Aaron Copland

“Appalachian Spring,” Ballet for Martha

AARON COPLAND was born in Brooklyn, New York, on November 14, 1900, and died in New York on December 2, 1990. He composed “Appalachian Spring” in 1943-44 as a ballet score for Martha Graham, calling originally for an ensemble of thirteen instruments (flute, clarinet, bassoons, piano, four violins, two violas, two cellos, and double bass). The work was commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation and was first performed in the Coolidge Festival at the Library of Congress on October 30, 1944. Louis Horst conducted, and the principal dancers were Graham (as the Bride), Erick Hawkins (the Husbandman), Merce Cunningham (the Revivalist), and May O’Donnell (the Pioneer Woman). The work received the Pulitzer Prize for Music, and the Music Critics’ Circle Award for the outstanding theatrical work of 1944-45. In May 1945 the composer prepared a somewhat shortened concert suite for orchestra, omitting one large section of the complete score—thereby joining the variations on the Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts” that made up the complete ballet’s “Interlude” to a later restatement in the section headed “The Lord’s Day”—and also making some smaller cuts and reordering the variations on “Simple Gifts.” This concert suite (the version being played by the BSO this week) had its premiere with Arthur Rod?zinski conducting the New York Philharmonic on October 4, 1945.

THE CONCERT VERSION OF “APPALACHIAN SPRING” calls for an orchestra of two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, xylophone, bass drum, side drum, cymbals, tabor (long drum), wood block, claves, glockenspiel, triangle, harp, piano, and strings.

In the cultural development of the United States, music is often perceived as having lagged far behind the arts of painting and literature. Already by the time of the Revolution we had noted artists like Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley; soon after that we had writers like Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, who were able to create an image of America not only for Americans themselves but for the rest of the world. Yet it took another century for American music to begin to make the same kind of international impact. When it did, the composer most strongly identified with this country, the composer most readily conceded to be our greatest, was Aaron Copland.

It is not that there was no American music before Copland. On the contrary, music arrived here with the first settlers and remained an important part of American life through all the centuries after—but it consisted of hymn tunes and “fuguing tunes,” theatrical songs and popular ditties, dances and marches: not the kind of music we usually mean when we talk about “culture.” Eventually, beginning in the middle of the last century, permanent symphony orchestras began to spring up all over the country (about the same time, incidentally, that the same development was taking place in Europe). A large number of composers appeared who strove to win artistic laurels for their native land. They produced much attractive music (some of which could easily be revived with great success today), but they did not yet strike most listeners as being “American” composers in the same way that Walt Whitman and Mark Twain were clearly American voices in literature. In fact, they had to do what nationalist composers all over Europe—in Hungary, Bohemia, Russia, Scandinavia, and England—were all doing at about the same time: they had to demonstrate that they could compose serious music as well as any German composer—in the dominant German style—before they would be taken seriously as composers in their own homeland.

The desire to write in a nationalistic, “American” style ran deeply before Aaron Copland created one way of doing so in the 1920s. His desire to become recognizably “American” led at first to an encounter with jazz elements (though never with actual jazz composition) in the *Organ Symphony*, *Music for the Theater*, and the Piano Concerto. Though these works marked Copland as a man to watch and hinted at the course of things to come, they were regarded by many as “difficult” scores. And his style became still more complex at the beginning of the 1930s with the *Symphonic Ode*, the *Short Symphony*, and the granitic *Piano Variations*.

But the social changes of the 1930s brought a general interest among the leftist artists and thinkers with whom Copland was friendly in attracting a wider audience than ever before, in addressing the common man and expressing his hopes, dreams, and desires by artistic means. Copland was one of a generation of composers who shared this desire; he accomplished the change of viewpoint with notable success, simplifying his style for greater accessibility, but never ceasing to be utterly individual in sound or approach. The simplicity heightened certain elements that had not been apparent in his music earlier—most notably an extraordinary tenderness that never becomes sentimental. At the same time, Copland’s music retained its energy and verve, its sense of space and color in laying out orchestral

lines; thus his music is instantly recognizable as proceeding from the same musical imagination, no matter what its style.

Copland had already had two popular ballet successes (*Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*) based on Western themes—a striking achievement in imagination for a composer city-born and city-bred—when Martha Graham asked him to compose a ballet for her. She chose the title from a poem by Hart Crane. The scenario is a simple one, touching on primal issues of marriage and survival, on the eternal regeneration suggested by spring. It is set in the Pennsylvania hills early in the nineteenth 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 are left quiet and strong in their new house.

The orchestral version contains the substance of the ballet, omitting a few passages that Copland felt were of interest only when accompanying the danced story.

All of Copland's three major ballet scores make use of old folk melodies, but *Appalachian Spring* uses the least; the only tune to pre-date the composition is the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts," which serves as the basis of a series of variations near the end of the ballet. But the tune also plays a background role in unifying the entire score; from the introduction on we frequently hear a three-note motive that is easily recognizable as the first five notes of "Simple Gifts" in outline form. From this motive comes the entire triadic "sound" of the ballet. From beginning to end, through all its changing moods, Copland's score calls up a sense of the optimism and courage, the vigor and energy, and the deep wellspring of faith and hope that we like to regard as characteristic of the American experience.

Steven Ledbetter