

Gershwin Rhapsody in Blue – November 5, 2016

Appalachian Spring

Aaron Copland
1900-1990

During his long career, Aaron Copland composed in many diverse styles. His output included scores for films (*The Red Pony*, *Our Town*, *The Heiress*), works incorporating jazz (Piano Concerto, *Music for the Theater*) and the 12-tone technique (Piano Quartet, Piano Fantasy). In the mid-1930s he began to feel “an increasing dissatisfaction with the relation of the music-loving public and the living composer.” In order to reach a wider audience he simplified his style to make it more accessible, yet without sacrificing sound artistic values. The first work in this more popular vein was *El Salón Mexico*, finished in 1936. This was followed by the works by which he is best known today: his three American ballets *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*.

Copland composed the ballet *Appalachian Spring* in 1944 for the great pioneer of modern dance, Martha Graham, to be performed at an evening of modern ballet at the Library of Congress (Other ballets on the program were by Paul Hindemith and Darius Milhaud.) Copland originally called it "Ballet for Martha," but Graham gave it its final title after a poem by Hart Crane – although the ballet bears no relation to the text of the poem. The size limitations of the stage at the Library dictated a small ensemble; consequently the original version was scored for 13 instruments (flute, clarinet, bassoon, piano and strings). Soon after the successful premiere, however, Copland extracted a somewhat shortened suite from the ballet for full orchestra, the version most frequently heard today.

In the preface to the score of the Suite, Copland summarized the story of the ballet using the words of the *New York Herald Tribune* review by Eric Denby, written after the New York premiere: “...A pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the last century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites... A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house.”

The sections of the suite merge into each other without pause, but reflect distinctly different moods and scenarios. The haunting but peaceful opening gives way suddenly to an outburst of excitement comprising several different musical motives, demonstrating the open octaves and fifths that became the hallmark of Copland's “American” style. After building up to a frenzied climax, a solo clarinet interrupts plaintively with the Shaker tune “Simple Gifts.” Copland uses the song as the theme for a set of variations, which themselves increase in intensity as more and more instruments are added with each new variation. Then, with another sudden shift in mood, we are transported back to the quiet introduction, and the Suite ends as it began.

“Simple Gifts” was composed by Shaker Elder Joseph Brackett, Jr. in 1848 for dancing during Shaker worship. Copland’s five variations never veer far from the original melody, which he found in a 1940 collection of Shaker songs compiled by Edward D. Andrews. While the tune was certainly perfect for Graham’s choreography, it didn’t exactly fit the story line, as the Shakers themselves were dedicated to a life of celibacy.

Rhapsody in Blue

George Gershwin
1898-1937

George Gershwin was the first American composer to make jazz acceptable to the American classical music audience. The son of poor Jewish immigrants in lower Manhattan, he was a natural-born pianist and left school at 16 to become a pianist with a Tin-Pan Alley firm, plugging their new songs. He soon commenced writing songs himself, eventually teaming up with his brother Ira as lyricist to become one of the most successful teams of song and musical comedy writers on Broadway. They created a string of immensely successful musicals from *Lady be Good* in December 1924 to *Let 'em Eat Cake* in October 1933. The opening night of a George Gershwin musical comedy was a social and media event with Gershwin himself usually leading the orchestra.

Gershwin received the commission for an extended jazz composition from a conductor of popular music, Paul Whiteman, who promoted concerts of jazz music in New York's Aeolian Hall. Whiteman was the self-styled "King of Jazz" who attempted to make jazz more symphonic and respectable. Whiteman's commission followed an Aeolian Hall concert in the fall of 1923, at which Gershwin had played piano arrangements of a few of his songs.

Gershwin composed the *Rhapsody* in a mere three weeks early in 1924, in a two-piano version. Lacking the skills to orchestrate the work, he turned it over for piano and jazz orchestration to Ferde Grofé, a popular composer, pianist and arranger, who served as Whiteman's factotum. Grofé practically lived in Gershwin's house, orchestrating the work page-by-page as it came from the composer's pen. He also rescored the *Rhapsody* two years later for full symphony orchestra.

The premiere, on February 12 1924, was a smashing success. Although the critics – true to form – mostly panned it, the audience loved it. Virtually overnight, jazz became respectable. Gershwin himself played the piano part, becoming an instant celebrity. Significant credit for the success must go to Grofé's imaginative orchestration, which has ended up as his most enduring contribution to music, along with his *Grand Canyon Suite*.

Scheherazade, Op. 35

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov
1844-1908

In the tradition of Russian national music, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov holds a place of honor. Musically self-taught, he originally trained as a naval officer, serving in that capacity from 1862 to 1873. Throughout his naval career he studied music on the side until 1871 when he won a faculty position at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in spite of the fact that he had little formal training. Until his death he taught and encouraged nearly every young Russian composer from Alexander Glazunov and Anton Arensky to Igor Stravinsky and Sergey Prokofiev.

Rimsky-Korsakov's inspiration derived from the operas of Mikhail Glinka, whose music combined Russian melodies with the oriental modes of Russia's vast Eastern provinces. Together with César Cui, Aleksander Borodin, Mily Balakirev and Modest Mussorgsky, he formed the group called "The mighty five," whose aim was to promote Russian national music. Ironically, Rimsky-Korsakov was by far the best-trained musician among them. His use of instrumental color and masterly orchestration was so famous that any Russian composer with serious aspirations made the pilgrimage to his orchestration and composition classes, even occasional foreigners, like Ottorino Respighi who came from Italy.

The symphonic poem *Scheherazade*, based on *A Thousand Nights and One Night* (commonly called the *Arabian Nights*) was composed in 1888 and premiered in November of that year. It is among the most colorful works in the orchestral repertoire, glowing with brilliant orchestration and lush solos. The frame story of *A Thousand Nights and One Night* tells of a Khalif who was in the habit of killing his wives after a single night of lovemaking. His latest bride, Scheherazade, avoids that fate by telling him suspenseful stories, concluding each evening with a cliffhanger. After years of such nightly entertainment, the Khalif finally decides to keep her.

The Suite comprises four tableaux, in which the yarn-spinning Scheherazade “speaks” through virtuoso passages for solo violin. Her theme ties the tableaux together and is occasionally incorporated into a story. None of the four tableaux, however, is a musical setting for any of Scheherazade’s tales; rather, they allude to the character types and incidents that make up the vast body of stories. The tone poem begins with the low brasses blasting out the theme representing the Khalif, followed by a passage that Rimsky snatched – although he modified it harmonically – from Mendelssohn’s Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, denoting the world of fairytales.

The first tableau, “The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship,” includes a combination of rhythms and changing dynamics that imitate the motion of the waves by means of two principal themes: the second one is a transformation of the Khalif’s theme while Scheherazade’s theme is transformed to fit the rocking of the waves.

“The Tale of the Kalendar Prince” changes the pace to reflect a number of loosely bound battle episodes, including a main theme introduced in an English horn solo, and virtuosic fanfare passages for solo trumpet.

The third tableau, “The Young Prince and the Young Princess,” is the most romantic. The violins introduce the first intimate theme, followed by an Oriental dance

The final tableau is a passionate conversation between the Khalif and Scheherazade, as she readies herself for her last chance at survival. The tableau actually recalls a number of episodes from her repertory of stories; marked in the score are: “The Festival at Baghdad;” “The Sea” (reprise of the theme from the first tableau); “The ship founders on a rock topped by the bronze statue of a warrior;” and “Conclusion.” The music is fiery and exciting until the end, when Scheherazade’s stories come to a quiet and plaintive end as she awaits the fatal verdict of the Khalif, whose theme finally moderates to a gentle section solo for the cellos.

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