

20th-Century American Music

An American Composer's Perspective on Copland, Gershwin, Barber & Bernstein

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If we Americans were enlightened to the point of putting pictures of composers on our money instead of politicians, then Gershwin would be on the one-dollar bill and Copland would be on the five. Tonight's Plano Symphony Opening Night concert honors four of the most distinguished American composers who were active in the first half of the twentieth century, beginning with Copland and Gershwin followed by Samuel Barber and Leonard Bernstein.

I.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990) said that he wrote music "to show what it's like to be alive today." His roots were in American jazz, and, ironically, he found his own uniquely American voice by studying with the legendary Nadia Boulanger in Paris. With her guidance, he became the first American composer to break free of European models and to capture in his music what it is like to be an American -- from the clanging bustle of his native New York to serene New England villages to the open spaces of the Western plains.

His contemporaries called him "the Dean of American Music," and he left a legacy of 100 works which are widely performed internationally as part of the standard repertoire. He wrote in all genres, including ballet, orchestral works, concertos, operas and chamber music. He enjoyed the popular success of his "Americana" works, saying, "I do not mean to belittle the value of accessibility, nor the value for native music of a certain Americanism in our musical language. But neither do I wish to be limited to that frame of reference." In his later years, Copland followed Stravinsky's practice of writing in the 12-tone technique developed by Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), and, in those works, like Stravinsky, he always retained his own forceful and distinctive personal style.

Tonight's concert opens with Copland's best-known work, the powerful and moving *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942). The premiere performance, by the Cincinnati Symphony, was scheduled during March, when people were looking ahead to the tax deadline of April 15. Copland explained that "I'm honoring the common man at income tax time," and, in the music, we can hear the united power of the ordinary American taxpayer rising to heroic proportions.

II.

George Gershwin (1898-1937) was born Jacob Gershovitz in Brooklyn, New York, and in his brief 39 years, he attained enormous artistic and professional success. In 2005, the British journal *The Guardian* called him "the wealthiest composer of all time." Gershwin's unique combination of classical complexity and popular appeal makes him --- like Kurt Weill, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim -- one of the few composers whose music is admired equally by lovers of classical music and popular music.

Gershwin began his career writing commercial songs for "Tin Pan Alley," the street on New York's west side where many music publishers had their offices. Gershwin became a star composer both on Broadway and in Hollywood, but his life-long ambition was to transcend the popular realm in favor of what he considered the more respectable and meaningful world of classical music. To this end, like Copland, he approached Nadia Boulanger for composition lessons. Boulanger did not want him to change his musical personality by emulating academic models, so she refused, explaining later that, "By then, he was already Gershwin." Gershwin also asked Maurice Ravel for lessons. Ravel told him, "Why be a second-rate Ravel, when you can be a first-rate Gershwin?" Ravel then asked Gershwin how much money he made in a year. Gershwin answered, "\$100,000," to which Ravel replied, "I should study with you!" And Ravel actually helped himself to liberal doses of Gershwin's style, particularly in his jazzy Piano Concerto in G.

Gershwin's Concerto in F (1924) followed the famous *Rhapsody in Blue*, written the same year, but it reveals a composer more confident about his orchestral technique. With the *Rhapsody*, Gershwin had asked the Hollywood composer Ferde Grofé to orchestrate it for him, but with this piece, Gershwin could proudly write on his score, "Orchestrated by the Composer."

In the bold first movement, the music has moments when it veers away from jazz and edges closer to the more conventional language and gestures of Rachmaninoff, but Gershwin always manages to pull a fresh, new jazzy strain out of his hat to remind us who is in charge. Classic blues tags abound, similar to the gratuitous "...and many more" tag that someone inevitably inflicts upon a group singing of "Happy Birthday." Here, it actually fits. The second movement alternates a wistfully lyrical high/low trumpet solo with a sprightly ragtime piano scherzo: a juxtaposition that is one of Gershwin's finest inspirations. The last movement is a driving *moto perpetuo* that uses one of Rachmaninoff's favorite tricks: a gentle (in this case jazzy) tune tossed off earlier in the movement returns at the end, slowly and at full volume, with piano and orchestra in unison rhythm to end in a blaze of glory.

III.

The music of Samuel Barber (1910-1981) is characterized by lyricism, craftsmanship and seriousness of purpose. His early works were in an unabashedly Romantic 19th-century style, although throughout his career, he gradually incorporated more and more modernist techniques into his scores. Barber was unusual among composers in that he was a trained singer, and he actually performed professionally as a baritone. Nearly two-thirds of his large output is vocal, and one can hear a “singing voice” even in his instrumental music, especially in the famous *Adagio for Strings* (1936). Other well-known vocal works include the opera *Vanessa* (1957) and *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (1947). He won the Pulitzer Prize for music twice, and, along with George Gershwin (1898-1937), Aaron Copland (1900-1990), Elliott Carter (1908-2012) and Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), he is considered one of the most significant American composers born near the turn of the 20th century.

Barber began his *Second Essay for Orchestra* (1942) shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and six months after the premiere, by the New York Philharmonic, he received his draft notice for WW II. The shadow of war, therefore, hangs over the piece from beginning to end. The music, however, has no specific programmatic references. It is, rather, more of an argument, in the manner of an essay written with words, with one idea following another in a clear and convincing line of development. As Toni Morrison said about a good book, “It takes you on a journey from *here* to *there*.”

The work begins pensively, with soft woodwinds. As the strings enter, the music becomes more lyrical, reminiscent of Copland, although a little sweeter. Soon, however, there are restless stirrings with unpredictable explosions of brass and timpani. Clarinets and bassoons begin a nervous fugue, which quickly spreads through the whole orchestra. Over the fugue, Barber continues the inexorable drive of the earlier unsettling stirrings, building to a dramatic climax. At the end, as in every good essay, there is a strong conclusion. Here, the strings lead the orchestra in a slow, solemn chorale of philosophical resignation to what lies ahead. Just before the end, the violins desperately reach up to their highest register as if to escape the inevitable, before they succumb to the definitive final chords.

IV.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) was the first American musician to become an international superstar. Better known as a conductor than as a composer, he erupted onto the world stage when, without rehearsal, he substituted for an indisposed Bruno Walter to conduct the New York Philharmonic. He later became the orchestra’s music director, where he championed the symphonies of Gustav Mahler (1860-1911), and he continued to conduct leading orchestras all over the world. A master teacher and pianist, he brought and explained classical music to millions through his *Unanswered Question* lectures at Harvard, his televised “Omnibus” series and the brilliant “Young People’s Concerts.”

As a composer, along with Copland and Gershwin, Bernstein drew upon his roots in American jazz. He contributed many distinguished works to the repertoire, including three symphonies (the *Jeremiah*, *Age of Anxiety* and *Kaddish*), the Oscar-winning film score for *On the Waterfront*, the ballet *Fancy Free*, the *Chichester Psalms*, the *Serenade based on Plato's Symposium*, *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* and the musical theatre works *On the Town*, *Candide* and *West Side Story*.

West Side Story (1957) is Bernstein's "hit tune," and it was a "monster hit" on Broadway. Based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the show is set in New York's upper west side. Instead of the Montagues and the Capulets, there are street gangs called "The Sharks" (Anglos) and "The Jets" (Latinos). The choreographer Jerome Robbins conceived the idea, and Stephen Sondheim wrote the lyrics. In 1960, Bernstein created a *Symphonic Suite from West Side Story*, adapted from the full score. There are nine sections, drawn from the show in an order that follows the action of the story: Prologue, Somewhere, Scherzo, Mambo, Cha Cha, María, Cool, Rumble and Finale.

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