most widespread, destructive conflict in human history. It was far too big to be won by military leaders, generals, and well-trained troops alone. It would require the mass mobilization of almost every part of American society."¹³ For this reason, *Fanfare for the Common Man* became a

13 "ARTSEEDGE: Fanfare for the Common Man," The Kennedy Center: ARTSEEDGE - the National Arts and Education Network. Accessed April 22, 2013.

rallying call for Americans to step up to support the war effort. Upon hearing about this project from the Cincinnati Orchestra, and Copland himself, other American artists followed suit.

Fanfare for the Common Man, while the other fanfares from the CSO commission have widely fallen from use, has become one of the most performed works by an American composer, and upon its inclusion in Copland's *Third Symphony*, became part of the most performed and recorded American symphony of all time.¹⁴

The theme of the fanfare is a simple three note motive, which is altered numerous times to create one continuous melody. The melody is written where each brass instrument must remain on the same partial to play most of the notes, as the melody is made up of, and developed on the notes on the respective partial that each instrument begins on. (figure 6)

Figure 6: Fanfare for the Common Man, melody based on three-note motive



Aaron Copland was (and is) a celebrated American composer not only because of the simple beauty of his music. Beyond the base-level enjoyment of well-written music, Aaron Copland's work speaks on a deeply emotional level, and tells the story of America's beauty, patriotism, history, and strength through powerful orchestration and melodies with ties to the most traditional of American music. Copland's constant attention to artistic intent, his deep patriotism, and his aptitude for communicative writing make him the most celebrated of all the great American composers in history. His work defined the style of both a culture and a generation, and his contribution to American music has solidified his place amongst the greatest of nationalist composers.

¹⁴ Pollack, Howard, "Aaron Copland," Henry Holt and Co., 1999. p. 418

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