

# Aaron Copland **Nationalism and Innovation in** *Appalachian Spring*

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## Historical Context

- Composed as a ballet for the dancer-choreographer Martha Graham, who viewed modern dance as a vehicle for the expression of emotions.
- The original score was titled *Ballet for Martha* and scored for an ensemble of 13 instrumentalists.
- Commissioned by the American philanthropist and patron of the arts, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and premiered in celebration of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday on 30 October 1944 at the Library of Congress.
- The preface to the Boosey & Hawkes score describes the ballet as “a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-build 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. An older neighbour suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. 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”.
- Edited for a larger orchestral ensemble and titled *Appalachian Spring Suite*; premiered in October 1945 by the New York Philharmonic.



A farmstead at Rock Hill Farm, Pennsylvania, mid 19<sup>th</sup>-Century  
(J+R Klotz, Creative Commons)

## Key Ideas

- The work is regarded as offering an ‘American’ sound. Yet, it was composed by the son of Russian migrants to the United States of America who went to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. The ‘nationalist’ dimensions of the work are embedded in the context of transnational flows.
- One reason for emphasising Copland’s American sound is his own critique of the dominance of European cultural influence. Another reason is his interest in American vernacular traditions. What alternatives did Copland turn to in his exploration of American vernacular traditions? Which traditions have been excluded in his construction of an ‘American sound’?



Shaker Home, Hancock Shaker Village  
(Bestbudbrian, Creative Commons)

- The work highlights the polarity of homogenous visions of nation identity (perhaps based on images of a pioneering white America) versus the 'melting pot' model of American society (which takes into consideration histories of indigeneity, enslavement, and diverse migrations) drawing on musical vocabularies that chart Copland's exploration of Jewish traditions, Harlem jazz, folk repertoires, and New York modernism, as well as his interests in Mexican music traditions.
- Other composers were also constructing an American sound based on musical materials from other traditions, e.g. Lou Harrison's turn to gamelan.
- In his 1952 Harvard lecture, Copland identified the mass media as enabling composers to transcend the limits of the concert-hall and allow popular audiences to connect with serious "art" music. His aim was to communicate effectively and simply with mass audiences.
- As a ballet, the work is a collaborative enterprise between music composer and dance choreographer. Robertson describes the collaborative process as follows:



Nuremberg, Pennsylvania, present day.  
(Jakec Creative Commons)

"Graham's correspondence documents that she initiated the collaboration, producing several provisional scripts that Copland either rejected or revised. After eleven months, Graham produced a mutually acceptable script incorporating Copland's revisions. This process represents the first stage of the collaboration. In the second stage, Copland began thematic sketches from Graham's twelve-page provisional script. He composed a highly programmatic score that exactly followed her episodic structure, timings, and psychological development of characters. The third and final stage of the collaboration

began when, after much delay, Graham received Copland's piano score, which, although it matched the original scenario, had a high degree of musical independence from Graham's narrative. Copland's musical interpretation of the scenario led Graham to revise her script substantially; as she devised specific movements for the music, the plot became tighter and more abstract" (1999: 8).

## Things to Listen For

- *Appalachian Spring* quotes a melody associated with a religious minority, the Shakers: "Simple Gifts". It is one of the most recognizable melodies in the work and can easily be found on YouTube.
- How does Copland treat melody, harmony and rhythm throughout?
- Contrasts between sparse and full orchestral textures.

## Legacy and Reception

- *Appalachian Spring* is performed most often as an instrumental suite rather than a ballet nowadays. Yet, the relation between music and dance is one of the most innovative and interesting dimensions of the work. We learn about the forging of a nationalist vision of America by both Copland and Graham.
- The Shakers were framed as 'folk culture' and although they were criticised for communist, leftist political views, and excluded from the mainstream, they were also viewed as symbolising

American identity, virtue and aesthetics. Thus Copland's use of 'Simple Gifts' seemed to offer responses to ontological questions posed during the Second World War about Americans and Americanness.

- The quotation of "Simple Gifts" raises questions that are still relevant today. Vanderhamm observes that:

*Appalachian Spring* and the presence of the Shaker melody in particular ought to prompt more than a swell of triumphalist sentiment. Instead, it might offer important and difficult questions: How do we walk the line between inclusion and appropriation? What does it mean when the melting pot is the marketplace? As with all artistic works, the meanings of *Appalachian Spring* have far outgrown the intentions of its creators. But restoring these hard questions to our encounter with *Appalachian Spring* recalls one of Graham's initial hopes. Attempting to sketch her ideas to Copland, she wrote, "I want to say things to people about themselves, some good and some bad. . . . Sometimes the wall between is very thin" (2018: 522).



Lamb at a Shaker village.  
(Bonnie Kittle Creative Commons)

- The work is often regarded in terms of American populism but its compositional features and historical contexts lead to a revisionist historiography highlighting intersections with ideas about folk-based nationalism, pan-Americanism across the north and south, the institutionalisation of music as a discipline in American universities, and the removal of militaristic musical elements in the suite because they clashed with idealised notions of American values in the wake of World War II and the dropping of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

## Other Resources

- Copland conducting *Appalachian Spring* in 1980 has been preserved on YouTube.
- Robertson, M. 1999. "Musical and Choreographic Integration in Copland's and Graham's *Appalachian Spring*" in *The Musical Quarterly* 83 (1): 6–26.
- Vanderhamm, D. 2018. "Simple Shaker Folk: Appropriation, American Identity, and *Appalachian Spring*" in *American Music* 36 (4): 507-526.
- 1959 film with Martha Graham dancing in *Appalachian Spring*.

## Further Listening

- Try listening to Leonard Bernstein conducting the New York Philharmonic and his recording with the Los Angeles Philharmonic to compare the differences.

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