

AARON COPLAND

(1991)

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The recent death of Aaron Copland has prompted me to say these few words about him.

Copland's famous Fanfare for the Common Man has become a soft of phantom National Anthem for the USA.

His music is easily identifiable. Yet people hear music in different ways. The professional hears it differently from the scholar and a fellow composer hears it differently from an enthusiastic music lover.

I first met Copland in London in 1965 when he was rehearsing his Symphony no 3 with the London Symphony Orchestra. This is the symphony that quotes from the Fanfare for the Common Man.

Immediately, I liked the man but he did not look like a composer. He was so ordinary. He looked more like a grocer. Like his music, he was simple, direct and in his music usually used elemental harmony. But he was talkative.

No one sounds like Copland. The spaced octaves in the opening of the Symphony no. 3 is typical of him. It is also a feature of his film music.

Copland was concerned that America had no history and no musical heritage. He was also concerned that the music of the Red Indians and the Old West had to be recorded and, consequently, the Library of Congress in Washington began to study their archive material.

His three ballets indulge in American folk custom. They are Billy The Kid, Rodeo and Appalachian Spring. In the final ballet of 1944, he captures the nostalgia of America.

He was Jewish, born in 1900, and came from a non-musical family. He said that the first twenty years of his life were ordinary living in Brooklyn. But he was enchanted with music from an early age and discovered music on his own.

Because France was considered the place where the greatest progress in music was being made, he went there. Debussy and Ravel were the latest thing and, of course, Stravinsky and Prokofiev walked the streets of Paris.

At that time, Nadia Boulanger did not have the reputation she later enjoyed. Her success was in her encouragement of composers and she did not initially behave as a pedagogue. She knew about current music more than anyone else in France and she encouraged all new styles and expressions.

Copland told us, "When I played my music for Nadia somehow she became me. Her suggestions seem to be coming out of my mouth whereas I had overlooked them".



She has the rare quality of giving confidence and she saw Copland's desire to make American music, particularly since America had no musical history.

All America had was jazz which he believed was an American invention. He was wrong, of course as its origins seem to be in another continent altogether and, as I have said elsewhere, Beethoven's last piano sonata has a variation which is a precursor of jazz.

But jazz was regarded as not quite nice. It was associated with gambling joints and brothels and so Copland thought he could make it respectable by combining it with classical music and form.

Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra commissioned Copland's Music for Theatre of 1925, the same year that produced Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. Copland's score is full of life and fun and superbly orchestrated.

When it was played at the MacDowell Colony, Virgil Thomson complained that it was whore house music.

It was certainly a daring work and Copland was only 25 years old but not interested in the sexual goings on in such establishments. He was a committed homosexual.

He still persisted that jazz was an American invention. He also wanted to use and promote American folk music

But he also saw the severe limitations both of jazz and folk music and its sameness within its own species and jazz, in particular, is limited.

Therefore all his life he had an identity crisis and jumped on any bandwagon that was going.

His efforts at being more serious were riot appreciated. The Short Symphony and Statements for orchestra of 1935 did not fare well. Copland became severely depressed.

He was not a serious composer or a composer who could be taken seriously. Or so it was said.

So he wrote El Salon Mexico which is one of those works you either like or positively dislike. He wanted to regain favour. It is really a tone poem of a Mexican dance hall and it introduced complicated rhythms and a sophisticated use of a folk song. This appeared in 1936 and re-established him.

Copland was a very good conductor of his own music whereas, for example, neither Stravinsky nor Walton were. He was very particular that his music did not sound emotional or sentimental.

I remember at a rehearsal with the London Symphony Orchestra he suddenly stopped conducting. The leader asked if the tempo was wrong. Copland wagged his head. The next question was if the rhythm was wrong. Copland did likewise. The further question was, were there some wrong notes. Copland indicated that that was not the case.

There was silence. Copland looked cross.

"Keep away from the Tchaikovsky sound," he said, "Who wants to sound like Tchaikovsky?"

Indeed!

Copland went back to the roots of folk song in simplicity and produced his Old American Songs in the early 1950s. He saw his music as functional and this is why his ballets and film scores took on this style.

Billy the Kid appeared in 1939. Here was a ballet about the Old West and cowboys and, in the performance, I saw the choreography was by Eugene Loring. Rodeo followed in 1942 with more cowboys dancing and the version I saw was with choreography by Agnes de Mile.

Copland was drawn to cowboys dancing in tight jeans because he was gay! All credit to him since he was honest enough to say so! But ballets with cowboys seem so anti-masculine and, quite frankly, the choreography for these first ballets is ridiculous and grotesquely absurd.

However, his career took off. He won a Pulitzer Prize and the New York Music Critics Award.

Appalachian Spring of 1944 is the greatest of his ballets. The choreography by Martha Graham was also vastly superior. It uses American folk music such as the Simple Gifts tune but this vast expansive music, which may represent extended flat American landscapes, can become wearisome. The use of the piano in the score is an asset.

And so, these ballets became jewels of Americana.

The New York World Fair of 1939 was a morale booster. The USA was coming out of the Depression and the slogan for the Fair was The World of Tomorrow. Sir Arthur Bliss wrote his scintillating Piano Concerto for this occasion. Copland produced From Sorcery to Science which is a twelve minute ballet for a puppet show in the Hall of Pharmacy. It tells the history of pharmacy from China to the present day. In the Chinese music, Copland used the pentatonic scale.

Despite Copland wanting to go back to the root of things he would say, "This is a modern world."

American Documentary Films commissioned Copland for music to The City, a blatant left wing piece of propaganda. It starts with a New England village, explores the open spaces of the West with corresponding open landscapes and enters a thriving city. The traffic jam sequence is very repetitive anticipating the minimalism of John Adams but, as Copland said, simple and repetitive music for films is best because it may have to be cut to accommodate the precise timing or, as he called it fight editing.

Film music is very profitable for composers. It provides a healthy income. It supported Copland's career.

But he was never really an arrogant man. My father used to say that the greatest men are also the most humblest of men. He was right. Sadly, Britain has produced a couple of hatefully arrogant and pompous composers, but it as said of Copland that he took his fame graciously.

His first feature film, or Hollywood film as he called it, was Of Mice and Men. For his next film, North State, he had a problem. This is a story of the Nazis oppressing Russia and it starred Dana Andrews, Anne Baxter and the dependable Dean Jagger. The director, Lewis Milestone, wanted some songs for the Russian guerrillas to sing and employed Ira Gershwin to write the lyrics. His lyrics were light-hearted, inane, utterly stupid and out of character with the film and with Copland.

Other notable films were The Red Pony and The Heiress, a super version of Henry James's Washington Square, in which Olivia de Havilland had not looked so lovely since she was in Dodge City.

Copland was always on the lookout for talented young musicians. One of these was Leonard Bernstein. Lenny showed his works to Aaron and, although Lenny was not a shrinking violet, he held Copland up on a pedestal.

Bernstein was a fine musician. He was a good pianist, a gifted conductor and a versatile composer. While West Side Story may be his most popular movie musical, On The Town of 1949 is a marvellous

score. On personal note, it is my all time favourite musical and not just because the gorgeous Vera Ellen was in it. Bernstein's music captures exactly what it meant to. Not many composers can do that. His Chichester Psalms is a glowing choral masterpiece and the Mass is unfairly maligned. It has some marvellous music in it, that the criticism of it is both unjust and unwarranted.

It has been said that Bernstein's jazz is a later version of Copland's jazz. Of the two, Bernstein is the better composer by far in that he has a wide range of expression and his orchestration is far more interesting. While he can write tender music he has a greater ability for excitement than Copland.

Copland had an identity crisis throughout his life. At first, he wanted to write French sounding music, then American folk music, then jazz, then serial music and so on. He liked twelve note music because, as he rightly said, it is disciplined music and the melodic lines and the harmonies were far more interesting. These who decry serial music are ignorant or prejudiced simply because they do not have the skill to write such music as Copland told us once and he is right.

His Connotations for Orchestra of 1962 is one such work. It is probably his finest work. It is strident and captures the tensions of urban life. It is what would now be called an 'in your face piece.'

Copland had a high regard for Benny Goodman the clarinet player. His performance of the Mozart concerto is very good although his tone is a little dry. In 1943, Copland wrote his Clarinet Concerto for him. The slow music is very fine but when the clarinet shrieks and screams and there are long high notes the result is ugly and degenerate. Some has said it would be a wonderful clarinet concerto if the clarinet did not play a note. Other clarinetists have said that this could be clarinet abuse.

But another problem is form. There is no form or structure in his works and the other concerto, the Piano Concerto, has the same problems. This is strange for a man who later was to compose disciplined serial music.

In 1954, he turned his hand to opera and The Tender Land. Again, the weakness of musical inactivity is often here, but I have always been fond of this work.

But he ran out of ideas. By 1983, he said, that his thoughts did not flow and this probably corresponded with the onset of Alzheimer's disease, the brain condition that produces senility. On his piano stand, he had an attempt at a String Quartet but at no time in his life would have been able to compose a successful work in this medium. It simply wasn't him.

What I most liked about him was his humility and honesty. He had been a close friend of Irving Fine the American composer I admire the most. Aaron would talk about Fine in an almost reverential way. On one occasion he looked away with tears forming in his eyes, paused, and said of Irving Fine, 'He is the greatest of us all.'

Copland was not a great composer but his contribution to American music is of vital importance.



He died last year (1990) and we shall miss him.

(2078)

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