



Copland, Aaron (1900-1990)

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Aaron Copland standing in front of the entrance to the offices of the U.S. State Department in 1947.

In the course of a long life that spanned nearly the entire twentieth century, Aaron Copland composed a significant number of frequently performed musical works that have become so ingrained in the American cultural consciousness that the mere hearing of them evokes for many the idea of American history, struggle, and courage.

Copland was born November 14, 1900 to an impoverished Lithuanian Jewish immigrant family in Brooklyn, New York, and his early experiences were shaped by the urban "melting pot" of American culture. That he was also homosexual contributed to the outsider status that might be said to manifest itself in the celebration of the underdog, "the common man," that characterizes his music.

Like many other prominent twentieth-century American composers, Aaron Copland was trained in France by Nadia Boulanger. His music, however, is best known for its rejection of European, neo-Romantic forms and the creation of a uniquely American, modernist style in his orchestral works, particularly his ballets and film scores.

Upon his return from France in 1925, his *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra* had its premiere performance with the New York Symphony Orchestra, Boulanger playing the organ. This work established Copland's reputation in his own country, and by the late 1920s he had begun experimenting with a daringly modern style that incorporated elements of jazz, reflected most notably in his *Piano Concerto* (1927).

By the end of the 1930s, Copland had incorporated into his music a number of American popular motifs, particularly those of the American West (for example, the pioneering settlers, the cowboy, the outlaw), along with the influences of the folk song and Hispanic culture.

These elements are present in Copland's most famous works written between the late 1930s and the early 1950s, the peak years of his career, particularly in the ballets *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944). The music from these ballets has, for over half a century, been appropriated for a wide variety of purposes in the media, whether as themes for television programs, in advertising, or, however ironically, in the soundtrack of Spike Lee's film *He Got Game* (1998).

So pervasive is his music in American culture that it is hardly an exaggeration to suppose that virtually every American, regardless of his or her interest in classical music (or lack thereof), has heard Copland's compositions somewhere.

Provocatively--perhaps subversively--his ballet pieces present traditionally "masculine" heroic roles and images in the supposedly "effeminate" (and, in many cases, homosexual) context of ballet and dance. Some critics, for instance, have seen a homoerotic element in the interactions of the title character and Sheriff Pat Garrett in *Billy the Kid*.

Rodeo presents an even more complex gender theme that many homosexuals, both then and now, can

understand. Its heroine, a tomboy who is as adept as her male counterparts as a rodeo rider, is rejected and mocked for her efforts, and it is only when she puts on the garb and behavior of traditional femininity that she finds acceptance--and heterosexual romance. While more recent critics see the female protagonist's change as a capitulation to conformity, the ballet can also be interpreted as an ironic commentary on gender norms.

The success of these ballets notwithstanding, Copland's music reached an even larger audience, one outside the traditional sphere of "high culture," through his composition of scores for a number of now-classic films addressing the American experience, including *Of Mice and Men* (1939), *Our Town* (1940), *The Red Pony* (1948), and *The Heiress* (1949).

Among his other famous compositions are *El Salón México* (1936), *A Lincoln Portrait* for narrator and orchestra (1942), and an opera, *The Tender Land* (1954), as well as the familiar *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1943).

It is ironic, considering the political climate rampant in the United States during the decade following World War II, that the composer whose music was so strongly identified with the American myth was not only a homosexual but a leftist. In 1953, despite (or perhaps because of) his public stature, Copland was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee as an alleged Communist sympathizer, as he had--in his identification with the "common man"--supported socialist causes in the 1930s.

During the interrogation, Copland was a model of dignity and, in his answers, gave the committee no information that corroborated the Committee in its "witchhunts." Frustrated by this less than useful witness, the Committee dismissed Copland, but, as a result of his questioning, the performance of *A Lincoln Portrait* scheduled for President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration a mere two weeks later was cancelled by government officials.

Despite this insult, only a decade later, in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson awarded Copland the Medal of Freedom for his contributions to American culture.

Unlike many gay men of his age, Copland was neither ashamed of nor tortured by his sexuality. He apparently understood and accepted it from an early age, and throughout his life was involved in relationships with other men. In later years, his affairs were mostly with younger men, usually musicians or artists, whom he mentored, including composer Leonard Bernstein, dancer and artist Erik Johns (who wrote the libretto for *The Tender Land*), photographer Victor Kraft, and music critic Paul Moor.

Given the social prejudices of the times in which he lived, Copland was relatively open about his homosexuality, yet this seems not to have interfered with the acceptance of his music or with his status as a cultural figure. The likely explanation is that Copland conducted his personal life with the characteristic modesty, tactfulness, and serenity that marked his professional life as well.

In his later years, Copland was increasingly disabled with the advance of Alzheimer's disease. In spite of failing health, until his death at the age of ninety on December 2, 1990, he remained a participant in the advancement of American music and culture, not only as a composer but as a conductor, teacher, and author as well.

In the words of his recent biographer Howard Pollack, the accomplishments of this unlikely and unassuming cultural hero over the course of his long life made him truly an "Uncommon Man."

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