

AQA AoS4: Orchestral music of Copland

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Introduction

Picture the following Hollywood scene: a hero has fallen, and a faded Stars and Stripes flutters in the breeze as we remember their act of sacrifice for their country. What underscore do you hear? Most probably a muted trumpet sounding a distant fanfare accompanied by lean-scored strings and transparent wind, something that connotes noble acts and a vast, open landscape.

This iconic 'American sound' has its roots in Copland's orchestral works and ballet scores, in particular from his populist phase in the late 1930s and 40s. Together with his contemporaries Virgil Thomson, William Schuman and Roy Harris, he set out to find a classical sound that encapsulated the traditions and aspirations of his country as the new century broke. They succeeded, to the point of being typecast. That sound has since been enshrined in film scores and orchestral works ever since as a symbol of American identity.

This is the sound that AQA has chosen to explore as part of its GCSE Area of Study 4 (Western classical tradition since 1910). Copland's music offers an accessible introduction to the world of 20th-century orchestral music, whatever the specification. A previous resource (*Music Teacher*, June 2017) set the context for Copland's style and looked at the ballets in particular, with an analysis of some of the dances from the set work *Rodeo*. This resource throws the net wider to place those ballets in the context of his other popular orchestral works, including:

- ▶ *El salón México*
- ▶ *Appalachian Spring*
- ▶ *Fanfare for the Common Man*
- ▶ *Third Symphony*
- ▶ *Quiet City*

Overview of Copland's main phases

Composers' lives are often neatly divided into beginning, middle and late periods. Although Copland went through distinct phases, they are not always easily distinguished by chronology. In his 70s, he wrote both catchy dances (eg *Danzón cubano*, *Latin American Sketches*) and confrontational, dissonant pieces such as *Inscape* and *Connotations*. Throughout his life, Copland was aware of cultural shifts and how his music might land with the listener. Although he is most readily connected to the pastoral American sound, he had many different creative identities. The following is a summary of the main ones, distilling what was set out in the earlier resource and adding some new insights.

1920s to early 1930s: the 'boy from Brooklyn' meets Boulanger

Biographies of the composer, and Copland himself, like to emphasise how he was just a 'boy from Brooklyn', lost in the melting pot of immigrant communities and one of the many who had to fight to transcend his humble surroundings. As he put it:

'I was born on a street that can only be described as drab. It had none of the garish colour of the ghetto and none of the charm of an Old England thoroughfare. It was simply drab.'

His family, to their credit, recognised his talent early on and supported it with the best of teachers. He ended up studying for three years with the celebrated French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger in the inspiring setting of Fontainebleau, just outside of Paris. Boulanger put him and his fellow students through their paces with a strict formal training, while also encouraging each one to be alive to contemporary developments, including jazz. Stravinsky and Bartók were seen as luminaries and every

pupil was invited to find their own voice. Her influence was so widespread and her American students so numerous that by the 1940s the musical historian Harold Schonberg was able to write: 'It was said that every American town had two things: a five-and-dime, and a Boulanger pupil.'

The young Copland was fired up by the energy of Les six composers, and the crisp polyrhythms and angular writing of Stravinsky, who was then in his jaunty neo-Classical phase. His first major works, such as the *Dance Symphony* (1925), *Music for the Theatre* (1925) and the Piano Concerto (1926), fizz along with jazzy rhythms while displaying a highly disciplined mind. They are jazzy in the loosest sense, however. Where Gershwin swings and grooves, Copland is more studied, giving a classical take on a native language – like reading Kerouac with a posh accent.

After the Concerto, Copland stopped his experiments with jazz, realising that it was not coming from an authentic place.

'With the concerto, I felt I had done all I could with the idiom, considering its limited emotional scope. True, it was an easy way to be American in musical terms, but all American music could not possibly be confined to the Blues and the "snappy number".'

Late 1930s to 1940s: the modernist and the populist

As Copland became regarded as part of the new American school, so he sought a more complex, intellectually impressive style that would hold its own against his European counterparts. With the *Piano Variations* of 1930 (that were later made into the *Orchestral Variations* in 1957) and *Statements* for orchestra (1935), he pushed into serialist territory with dissonant and pared-back scores that were both difficult to perform and to understand.

These modernist experimentations were always counterbalanced by a more pragmatic approach, however. Copland was against being new for the sake of it, and argued that he and his composing colleagues could be 'content to rest awhile and to till the ground others have cleared'. Paired with this was a recognition, in the era of radio and the phonograph, that audiences were broadening. In an autobiographical essay published in 1939, Copland wrote:

'It made no sense to ignore the public and to continue writing as if they did not exist. I felt that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn't say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms.'

The works that followed embodied what he called this **'imposed simplicity'**, mixing the vernacular with the formal, and developing folk ideas with a strong structural logic. Music from this populist phase was led by:

- ▶ clear melodies
- ▶ triadic harmonies
- ▶ peppy rhythms and polyrhythmic textures

The Great Depression, socialism and Mexico

As Copland was keen to point out, the move to 'imposed simplicity' was not just an artistic decision but also in response to the crippling effects of the Great Depression of 1929. By the mid-1930s, Broadway's finest musicians and promoters had jumped the sinking ship of New York to seek new fortunes in Hollywood. The New Deal was launched to restore hope, and writers, artists, actors and composers were all recruited to bring cheer to the depressed masses. Copland saw musicians as being 'in a first-line position on the cultural front' and that sense of duty, together with his leftist ideals of using art to promote solidarity, shaped his writing through to the end of the Second World War. Music from this period includes:

- ▶ *El salón México* (1936): a single-movement orchestral fantasy based on Mexican tunes.
- ▶ *The Second Hurricane* (1936): an opera for secondary schoolchildren.
- ▶ *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944): ballets inspired by the West.
- ▶ Film scores for *Of Mice and Men* (1939) and *Our Town* (1940).

Although the first reason Copland went to Mexico was that he was sent as a cultural ambassador, he quickly fell in love with the people and the music. He saw their noble resilience in the face of poverty and a society untainted by capitalism:

'Mexico offers something fresh, pure and wholesome – a quality which is deeply unconventional.'

For him, blending Mexican tunes and rhythms in a North American mould was a way of celebrating pluralism and the power of the people, and therefore an important symbol of hope in such troubled times. Local composers such as Carlos Chávez (who became a close friend) and Silvestre Revueltas were happy to ditch larger structural concerns in favour of simple medleys and patchworks of tunes. Inspired by their spirit as much as by their infectiously upbeat music, Copland wrote his own 'tourist souvenir', *El salón México*, absorbing folk idioms into his own style much as he had done with jazz a decade before.

A look at *El salón México*

This short tone poem is based on a night club in the city of the same name, known locally as 'El Marro' (the 'policeman's nightstick'). People from all social classes gathered there to dance the *paso doble*, waltz, foxtrot and local *danzón*, often staying until dawn the next day as they danced their troubles away.

Getting away from German sounds

Using Mexican idioms in this way was as much about uniting North and South America at a time of war as it was rejecting the German traditional way of doing things. For Copland, Carlos Chávez's music 'exemplified the complete overthrow of 19th-century Germanic ideals which tyrannised music for more than 100 years' and offered 'the first authentic signs of a new world with its own new music'.

It was Carlos Chávez who was honoured with giving the first performance of the work with the Mexico City Orchestra, which Copland described as 'making a mess, but such a pretty mess'.

Copland drew on two published collections of folksong to find three tunes he could incorporate into his own medley:

- ▶ 'El palo verde', for its opening flourishes that alternate between 6/8 and 3/4.
- ▶ 'La Jesunita', a love song sung by revolutionaries, for the trumpet motif and its variations.
- ▶ 'El mosco' for the main, swaying tune.

What follows is loosely bound set of arrangements of those themes drawn together into one humorous medley. Humorous, because of the extreme contrasts of mood, none more so than right at the beginning. After a dramatic opening salvo, a slow drunken tread is set up with a trumpet imitating someone slurring their words. The bass drum, woodblock and side drum are used both lightheartedly (eg to imitate patrons making their way back home on their long-suffering horses) and to create rhythmic drive.

Other pragmatists

Copland's desire to use music for a clear social purpose echoes similar movements elsewhere. Copland heard Paul Hindemith's theatre music in Berlin during his student days in Paris, and was impressed by its directness and accessibility. This was an example of Hindemith's *Gebrauchsmusik*, music written for an express occasion and to serve public interest, and of the German 'New Objectivity' (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), where the composer's subjective approach was overridden by the practicalities of the brief.

In Russia, Soviet composers were also requested to write straightforward scores with mass appeal as part of the propaganda machine. The context, though, was a totalitarian regime that persecuted artists who did not follow its edicts. The results may be similar to *Gebrauchsmusik*, but the means were sinister and entirely different.

The ballets

Copland continued his populist style throughout the war and saw it as his patriotic duty to create music that celebrated American values and nurtured a sense of home. For his ballets he was encouraged to look at the legends of the Wild West for inspiration. The West was a strong symbol in the American psyche and represented many virtues and aspirations:

- ▶ family values of a homestead and facing the wilderness in a community.
- ▶ individual acts of heroism and derring-do.
- ▶ nostalgic escape from the city and embracing the beauty of nature.
- ▶ pioneering spirit of discovery and self-dependence.

Treatment of folk material in the ballets

Although both *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo* draw on cowboy tunes, some from folksong catalogues and others imitated, there is a distinction in how those tunes are treated. In *Billy the Kid*, Copland tries to distance himself from the original material by recasting it, expanding or fragmenting the tunes and playing with the underlying rhythms. Although he preserves the main shape of the melody, he reworks them to be more in his own voice, often quickly juxtaposing one idea against another.

In *Rodeo*, however, the melodies are kept more intact, without as many metric manipulations or melodic reinventions. The use of 'Old Paint' in 'Saturday Night Waltz' is a good example, with both the original tune and its harmonies being faithfully adhered to. Copland was initially resistant to using extant Western tunes such as this, worried they would render the tone too banal. However, he soon became

The irony that a gay, urbane son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants became the mascot composer of the Wild West has often been noted.

fascinated with their rich heritage and ‘hopelessly involved’ in their stories as he wrote the score. In both ballets you can sense that genuine affection for the source material, and a conviction in its ability to connect with and move the American listener.

Despite the immediate success of *Billy the Kid*, Copland had had enough of Western themes when he was approached by *Rodeo*'s choreographer, Agnes de Mille. When she invited him to write the music, he responded: ‘Oh no! I’ve already composed one of those. I don’t want to do another cowboy ballet!’

Appalachian Spring

The final of Copland’s three populist ballets, *Appalachian Spring*, is in a different mode and marks a new stylistic maturity, reflected in the ballet being awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The most memorable tune from that score, ‘Simple Gifts’, had actually been discovered by Copland four years before he was commissioned to write the ballet. It turned out to be the perfect fit. The symphonic suite taken from the ballet is now mainstream repertoire for any orchestra (or smaller ensemble, if the chamber version is used) and its subtle and confident writing assured Copland of both critical and popular acclaim.

The scenario represents a pastoral idyll, or American Eden, as a young couple set up house in the Pennsylvania hills. A sense of spring permeates the score from the upward ascending triads (that wonderful aggregate of E major over A major), through the vigorous multi-meter rhythmic passages and the contrasting serene episodes with their trademark transparent scoring. There are only brief moments given to dissonance and conflict, and they are all the more powerful for this context.

The orchestration of the ‘Simple Gifts’ passage (cues 55-69) is an excellent example of Copland’s craft and a good excerpt to introduce GCSE students to his sound. You could point out the following features:

- ▶ The use of solo clarinet as an idiomatic folk instrument.
- ▶ The light touches of piccolo, harp harmonics and triangle.
- ▶ The subtle build-up of tempo and momentum, eg the syncopated trumpets underneath the bassoon and oboe duet.
- ▶ The unusual pairing of trombone and viola as solo duet against beautifully patterned accompaniment.
- ▶ The use of orchestral piano, a feature of Copland’s writing.
- ▶ The clear wind sectional writing once the tune goes double speed, with softer colours given by flute and clarinet.
- ▶ How the final tutti rendition in *fff* enters unexpectedly and therefore all the more dramatically.

In all of these ballets, Copland shows how he is able to keep the integrity of his own distinct compositional voice without selling out to a mass market.

Wartime works

The *Fanfare for the Common Man* is Copland’s most performed work, and is reliably rolled out on Fourth of July celebrations, Republican conventions and any occasion that has a jingoistic overtone. The irony is that Copland’s socialist politics were at odds with such occasions, and his original intention was to draw attention away from idealised heroics to the simple contribution of ‘the common man, after all who was doing all the dirty work in the war and the army and who deserved a fanfare’.

Running for only three minutes, its effectiveness is down to several well-judged features:

- ▶ How the gong and percussion set the tone initially, building anticipation for the trumpets.
- ▶ The bold 4ths and 5ths and clear arch of the trumpet phrase.
- ▶ The simple countermelody in the horns.
- ▶ How the three-note idea is used in dialogue between lower brass and timpani.
- ▶ The descending triads of the answering phrase.
- ▶ The overall grandeur in the pacing – plenty of space is allowed.
- ▶ The surprising final D major chord.

The Fanfare started off as a relatively minor commission, but its popularity soared when it was included in the high-profile Third Symphony as part of its finale. Its noble sentiment and pomp suited the Symphony perfectly and helped reinforce its ‘heroic’ travel from darkness to light. The Symphony had been commissioned by Koussevitzky, an impresario conductor who was Copland’s mentor in his early career.

The importance of mentors

Just as Koussevitzky had taken the young Copland under his wing and given him his first career-defining commissions, so Copland befriended and was a life-long mentor of Leonard Bernstein, the conductor, composer and flamboyant all-round ambassador for American music. Not only did they support each other throughout their artistic lives, but together they represented a formidable force that brought about the creation of the American Composers' Association and the Tanglewood Festival.

Copland 'knew the kind of thing Koussevitzky liked to conduct and what he wanted', namely a work 'in the grand manner with broad appeal'. And he delivered. The nation needed an anthem to the fallen of the war and a statement of optimism and unity, and they got it. Bernstein said the Symphony became 'an American monument, like the Washington Monument or Lincoln Memorial'. Koussevitzky called it the greatest American symphony ever written (although, admittedly, he was biased).

The grandeur of the material is certainly a defining feature, but there are subtler, more intimate and darker moments that also characterise it. The **third movement** starts high on the violins in elegiac mode, the wandering lines expressing the lostness and desolation so many will have been feeling at the time. It recalls the largos of Shostakovich and how their sinewy lines twist and unfold. A quicker, more consoling episode follows that takes its rhythmic imprint from *Appalachian Spring*, but the movement returns to a more reflective state, and it is out of this that the finale takes its shape.

This quieter aspect to Copland's writing, with its stringent harmonies and carefully parsed textures defines his style as much as the grander, 'open-prairie' sound, or his more exuberant, balletic passages. The incidental music to **Quiet City** is another good example to use. The apparent simplicity of the opening string accompaniment is daring, as is the use of bare one-note rhythmic motifs and interlocking triads. What marks this piece out is its use of subtle timbre – the strings, cor anglais and various shades on the trumpet – and its atmospheric evocation of space. It is such a well-contained composition and says so much with so little, showing Copland at his most lyrical. It is a wonderful piece to end a session with on a more reflective tone, or it could equally be used as a creative opener, where you ask the students to devise a narrative to accompany it.

Conclusion

After the war years, Copland's output slowed, and by the time he was in his 60s, he was busier as a lecturer and conductor than he was as a composer. There are a few more experimental works that he wrote in the 1960s that never really caught the public imagination in the same way as the ones from his heyday. Listening to the major works described above will give the student a clear aural picture of Copland's signature style, with all its breadth, lyricism and rhythmic vitality, and those qualities can be traced through all of the ballets. This resource has emphasised, though, that as well as being the architect of the 'American Sound', Copland was a truly versatile composer, capable of responding to very different briefs and of being imaginative and convincing, whatever the setting. **MT**