Aaron Copland – Suite from *Appalachian Spring*

*Born November 14, 1900, Brooklyn, New York.*  
*Died December 2, 1990, Peekskill, New York.*

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Copland composed *Appalachian Spring* in 1943–44 as a ballet for Martha Graham, on a commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation. The work was first performed on October 30, 1944, at the Library of Congress (with a cast that included Martha Graham as the Bride and Merce Cunningham as the Preacher). At these concerts, the suite from the complete ballet is performed in Copland’s original ensemble version for thirteen instruments, not his later orchestral arrangement. The score calls for flute, clarinet, bassoon, piano, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-three minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* were given at Orchestra Hall on October 9 and 10, 1947, with Artur Rodzinski conducting. The composer himself led performances at Orchestra Hall on April 9, 10, and 11, 1970. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on April 12, 13, 14, and 17, 2001, with William Eddins conducting. The Orchestra first performed this work at the Ravinia Festival on August 1, 1946, with Pierre Monteux conducting; Copland himself led a performance on July 23, 1964; and our most recent performance at Ravinia was given on July 16, 2000, with David Alan Miller conducting.

Aaron Copland wrote nothing that didn’t seem to be stamped “Made in the U.S.A.” (Virgil Thomson called him “the president of American music.”) Copland was one of the earliest important composers to put his finger on the musical pulse of this country, and he helped to establish a distinctive American sound, particularly with his first two ballet hits, *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*. (Both are triumphs of imagination over experience for a composer city-born and -bred.)
No Copland score, however, more perfectly captures the vast open spaces, the homespun plainness, and the bracing pioneer spirit of our country than Appalachian Spring. “I felt,” he wrote, “that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn’t say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms.” Appalachian Spring was written for Martha Graham, the doyenne of American dance—the score’s working title was Ballet for Martha, replaced only at the last minute by the now-familiar phrase Graham found in Hart Crane’s poem “The Dance,” from his epic cycle The Bridge. (Crane meant spring as a source of water, not a season.)

Graham had been commissioning scores since the thirties, and she also had begun working on set design with Alexander Calder and Isamu Noguchi. For years, she had wanted Copland to write a ballet for her company; in 1941, armed with money from Chicago-born Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, she commissioned both César Chávez and Copland. It took Graham and Copland a while to agree on their subject. Graham finally suggested something that would capture the spirit of Thorton Wilder’s 1938 play, Our Town, and that became their touchstone. When Copland received Graham’s first script, he said, “This is a legend of American living. It is like the bone structure, the inner frame that holds together a people.” Eventually Graham settled on a simple tale, defined by the rituals of daily life, and set in a small town in rural western Pennsylvania (Graham had spent her childhood in Allegheny, not far from Pittsburgh). Although Copland originally envisioned a work for double string quartet and piano, he added double bass and woodwinds when he learned that Chávez intended to use them as well.

Although Appalachian Spring has taken on iconic status as a portrait of rural Americana, with its furrowed fields and radiant skies, Copland was thinking primarily about Graham “and her unique choreographic style” when he wrote it. “Nobody else seems quite like Martha: she’s so proud, so very much herself. And she’s unquestionably very American: there’s something prim and restrained, simple yet strong, about her which one tends to think of as American.”

In a score that is suffused with the natural melodic charm of folk music, there’s just one actual folk song—the then-obscure Shaker song “Simple Gifts” that, in a moment of true inspiration, Copland picked out of a book on Shaker music and dance. (Apparently a line in Graham’s initial script, referring to a “Shaker rocking chair,” pointed him in this direction. As Copland later admitted, “my research evidently was not very thorough, since I did not realize that there have never been Shaker settlements in rural Pennsylvania.”) From its first performance, with sets by Noguchi and Graham herself dancing the young bride, Appalachian Spring took its place in the history of American culture. Copland’s score won both
the New York Music Critics’ Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize. The ballet became a cornerstone of the Graham Company repertory (Martha continued to dance the bride’s role for many years), earning its status not only as “one of Martha’s signature pieces,” in the words of Agnes de Mille, but as a landmark in American music.

When the score was first published, Copland offered this summary of the ballet’s action:

A pioneer celebration in spring around a newly built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the last [nineteenth] century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites. An older neighbor suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. 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.

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