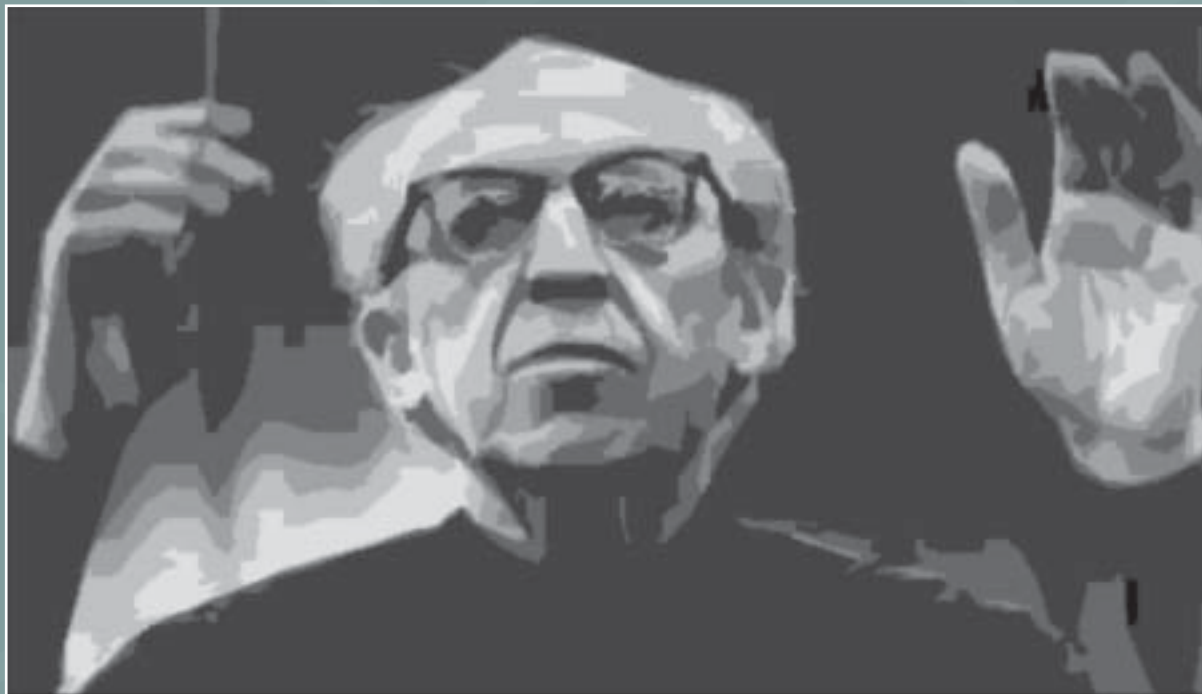


# A COPLAND PORTRAIT



## MEMORIES OF A FRIENDSHIP, AND THOUGHTS ABOUT HIS INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN CHORAL MUSIC DAVID CONTE

David Conte is professor of composition and conductor of the Conservatory Chorus at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. In 2007, he received the ACDA Raymond Brock commission. His orchestral works include *A Copland Portrait*. Conte worked with Aaron Copland in 1982 preparing a thesis on his manuscript sketches.

Aaron Copland's *Third Symphony* had a powerful effect on me when I first heard it at the age of five. My parents owned the Antal Dorati recording with the Minneapolis Symphony. I still prefer the pacing of this rendition above many other good ones, with its faster tempos in general, especially the first movement.

It was partly my deep love and admiration for Copland's music that led me to my own studies with his teacher, Nadia Boulanger. Copland had studied with her from 1921 to 1924; I was one of her last students, working with her from 1975 to 1978. By the time I began my studies with her at the age of nineteen, I knew Copland's popular works quite well; by the time I had finished them, I came to understand what he had learned from her, and by the time I entered Cornell for graduate study soon after, I had decided that Copland would be the subject of my theses. In February of 1982, I sent Copland my analysis of his *Piano Quartet*, my MFA thesis. He responded with a letter:

I must tell you how very impressed I was with your analysis of my 30-year old work. I confess, however, that, at the time of composing, I was not aware of several of the points you made...

with which, incidentally, I agree....I would be glad to arrange a meeting whenever you are to be in this area....

During a visit with Copland in April of 1982, I learned that there was a considerable amount of sketch material at his home in Peekskill, New York. After this initial visit, Copland invited me to spend several days a week there during the summer of 1982 to study these sketches in preparation for my eventual DMA thesis.

During my work on Copland's sketches, I lived in Manhattan and would travel to Peekskill with David Walker (a lovely man who was deeply devoted to Copland, and who had been first Menotti's secretary, then Copland's secretary for many years), generally on a Tuesday, and would stay at Copland's home until Thursday or Friday. During those days, I would work on organizing and deciphering the sketch material for *Inscape*, his last orchestra composition, and one of four works consciously written using the twelve-tone technique. I wanted to find out how America's foremost tonal composer had adapted this technique for his own expressive purposes without losing the strong character of his musical personality. I would work at the dining room table. Copland would come



in and out, and, for the first few weeks, would ask me what I was doing there, due to the onset of a form of cerebral atrophy from which he suffered for many years, beginning in the late 1970s until his death in 1990 at the age of 90. Eventually, he came to remember me, and we had many wonderful interactions during those summer months.

I remember, above all, Copland's sense of humor. And his concern. Before retiring in the evening, he used to jokingly ask me if I wanted a glass of warm milk, as if it amused him to have "junior" staying at his house. I was 26 years old. We used to go for frequent walks around the grounds of his house. I asked him many questions about his life and work, and his memory particularly for events of the past was remarkably sharp.

I once told Copland about Virgil Thomson's visit to Cornell in 1980. In his lecture I attended, Mr. Thomson had said that nothing new had happened in music since 1913 (the year of the premiere of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring"). Copland immediately yelled: "The old hound!"

He said something cryptic to me about Leonard Bernstein. Somehow his name came up and Copland said: "Along with Benjy Britten, who departed from us far too soon, Lenny is one of the most fabulously gifted musicians I've ever encountered." I asked him quite innocently: "What do you think of his music?", to which he replied: "One has the impression that it isn't always entirely necessary." I mention this remark not to cast aspersions on Bernstein's music, much

of which I love, but because I connect it with something Boulanger had said about her own compositions, and why she gave up composition at an early age. She realized that her own works, though technically proficient, were not written out of a true "inner need." This feeling of the absolute necessity behind the choice of every note was deeply important to Copland, and translated into a kind of urgency in his music, a quality that compels attention from the listener, and brings him into the unique sound world of each piece. Paul Valery, the great French poet and close friend of Nadia Boulanger, compared her attitude about craft to the painter Ingres, who said: "You must risk your neck even for a study."

We spent several afternoons playing and listening to music. I played him the first movement of his *Piano Sonata*. We listened to several recordings of his *Inscape*. He would always jolt jokingly at the sound of the opening *fortissimo* 12-tone chord, another expression of his good humor. I played him some of my own music. He cautioned me to continue to pay attention to the importance of each note, a lesson I have never forgotten. He was very preoccupied with form and the length of pieces, and whether the content was expressed convincingly in the form. This experience was an important part of the development of my own consciousness about the handling of forms both large and small.

One incident stands out as particularly revealing of his personality. One afternoon,



Aaron Copland signs an autograph for a student at the University of Miami, as Donald Oglesby looks on (1979).

I suggested that I sing through his *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* with him at the piano. In spite of his impaired memory, he played the difficult accompaniments practically note perfect and with the pacing and inflection that I knew well from his own recording with Adele Addison. At the end of the first song, *Nature the Gentlest Mother*, I pointed out a chord progression that was a favorite of mine, a series of descending first-inversion ninth chords in the left hand of the piano accompaniment. Copland seemed pleased at my demonstration of pleasure, and slightly amused at my technical description of these chords. The same progression occurs again in the 8th song, *When They Come Back*. I pointed this out, saying: "There's that chord progression again." He responded coolly: "So it is, so it is." It occurs yet again in song number 11, *Going to Heaven*. I said: "And there it is again!" Copland turned to me and said in a slightly exasperated tone: "A



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fellow could lose a lot of friends that way!"

A both humorous and sad example of how Copland dealt with his memory loss occurred when I accompanied him to conduct *Appalachian Spring* for a benefit for the Martha Graham Dance Company at the New York State Theatre in July of 1982. I was assigned to escort Copland into the theater and sit with him for the first half of the program and at the intermission to take him backstage to conduct his work for the second half of the program. We arrived at the theater and settled into our seats. Copland opened the program and said in a perfectly straight-forward tone of voice: "I wonder who's conducting my piece this evening." I turned to him, startled, and said: "Aaron, you are." (Very early in our time together Copland insisted I call him "Aaron," another sign to me of his utter lack of pretension.) He momentarily looked flustered, then brightened and said: "Well, young man, it's a good thing you're here to tell me, or I would have wondered off at the intermission to have a cigarette!" (Copland never smoked.)

\* \* \* \* \*

In a consideration of Copland's contribution to the choral art of our country, it is valuable first to explore his general influence on American music. Ned Rorem has beautifully described Copland's music as "a fact of sonic geology, like a throbbing song-filled Rock of Gibraltar." Sounds that Copland imagined for the first time are so much a part of our musical vernacular that just a few notes of wide-arching upward intervals evoke a particularly American optimism, a reaching out and upward, of both the open spaces of the prairie and the towering skyscraper. Consider the opening three notes of *Fanfare for the Common Man* (Sol-Do-Sol). The energy of the rhythm—two sixteenths followed by an eighth; the openness of a perfect fourth followed by a perfect fifth—this is an indication of genius; the ability to capture the spirit and character of a people in a few notes.

It is important to say that Copland was not a singer, and did not have the intuitions

of a singer or the sensitivity to the unique psychology of the singer in the sense that Samuel Barber had, our consummate master of music for the voice. But Copland's assimilation of American folk melody in so many of his works is an indispensable contribution to our choral art. Color and character and inflection of language are the seeds of a national musical style: Debussy's music embodies this for France; Bartok's for Hungary; Vaughan Williams's for England, to name just a few. It seems that Copland does this for American music more profoundly than any other composer.

Perhaps the most original "musical children" of works such as the *Old American Songs*, are two works by Conrad Susa: *Two Ballads* (1968) and *Shenandoah* (1964). (Listen to Charles Bruffy's beautiful rendition of this last with the Kansas City Chorale). These works contain many of Copland's unique stylistic hallmarks: open-spaced sonorities; pandiatonic dissonance; open intervals suggesting Medieval organum and Machaut, and early American hymnody and shape-note singing. The ingenuity of Susa's accompaniments for his ballads in imagining anew the original source material owes a great deal to Copland's accompaniments for his songs.

Further sonic influence of Copland can be distinctly felt in the music of two composers widely performed at present: in Morten Lauridsen's simple diatonic triads with their added 2nds, 4ths, and 9ths; and Eric Whitacre's pandiatonic chord-clusters arrived at through conjunct motion. These are sounds and colors that, again, Copland imagined for the first time.

Most choral musicians know well Copland's two sets of *Old American Songs*, and *In the Beginning*. (I was lucky to hear an extraordinary performance of this challenging work, sadly not recorded commercially, with Vance George's San Francisco Symphony Chorus and soprano Roberta Alexander; under the direction of expert Copland interpreter Michael Tilson Thomas.) Two choral works that deserve to be better known are *Canticle of Freedom* (1955) for chorus and orchestra, and his two choruses for *Women's Voices: An Immortality* and *The House on the Hill* (1925).

For those interested in exploring Co-

pland in greater depth, I enthusiastically recommend Howard Pollack's magnificent biography, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (Henry Holt, New York, 1999).

I end my portrait of Aaron Copland, dear man, and cherished and indispensable composer, with two quotes from two other writers whose insights were valuable guides for me as I was beginning my serious study of Copland's music.

Bayan Northcott wrote, in a tribute for Copland's 80th birthday:

If, somewhat unexpectedly, we are witnessing the emergence of a new 'common practice' in the handling of equal temperament—to which serialism has only been the catalyst—then the compositional significance of Copland's unique acuity for the spacing, duration, and coloring of pitches can only increase.

Virgil Thomson's words in 1971, in another tribute to Copland, seem as true now as when he first wrote them:

The non-programmatic works...have long served American composers as models of procedure and as storehouses of precious device, all of it ready to be picked right off the shelf.

Though it is impossible in an essay of this length to list all the American composers who have been influenced by Copland, (or those who would make a claim to the contrary for whatever reasons), Copland's musical voice is so powerful and pervasive that ever since *Appalachian Spring*, the composing of a simple triad is very difficult to do without sounding like Copland. Born at the dawn of the last century, in his creation of new and shining sound images, he heard first for us all.

