

Aaron Copland—Appalachian Spring

When Aaron Copland (1900-1990) was born at the turn of the twentieth century, the one piece of serious music considered to be “American” was written by a Czech composer. As head of the newly-founded New York Conservatory of Music, Antonín Dvorak had composed a symphony to illustrate to his students—and to America’s classical composers—how to incorporate native American influences into their compositions, so that their works were reflective of American culture rather than the European trends of Wagner and Brahms.

Dvorak’s *Symphony No 9 in E minor, “From the New World,”* was viewed by many as incorporating slave melodies and Native American music into, particularly, the second and third movements, respectively. Sensitive to any suggestion that he might have copied verbatim from native musical sources, Dvorak vehemently denied doing so, stating that he only sought to capture the essence of the American spirit in his work. Long after his American sojourn, he explained to one music journal writer

*...I am sending you Kretschmar’s analysis of the Symphony [No 9], but the nonsense that I made use of “Indian” and American motifs leave out, because it is a lie, I only sought to write in the **spirit** of these American folk-melodies.*

Only after World War I did American composers take seriously the task of presenting idiosyncratic American music to world audiences. The most notable instances was Broadway composer George Gershwin’s venture into classical music with his jazz-infused scores: *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), *Piano Concerto in F* (1925), and *An American in Paris* (1928).

Fresh from his studies in Europe, Aaron Copland sought in his early works in the 1920s and ‘30s to fashion a music that truly embraced the singularities of a unique American tradition in subjects and tonalities. His first attempts were, like Gershwin’s, jazz-inspired, but had negligible impact in forwarding his career. However, when he turned his considerable skills to western-themed subjects, to writing in his “vernacular style”, as he put it, he struck a chord with critics and the public that brought him broad recognition. His two notable ballets of that period were *Billy the Kid* (1939) and *Rodeo* (1942), both for the Martha Graham Dance Company and funded by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation.

Copland began working on ***Appalachian Spring*** in late 1942, following the success of *Rodeo*; again, the score was for the Graham Dance group and commissioned by the Coolidge Foundation. His fee was a quite generous five-hundred dollars.

When he started composing for the ballet, Copland had no clear idea of what the story concept was. According to the composer, Graham gave him only the barest of hints, “the legend of American living.” Happily, Copland’s inspiration arrived in the form of a book by Edward Deming Andrews, *The Gift to be Simple—Songs, Dances and Rituals*

of the American Shakers. Copland stated that the book's title song jumped out to him immediately. But his *Ballet for Martha*, stressed the characteristics of Graham herself:

I was thinking primarily about Martha and her unique choreographic style, which I knew well. There's something prim and restrained, simple yet strong, about her which one tends to think of as American. Appalachian Spring would never have existed without her special personality. The music reflects...the unique quality of a human being, an American landscape and a way of feeling.

The ballet is set in the Pennsylvania countryside during the early nineteenth century. The bride-to-be and her future husband along with their neighbors are celebrating the construction of the couple's new farmhouse. The young couple depict the joy and apprehension that await them, while the neighbors attempt to moderate their naive expectations with anecdotes of human frailty and fate. But the couple end the celebration in the quiet and calm of a new resolve.

Copland made liberal use of the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts", composed in 1848 by Elder Joseph Brackett. Copland later learned to his chagrin that the Shakers had never resided in the part of Pennsylvania referenced in the ballet. The title of the ballet was chosen by Graham shortly before its premiere, suggested by a Hart Crane poem, "The Dance," from his book *The Bridge*.

Copland's original orchestration of thirteen instruments was determined by the venue for the ballet—the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.:

There simply wasn't room for any more instruments in that little pit in front of the stage, so there could be no question of scoring the ballet for a larger orchestra.

The ballet was first performed at a concert on October 30, 1944, at the Coolidge Auditorium in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. with Graham in the lead role of the bride, as part of a festival of chamber music celebrating Mrs Coolidge's eightieth birthday. The suite that Copland subsequently prepared in 1945 is a reworked version of the original, scored for full orchestra.

In total, four versions of Appalachian Spring exist in performing editions, dating from 1944 (13-player complete), 1945 (orchestral suite), 1954 (orchestral complete) and 1972 (13-player suite).

Appalachian Spring received the Pulitzer Prize for music as well as the Music Critics Circle of New York Award for the outstanding theatrical work of the 1944-45 season.

Béla Bartók - *Rumanian Folk Dances*

The first decade of the 20th century was a decisive period of discovery in the musical development of Hungarian composer Béla Viktor János Bartók (1881-1945). During this span he came under the influences of several strands of musical invention which led him to recognize his own musical core values.

In 1902, while a student at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, Bartók met German composer Richard Strauss at the Budapest premiere of Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and the composer and his music had an immediate effect on Bartók, for the young man set to work on his first major orchestral composition, a piece to honor his countryman Lajos Kossuth. The resulting piece *Kossuth* is a late-Romantic work of the first order, clearly reflecting the influences not only of Strauss, but those of Hungarian Franz Liszt as well. He completed the work in short order during the spring and summer of 1903; *Kossuth* was accepted for performance by the noted conductor Hans Richter for his orchestra at Manchester, England, which led the Budapest Philharmonic Society to beg Bartók for the privilege to hold the premiere in Budapest in January 1904. The Manchester performance took place the following month, the 18th of February. These were the only two performances of *Kossuth* during the composer's life.

Bartók's fascination with Strauss was short lived. In mid-decade Bartók met fellow composer Zoltán Kodály with whom he forged a lifelong friendship. It was through Kodály that Bartók came to know the music of Claude Debussy. Bartók was so captivated by the French master's use of harmonics that Debussy's influence is present in the *Fourteen Bagatelles* of 1908 and in *Bluebeard's Castle* (1910-11), Bartók's only opera. Critical and public reception of the opera was so negative that Bartók took a hiatus from composing to concentrate his musical talents in another field - that of folk music research.

Even as he struggled to find his own musical 'voice' through attachments to Strauss, Liszt, and Debussy, the young composer and his colleague Kodály undertook 'field trips' into the Hungarian back country to collect and research old folk melodies. To their surprise, they discovered that the Gypsy songs performed in cafés and salons and popularized by Liszt in his *Hungarian Rhapsodies* had little correlation to authentic Gypsy folk melodies as performed by local bands. Based on their findings, both Bartók and Kodály began to incorporate folk elements into their music. Bartók believed that a composer has three options in the use of folk music - he can quote the music literally; he can write imitation folk tunes; or, he can strive to embody the essence or 'spirit' of a peoples' music in his compositions. Bartók followed the third option, sure that on the foundations of his studies he could base his original music on folk elements.

That first foray into the Hungarian hinterland in 1907 also took the two composers into Transylvania, a largely Romanian district which at the time was a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Here, Bartók observed, listened and took notes which he later transcribed and embellished into several collections of folk-song arrangements. One of these sets is ***Rumanian Folk Dances*** (1915), a suite of six short piano pieces which he later orchestrated for chamber ensemble (1917). The suite is based on seven Romanian fiddle tunes from the Transylvanian region (The last dance incorporates two tunes).

Antonín Dvořák - Symphony No 9 in E minor, Op 95, 'From the New World'.

In 1889 **Antonín Leopold Dvořák** (1841-1904) became a professor of composition at the Prague conservatory, where he was known as a tough instructor who demanded that his students nurture their own voice. It was his mode of instruction that brought him to the attention of American philanthropist, Jeannette Thurber, who wanted to encourage American composers to create a uniquely American form of musical expression. To this end, she helped establish the National Conservatory of Music of America and invited Dvořák to head the institution, at the princely sum of \$15,000 per annum. Dvořák knew what Thurber expected of him when he accepted the offer. As he explained to one of his Prague colleagues:

I am to show them the way into the Promised Land, a new, independent art, in short a national style of music!

Within a few days of his arrival in New York in September 1892, Dvořák began to assemble the materials he would consult in fashioning a new symphony to showcase his nationalist intent for his students.

Dvořák recognized that his knowledge of American folk and customs was limited, but he knew, as well, that the country was a motley mix of various cultural strains. He chose to concentrate on two cultures, the native Indian and the African American. He felt, with some reason, that other prominent cultures were still too closely connected with their European roots to be seriously considered as singularly American. To him, then, the "inspiration for truly national [American] music might be derived from the Negro melodies or Indian chants." Despite protestations from American composers, Dvořák maintained his opinion until he departed American shores in 1895.

In his search for authentic American music material, Dvořák consulted with music critic Henry Krehbiel on Amerindian songs and chants and with a student at the Conservatory on African American slave songs. The student, Harry (Henry) Thacker Burleigh, had learned the tone and timbre of slave songs from his grandfather. His mother had inculcated this tradition in Burleigh, as well, when she sang the old songs as she went about her household chores. Dvořák began the preliminary sketches for his new symphony in January 1893 and by mid-February; he was hard at work on the full score. He completed the work in May, and it received its premiere on December 16, 1893, in Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The symphony was an outstanding success, with performances quickly scheduled by other American and European orchestras.

Some controversy arose almost immediately over the "American themes" that Dvořák utilized in his *Symphony No 9 in E minor, Op 95, 'From the New World'*. The composer himself no doubt fueled the flames when he stated in an article for the New York *Herald* that American composers could find everything they needed for a national music in the melodies of African Americans, specifically referring to plantation and work songs, as well as minstrel show tunes. Burleigh wrote, "Dvořák saturated himself with the spirit of these old tunes and then invented his own themes." Some confusion came about particularly after William Arms

Fisher, a student of Dvořák's at the conservatory, put lyrics to the *Largo* melody to produce *Goin' Home*, which soon became a 'spiritual' incorrectly credited as a plantation song.

In fact, Dvořák became caught up in an idea to compose an opera or cantata based on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, a project that Burleigh attests held the Czech composer's attention throughout his tenure at the Conservatory. In his *Herald* article in December 1893, Dvořák wrote that he drew the *Largo* second movement from sketches "for a later work, either a cantata or opera...which will be based upon Longfellow's *Hiawatha*." The precise inspiration for the famous *Largo* is the famine scene from the poet's epic tale.

Dvořák further wrote the third movement *Scherzo* was "suggested by the scene at the feast in *Hiawatha* where the Indians dance." Yet the composer wanted to quell any contrary ideas that he had used any melodies or tunes not of his own design.

A more appropriate subtitle for the *Symphony No 9* may be *Song of Hiawatha* rather than *From the New World*. One should bear in mind, however, that the work is Dvořák's letter home, from the new world to the old world. Notwithstanding all the attention to the influences of his temporary home, *Symphony No 9* is a Bohemian symphony written by a homesick Czech composer.