

Copland: *Appalachian Spring*

Aaron Copland's ballet *Appalachian Spring* has deservedly remained one of his most popular works. Copland's invention here was, at the time of its composition, startlingly original, and was recognized eventually with a Pulitzer Prize. Begun in 1942, the ballet was written for the brilliant choreographer Martha Graham and in fact carried the working title "Ballet for Martha" for much of its inception. The two major elements of American folk music presented in the work – hymn and folk dance – spurred Graham to create the "Appalachian Spring" plot, which was not initially in Copland's mind as he composed. In the ballet, a pair of newlyweds are settling in a Pennsylvania homestead in the early nineteenth century, excited and anxious about their new life together. They receive advice from an older neighbour and are startled by a religious revivalist and his followers; in the end, they feel prepared to face whatever difficulties they may encounter. Completed in Mexico in 1944, the work received its premiere on October 30th of that year; it was then reworked for full orchestra in 1945, and it is this version that is most commonly heard today. As in his two previous ballets on American themes, *Rodeo* and *Billy the Kid*, Copland adapted the melodic and rhythmic language of American folk music in *Appalachian Spring* to his distinctive personal style.

The work's structure is basically an alternation between energetic dance sections and serene hymn-like interludes. The opening's diatonic simplicity illustrates the familiar and yet foreign world of the Pennsylvania settlers. Gradually, a dance evolves in which excitement and tension are expressed by simple, but not simplistic, harmonic language and clear, brilliant orchestration. As the work continues to move between these two basic thematic worlds, intensity increases with the introduction of more chromatically inflected melodies and harmonies and with a gradual thickening of contrapuntal and orchestral texture. This progression culminates in a set of variations on the well-known Shaker hymn tune "Simple Gifts" in which the dance-like and hymn-like aspects of the work are unified in a purposeful, moving finale.

-Notes by Brian E. Power