

AARON COPLAND'S PIANO SONATA

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THESE are times when any factors which unite, which clarify, which reconcile opposite points of view, are especially welcome. And to whatever degree the arts may be thought of as sharing the responsibilities of leadership in national life, any move toward a more unified cohesion of our esthetic outlook sets a timely example. In just such a way, Copland's new *Sonata** is a reassuring sign, in that it not only reconciles two apparently contradictory phases of his production separated by his seeming volte-face of 1935, but gives promise of bringing closer together the two corresponding audience groups.

Many have expressed anxiety about the conscious simplification represented by *El Salón México*, *Music for Radio*, *An Outdoor Overture*, suspecting more concession than conviction. For them, the *Sonata* will reveal the well-known integrity, purposefulness and formal mastery of the *Ode*, *Variations*, *Statements*, still perfectly intact. But the style has schooled itself in a humbler simplicity, has plunged into the demotic bath, and has emerged fresher, more directly functional, purified of the arbitrary complications which have become the self-indulgent habit of so much twentieth century art. And for the many who, innocent of "this modern music", have embraced only his more popularly conceived pieces, the clarity of the sonata should help to open up the rich store of his less accessible works.

That such happy results may be hoped for is largely due to the inner power of this essentially religious work. One feels a strong contact with the Old Testament, which evidently operates quite without the composer's knowledge. Copland may never consciously think of the Bible, but all his more solemn musical thought is so Biblically evocative that it is difficult not to consider it as a crystallizing of a kindred inspiration. Like the *Ode*, the *Sonata* juxtaposes the feeling of this ancient tradition with the nervous unrest of the twentieth century, but in a different relation. The *Ode*, being more concerned with the play of energies, seems to demonstrate the impul-

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sive jitter of today as a diffusion of the firmer, ever-expanding energies of an older source. The *Sonata*, being more subjective, shows present psychological states as opening up new doors to older mysteries.

The work is in three movements, perhaps more exactly in four, and might be thought of as: Rhapsody – Scherzo – Interlude and Hymn. This lay-out brings to mind the impressionists' love of slow-fast-slow triptychs, and also invites grouping with the few sonatas that end with their slow movements: Opus 111, the *Pathétique Symphony*, *Concord*, all mature, quintessential expressions.

The tonal centers are nearly always quite obvious. There is considerable sharp dissonance, but the harmony is predominantly consonant. Throughout it provides a finely sensitive medium for the emotional expression, which is extremely direct, thus giving the *Sonata* more an air of romantic realism than any of his previous major works. It might indeed be considered a model for organizing a direct emotional continuity into a firmly balanced structure, justifying the sense of leadership attributed to him by so many younger composers.

Economy of material, as in the *Ode*, is extreme; and here resides the performer's chief difficulty – of imparting the just degree of freshness to each slight transformation which the perhaps over-used themes undergo. Otherwise it is comparatively easy to play and makes a grateful and welcome recital piece.

As is usual with Copland, the subjective drama is both intense and logical, but here it is unusually free and varied. Each movement has a classic symmetry, but the whole work presents a sequence of naturally evolving psychological states. The clarity of this interrelation is considerably strengthened by a certain amount of cyclical thematic interplay. On the other hand, the separate character of each movement is kept perfectly distinct by the relative similarity of its principal themes, which gives each one a marked melodic homogeneity.

The first movement is a fairly simple treatment of the old sonata-formula. Throughout it is burdened with a stoically self-contained pain. The first theme is tragic and bitter. Two phrases are involved: one, a piercing triad, echoes the *First Symphony*; the other, descending in leaden thuds, recalls the *Variations*. The transitional development of this first theme is extensive. There is a gently arpeggiated mirage of a longed-for illusion. But the return to bitter reality is faced with determination and

decisive action, which subsides into the second theme. This is tender, lyrical, all in flowing thirds, with a restive, major-minor awareness. The development section reveals some surprising aspects of both themes, a "crystalline" attenuation of the first, and a variation of the second that jerks about with a strange, taut brightness. The recapitulation is clearly defined and highly dramatic. When the second theme returns, it serves as an accompaniment to a phrase derived from the first, and brings the mood to a fatalistic acceptance. The brief coda echoes the first triad phrase in sombre finality.

The second movement is a free adaptation of scherzo and trio, with the recapitulation reversed. Its one principal theme is presented in two contrasting forms. At first, its "delicate, restless" fantasy is like some trivial object or association that flits past the eye and beguiles the consciousness away from the heavy introversion of the first movement to more extrovert interests or action. Its perky volubility gradually gains momentum and self-confidence, and bursts out into a willful assertion of its power, of a crudity that one would hardly have suspected after its opening delicacy. The trio is represented by a short, airy melody, simple and diatonic, but with more vaguely shifting tonal centers than the rest of the piece. This gives it an immaterial quality, and suggests that the extroversion of the scherzo has resulted here in a freer play of the subconscious. After the return of the main theme, first crude, then delicate, there is a short but significant coda, which reveals the little wedge-shaped melody in its simplest guise, giving the feeling of something familiar suddenly seen in its true light for the first time.

This sense of clear recognition seems to directly bring about the amazing opening of the third movement. There are solemn three-chord phrases (like the traditional three stomps of the French stage, ringing up the curtain), unfolding three variations of the melody that served as the trio of the scherzo. First it is heard gravely declaimed, next with "hesitant, delicate" motion, then sung serenely over a slowly undulating bass figure. The strange calm of this whole interlude creates the feeling of smoothing away one by one the layers of material association and achieving a completely inner concentration.

In this stillness begins the principal section of the movement, which exhibits the main features of sonata-form. The first theme consists of a series of gentle two-note arpeggi, the upper melody being a sequence of

two upward thirds. They give an impression of simple beginnings, and as they rearrange themselves mysteriously, they seem to symbolize primal differentiations. In a brief transition, the theme gradually assumes the exaltation of a religious idea, leading into the second theme, which was the bass figure in the interlude, and which also has a simple, geometric character, as of a fundamental truth. It is developed in an atmosphere of dogmatic yet visionary ritual. A sudden interruption by the tragic reality of the first movement only serves to strengthen the intensity of this second theme which mounts to a violent explosion. The development section closes with a recession inward, in a single descending phrase. The recapitulation faithfully mirrors the exposition, except that the second theme (as in the first movement) accompanies a variant of the first, again with a feeling of exalted ritual. The coda alternates the sadness of the first movement (always more and more gently resigned) with a calm transfiguration of the first theme, ending in peaceful serenity.

It is a work that has many things to stimulate and satisfy the interests of many kinds of listeners. One may earnestly hope that the literature of contemporary United States piano music has here offered the "big shots" of the keyboard something it will be difficult to ignore.