

## AMERICAN COMPOSERS. VII

Aaron Copland

VIRGIL THOMSON

**A**ARON COPLAND'S music is American in rhythm, Jewish in melody, eclectic in all the rest.

The subject matter is limited but deeply felt. Its emotional origin is seldom gay, rarely amorous, almost invariably religious. Occasionally excitation of a purely nervous and cerebral kind is the origin of a *scherzo*. This tendency gave him a year or two of jazz-experiment. That has been his one wild oat. It was not a very fertile one.

He liked the stridency of high saxophones and his nerves were pleasantly violated by displaced accents. But he never understood that sensuality of sentiment which is the force of American popular music nor accepted the simple heart-beat that is the pulse of its rhythm, as it is the pulse of his own rhythm whenever his music is at ease.

His religious feeling is serious and sustained. He is a prophet calling out her sins to Israel. He is filled with the fear of God. His music is an evocation of the fury of God. His God is the god of battle, the Lord of Hosts, the jealous, the angry, the avenging god, who rides upon the storm. Far from Copland's thoughts are the Lord as shepherd in green pastures, the Lord as patriarch, the God of Jacob, the bridegroom of the Shulamite, the lover, the father, the guide-philosopher-and-friend. The gentler movements of his music are more like an oriental contemplation of infinity than like any tender depiction of the gentler aspects of Jehovah.

Hence the absence of intimacy. And the tension. Because his music has tension. His brass plays high. His rhythm is strained. There is also weight; five trumpets and eight horns are his common orchestral practice. They give the tension and weight of

battle. The screaming of piccolos and pianos evokes the glitter of armaments and swords. His instrumentation is designed to impress, to overpower, to terrify, not to sing.



All this I write is bunk, naturally. But I put it down because it seems to me to provide as good an evocative scheme as any for fitting together the various observations one can make about the way his music is made.

I note the following:

His melodic material is of a markedly Hebrew cast. Its tendency to return on itself is penitential. It is predominantly minor. Its chromaticism is ornamental and expressive rather than modulatory. When he sings, it is as wailing before the wall. More commonly his material is used as a framework for a purely coloristic compilation.

By coloristic I mean it is made out of harmonic and instrumental rather than melodic devices. This compilation is picturesque and cumulative. It tends to augment its excitement, to add to weight and tension. His dominant idea of form is crescendo. This is Russian, because it is a crescendo of excitement. Of development in the classic German sense, the free development of Haydn and Beethoven, there is none.

His conception of harmony is not form but texture. Hence the absence of marked tonal modulation. His conception of instrumentation is not variety but mass. He has no polyphonic conception at all, because he is alone in his music. His commonest contrapuntal device is a form of canon, usually at the octave or unison, everybody doing the same thing at a different moment. This is counterpoint but not polyphony. He is not walking with God or talking with men or seducing house-maids or tickling duchesses. He is crying aloud to Israel. And very much as if no one could hear him.

The *Piano Variations* have not even this canonic counterpoint. They are a monody, one line repeated, not developed, and lengthened-out from time to time by oriental flourishes, accented and made sharp, orchestrated, as it were, by slightly dissonant octaves, by grace-notes and arpeggios.



AARON COPLAND

A Portrait By  
FRANCES E. O'BRIEN

I find the music of them very beautiful, only I wish he wouldn't play it so loud. One hears it better unforced. I miss in his playing of it the singing of a certain still, small voice that seems to me to be clearly implied on the written page.



I also note this:

There is a certain resemblance of procedure between Copland, Antheil, Varèse, Chavez. This in spite of antipodal differences in their personalities and sentiments. Their common homage to Stravinsky honors the White-Russian master more than it profits them. It creates a false community and obliterates distinctions. It also smothers quality.

The quality that distinguishes American writing from all other is a very particular and special approach to rhythm. It is in these composers when they forget Stravinsky; it is in all American music whatever its school or origins. It is a quiet, vibratory shimmer, a play of light and movement over a well-felt but not expressed basic pulsation, as regular and as varied as a heart-beat, and as unconscious. It is lively but at ease, quiet, assured, lascivious.

Stravinsky knocked us all over when we first heard him, because he had invented a new rhythmic notation and we all thought we could use it. We cannot. It is the notation of the jerks that muscles give to escape the grip of taut nerves. It has nothing to do with blood-flow. It is spectacularly effective when used to express the movements it was invented to express. It is the contrary when imposed upon our radically different ones. How infinitely superior in simple effectiveness are our popular composers over our tonier ones. They have no technical drama of composition. They are at ease in their notation.

Our high-brow music, on the other hand, is notoriously ineffective. It is the bane of audiences at home and abroad. It is proverbially dull, in spite of the very best will on everybody's part.

I deny that it is really as dull as it sounds. There is bound to be fire behind so much smoke.

I think our gift, our especial gift, is the particular rhythmic

feeling I have described above. That is enough to make an epoch. It takes very little. The rest is appropriate framing. Our weakness is timidity, hence snobbishness and eclecticism.

Today we ape Stravinsky. Yesterday it was Debussy. Before, it was Wagner. Copland's best recommendation is that he is less eclectic than his confrères. I reproach him with eclecticism all the same.

There is real music in his pieces, true invention and a high (sometimes too high) nobility of feeling. He is not banal. He has truth, force and elegance. He has not quite style. There remain too many irrelevant memories of Nadia Boulanger's lessons, of the scores of Stravinsky and Mahler and perhaps Richard Strauss.

I wish they were plain thefts. Theft is refreshing and legitimate. Copland is like certain American poets (very distinguished ones and supply your own examples), who cannot quite forget their collegiate loyalty to Keats and Browning and who are more occupied with an illusory continuation of some foreign tradition or other than with style, which is personal integrity.

This may explain a little why Aaron Copland is at the same time an inspired composer and a comparatively ineffective one. Comparatively, because most American music is less effective in performance than his. In fact, his music is often so near to a real knock-out that I am sometimes left wondering whether it is a case of a knock-out not quite achieved or of an unwise application of the knock-out technic to a case where persuasion were more to the point.

In any case, there is a problem of rhetoric for the American composer. The problem of adjusted emphasis, the appropriate stating and effective underlining of the personal invention. This means selection and variety. The forcing of every idea into the key of the *grandiose* and the *sublime* is obviously false and in the long-run frightfully monotonous.

I fancy there is more of use to us in the example of Verdi than in that of Wagner, Puccini even than Hindemith, certainly Bizet than Debussy, Schubert than Brahms. Simple clarity is what we need, and we will get it only by a radical simplification of our methods of composition. If Copland's simplifications are per-

haps not radical enough for my taste, they are important simplifications all the same.

Because he is good, terribly good. A European composer of his intrinsic quality would have today a world-wide celebrity and influence. It is a source of continual annoyance to me that his usefulness and his beauty are not fully achieved because he has not yet done the merciless weeding out of his garden that any European composer would have done after his first orchestral hearing.

The music is all right but the man is not clearly enough visible through it. An American certainly, a Hebrew certainly. But his more precise and personal outline is still blurred by the shadows of those who formed his youth.

## LIST OF WORKS BY AARON COPLAND

DATE		PUBLISHER
1920	Scherzo Humoristique (piano) The Cat and the Mouse	Durand
1920	Old Poem [Chinese, translated by Arthur Waley] (voice and piano)	Senart
1921	Pastorale [Kafiristan, translated by Edward Powys Mather] (voice and piano)	Manuscript
1921	Four Motets (a capella)	Manuscript
1921-22	Passacaglia (piano)	Senart
1922-23	Grohg. One-act ballet Extracts—Cortège Macabre —A Dance Symphony	Manuscript Manuscript Cos Cob Press
1923	As it fell upon a day [Richard Barnefield] (voice, flute, clarinet)	New Music
1924	Symphony for organ and orchestra Prelude—Scherzo—Finale	Cos Cob Press
1928	First Symphony (arrangement for orchestra alone)	
1925	Two Choruses for Women's Voices: The House on the Hill [Edward A. Robinson] (a capella) An Immorality [Ezra Pound] (soprano solo, piano)	E. C. Schirmer,
1925	Music for the Theatre. Suite for small orchestra Prologue—Dance—Interlude—Burlesque— Epilogue	Universal Edition
1926	Two Pieces for Violin and Piano: Nocturne Ukelele Serenade	Schott
1926	Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (two movements played without pause)	Cos Cob Press
1926	Sentimental Melody	Schott, New Piano Music Vol. III
1927	Song [E. E. Cummings] (voice and piano)	Manuscript
—	Two Pieces for String Quartet	Manuscript
1928	Lento Molto	
1923	Rondino (on the name of Gabriel Fauré)	
1929	Vitebsk—Trio for violin, cello, piano	Cos Cob Press
1927-29	Symphonic Ode	Cos Cob Press
1930	Piano Variations	Cos Cob Press