

All American – October 2, 2016

Variations on “America” **Orch. William Schuman**

Charles Ives
1874-1954

Charles Ives was one of the few artists with the luxury of and talent to exercise his full creative energies unimpeded by the need to eke out a living from his art. He was the son of a New England bandleader who started him on his way to becoming one of the most innovative and independent composers. He learned the rudiments of polytonality and polyrhythm from his father, who allowed him to bang on the piano with his fist “as long as you know what you’re doing,” and sent him off to learn drums, piano and organ. As a composer, Ives always marched to a different drummer, never abandoning his fists at the piano. Although his father dreamed of his son as concert pianist, Ives embarked on a successful career in life insurance. He lived a double life, experimenting and composing in his idiosyncratic musical style, as well as applying his creativity and idealism to his business. His important new concepts for the life insurance industry, including estate planning, made Ives & Myrick the largest agency in the country.

At age 14, Ives became the youngest salaried church organist in Connecticut and started composing anthems and sacred songs for church service. Although he worked at music with remarkable discipline for his age, he was partially ashamed of it. When people asked him what he played, he replied, “shortstop.” In 1891 he composed his virtuoso *Variations on “America”* for organ, based on the old national hymn, also known overseas as “God Save the Queen [Victoria].” The variations include some of his early experiments in polytonality (although some of the polytonal interludes were added in 1909-10). They are full of misplaced fanfares and mock solemnity of a gifted teenager’s caper. Queen Victoria surely would not have been amused.

In 1963, Broadcast Music Inc. commissioned William Schuman to orchestrate Ives’s work. The orchestrated version was premiered by the New York Philharmonic under Andre Kostelanetz. Schuman captured Ives’s spirit in a rollicking and zany orchestration.

Rhapsody in Blue

George Gershwin
1898-1937

The musical idiom of jazz evolved in New Orleans in the early part of the twentieth century from ragtime and the blues. The origin of the term jazz is obscure, but it first appeared in print in 1913 in a San Francisco newspaper, in reference to enthusiasm at a baseball game. The application of the term to a specific style of music occurred during World War I.

It was in Europe, however, where American dance bands were popular, that classical composers first incorporated the new idiom into their compositions: Claude Debussy in *Golliwog’s Cakewalk* (1908); Igor Stravinsky in *Ragtime* (1918); Maurice Ravel in the Piano Concerto in G major; and especially Darius Milhaud in the ballet *La création du monde* (1923).

George Gershwin was the first American composer to make jazz acceptable to the American classical music audience. The son of poor Jewish immigrants in lower Manhattan, he was a natural-born pianist and left school at 16 to become a pianist with a Tin-Pan Alley firm,

plugging their new songs. He soon commenced writing songs himself, eventually teaming up with his brother Ira as lyricist to become one of the most successful teams of song and musical comedy writers on Broadway. They created a string of immensely successful musicals from *Lady be Good* in December 1924 to *Let 'em Eat Cake* in October 1933. The opening night of a George Gershwin musical comedy was a social and media event with Gershwin himself usually leading the orchestra.

Gershwin received the commission for an extended jazz composition from a conductor of popular music, Paul Whiteman, who promoted concerts of jazz music in New York's Aeolian Hall. Whiteman was the self-styled "King of Jazz" who attempted to make jazz more symphonic and respectable. Whiteman's commission followed an Aeolian Hall concert in the fall of 1923, at which Gershwin had played piano arrangements of a few of his songs.

Gershwin composed the *Rhapsody* in a mere three weeks early in 1924, in a two-piano version. Lacking the skills to orchestrate the work, he turned it over for piano and jazz orchestration to Ferde Grofé, a popular composer, pianist and arranger, who served as Whiteman's factotum. Grofé practically lived in Gershwin's house, orchestrating the work page-by-page as it came from the composer's pen. He also rescored the *Rhapsody* two years later for full symphony orchestra.

The premiere, on February 12 1924, was a smashing success. Although the critics ó true to form ó mostly panned it, the audience loved it. Virtually overnight, jazz became respectable. Gershwin himself played the piano part, becoming an instant celebrity. Significant credit for the success must go to Grofé's imaginative orchestration, which has ended up as his most enduring contribution to music, along with his *Grand Canyon Suite*.

Appalachian Spring

Aaron Copland
1900-1990

During his long career, Aaron Copland composed in many diverse styles. His output included scores for films (*The Red Pony*, *Our Town*, *The Heiress*), works incorporating jazz (Piano Concerto, *Music for the Theater*) and the 12-tone technique (Piano Quartet, Piano Fantasy). In the mid-1930s he began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relation of the music-loving public and the living composer. In order to reach a wider audience he simplified his style to make it more accessible, yet without sacrificing sound artistic values. The first work in this more popular vein was *El Salón Mexico*, finished in 1936. This was followed by the works by which he is best known today: his three American ballets *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*.

Copland composed the ballet *Appalachian Spring* in 1944 for the great pioneer of modern dance, Martha Graham, to be performed at an evening of modern ballet at the Library of Congress (Other ballets on the program were by Paul Hindemith and Darius Milhaud.) Copland originally called it "Ballet for Martha," but Graham gave it its final title after a poem by Hart Crane ó although the ballet bears no relation to the text of the poem. The size limitations of the stage at the Library dictated a small ensemble; consequently the original version was scored for 13 instruments (flute, clarinet, bassoon, piano and strings). Soon after the successful premiere, however, Copland extracted a somewhat shortened suite from the ballet for full orchestra, the version most frequently heard today.

In the preface to the score of the Suite, Copland summarized the story of the ballet using the words of the *New York Herald Tribune* review by Eric Denby, written after the New York premiere: "A pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the last century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites... A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house."

The sections of the suite merge into each other without pause, but reflect distinctly different moods and scenarios. The haunting but peaceful opening gives way suddenly to an outburst of excitement comprising several different musical motives, demonstrating the open octaves and fifths that became the hallmark of Copland's "American" style. After building up to a frenzied climax, a solo clarinet interrupts plaintively with the Shaker tune "Simple Gifts." Copland uses the song as the theme for a set of variations, which themselves increase in intensity as more and more instruments are added with each new variation. Then, with another sudden shift in mood, we are transported back to the quiet introduction, and the Suite ends as it began.

"Simple Gifts" was composed by Shaker Elder Joseph Brackett, Jr. in 1848 for dancing during Shaker worship. Copland's five variations never veer far from the original melody, which he found in a 1940 collection of Shaker songs compiled by Edward D. Andrews. While the tune was certainly perfect for Graham's choreography, it didn't exactly fit the story line, as the Shakers themselves were dedicated to a life of celibacy.

Fancy Free
Suite from the Ballet

Leonard Bernstein
1918-1990

In 1943, Jerome Robbins, then a dancer with the Ballet Theater, wanted to make his name as a choreographer. He had a scenario for a ballet about three sailors on a 24-hour shore leave in New York, looking for girls, excitement and any kind of fun they can stir up. They find it all. It was the perfect subject for the war years, with the city full of sailors on leave. Hunting for a composer, he was turned down by Vincent Persichetti who suggested that Robbins approach Leonard Bernstein instead.

At the time Bernstein's star was rising as a conductor and composer of serious music, although his mentor, Serge Koussevitzky, decried his selling out to "commercialism." The ballet, when it opened in April 1944 in the old Metropolitan Opera House, was a spectacular success both in choreography and the music.

The music, full of complex rhythms and snappy, jazzy themes, shows Bernstein at his most exuberant and most inventive. It joined scores of other American composers, such as Aaron Copland, Morton Gould and others, who employed the rhythms and harmonies of American popular culture on the classical ballet stage. It was also Bernstein's inaugural work in a string of hugely successful ballets and musicals leading up to his most successful work in this genre, *West Side Story*.

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