

In 1970, on the occasion of his 70th birthday, the New York Philharmonic elected Aaron Copland an Honorary Member of the Society, paying him its highest tribute. Copland was the first American composer selected to enter the elite group of fewer than 50 musicians, a tradition that had begun in 1843 and included Liszt, Mendelssohn, Wagner, and Stravinsky. From the stage of Philharmonic Hall (now David Geffen Hall), Philharmonic President Carlos Moseley hailed Copland as the person “whose works and teachings have been an incalculable influence on young composers, whose achievements have been a source of untold pride to his native land, and who has been a pioneer in placing American music in the mainstream of twentieth-century creation.”

Copland’s association with the Philharmonic is unequalled by that of any other American composer. Since 1925 the Philharmonic has performed almost 40 of his works on more than 1,100 occasions and premiered seven, two of them commissioned by the Philharmonic; *Four Dance Episodes from Rodeo*, performed on this week’s New Year’s Eve program, was among the premieres. Leonard Bernstein, a lifelong advocate of the composer, devoted three of the Orchestra’s nationally acclaimed, televised Young People’s Concerts to him — more than any other composer — and featured his work in a landmark concert broadcast from Moscow in 1959. Copland’s last birthday celebrated with the Orchestra — his 85th — was marked by a season-long retrospective, and featured appearances by both Bernstein and Zubin Mehta on the same concert podium. And in 2000 the Philharmonic launched Copland’s centennial year with a three-week festival of performances and events.

At that nationally televised concert in 1970, Bernstein saluted his friend:

Copland has often been called the “Dean of American Composers” — whatever that means. I suppose it means that he’s the oldest, but he isn’t the oldest: he’s just unique.

He has led American music through paths both pleasant and thorny, and he has never ceased fighting for the cause of new music, especially new American music. What’s more he has been the idol and teacher and model of more young composers than you can count, and he has entered the minds and hearts of millions of music lovers, to find a new meaning and beauty in music. In short, he is a National Treasure.

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*Aaron Copland with First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy at the New York Philharmonic’s opening concert of the 1962–63 season — the inaugural performance at Lincoln Center — which featured the World Premiere of his *Connotations**

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Quiet City

Aaron Copland

A classical music lover asked to describe what constitutes “the American sound” has some tough deciding to do. Colonial fusing tunes by William Billings, antebellum ballads by Stephen Foster, irresistible foot-lifters by John Philip Sousa, fearless experiments by Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles, rhythmically vibrant effusions by William Bolcom and John Adams, boundary-breaking syntheses by George Gershwin, Duke Ellington, Leonard Bernstein, and Wynton Marsalis — they all play irreplaceable parts in what makes our nation’s concert music unique. And yet, if we had to boil it down to just one composer, many would agree that the essential summation of “the American sound” may be found in the scores of Aaron Copland.

To some extent, that identification is a chicken-and-egg conundrum. Would Copland’s tones have sounded so American if they had not been attached to subjects that illuminated such specifically American places: the urban landscape in *Quiet City*, the heartland in *Appalachian Spring*, the American West in *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*? Or is there something deeply, inherently American in Copland’s musical vocabulary, rich as it usually is in rhythmic point, in widely spread voicing, in disjunct intervals shaping its melodies and harmonies? Well before he approached the end of his long career, Copland was nationally revered as the “Dean of American Composers.”

Following studies with Rubin Goldmark in New York, Copland sailed for France to

spend the summer of 1921 at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau. There he began studying with Nadia Boulanger, with whom he worked through 1924. She had the ability to develop many of her pupils’ unique gifts without bending them to adhere to any particular method. This proved to be a congenial approach for Copland, such that even the earliest works of his maturity afford glimpses of his distinctive voice.

He went on to define the sound of mid-century American music, a vocabulary that was quickly absorbed by others and that survives to this day, if in debased form, whenever advertisers are intent on evoking the solid ethos and warm-hearted

IN SHORT

Born: November 14, 1900, in Brooklyn, New York

Died: December 2, 1990, in Peekskill, New York

Work composed: 1939, revised September 1940

World premiere: January 29, 1941, at New York’s Town Hall, by the Saidenberg Little Symphony, Daniel Saidenberg, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: August 8, 1941, Alexander Smallens, conductor, Michael Nazi, English horn, and William Vacchiano, trumpet

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 3, 2005, Bramwell Tovey, conductor, Thomas Stacy, English horn, and Thomas V. Smith, trumpet

Estimated duration: ca. 10 minutes

nostalgia of days gone by. It is curious that the iconic sound of the *American Wild West*, such music as *Rodeo* or *Billy the Kid*, was the inspiration of such a city slicker as Copland, but he also used his talent to celebrate the urban landscape.

Quiet City was initially intended as a section of incidental music for a production of Irwin Shaw's play of the same title, which was being prepared in 1939 by the Group Theatre in New York. The piece was to be performed by a chamber quartet of clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, and piano. The production was basically stillborn, but in the summer of 1940 Copland resurrected this section of his incidental music and turned it into a moody, evocative orchestral piece, again for modest forces comprising only trumpet, English horn, and strings.

In a conversation with the oral historian Vivian Perlis, published in her *Copland: 1900-1942*, the composer recalled:

Quiet City was billed as a “realistic fantasy,” a contradiction in terms that only meant the stylistic differences made for difficulties in production. The script was

about a young trumpet player who imagined the night thoughts of many different people in a great city and played trumpet to express his emotions and to arouse the consciences of the other characters and of the audience. After reading the play, I composed music that I hoped would evoke the inner distress of the central character. [Group Theatre co-founder Harold] Clurman and Elia Kazan, the director, agreed that *Quiet City* needed a free and imaginative treatment. They and the cast ... struggled valiantly to make the play convincing, but after two try-out performances in April [1939], *Quiet City* was dropped.

Reviewing the premiere of the orchestral version of *Quiet City*, in early 1941, Ross Parmenter wrote in *The New York Times*: “The work had in its silent streets the slogging gait of a dispossessed man, and some of the feeling of mournful beauty that comes from loneliness.”

Instrumentation: solo trumpet with English horn and strings.

In the Composer's Words

In remarks published in Vivian Perlis's *Copland: 1900-1942*, the composer reminisced about recasting *Quiet City* into its final, orchestral form:

In arranging [*Quiet City*] for trumpet and string orchestra, I added an English horn for contrast and to give the trumpeter breathing spaces. I cannot take credit for what a few reviewers called my affinity to Whitman's “mystic trumpeter” or Ives' persistent soloist in *The Unanswered Question*. My trumpet player was simply an attempt to mirror the troubled main character, David Mellnikoff, of Irwin Shaw's play. In fact, one of my markings for the trumpeter is to play “nervously.” But *Quiet City* seems to have become a musical entity, superseding the original reasons for its composition. The work has been called “atmospheric” and “reflective,” and David Mellnikoff has long since been forgotten!

Early morning in New York City, 1940s

