

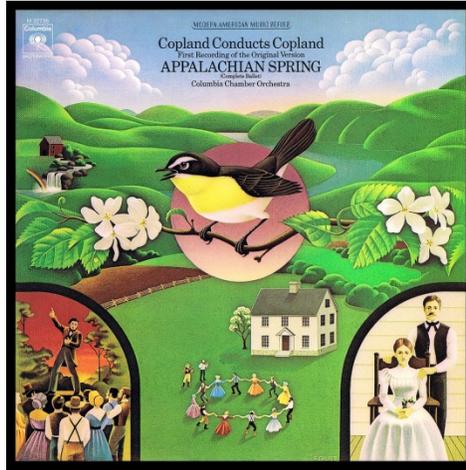
# “Copland Conducts Copland: Appalachian Spring”-- Aaron Copland (1974)

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Essay by Michael Boriskin (guest post)\*



*Aaron Copland*



*Album Cover*



*Martha Graham*

“I was quite amazed when my music won so many awards and became so popular,” recalled composer Aaron Copland about the ballet “Appalachian Spring.” “When you are working on a piece, you don’t think it might have use past the immediate purpose for its composition, and you certainly don’t consider its lasting power. You are so relieved just to have it finished for the premiere!” Copland and his creative partner, choreographer Martha Graham, thought the simple story of frontier love, community, perseverance, and fidelity could serve as the foundation for a compelling piece of theater --“a legend of American living,” according to Graham’s initial script. They could not have predicted that the triumphant premiere of “Appalachian Spring” heard at the Library of Congress in October 1944 would soon be followed by widespread popularity and critical accolades, and then a rapid ascent to iconic status as a landmark in 20<sup>th</sup> century American music and modern dance.

“Appalachian Spring” brought Copland and Graham together for their only collaboration; though both were only in their 40s, they were two of America’s most formidable artistic figures. Graham was one of the pioneers of modern dance in the US, and Copland had already become regarded as the “Dean of American Composers.” They had long admired each other’s work, and had hoped to be able to find a suitable project on which to partner. In the early 1940s, Graham crafted the outlines of a tale that appealed to Copland about struggle and survival, renewal, friendship, and faithfulness. The concept evolved before assuming its final form, with early versions referencing the Bible, Native Americans, the Civil War, the American Southwest, and New England. Always present, though, was what Copland called “the essence of Martha’s ideas,” and, according to an early draft, “the inner frame that holds together a people.” Copland wrote that the working version of the narrative “concerned a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century ... it had to do with the pioneer American spirit, with youth and spring, with optimism and hope.” The story and its musical embodiment would resonate deeply--first with a nation that had experienced years of economic upheaval, violent conflict at home, and war abroad, and then with succeeding generations near and far. (The

supremely-gifted cast in the premiere production included an array of artists in the early stages of their careers, who subsequently left lasting and influential legacies in their fields, including dancers Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins, and May O'Donnell, and artist and sculptor Isamu Noguchi.)

Copland's task in "Appalachian Spring" was to find "the feeling and the spirit." He encountered a then-obscure Shaker song that epitomized for him the sound world and musical character of the whole ballet. "I felt that 'Simple Gifts'," he later explained, "was ideal for Martha's scenario and for the kind of austere movements associated with her choreography." The song would subsequently form the core of a series of variations at the climax of the entire work. The prominence of "Simple Gifts" in "Appalachian Spring" led to the song's nationwide popularity as an emblematic piece of Americana.

Blazing a trail into the American vernacular for generations of US composers who followed him, Copland's historic importance rests on his helping to create and define this nation's musical identity in concert, ballet, and film. Well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, American concert composers were continuing to create music in the mold of the great European masters who either taught or influenced them. Already as a young man in the early 1920s, Copland was determined to "make an American-sounding music," and was soon integrating jazz into several major works. In the 1930s and 1940s, he created a number of indelibly evocative works that were based upon American iconography (Lincoln, the common man, the Open West, cowboy lore and heartland legends, small-town life, etc.), and that have become deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness of the US "Appalachian Spring" heads that list.

While "Appalachian Spring" has been widely acclaimed as "the quintessential American dance work" ("The New York Times"), Copland's memorable score took on a life of its own soon after the premiere. The music won both the 1945 Pulitzer Prize in Music and that year's coveted New York Music Critics' Circle Award.

His ballet score was composed for a chamber ensemble of 13 instruments, a limitation imposed by space requirements in the Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress, as well as financial constraints. Already thinking of the prospects for concert performances of the music alone, Copland extracted a suite from the ballet and scored it for full symphony orchestra, eliminating only about 10 minutes of music he deemed to be primarily of choreographic interest. In this version, it was immediately introduced by the New York Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which made the premiere recording, and then performed extensively by orchestras around the U.S. and the world.

In connection with a planned performance in the 1950s of the complete ballet by the Philadelphia Orchestra, Copland went back and scored for full orchestra the music he had removed from the symphonic suite. By the late 1960s, Copland had been persuaded to publish the suite in its original scoring for 13 instruments, despite his earlier misgivings about offering a small-ensemble version of a composition that had become widely known in its more glamorous setting for full orchestra. "In time," he recalled later, "I have come to think that the original instrumentation has a clarity and is closer to my original conception than the more opulent orchestrated version."

Over the decades, there have been countless recordings of the various versions of "Appalachian Spring," often by many of the world's most famous conductors with leading international orchestras. But a recording like this one, presided over by its composer, carries special interest and

meaning, and remains irreplaceable--especially as it is of the complete original version in its chamber-ensemble scoring. Having a concert composer record his or her own music is often illuminating, by conveying the creator's thoughts and goals in an actual performance--and in a lasting form. Copland recognized the importance of this, and took advantage of every opportunity to record his own music, either as conductor or pianist, even if he regarded working in front of the microphones as more nerve-wracking than performing live. Copland's conducting, here as elsewhere, is of a whole with his composition. Like his music, this recording is full of character, understated and direct, poised and dignified, spacious, buoyant, and warmly expressive. While recordings by others may offer greater instrumental virtuosity, sonic refinement, and conductorial dazzle, this recording is one to cherish for its humanity, rectitude, deep musicality, and quiet joy in living.

*Pianist Michael Boriskin has performed in over 30 countries, recorded extensively for a dozen labels, and served as a program advisor or artistic consultant for major institutions across the US. He is the longtime Artistic and Executive Director of Copland House, the award-winning creative center for American music based at Aaron Copland's National Historic Landmark home near New York City.*

\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.