

Concerto for Clarinet and String Orchestra, with Harp and Piano

Aaron Copland

From the 1920s through the 1940s many figures strove to bring about a rapprochement between classical music and jazz. The most famous early effort in this direction was the Experiment in Modern Music organized by Paul Whiteman in 1924, an event that introduced works from both sides of the aisle, including the newly composed *Rhapsody in Blue* by George Gershwin. In ensuing years a few other bandleaders would also tender commissions to classical composers. Woody Herman, for example, persuaded Stravinsky to compose his *Ebony Concerto* (for clarinet and jazz band) in 1945. Benny Goodman, “The King of Swing,” reached even more deeply into the classical aesthetic, requesting pieces for non-jazz ensembles that he could play as a “classical” clarinetist. Thus were born Bartók’s *Contrasts* (for clarinet, violin, and piano) in 1938 and Hindemith’s *Clarinet Concerto* in 1947.

Herman and Goodman approached Aaron Copland at about the same time, the former in the summer of 1946, the latter in early 1947. Goodman became the successful suitor, offering a very substantial fee of \$2,000, and Copland set to work shortly thereafter, while on tour in South America. The concerto’s progress is documented through letters Copland wrote to Leonard Bernstein, with whom he was extremely close both musically and as a friend. On September 24, 1947, Copland wrote to Bernstein (whom he saluted with “Dear You —”) from Rio de Janeiro, “I’ve just about begun work on the B. Goodman piece.” A little over a year later, on October 18, 1948, he informed Bernstein (now addressed through another affectionate appellation, “Dear Lensk”):

Nothing much has been happening. I stayed home a lot and finished my Clarinet Concerto — *endlich* [finally]! Tried it over

for Benny [Goodman] the other day. He had Dave O [the clarinetist David Oppenheim] around for moral support. (O what an angelicums that O is!) Seems I wrote the last page too high “for all normal purposes.” So it’ll have to come down a step.

It was a considerable gestation period for a piece that lasts around 16 minutes. It seems the poignantly beautiful first movement had come to Copland easily; in fact, its central section was already mostly written, being a recasting of music composed in 1945 for the film *The Cummington Story*. What would happen beyond the first movement stymied the composer for a while; he set the project aside to germinate while he fulfilled a remunerative contract from Republic Pictures for *The Red Pony* in the winter of 1948 ... and then there was the summer season to which he was committed at the Berkshire Music Festival (Tanglewood).

IN SHORT

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

Died: December 2, 1990, in North Tarrytown, New York

Work composed: 1947–48

World premiere: November 6, 1950, in a broadcast by the NBC Symphony, Fritz Reiner, conductor, Benny Goodman, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: June 19, 1969, at the Garden State Arts Center in Holmdel, New Jersey, with the composer conducting, Benny Goodman, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 23, 2004, at Bravo! Vail, in Colorado, Bramwell Tovey, conductor, Mark Nuccio, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 16 minutes

Finally, he managed to invent a fast second movement to counterbalance the languorous first, drawing on South American popular music as well as North American jazz. Some of this finale's material is introduced by the solo clarinet in a substantial cadenza that connects the two movements, a section that, Copland pointed out, "is not *ad lib* as in cadenzas of many traditional concertos; I always felt there was enough room in interpretation even when everything is written out."

The concerto waited two years for its first performance, and Copland had little control over the situation, since Goodman retained exclusive performance rights. Two separate attempts to schedule a premiere with Eugene Ormandy conducting (presumably The Philadelphia Orchestra) fell through, and, despite Bernstein's pleading, Serge Kousse-

vitzky would not authorize a performance of it with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood. On May 21, 1950, Bernstein wrote to break the news about Koussevitzky's recalcitrance: "I fought with Kousss valiantly over the Clarinet Concerto, to no avail. Benny & Tanglewood don't mix in his mind."

So it was that the concerto was first heard in a broadcast by the NBC Symphony, with Fritz Reiner conducting, in November 1950. The response was reportedly lukewarm, but Copland and Goodman recorded the work together twice, in 1950 and again in 1963, and the second of these proved something of a hit, doing much to establish the piece in the essential clarinet repertoire.

Instrumentation: strings, harp, and piano, in addition to the solo clarinet.

Copland Sticks to His Guns



Copland and Koussevitzky at Tanglewood, ca. 1950

The conductor Serge Koussevitzky was usually a champion of Copland's music, but he failed to embrace the Clarinet Concerto. The problem was the second movement; its jazzy aspects were far from his musical preferences. On the other hand, he very much liked the first movement, and in the summer of 1950 he telephoned Copland to ask him to recast it as a work for string orchestra, which he would then conduct with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Copland consented, but soon changed his mind. On August 29, 1950, he wrote in a letter to Koussevitzky that "the thought has been growing in my mind that I made a mistake in saying 'yes'" He continued:

I am convinced that to cut the piece in half takes away from the integrity of the Concerto as I originally conceived it, and am basically unwilling to do that, — at least until the work has had several seasons to make it as a complete Concerto. No one will be able to understand why, if I am satisfied with the Concerto as a whole, I should be willing now to present only half the work in an orchestral dress in which it was not conceived. Moreover, no one will be able to understand why you should want to present an arrangement of half the work when the entire work is available and has never been heard in its original form in Boston. In the public's mind it can only be understood as an implied criticism of the second movement, and I am unwilling to launch a new work in such a light.