Ears Wide Open Concert Two

Copland
Appalachian Spring: Suite

Tuesday 14 July at 6.30pm
Melbourne Recital Centre
Welcome to Ears Wide Open
Concert Two

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

Richard Gill
conductor

— COPLAND
Appalachian Spring: Suite

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

With a reputation for excellence, versatility and innovation, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra is Australia’s oldest orchestra, established in 1906. The Orchestra currently performs live to more than 200,000 people annually, in concerts ranging from subscription performances at its home, Hamer Hall at Arts Centre Melbourne, to its annual free concerts at Melbourne’s largest outdoor venue, the Sidney Myer Music Bowl.

Sir Andrew Davis gave his inaugural concerts as Chief Conductor of the MSO in April 2013, having made his debut with the Orchestra in 2009. Highlights of his tenure have already included collaborations with artists including Bryn Terfel, Emanuel Ax and Truls Mørk, the release of recordings of music by Percy Grainger and Eugene Goossens, and its 2014 European Festivals tour.

Richard Gill
conductor

Richard Gill, OAM, is one of Australia’s preeminent conductors and an internationally respected music educator. He is Founding Music Director and Conductor Emeritus of Victorian Opera and Artistic Director of the Education Program for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

He has been Artistic Director of OzOpera, Artistic Director and Chief Conductor of the Canberra Symphony Orchestra, Director of Chorus at Opera Australia (then the Australian Opera), and Adviser for the Musica Viva In Schools program.

He has conducted all of the major Australian symphony orchestras and youth orchestras, including conducting the Sydney Symphony Orchestra’s Meet the Music and Family concerts and was previously the Dean of the West Australian Conservatorium of Music.

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Aaron Copland
(1900–1990)

Appalachian Spring:
Suite for 13 instruments (1944)
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The Composer

With bold, lean melodies, muscular rhythms and sharply-etched or punchy orchestrations, Aaron Copland’s music often expresses the sound of America’s wide open spaces, even though he was born in Brooklyn, New York City to parents of Lithuanian-Russian origin. Young Aaron helped his parents run the family store while his sister Laurine introduced him to ragtime and opera. His formal lessons began when he was 13 but rather than attend university, he took private lessons with composer Rubin Goldmark.

In 1921 he went first to the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau and then to Paris where Nadia Boulanger instilled in him her ideal of la grande ligne. He still wavered for a time, however, between various styles – like jazz (the Piano Concerto of 1927) or 12-tone technique (the E.E. Cummings setting Poet’s Song).

Copland found numerous mentors (including Serge Koussevitzky of the Boston Symphony Orchestra), but initially struggled to earn a living on return to the USA, though he became a skilled organiser and administrator, including co-founding composer organisations. Travel to Mexico in the 1930s resulted in one of his most popular works, El Salon México, but also strengthened mildly-Leftist political beliefs.

The 1940s were a highpoint, for it was then that he wrote his most popular works: Rodeo, Lincoln Portrait, Fanfare for the Common Man and Appalachian Spring. He also moved out of New York City to live ‘upstate’.

The 1950s saw a return to 12-note technique (the Piano Quartet).

He was also called before Senator McCarthy’s House Committee on Un-American Activities. But politics never prevented Copland representing the United States on overseas visits, nor receiving a wealth of honours, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964.

In 1961, Copland moved to Peekskill, New York. Leonard Bernstein, a protégé, conducted the world premiere of Connotations, a work that some critics derided as a betrayal of Copland’s more popular tonal style, although Copland retorted that he was merely broadening his options.

After 1972, Copland composed little (‘… as if someone had simply turned off a faucet’) but he still conducted. He conducted the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 1978 (having conducted the Boston Symphony in Australia in 1960). And in 1986 he published, with Vivian Perlis, the first instalment of a two-volume autobiography (the second appeared in 1989).

Among Copland’s legacies are the numerous composers he mentored and championed, including Bernstein, Chávez, and Ginastera. Copland died in Tarrytown, New York on 2 December 1990.

The Music

Martha Graham had already choreographed Copland’s Piano Variations (Dithyramb, 1931) when, in 1942, arts patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge commissioned her to produce three new ballets and Copland was chosen to write music for one of them. Appalachian Spring premiered in Washington in October 1944. It is one of those works which defines the American spirit in music.

At first Copland was in the dark about a title. Eventually Graham confided in him: ‘Appalachian Spring’, from a line in a poem by Hart Crane about a spring of water in the Appalachian Mountains:

I took the portage climb, then chose
A further valley-shed; I could not stop.
Feet nozzleled wat’ry webs of upper flows;
One white veil gusted from the very top.

O Appalachian Spring!...

The original scenario had references to ‘Native American princess’ Pocahontas and the Civil War but was eventually whittled down to preparations for a wedding in the Pennsylvania hill country in the early 1800s.

The keynote of the whole enterprise was ‘simplicity’. The choreography was restrained. Copland’s music was ‘Plain, plain, plain!’; as Leonard Bernstein said in admiration: ‘one of those Puritan values like being fair …’.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Appalachian Spring:
Suite for 13 instruments (1944)

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Never has a composer so gracefully evoked the vast openness of the American landscape as Copland does in *Appalachian Spring*. Mozart’s Piano Concerto in D minor is complemented by Beethoven’s majestic Seventh Symphony.

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Graham had a great admiration for Shaker furniture and Copland even made use of a Shaker hymn, “Simple Gifts”. Variations on this theme take place just before the end when “The Bride takes her place among her neighbours (and) the couple are left “quiet and strong in their new house”.

In 1944, Copland extracted a concert suite from the ballet, which he orchestrated the following year. He trimmed 15 minutes of what was primarily choreographic material, and expanded the original 13-member chamber ensemble. But it is the 13-instrument version (performed this evening) which most purely conveys Graham’s original intentions.

The suite is constructed in eight sections, played without interruption. Copland provided the following scenario:

1. Very slowly. Introduction of the characters, one by one, in a suffused light.
2. Fast. Sudden burst of unison strings in A major arpeggios starts the action. A sentiment both elated and religious gives the keynote to this scene.
6. Very slow (as at first). Transition scenes reminiscent of the introduction.

7. Calm and flowing. Scenes of daily activity for the Bride and her Farmer-husband. There are five variations on a Shaker theme. The theme, sung by a solo clarinet, was taken from a collection of Shaker melodies compiled by Edward D. Andrews, and published under the title The Gift to be Simple. The melody I borrowed and used almost literally is called “Simple Gifts”.

8. Moderato – Coda. The Bride takes her place among her neighbors. At the end the couple are left ‘quiet and strong in their new house’. Muted strings intone a hushed, prayer-like passage. We hear a last echo of the principal theme sung by a flute and solo violin. The close is reminiscent of the opening music.

Glossary

- chamber music – music for a small ensemble such as a string quartet that could fit into a small venue or ‘chamber’
- suite – a sequence of closed-form musical pieces that have been collected together according to some common identifying principle (e.g. Bach’s suites of dances)
- tonal – music in which all the melodic and harmonic material is derived from the major and minor scales
- 12-tone – music in which all the harmony and melody is derived from the 12 tones of the chromatic scale, though specifically from an ordering of those 12 tones that creates a foundational pattern for the piece. The resulting harmonies can be dissonant in a tonal sense.

Further Listening

There are different versions of Appalachian Spring. The 13-instrument version is available on a number of recordings, including by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (ABC Classics: 481 0863). Perhaps one obvious thing to listen for is the greater prominence given to piano, compared to the orchestral version. Copland himself conducted the work on a recording with the London Symphony Orchestra (Sony: SMK89874).

Martha Graham’s ballet is on YouTube. In black and white, it provides a graphic understanding of the sparseness of the whole conception, including Isamu Noguchi’s sets and costumes.

Copland was at times influenced by jazz (listen to the Piano Concerto of 1927). A more strident Copland, less concerned with speaking to a broader public, can be heard in the Piano Variations of 1930, or listen to Grohg, Copland’s response to German Expressionism; its scenario is based on the silent vampire film, Nosferatu (1922). Oliver Knussen made a recording of his reconstruction of this ballet with the Cleveland Orchestra (Decca: 443203).

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Appalachian Spring was first staged on 30 October 1944 at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. with Louis Horst conducting. Martha Graham danced the role of The Bride and Erick Hawkins was The Husband.

The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra first performed the suite from the ballet on 29 and 30 March 1967 under conductor Moshe Atzmon. The MSO’s most recent performance of the Suite for 13 instruments was on 6 and 7 June 2013 with Benjamin Northey conducting.

Right: Appalachian Spring premiere production 1944.
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