

Notes on the Program

BY JAMES M. KELLER, NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC PROGRAM ANNOTATOR

El Salón México

AARON COPLAND

Born

November 14, 1900, in Brooklyn, New York

Died

December 2, 1990, in Peekskill, New York

Work composed

mostly in 1933–34, orchestrated in July 1936. When published, in 1939, it bore the title *El Salón México: Popular Type Dance Hall in Mexico City*, although the subtitle is rarely used. The piece is dedicated to Copland's then partner Victor Kraft.

World premiere

August 27, 1937, in Mexico City, by Carlos Chávez conducting the Orquesta Sinfónica de México

New York Philharmonic premiere

August 8, 1943, Fritz Reiner, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

December 9, 1999, Marin Alsop, conductor

Estimated duration

ca. 11 minutes

surely deserved the title for many reasons, among which was an important qualification that, as he himself put it, he could serve as “a good citizen of the Republic of Music.” For Copland, that republic extended to Europe, where he had received much of his training as a composer in the 1920s, and throughout the Americas. In 1932 he traveled for the first time to Mexico, at the invitation of the distinguished composer and conductor Carlos Chávez; Copland had praised Chávez's compositions heartily, and Chávez returned the favor by leading an all-Copland program in Mexico City that September — the first time that an all-Copland concert was presented anywhere.

Mexico wielded considerable magnetism on creative artists in the United States during the 1920s and '30s, particularly on those who, like Copland, were attracted to the socialist political ideals being worked out in Mexico at that time. American expatriates south of the border included important figures such as the photographer Paul Strand, the painters Marsden Hartley and Mark Tobey, and the writer Hart Crane.

Copland's trip left indelible impressions on him, with particularly vivid ones resulting from his visits to El Salón México, a notorious dance hall in Mexico City (see sidebar, page 42). “When Chávez took me to an unusual night spot called El Salón México,” he reported, “the atmosphere of this dance hall impressed me, and I came away with the germ of a musical idea.” The earthy, rowdy spirit of the place guided the piece from conception to completion through the course of several years. “This composition celebrating Mexico,” Copland wrote,

In Aaron Copland's later years, the appellation “Dean of American Composers” became so insistently used that it seemed almost a part of his surname. He

was completed, strangely enough, in Bemidji, Minnesota, 250 miles north of Minneapolis, where I spent the summer of 1934.... Because of other projects that intervened, the orchestration was not undertaken until two years later, when I was once again in Mexico.

A number of Mexican folk songs and mariachi references figure in *El Salón México*, some of which Copland derived from folk-song collections by Rubén Campos (*El Folklore y la música mexicana*, 1928) and the American musicologist

Frances Toor. Toor's, titled *Cancionero Mexicano*, was published in 1931 with illustrations by the Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo. When Copland presented his autograph score of this composition to the Library of Congress, in 1957, he included with it the copy of the *Cancionero Mexicano* that Toor had given to him. Copland heightens the effect of these song quotations by fragmenting them, presenting them in bracing juxtapositions, or subjecting them to imaginative rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic

Sources and Inspirations

Copland described the scene that inspired *El Salón México* in an article that he penned in 1939, when the Boston Symphony Orchestra released a recording of the work, the first ever of any of Copland's orchestral compositions:

I remember reading about it for the very first time in Anita Brenner's guide book. Under "Entertainment" she had this entry: "Harlem type night-club for the peepul [sic], grand Cuban orchestra, *Salón México*. Three halls: one for people dressed in your way, one for people dressed in overalls but shod, and one for the barefoot." Miss Brenner forgot to mention the sign on the wall which said: "Please don't throw lighted cigarette butts on the floor so the ladies don't burn their feet." The unsuspecting tourist should also have been warned that a guard stationed at the bottom of the steps leading to the "three halls" would nonchalantly frisk you as you started up the stairs just to be sure you had checked all your "artillery" at the door.... [W]hen the dance hall closed its doors at five a.m. it hardly seemed worthwhile to the overalled patrons to travel all the way home, so they curled themselves up on the chairs around the walls for a quick two-hour snooze before getting to a seven o'clock job in the morning.... It wasn't the music that I heard there, or the dances that attracted me, so much as the spirit of the place. In some inexplicable way, while milling about in those crowded halls, one felt a really live contact with the Mexican "people" — the electric sense one gets sometimes in far-off places, of suddenly knowing the essence of a people — their humanity, their separate shyness, their dignity and unique charm. I remember quite well that it was at just such a moment that I conceived the idea of composing a piece about Mexico and naming it *El Salón México*.



Ruth Keahey's *El Saloon Mexico* (1944), which includes a depiction of Aaron Copland at the piano

alterations. The percussion section includes a Latin-flavored wood block and a Mexican gourd, in addition to timpani, which are put to thundering effect. The dance begins slowly but soon picks up speed. The momentum suddenly breaks, making way for a lyrical clarinet solo, and the work concludes with the dance hall in full swing.

El Salón México was instrumental in Copland's achieving widespread acclaim among general audiences. The piece was enthusiastically received when Chávez conducted the premiere, in Mexico City in 1937, and it was warmly applauded the following summer at the International Society for Contemporary Music's London Festival. Arturo Toscanini helped spread the work's fame through a 1942 radio broadcast, with the NBC Symphony, and it

was adapted to serve as an important plot element in the 1947 MGM movie-musical *Fiesta*, about a Mexican lad who struggles to find his way as a composer. It also provided a boost for Copland's own creative spirit, confirming his devotion to musical regionalism. "Europe now seems conventional to me by comparison," he wrote to a friend in 1933. "Mexico offers something fresh and pure and wholesome — a quality which is deeply unconventionalized."

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, wood block, snare drum, bass drum, xylophone, gourd, temple blocks, Provençal drum, piano, and strings.

The New York Philharmonic Connection

The New York Philharmonic first performed one of Aaron Copland's works on January 11, 1925, when Walter Damrosch conducted the New York Symphony (one of the Philharmonic's forebears) in the world premiere of the *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra*, with Nadia Boulanger as soloist. The Orchestra would go on to premiere a total of eight of Copland's works, including two Philharmonic commissions: *Connotations*, composed for the opening of Philharmonic (now Avery Fisher) Hall, on September 23, 1962, and *Inscape*, for the Philharmonic's 125th anniversary five years later. Copland's works were featured on many national and international broadcasts, including three of the famous New York Philharmonic Young People's Concerts with its Music Director, Leonard Bernstein (Copland's longtime friend).

In 1970 Copland was named an Honorary Member of the Philharmonic-Symphony Society — a rare distinction. In 1985–86, when the composer reached the age of 85, the Philharmonic performed a series of his works over the course of a season. Some New Yorkers may remember the Orchestra's celebration of his centennial, the *Completely Copland* festival, November 20–December 12, 1999, during which the Philharmonic examined his legacy as a composer of orchestral, stage, chamber, and choral works, and of film scores.



Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein at a rehearsal for the world premiere of Copland's *Connotations*, which the Philharmonic commissioned for and performed at the opening of Philharmonic (now Avery Fisher) Hall in 1962