

## Kingsville Music Club

February 16, 2010

6:30 p.m.

# The Music of Aaron Copland

Dr. Melinda Brou

### Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

- Born November 14, 1900 in Brooklyn, NY
- Youngest of five children of Harris and Sarah Copland
- His first written melody was 7 bars of music written at the age of 11 for an opera scene that he had envisioned.
- Studied with Leopold Wolfson from 1913-1917
- Studied theory, harmony and composition with Rubin Goldmark
- Studied with Nadia Boulanger from 1920 to 1924 in Paris
- Strong supporter of “new music” formed several groups to this end including Young Composer’s Group and a group based on Les Six, including Roger Sessions, Roy Harris, Virgil Thomson and Walter Piston
- In the 1930’s undertook the German idea of Gebrauchsmusik (“music for use”) as composers sought to create music that could serve a utilitarian as well as artistic purpose.
- Considered “Dean of American Composers”
- In addition to being a composer, he was a pianist, teacher, lecturer, author of 3 books on music, conductor
- Worked in many genres: orchestra, film, ballet, opera, chamber music.
- Music varies in styles—in early years constantly looking for an American aesthetic, which leads to incorporation of jazz and folk melodies. Extensive use of percussion/rhythm, use of polyrhythm, polychords, later on experiments with serialism.
- In describing the “American Sound” of his music he pointed to “the optimistic tone”, “his love of rather large canvases”, “a certain directness in expression of sentiment”, and “a certain songfulness”.
- As his career progressed he wrote : “I no longer feel the need of seeking out conscious Americanisms. Because we live here and work here, we can be certain that when our music is mature it will also be American in quality.”
- *El Salón México*—written between 1932 and 1936, was his first piece to meet with popular success and to be embraced by the public.
- Was blacklisted in the 1950’s due to suspected Communist ties—though his music never fell out of popularity, and ultimately his reputation emerged fairly untarnished.
- Became a multimillionaire from the profits of his music.
- Received many grants in his lifetime which helped him financially especially during his early years
- Wrote slowly, often revised music. Very methodical in his note keeping and would go through old journals for discarded melodies
- By the 1960’s, he is conducting more, composing less. Of his fall off in compositional ideas he said: “It was exactly as if someone had simply turned off a faucet.”
- Academy Award nominated for his scores for *Of Mice and Men* (1939), *Our Town* (1940), and *The North Star* (1943). He won with *The Heiress* in 1950.
- Winner of the Pulitzer prize in composition for *Appalachian Spring*.
- Died December 2, 1990 Sleepy Hollow, NY

### Quotes about music by Aaron Copland:

- “So long as the human spirit thrives on this planet, music in some living form will accompany and sustain it and give it expressive meaning.”
- “The whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking, “Is there a meaning to music?” My answer would be, ‘Yes.’ And ‘Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?’ My answer to that would be, ‘No.’ ”
- “To stop the flow of music would be like the stopping of time itself, incredible and inconceivable.”
- “You compose because you want to somehow summarize in some permanent form your most basic feelings about being alive, to set down... some sort of permanent statement about the way it feels to live now, today.”
- “I have never known a public concert of a variegated make-up that wasn't enlivened by ten minutes of controversial music. Even those who are sure to hate it are given something to talk about.”

**Today's Listening:**

- *Fanfare for the Common Man*, 1942 (Brass and Percussion) London Symphony Orchestra—Aaron Copland, Conductor
- “Hoe-Down” from *Rodeo*, 1942 (Ballet) New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein Conductor
- “Simple Gifts” from *Appalachian Spring*, 1943-44 (Ballet) Boston Pops Orchestra, John Williams, Conductor
- “Zion’s Walls” from *Old American Songs*, set II, 1952 (song cycle) Susan Chilcott, Soprano; Iain Burnside, Piano
- “Zion’s Walls” from *Old American Songs*, set II (song cycle) Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Utah Symphony, Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor
- “The Promise of Living” from *The Tender Land*, 1952-54 (Opera) Tanglewood Festival Chorus and Boston Pops Orchestra, John Williams Conductor
- “I bought me a cat” from *Old American Songs*, set I (song cycle) Susan Chilcott, Soprano; Iain Burnside, Piano
- “Why do they shut me out of Heaven?” from *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 1950 (song cycle) Jan De Gaetani, mezzo-soprano; Leo Smit, piano
- “Laurie’s Song” from *The Tender Land*, 1952-54 (Opera) Charis Strange, soprano, The University of Kentucky Opera Theater, Bohuslav Martinu Philharmonic Orchestra, Kirk Trevor Conductor.

**Further Listening:**

*El Salón Mexico*, 1933-36 (orchestral)

*Billy the Kid*, 1938 (Ballet)

*Lincoln Portrait*, 1942 (narrator and orchestra)

*Third Symphony*, 1944-1946 (orchestral)

*Clarinet Concerto*, 1947-48 (orchestral)

*Piano Quartet*, 1950

*Piano Fantasy*, 1957

**Writings by Copland**

- *What To Listen for in Music*, 1939
- *Our New Music*, 1941
- *Music and Imagination*, (Norton Lectures) 1952
- *Copland on Music*, 1960

**Links:**

NPR stories about Copland, including performances

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15404219>

Michael Tilson Thomas narrating story of Aaron Copland

<http://www.keepingsscore.org/sites/default/files/swf/copland/full>

**Upcoming Vocal Dates at TAMU-K**

All concerts in Recital Hall at Bellamah Music Building, unless otherwise noted:

- March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 8 p.m. TAMU-K Choirs Concert
- April 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, TAMU-K Opera Workshop, 8 p.m. “The Night We MET”—operatic arias, duets, trios, quartets and choruses set in 1950’s New York City.
- April 18<sup>th</sup> Opera Workshop, 4 p.m. Rockport, TX First United Methodist Church
- April 21<sup>st</sup>, 8 p.m. TAMU-K Choirs Concert
- May 4<sup>th</sup>, 8 p.m. TAMU-K Voice Studio Recital

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