

## Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*

[**Note to readers:** The links to pieces other than *Appalachian Spring* are for reference only. Listening to all of them in their entirety would require a significant amount of time. The excerpts from *Appalachian Spring* are short and highly recommended.]

*Inspiration may be a form of super-consciousness, or perhaps of sub-consciousness—I wouldn't know. But I am sure it is the antithesis of self-consciousness.* –Aaron Copland

Copland's *Appalachian Spring* is the quintessential piece of American orchestral music. More than any other work, it captures the spirit of early America. With understated eloquence and grace, Copland tells the story of a quaint country wedding, but still finds a way to challenge musicians and audiences. *Appalachian Spring* would earn Copland the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1945, catapult him to fame, and make his music a permanent part of the orchestral repertoire. This is the story of America's greatest composer and his *Appalachian Spring*.

### I. Humble Beginnings

As Aaron's career skyrocketed, the question everyone was asking was, "How could a Jewish boy, born and raised in Brooklyn, write 'cowboy' music?" *Billy the Kid* in 1938 and *Rodeo* in 1942 had defined the orchestral sound of the Old West, but Aaron's musical voice had been cultivated in New York and Paris, and he never spent much time in the Old West (unless, of course, he was flying over it on his way to Hollywood for a film score). But if Aaron had a little of the Old West in him, it came from his mother, Sarah Mittenenthal, who was born in Russia but lived in Illinois and Texas. Sarah arrived in New York when she was nineteen and moved with her family as they expanded their clothing and dry goods business. The West was changing rapidly, so if business in one area was slow, the Mittenenthals might simply pick up their store and move it to another town. Sarah was tall and thin, hardworking, reserved and formal—none of which was in fashion at the time. Aaron would inherit his mother's features and adopt her quiet manner. Sarah played piano and also sang. It was at a social gathering that her singing and playing attracted the attention of Harris Copland, Aaron's father.

Harris Copland emigrated from Lithuania, fleeing intolerance toward Jews that was spreading across Europe. Leaving Lithuania was illegal, so Harris took a serious risk, traveling first to Glasgow and then to Manchester, taking menial jobs to earn money for a passage to America. He arrived in New York in 1877 at only seventeen years old. A cousin gave him a pushcart and place to live, and young Harris went right to work, saving every dollar so he could bring his parents and other family from

Russia. He found success in retail merchandising, opening “H.M. Copland’s Department Store” in 1884, and typically working twelve-hour days to remain competitive.

Sarah and Harris married on October 25, 1885. They worked tirelessly, building Copland’s Department Store on Washington Avenue and Dean Street, and later moving to a larger building on Washington Avenue with the family home above the store. In this expanded location, Aaron was born. It was a simple home, but a Steinway upright piano, “the glory of the household,” sat in the parlor.

Little Aaron was different from the rest of his family. There had been no artists or musicians on either side, but his parents supported him completely. His earliest piano lessons were from his older sisters and his mother, and he quickly followed with a series of teachers, seeking different skills from each. Aaron helped with the store, and when business was slow, he could be heard practicing the piano upstairs. By the time he was nine, he was already composing little songs. The earliest written music from Aaron that survives is seven measures for piano and chorus—a sketch for an opera called *Zenatello*. *Lola*, a love song Aaron wrote when he was fourteen, abounds with the colors of Jewish music, which was such an important part of his childhood.

In a 1939 autobiographical sketch, Aaron would describe his street—Washington Avenue—as “drab,” but there was good culture nearby. A ten-minute walk up Washington Avenue to Eastern Parkway was the Brooklyn Museum, where Aaron got his first “cultural shock” at seeing a nude sculpture. Ten minutes in the opposite direction was the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where he heard his first symphonic concert when he was sixteen. At seventeen, he made his debut as a pianist, but Aaron had already decided that his future was composing, not the piano. It was so unlike anything that anyone in his family had done that he kept the decision a secret. He would later recall, “... deep down I knew that reasonableness had nothing to do with it. The urge toward spending a life in music was irresistible.” In his humble fashion, Aaron learned repertoire by other composers and attended concerts, but when he performed any of his music for anyone, he jokingly referred to his listeners as his “victims.” He tried a correspondence course in harmony, then went to study with Rubin Goldmark, the nephew of composer Karl Goldmark, a highly-regarded operatic composer in mid-nineteenth century Vienna. Rubin Goldmark taught traditional harmony and counterpoint. Aaron’s modernist tendencies made him something of a thorn in his teacher’s side, just like another Goldmark student who was determined to bring jazz into the concert hall—George Gershwin. Meanwhile, Aaron was learning orchestration by studying scores borrowed from the local library, and he was drawn to the music of Debussy, Ravel, and Scriabin.

Upon his graduation from high school, Aaron made the startling decision to put off college and start a life in music right away. For two years, he worked odd jobs as a pianist, meeting all sorts of musicians and continuing his education, but he knew

that he needed new direction and inspiration. In *Musical America* magazine, Aaron learned that the French were starting a summer school for American musicians in the Palace of Fontainebleau as a gesture of appreciation after World War I. Aaron was so excited that he was the first to apply and one of only nine awarded a scholarship. Now he could win the credibility of European study that was once considered essential among American professional musicians.

## II. Emergence

Paris, in the 1920s, was the perfect place for a young, modernist composer. As Aaron observed, “Tradition was nothing; innovation everything.” Upon his arrival in Paris, Aaron was immersed in the cultural life and the music of *Les Six*—a group of French composers struggling to define a new, modern French sound, whose members included Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, and Francis Poulenc. The French recognized Aaron’s talent, as well. Jacques Durand—Claude Debussy’s music publisher—purchased full rights to Aaron’s piano piece *The Cat and the Mouse*.

### **The Cat and the Mouse, played by Aaron Copland:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcsMhuREKbw>

Aaron wrote home in wild excitement to his parents about selling the piece for the modest sum of 500 francs—about \$40. Mr. Durand did well that day!

At Fontainebleau, homesick but loving the creative spirit of France, Aaron would meet the most important influence in his musical life—renowned composition teacher Nadia Boulanger, who taught harmony at the school. Aaron felt that he had all the harmony lessons he needed, but was persuaded to observe some of her courses. Boulanger’s deep understanding of virtually all repertoire and her uncanny musical instincts made her one of the most respected artistic voices in France, always in the circles of the avant garde composers, artists, and writers in Paris. She was notoriously tough on her students, expecting complete dedication. Technical mastery was essential so one could move past mechanics and create. “To study music, we must learn the rules. To create music, we must forget them.” Sensing the importance of Boulanger’s influence, Aaron stayed in Paris two more years. Boulanger introduced Aaron to the music of Stravinsky, which was like a beacon to him. Stravinsky’s use of Russian folk music would inspire Aaron to write distinctively American music.

Through Boulanger, Aaron met countless leading musicians, composers, and conductors. Most important was the modernist conductor Serge Koussevitzky, who had just been named music director of the Boston Symphony. Aaron had only one orchestral score—a macabre ballet called *Grohg*—some of which he played for Koussevitzky, who decided then and there that Aaron would write an organ concerto

for Miss Boulanger, which Koussevitzky would conduct in his first season with the Boston Symphony.

**Copland's ballet *Grohg*, performed by the Detroit Symphony & Leonard Slatkin:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UQ5t-B5p1Y>

Returning to New York in 1924, Aaron supported himself by playing piano and composing as much as possible in his off hours. Early in 1925, his *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra* was premiered by the New York Symphony Orchestra and the Boston Symphony with Miss Boulanger. The reviews may have been mixed, but Aaron's career as a serious composer was launched.

**Copland's *Symphony for Organ & Orchestra*, performed by the San Francisco Symphony & Michael Tilson Thomas:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StjRTTrR9A0g>

### III. Journey to the American Sound

It would be thirteen years before Aaron would craft his American sound. His early compositions were modernist, many influenced by his travels. His Piano Concerto, Dance Symphony, Symphonic Ode, and *El Salón México* had all the characteristics of Aaron's music—wide intervals, simple and effective textures, and a gift for cohesiveness—but 1938 brought a commission for a ballet about one of America's most notorious villains—Billy the Kid—and Aaron's American sound was born. The dry prairie, the crisp night air, the endless sky—it was all there in the music.

**Copland's Concert Suite from *Billy the Kid*, performed by the San Francisco Symphony & Michael Tilson Thomas:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sCt6Nv8rdE>

*Billy the Kid* made Aaron the leading name in American music. Hollywood recognized Aaron's gift and hired him to write scores for *The City* and *Of Mice and Men* in 1939 and the quintessential depiction of life in small-town America—the 1940 classic *Our Town*.

In the concert hall in 1940, Aaron would follow with his introspective *Quiet City* and dabble in African-American gospel with his musical depiction of legendary rail worker John Henry.

As America entered the Second World War, Aaron was completely committed to distinctive American music. He enshrined the words of the Great Liberator in his *Lincoln Portrait*. His ballet *Rodeo* was a celebration of life in America's Old West, and the Hoedown from *Rodeo* has been used by everyone from Emerson, Lake & Palmer to beef companies.

**Symphonic Suite from *Rodeo*, performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic & Zubin Mehta:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du4DrdGp9vM>

But it was Aaron's *Fanfare for the Common Man*, inspired by the efforts of all Americans to support our troops, that would stir the nation.

**Fanfare for the Common Man, performed by the San Francisco Symphony & Michael Tilson Thomas:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Na9OqLQ0py0>

With Aaron's star rising, the stage was now set for *Appalachian Spring*.

#### **Part IV: Appalachian Spring**

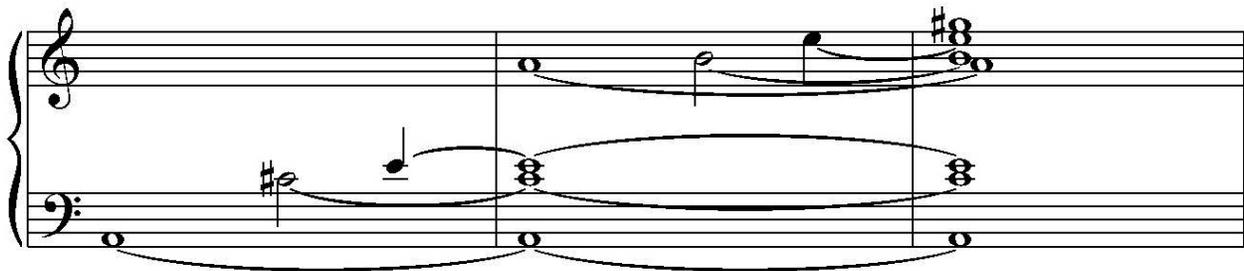
Aaron had long admired Martha Graham, observing, "There's something prim and restrained, a strong quality about her, that one tends to think of as American. Her dance style is seemingly, but only seemingly, simple and direct." Many people had come to describe Aaron's music in similar terms, and perhaps this is what had drawn Martha to dance to Aaron's *Piano Variations* in 1931. In 1941, Martha asked Aaron to compose music for a ballet on the story of Medea. Aaron found the story of betrayal and revenge "rather severe," so he declined. Out of respect for Aaron, Martha returned with the promise of an American-themed ballet and a substantial commission, paid by pianist and arts patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. Mrs. Coolidge made the official request herself, and Aaron accepted.

The first script was a mess, with Civil War references, a Native American girl, and biblical quotations, but Aaron understood the essence of Martha's idea and started composing. Inspired by a poem by Hart Crane, Martha then shifted the idea to a newly-built Pennsylvania farmhouse, with a young bride and her husband—a farmer—as the principal characters. Aaron recalled, "I knew certain crucial things—that it had to do with the pioneer American spirit, with youth and spring, with optimism and hope." Aaron then found the Shaker song *Simple Gifts* in a collection of Shaker tunes.

In all fairness, there never were any Shaker settlements in Pennsylvania, but no matter ... everything was coming together! For his orchestra, Aaron chose thirteen instruments—4 violins, 2 violas, 2 cellos, 1 doublebass, a flute, a clarinet, a bassoon, and a piano. He completed the piano score in Spring of 1944 while he was teaching at Harvard, and the version for small orchestra was finished that July. Since there was no title for the ballet, he simply called it *Ballet for Martha*. Aaron spent twenty-six dollars to make two recordings of him playing the piece on piano—one for Martha and one for the Library of Congress—sent them off and waited nervously for Martha’s reply. Aaron understood Martha’s gamble, agreeing to dance to music she hadn’t heard. She once described to Aaron “that dreadful moment when you hear the music for the first time,” so Aaron was on edge when Martha didn’t respond quickly. Finally, on August 5<sup>th</sup>, Aaron received a letter from Martha during a stay in Mexico: “The music is so knit and of a completeness that it takes you in very strong hands and leads you into its own world. I also know that the gift to be simple will stay with people and give them great joy.”

Aaron arrived in Washington, D.C., on October 26, 1944 to attend the premiere. By then Martha had chosen a line from another Hart Crane poem for the ballet’s title—*Appalachian Spring*. On October 30, 1944, *Appalachian Spring* was offered to the world for the first time. The sets were simple and minimal, but the choreography and music told the story of a young couple on their wedding day, starting their lives in a new farmhouse, with perfect grace.

Aaron’s music for *Appalachian Spring* is written in a harmonic language called “pan-diatonic.” In simplest terms, this means we stay along the major scale almost all the time. Although he didn’t write *Appalachian Spring* in C Major, virtually the entire piece can be transposed and played only on the white keys of the piano. At the opening of the piece, the violas and clarinet bring us the first glimmer of sunlight over the hills, and Aaron gives us the famous *Appalachian Spring* chord in the strings.



**The *Appalachian Spring* chord as it first appears in the ballet:**

<https://youtu.be/XmgaKGSxQVw?t=12> (listen through 0:23)

As the ballet opens, the new farmhouse stands empty when guests and the young couple arrive. The first dance is the Children’s Dance, which also incorporates

the bride and groom. After all, the young couple are practically children themselves! (Due to the war, the Martha Graham company had very few male dancers, so in this particular Appalachian community, the children are all girls.)

**Appalachian Spring, Children's Dance (from the original performance by the Martha Graham company):**

<https://youtu.be/XmgaKGSxQVw?t=129> (listen through 4:49)

Graham's interpretation seems at odds with Copland's music at times, but only because she had to work with such a small cast and only two men. The bassoon and simple "oom-pah" might suggest the arrival of grandparents, but Graham decided on a dance for the groom:

**Appalachian Spring, Groom's Dance:**

<https://youtu.be/XmgaKGSxQVw?t=289> (listen through 5:58)

The young couple shares their nervousness at taking such a big step in their lives:

**Appalachian Spring, Wedding Day Jitters:**

<https://youtu.be/XmgaKGSxQVw?t=358> (listen through end of Part 1)

... but they are assured by their guests that, through faith, happiness can be theirs. Notice that the bride thanks them but the groom holds his place in the background, either unmoved or in no need of reassurance:

**Appalachian Spring, Reassurance:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTdyDOWtE2Q> (listen through 3:40)

For the orchestra, the most challenging dance in *Appalachian Spring* is the Bride's Dance. Still trying to ease her nerves, the bride dances erratically, calming herself with a happy vision of the future, which includes children.

**Appalachian Spring, Bride's Dance:**

<https://youtu.be/PTdyDOWtE2Q?t=220> (listen through 6:54)

Again, the minister and guests try to reassure her, but the couple still seems a little unsettled:

**Appalachian Spring, Minister's Consolation:**

<https://youtu.be/PTdyDOWtE2Q?t=414> (listen through 7:28)

The wedding itself is surprisingly short—just a few seconds, and maybe not where Copland intended in the music.

**Appalachian Spring, The Wedding:**

<https://youtu.be/PTdyDOWtE2Q?t=448> (listen through the end of Part 2)

The guests are considering leaving when the young couple takes up the tune of *Simple Gifts* for their first dance as newlyweds.

**Appalachian Spring, *Simple Gifts* and Variations:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91y-NEdTj-g> (listen through 3:00)

Perhaps the most extraordinary music is an intense dance by the minister, warning the young couple of the evils of the world and the narrow path to heaven. This is fire and brimstone, hell and damnation—hardly appropriate for a joyous wedding celebration.

**Appalachian Spring, Minister's Dance:**

<https://youtu.be/91y-NEdTj-g?t=180> (listen through 4:29)

This upsets the young couple, and in a long and dramatic segment, the other guests comfort them while the minister stands aloof. The best way to break the tension is to return to their simpler faith and to the Shaker hymn. Indeed, many people see the final, forte statement of *Simple Gifts*, as the wedding party turns away, first from the preacher and then from the audience, as a rejection of all that fire and brimstone.

**Appalachian Spring, *Simple Gifts* Climax:**

<https://youtu.be/6KIn6xHbSZg?t=165> (listen through 3:46)

If that is how Martha envisioned it, it is certainly subtle, but those were different times. The end of the ballet is really the bride's moment, as she comes forward for one last prayer, saying a final farewell to her youth. Her new husband joins her, the guests leave, and the couple is left alone in their new house as the last rays of sunlight disappear over the hills. The *Appalachian Spring* chord gets one final statement just before the sun goes down.

**Appalachian Spring, Final Prayer and Epilogue:**

<https://youtu.be/6KIn6xHbSZg?t=165> (listen through 6:19)

American music changed that night in 1944. This was music so thoroughly about us, with our dances and hymns as its inspiration, that every American ballet to follow would have *Appalachian Spring* towering behind it. The reviews were glowing, and the awards were numerous. Martha later recalled, “*Appalachian Spring* has been one of the pleasures of my life—a kind of keystone and I treasure every note of it and the experience I had to be able to choreograph it.” The front page of the *New York Times* on May 8, 1945 proudly proclaimed the end of the war in Europe, but just below the headline, the *Times* staff managed to fit a tiny article announcing the winners of the Pulitzer Prize, including Aaron Copland for *Appalachian Spring*.

Aaron would quickly follow with a shorter version for concert performance, this time for full orchestra. He cut a few choreographic phrases, leaving the ballet intact except for the Minister’s Dance, and he never fully explained that decision. Most likely, he felt the Minister’s Dance to be too dissonant and violent to fit the optimistic mood of the Suite. This is the *Appalachian Spring Suite* with which we are most familiar today. In 1954, Eugene Ormandy asked Copland to orchestrate the Minister’s Dance and performed the complete *Appalachian Spring* with full orchestra and with great success, but Aaron was still uncomfortable with this version. Before he died, however, he made provisions with his publisher and estate that the full-length version could be put in publication.

*For better or worse, I have lived a composer’s life, which might be described as an occupation of putting small black notes on ruled lines. To the composer, music is a kind of language. Behind the written score, even behind the various sounds they make when played, is a language of the emotions. — Aaron Copland*

### **Recommended Recordings:**

- **Original 13-instrument complete ballet:** The San Francisco Symphony & Michael Tilson Thomas, San Francisco Symphony label. Tilson Thomas has a real affinity for Copland’s music and studied with Copland. He has demonstrated a strong commitment to the complete ballet, to include the Minister’s Dance.
- **13-instrument suite:** Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Deutsche Grammophon label. A spotless performance by Orpheus, recorded in amazing detail.
- **Full orchestra suite:** The Los Angeles Philharmonic & Leonard Bernstein, Deutsche Grammophon label. Bernstein’s iconic recording with the New York Philharmonic was wildly popular in its day, but the recording quality is limited and the interpretation seems a little rushed. After decades of living with the piece, Bernstein recorded it again with Los Angeles and it’s absolutely perfect. The orchestra is stunning and Bernstein paces everything flawlessly.

- **Full orchestra complete ballet:** The San Francisco Symphony & Michael Tilson Thomas, Sony label. Performances of the full orchestra version with the Minister's Dance are extremely rare. Tilson Thomas championed this version and was the first to deliver an excellent recording, which is available separately or as part of a larger set, "The Essence of America," that includes 46 minutes of Tilson Thomas discussing the music and his personal experiences with Copland. All the recordings are excellent, including the best Fanfare for the Common Man.

Questions for discussion:

- Listening only to the music of the Bride's Dance, could Copland have had something else in mind? If Graham had had a larger cast, what purpose could this rather wild dance have served?
- Since Graham and Copland never really conferred on the interpretation of the music, are there other places where you think Graham might have misunderstood Copland's intentions?
- The author began by describing *Appalachian Spring* as the quintessential piece of American music. Are there other pieces you think are equally (or even more) deserving of that title?
- Given the crazy state of music, especially in the 1920s-40s, what made *Appalachian Spring* "modern" in 1944, especially considering the piece's simple harmonies?

© Thomas G. Wilson, 2021