

AARON COPLAND: Dance Symphony

HALSEY STEVENS: Symphony No. 1

Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra; Akeo Watanabe, conducting

ON April 15, 1931, the *Dance Symphony*, written by a young composer whose talents were nevertheless very striking and whose name was becoming familiar to a vast segment of the American musical world, received its first performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra under the direction of Leopold Stokowski. Turning to the music page, readers of the next morning's *Philadelphia Record* discovered the provocative banner:

HISSES AND PRAISE GREET COPLAND WORK

This surely stimulated them to continue reading:

“It ‘is too modern’ whispered those who pursed their lips in violent sibilants . . . ‘It is magnificent’ called the others, increasing their applause to drown out the signals of disapproval . . .”

The critic himself felt that the work was:

“a colorful ballet suite, rich in oriental flavor . . . the finale . . . startling, for all the various themes are brought together in a dashing and brilliant climax.”

Touching on other aspects of this disturbing new work, Linton Martin, critic for the *Philadelphia Enquirer* remarked:

“The ‘Jazz’ (sic) or ‘Dance’ Symphony of Copland promptly proved popular and established itself as modern music of interest and individuality. It has substantial musical structure, with considerable diversity of material and resourcefulness in treatment. . . . the work is original and unusual in effect and distinctly evocative in atmosphere.”

Review after review has said largely the same regarding the *Dance Symphony* and, although the rhythmic intensity and drive are no longer “startling” and the increased activity of today’s composers in the field of jazz composition and integration render the use of jazz motives as such no longer novel, the adjectives applied to this work that still stand out; that still characterize it so aptly are “exciting,” “wholly individual,” “substantial” and “lasting.”

Aaron Copland was born in Brooklyn, New York on November 14, 1900. He received his fundamental education in the public school system of Brooklyn and his early musical training from his sister and later from Leopold Wolfson, Victor Wittgenstein and Clarence Adler. He continued to study theory with Rubin Goldmark for four years beginning in 1917 and in 1921 he became a composition student at the newly established Fontainebleau School of Music in France. Subsequently he spent three years in Paris as a student of Nadia Boulanger.

Copland has been a founder, director or an associate of nearly every American musical organization that we accept today as a firmly rooted part of our artistic world. In 1925 he was the first composer to be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. This was renewed in 1926. He was the director of the American Festival of Contemporary Music at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs during its initial two years. He was one of this country's earliest "good will ambassadors" to Latin America having appeared as pianist, conductor and lecturer in concerts of American music during 1941 and 1947. He is composer-chairman and a director of the League of Composers—I.S.C.M.; Vice President of the Koussevitsky Music Foundation and a director of the Edward MacDowell Association, the Walter W. Naumberg Music Foundation and the American Music Center. For eight years he was President of the American Composers Alliance.

In addition to the demands of composition and the exigencies of his extensive administrative duties, Copland has written three books: *What to Listen for in Music* (1939) and *Our New Music* (1941), both published by McGraw-Hill and *Music and Imagination* (1952) published by the Harvard University Press. The latter is a series of lectures delivered while he was the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard in 1951-52.

In scanning this endless list of awards and honors; duties as teacher and lecturer; as conductor and pianist and as an active member and, in many instances, officer of several societies for the advancement of contemporary music, one is amazed to discover that Copland still finds time to be one of the country's leading composers. Yet his prodigious list of works ranges from music for the theatre and the motion pictures to ballets, music for the modern dance and large symphonic works. His score, *Appalachian Spring* commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation for Martha Graham was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1945 and his score for the motion picture, *The Heiress* was given the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences "Oscar" in 1949.

Among his other best-known compositions are the ballets *Billy the Kid*, *The Pied Piper* (his Clarinet Concerto) and *Rodeo*; an opera *The Tender Land*; three symphonies; music for *Our Town* (1940), *Quiet City* (1940), *The Red Pony* (1948); *El Salon Mexico* for orchestra and the *Lincoln Portrait* for narrator and orchestra. One of his most recent works is the *Orchestra Variations* commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra and premiered by that group in 1958.

The *Dance Symphony* originated as a ballet entitled *Grohg*—the title role was that of a conjurer who possesses a morbid love for the dead and the supernatural ability to make them dance. In 1929 the RCA Victor Company announced a prize of \$25,000 for a symphonic work. Copland began a large orchestral composition called *Symphonic Ode*, but, finding it impossible to finish within the prescribed period, substituted a suite of three dances extracted from *Grohg* retitling them as they are now known. The final award was divided into five parts, however, and Copland was the recipient of \$5,000.

As for the work itself, Copland writes:

"The *Dance Symphony* is divided into three distinct units. However, a thin wisp of transitional material connects them, and the movements must be played without any separating pauses. There is no thematic relationship between the movements.

"There is a short, slow introduction, whereupon the first movement (Allegro) breaks out softly with a light, precise little motive on the bassoon, accompanied by plucked violins. The oboe continues the motive, slightly altered, as more fiddles pluck. The harp comes in to help with the plucking, then the clarinet continues a

derivative of the little motive. There are further derivatives; presently the flute sings a flowing strain which might be regarded as a new motive. The plucking keeps up in some form, on fiddles or harp, throughout the entire movement, except for a few spots where the piano is substituted. A climax is worked up, at the summit of which the movement ends.

“The second movement begins with a gentle melody prominently limned by the English horn over a bass in which the bass clarinet swings persistently from one of two notes to the other. Other woodwinds help develop the melody. Another melody ensues which violins and violas announce softly in canon to harp accompaniment. The first melody is developed into a great climax in which the second melody joins.

“If the first movement is thin, dainty and pointed, the second movement is songful and sustained. The third movement is characterized by violence and syncopation: Its initial jazzy motive can be heard *fortissimo* on the woodwinds, percussively reinforced by the piano, while violins, English horn and xylophone execute a sustained trill. A second motive soon starts *fortissimo* on the low strings and trombones. A figure of reiterated notes also assumes prominence. There is an extended development of all the material. An amusing interruption occurs: the notes of the initial motive appear masquerading as an exaggeratedly languishing waltz. At the very end, all the motives are blazoned forth at once.”

ALTHOUGH he is a few years younger than Copland, Halsey Stevens is no less prolific in his composition output. In addition to three symphonies, a concert overture and three string quartets, he has written a considerable number of works for other chamber combinations (including string and piano trios), for piano, for chorus and for voice. He has to his credit two Louisville Orchestra Commissions: *Triskelion* (1953) and the *Sinfonia Breve* (1957), a commission from the San Francisco Symphony which produced his exceptionally well-received *Symphonic Dances* (1958) performed by that orchestra under the direction of Enrique Jorda and a commission from the Fromm Foundation for the *Septet for Wind and String Instruments* (1957).

Stevens was born in Scott, New York, on December 3, 1908. Following the usual early piano and theory training, he enrolled in Syracuse University where he studied piano with George Mulfinger, a source of his first real encouragement, and composition with William Berwald. After a brief stint as an accompanist, organist and choirmaster he returned to Syracuse for graduate study and later went to University of California for a period of study with Ernest Bloch.

Since 1937 he has taught at several universities: Syracuse University, Dakota Wesleyan, Bradley (with a leave of absence for service in the USNR), the University of Redlands and the University of Southern California where he is now Chairman of the Department of Composition.

One of Stevens' most important contributions to music is his exhaustive study of the music of Bartók entitled *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók* (Oxford University Press, 1953, New York City). This work is still considered one of the most authoritative works on the late Hungarian composer.

Alfred Frankenstein, distinguished critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and contributor to numerous musical periodicals wrote in the Spring 1946 issue of *Modern Music*:

“A new composer made his appearance in San Francisco this season and the town sat up and took notice. His name is Halsey Stevens, and he was deposited with us by the United States Navy . . . He is a very talented man, and if you haven’t heard of him already, you are going to. His *First Symphony*, which he conducted at a concert of the San Francisco Symphony, was one of the most dynamic, compactly meaningful, and finely shaped scores of the year.”

The *Symphony No. 1* was completed in Berkeley, California in 1945, though a great deal of it had been written during the summer of 1941 and one of them even dates from 1938. The first performance took place on March 7, 1946 by the San Francisco Symphony with the composer conducting. The initial performance of the revised version (the version of this recording) took place on March 2, 1950 by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Alfred Wallenstein. In his Program Notes for this performance Stevens described his work as being built

“in a single extended movement (as Frankenstein noted in a review of the 1946 performance) not simply a first movement to which the composer is unwilling or unable to add more. It is a genuine symphony. It projects and encloses a complete and complex set of ideas, is large and eloquent in conception, has thrust and weight and power.

“The symphony is based upon four thematic ideas: the first, a rhythmic ostinato in kettledrums and bassoons at the outset, is never very far from the proceedings; the second, a horn melody which fluctuates much in the manner of plainsong, and the third, a long, winding theme for solo woodwinds (alto flute, English horn) in 6/8, furnish most of the materials for development; the fourth is a broad climactic section for strings and winds, never recurring. Although there is but one movement, sections of the work partake of the nature of scherzo and slow movement.

“The rhythmic element is one of the most characteristic aspects of the symphony. Asymmetric divisions of the measure shift constantly; freely irregular rhythmic patterns are superimposed upon rhythmic *ostinati* of many types. These *ostinati* provide a rather static foundation which is to a certain extent compensated for by other elements. There is no programmatic intention; the symphony is conceived in terms of music only; and there is only one movement because the work is complete as it stands. If *symphony* seems too pretentious a title in the light of the vast structures of Bruckner and Mahler, it may be recalled that earlier the word indicated an instrumental movement of any type.”

To summarize, it might be well to quote Paul Pisk, a composer-colleague of Stevens who has said:

“He never makes concessions to the common or the vulgar; on the other hand, he is not secluded in the ivory tower of systems and theories. His personal style has definite characteristics . . . His music is diverse, functional, full of inspiration and, most important of all, always sincere.”

Notes by Don Jennings

AKEO WATANABE, born to a Japanese clergyman and a Finnish vocalist in 1919, has displayed an exceptional musical talent since his early days. At the age of six he demonstrated a remarkable degree of proficiency at the piano in a performance of Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto and two years later he took up the violin under the tutelage of Saburo Sumi. In 1934 he entered the Tokyo School of Music (now the Tokyo University of Arts) where he majored in violin under Koko Ando and Alexander Moghilevski. After completing the undergraduate course with honor and winning the Koda Prize, he entered the school's undergraduate program as the conducting student of Helmut Felmer and Manfred Gurlitt. He has been a regular conductor of the school's orchestra since those days.

In 1942 he began his activity as a chamber music performer and formed the Tokyo Chamber Music Society with such leading Japanese Artists as Hideo Saito, Mari Iwamoto, Toshiya Eto and others. He continued to study conducting during this time with Josef Rosenstock and in 1945, at the conclusion of the war, he made his professional conducting debut as one of the three directors of the Tokyo City Symphony Orchestra. In 1947 he was appointed the permanent conductor of the Tokyo Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra. At this time he also began to teach and joined the faculty of the Tokyo University of Arts in 1949. During the initial stages of his tenure as conductor and teacher, Watanabe came to the United States for two years where he undertook study in advanced conducting with Jean Morel at the Juilliard School of Music. Following his return to Japan he left the Tokyo Philharmonic and continued to devote his time and energy to his newly acquired post as head of the Division of Conducting at the Tokyo University of Arts.

In cooperation with the Nihon Cultural Broadcasting System Inc. and with the encouragement of its outstanding director Shigeo Mizuno, Watanabe, in 1956, was able to create the orchestra of his dreams, the Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra and has served since that time as one of its executive directors and its permanent conductor.

In 1958, the government of Finland awarded him the Order of the Finnish Lion, Knight of First Class for his service to Finnish music in Japan.

WITH a population slightly greater than that of New York City, Tokyo, Japan boasts five major orchestras as well as a number of lesser ones: amateur and institutional. The newest of these, the Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, founded by its permanent conductor Akeo Watanabe and Shigeo Mizuno, Director of the Nihon Cultural Broadcasting System Inc., has made substantial strides during its three years of existence in becoming one of the world's outstanding orchestras. The number of first performances done by the group is already quite remarkable. In addition to its commission program for works by Japanese composers, the Japan Philharmonic has introduced to its public a steadily increasing number of works both foreign and Japanese, classical and contemporary.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)