

## Aaron Copland

ALL OF the new music announced by Mr. Wallenstein for the coming Philharmonic season is of major importance. Heading the list is Aaron Copland's *Third Symphony*, to be heard at the opening concert on Armistice Day. At subsequent concerts Mr. Wallenstein will conduct symphonies by Henry Cowell, David Diamond, and Arthur Honegger, the three late great concertos of Bartok (for orchestra, for piano, and for violin), and works of somewhat smaller dimensions by George Antheil, Prokofiev, Elie Siegmeister, and William Grant Still. That at least seven of the new pieces are big works of real weight and toughness is a decisive advance in the Philharmonic's program policy.



Copland's *Third Symphony* is an especially welcome addition to the repertoire. It is many years since the composer has written an orchestral work unassociated with the theatre, literary material, or the sights and sounds of foreign lands. The great public knows him as the composer of ballets (*Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo*, *Appalachian Spring*), of film scores (*Of Mice and Men*, *Our Town*), patriotic and Biblical pieces (*Lincoln Portrait* and *In the Beginning*), and travelogues (*El Salon Mexico* and *Danzon Cubano*). His grandest, most complete, and most personal utterance is still, therefore, the *Piano Sonata* of 1941. Without being ungrateful for that work, without being the least bit tired of it, one still wishes to know more about the deep places from which Copland's music springs, the heights to which it aspires. His theatre music has been full of charm and wit and drama. It has abounded in what an admirer has called the "Gee, it's good to be alive" spirit. But there is also a less known side to Copland's musical personality. For that more solid substance we would be happy to turn back to the *Short Symphony* or the *Statements* of the early 1930's, if a conductor could be found who would venture into the rigorous climate of those works. The earlier symphonies also remain obscure although they made their mark in their day. The first of them earned from Walter Damrosch the dire prediction that its composer was nearly ripe for the commission of murder. The second symphony earned a prize of

## Aaron Copland

\$5,000. Both date from the 1920's. Whether or not they belong to the category of "youthful indiscretions" I do not know, for I have neither heard them nor seen the scores. But there can be no mistake about the *Third*. It is a solid structure, exceedingly rich and varied in expressiveness, large in concept, masterful in execution, completely unabashed and outspoken.

It begins with a slow, extended, and asymmetrical melody for the violins. The composer directs that it be played "sweetly" and "with simple expression." It moves forward with a gradual gain in intensity. Other instruments join in the song, with the brasses providing an underpinning of typical Copland harmonies. These expand into a trumpet clangor that momentarily displaces the lyrical mood. But the melody persists along a new expressive path, to be interrupted again, this time by an austere and stubborn phrase that passes from the trombones to the horns and then to the trumpets. Its insistence leads to some highly dramatic controversy in the orchestra. In the end, lyricism is the victor. Even the trombone has been won over to song, succumbing to the blandishments of the solo flute. The violins have the final word, which is again, as at the beginning of the movement, sweetly and tenderly intoned.

The scherzo opens with the barbaric yawp of a politician scampering up and down the countryside gathering in the votes. His campaign is of the most vigorous sort, and he even gets down to a discussion of real issues. This does not prevent observers (in the woodwinds, naturally) from making sly and irreverent comments on his behavior. In the midst of the excitement, just as our candidate has promised us low-cost housing and fifty-cent butter (rim-shot on the drum, and a unison F in the orchestra), we go for a quiet afternoon in the park (oboe solo). Here everything is cool and green and calm; even the children are not too obstreperous.

Now to another world altogether, which might be that of *Ethan Frome*. The slow movement has to do with the aged, frozen, and despairing heart that recollects in anguish the beatitudes and summer joys of youth. The despair is in the icy tones of violins playing in the highest register, without expression. The despair is in a passionate descending phrase almost Schoenbergian in its avoidance of key. The summer

3  
Aaron Copland

joys are the whole central section of the movement. This is the composer in his most appealing vein—poetic, rural, perhaps even slightly sentimental. I suspect that this is the music of Copland's dream-world, the music of wish-fulfillment and idealized memories. It is significant, I believe, that he has never been able to end a piece in this mood. Thoroughly unreal to human experience, though certainly real in imagination, it can be only incidental to the facts of life. Here in the slow movement it must lead back to the arctic regions of the beginning.

The finale is loose-limbed, declamatory, aggressive almost to the point of violence. It is also long, filling sixty of the 150 pages of score, three of the nine surfaces of my home-recording of the broadcast performance. The materials are a noble fanfare for brass and percussion, a pastoral summons, a nervously energetic fast theme, a reference to the first-movement theme, and a grand triumph. This is the extrovert Copland—Copland the organizer of societies and *avant garde* concerts, the pamphleteer and lecturer, the writer of manifestos on composer-economics, the good-will ambassador to Latin America, the evangelist for young composers, the most active and efficient "do-gooder" on the American musical scene. It is flamboyant music—brilliant, thick in texture, complicated, and not always clear in its organization. It has also been called "editorial," with the implication that the expressive content is not Copland's own, but the property of propagandists and moral edifiers. For myself, I find it autobiographical, and rhetorical in the Walt Whitman manner. I do not entirely approve of it, but I find it persuasive and exhilarating. Considering what has preceded it in the *Third Symphony*, it is inevitably right for a finale. It makes one feel good.

No wonder that Sergei Koussevitzky called it "the greatest American symphony."

— LAWRENCE MORTON