

COLORADO COLLEGE



Summer
Music
festival

Program Notes
by
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FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA CONCERT

June 16, 2026

7:00 PM

Celeste Theatre

Appalachian Spring
(A Ballet for Martha)

Aaron Copland
(1900-1990)

Aaron Copland is often recognized as the “dean” of American music in the 20th Century. There are many reasons for this honor, including the fact that he influenced so many of his contemporary composers and younger protégés in a myriad of ways. But his fame rests on more than his influence on other musicians. In short, he wrote music that people liked to hear. That, however, had not always been the case. After having studied “modern” music with the celebrated Nadia Boulenger in Paris, one of his first concerts at home met with severe criticism. Walter Damrosch, a prominent critic at the time, wrote, “If a young man at the age of twenty-five can write a symphony like that, in five years he will be ready to commit murder.”

Copland, like many contemporaries, began to reconsider the place of modernist music and how it seemed to have lost contact with its audience. Soon he embarked on compositions that were to appeal to larger audiences. And this led to his famous collaborations with the most prominent proponent of modern dance in America, Martha Graham, who also believed that her art should seem relevant and pleasing to audiences. The Copland-Graham collaboration led to several works of legendary prominence, most notably *Rodeo*, *Billy the Kid*, and *Appalachian Spring*.

Martha Graham, the pioneer of modern dance in America, had danced to a piano sonata by Copland during the 1930’s. She liked Copland’s music so much that when she received a grant for new work in 1942, she commissioned Copland to write the score for a new ballet. This successful collaboration between dancer and composer spawned one of the most popular American ballets and musical scores of the 20th Century—*Appalachian Spring*. Copland’s music for the ballet received the award of the New York Music Critics Circle in 1944, the year of its premiere, and the symphonic suite drawn from the ballet score won the Pulitzer Prize in music in 1945.

As noted, the Graham-Copland collaboration brought together two similar artists. Both believed in a modern language for their respective arts, but both also wanted their arts to attract audiences, to be enjoyable. In thinking about his modernist period in France, Copland wrote, “During these years I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer. It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum. . . It made no sense to ignore them [the audience] and to continue writing as if they did not exist. I felt that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn’t say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms.” So, during the 1930s and 1940s Copland wrote several ballets and orchestral pieces that were not only more melodic and less dissonant than his earlier “modernist” works but were also on subjects of wide appeal. These included *Billy the Kid* in 1938 and *Rodeo* in 1942 and, of course, *Appalachian Spring* in 1944.

Apparently, Graham gave Copland a sketch of the scenario she had in mind for her ballet. It was simply about the marriage and struggles of a young couple. In Copland's words, "The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, which their new domestic partnership invites."

Copland extracted the orchestral suite which we hear tonight from the longer ballet score. The suite is in eight sections. They are played without interruption. He wrote a definitive synopsis of the music which gives his descriptions of the style of each section.

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.
3. *Moderate*—Duo for the Bride and Her Intended—Scene of tenderness and passion.
4. *Quite fast*—The Revivalist and his flock. Folksy feelings—Suggestions of square dances and country fiddlers.
5. *Still faster*—Solo dance of the Bride—Presentiment of motherhood. Extremes of joy and fear and wonder.
6. *Very slowly* (as at first)—Transition scene to music 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. *Moderate*—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 prayerlike passage. The close is reminiscent of the opening music.

Copland's music has, among other elements, a marvelous conglomeration of traditional melodies which evoke country fiddling, dancing, and, most notably, the singing of hymn tunes like the celebrated "Simple Gifts." Yet at the same time it has piquant dissonances and cross rhythms which give it a modern sound as well. The listener should be ready for the beautiful variations based on "Simple Gifts" in section 7. In these, the melody is kept intact, but the orchestral context changes in color, tempo and key.

Clarinet Concerto in A Major, K. 622

Allegro

Adagio

Rondo-Allegro

W. A. Mozart
(1756-1791)

Mozart's Clarinet Concerto is one of those divinely inspired moments in the history of Western music that makes us stop and think how lucky we are to be alive hearing this music. It was composed during the twilight of Mozart's all-too-brief life, during October of 1791, less than two months before he took his last breath. He was aware of his illness, and possibly aware that he might not survive. This awareness was brought on in part by the mysterious commission for a setting of a Requiem Mass; as he worked on that piece off and on, he became obsessed with the idea that he was writing his own "death" Mass. Still, during these last months he managed to complete a serious opera, *The Clemency of Titus*, on September 5 for a performance at the court on September 6; the comic German opera, *The Magic Flute*, on September 28 for a performance on September 30; and the Clarinet Concerto!

At moments when one is aware of one's own mortality, often expressions of supreme serenity and sublimity emerge. And this is the case with the concerto at hand. It should be noted, however, that Mozart was fully aware of his senses and surroundings, because the work was written for a close associate, clarinetist Anton Stadler. The composer, after hearing Stadler's playing, was becoming more and more infatuated with the sound of the instrument. It didn't have the polite classical background of the flute, the strident tone of the oboe, or the mellow and outdoorsy timbre of

the French horn. Instead, it seemed to have the slightly nasal and rich sound of the human voice. Mozart was so smitten with this instrument that he wrote two great works for the clarinet late in his life—this concerto and the clarinet quintet. The exact dates of completion, or the first performance, of the clarinet concerto are not known.

The first movement, *Allegro*, is easy-paced with a lyrical mold that is characteristic of late Mozart. There is no flash, no virtuosity for its own sake. Instead, a stunning variety of moods, colors, and images emerge. The opening melody is heard first in the orchestra and later in the clarinet. It is simple, heart-felt, and classically constructed out of elegant balanced phrases. In the development, it is particularly stunning how he achieves his usual balance between tutti (orchestra) and solo. The soloist is no diva, but rather a conversationalist who can hold his own among a crowd but is always willing to listen to the others. And in this development, he also shows an uncanny ability to reshape the themes of the exposition. One other striking Mozartian feature is how he occasionally has the soloist accompany the orchestra, kind of like the tail wagging the dog; listen for passages where the clarinet plays big arpeggios (broken chords) around the entire ambitus of the orchestra, while the latter carries on with the melody. The recapitulation is brief and does not allow for the traditional show-off cadenza at the end. Oh, how tasteful!

The second movement, *Adagio*, was described by the famous Mozart scholar, Alec Hyatt King, as “music of utter simplicity, which seems to reflect the timeless beatific vision of a mind at peace with itself.” King was undoubtedly thinking of Mozart’s current sense of mortality. The melody which opens this movement is one of those moments in Mozart’s music where words cannot come close to defining what happens. The bottom line is sheer musicality that defies analysis. One striking feature is that the movement is in a major key, instead of the usual minor for moments of sadness. As another Mozart scholar, H. C. Robbins Landon, noted, “There are times when an unbearable sadness seems to linger in the music, the more profound and tragic because it smilingly emerges from the serenity of a bright major key.” The listener should be sure to note the great variety of colors Mozart manages to draw out of the solo instrument in this movement.

The last movement, *Rondo-Allegro*, is written as a rondo, with a main or “rondo” theme that returns from time to time and alternates with episodes of contrasting natures. Again, there is wonderful dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra. At times the clarinet speaks its peace, and at other times it listens to the orchestra with only friendly little words of support. The movement contains the first music that might be called spritely. Once again, however, there is an underlying aura of melancholy. Robbins Landon borrows a line from Leontes at the end of Act I of Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale* which seems to summarize how this movement makes us feel: “My heart dances, but not for joy.”

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43

Allegretto

Tempo andante, ma rubato

Vivacissimo

Finale-Allegro moderato

Jean Sibelius
(1865-1957)

Like Edvard Grieg in Norway and Carl Nielsen in Denmark, Jean Sibelius was a hero in Finland, his own Scandinavian country. In fact, his romantic music played a role in the emergence of a national Finnish identity in the 19th century. His famous symphonic poem, *Finlandia*, is almost perceived as a national anthem. Some of this undoubtedly reflects his parents’ determination that he study in Finnish language schools. At the time, Finnish was regarded as a peasant language and many students studied in Swedish or German. In opposition to this, the emerging “Fennoman” movement tried to raise the status of the national language and attracted Sibelius and his family to the new way. He did, after initial studies in law, focus on music and pursued the required study in both Berlin and Vienna, the recognized musical capitals of Europe.

Sibelius is known best for his symphonic music, particularly the seven completed symphonies, the much-played violin concerto, and the symphonic poems on nationalistic subjects. In each work he develops his compositional style so that, as with Beethoven, one can trace a musical growth that is impressive. His work is generally distinguished by his original use of common musical procedures. His harmonies are often unorthodox but strikingly pleasing; he has an unsurpassed ability to control orchestral color; and he is fascinated by musical process and structure, eventually nearly replacing the old sonata form!

The historical context for this symphony is interesting. When the work was composed during 1901 to 1903, tensions were running high between Finland and Russia. We should note that Finland was still the "Russian Grand Duchy of Finland" until 1917, thereby a part of the Russian Empire. This was repulsive to nationalists like Sibelius and certainly weighed heavily on his mind. From the time of its first performance in Stockholm in 1903, the Finns heard in it an expression of their yearning for national selfhood and liberty, which served to ensure Sibelius' standing as a national hero. Such vague musical expression may be hard to pinpoint in the music, but in the heroic quality of the last movement, it would be easy to infer such nationalism by a public that was living the struggle in its everyday existence. Incidentally, Sibelius vehemently denied that the work was an expression of the Finnish struggle against Russia.

The first movement, *Allegretto*, is expansive and complex. It is a kind of sonata form, but the form is difficult to hear or follow because the melodies are long-phrased and not as distinct from one another as the two themes in a typical classical symphony. The themes seem to grow out of one another. One can, however, get the sense of thematic ideas that are developed with some tension and which recur in their original state toward the end. Instead of trying to hear this, the listener will benefit more by hearing how Sibelius creates wonderful orchestral colors and dynamics.

The second movement, *Tempo Andante, ma rubato*, is allegedly based on the Commendatore's music in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, although I have yet to hear the relationship. It may just be that they share the same key of D minor? This theme alternates with another, more grievous one in the strings, which Sibelius himself dubbed "Christus." This second theme seems to offer consolation without alleviating the tragic mood of the first.

The third movement, *Vivacissimo*, offers some relief from the tragic sounds of the second movement. It is a fast and light *scherzo*. There is a serene middle section, the *Trio*, with a lovely melody for the oboe. Both the *scherzo* and *trio* return, but the *trio* now becomes a transition to the final movement which bursts upon the scene with heroic grandeur.

The fourth movement, *Allegro moderato*, begins with a melody characterized by a three-note ascending pattern. This becomes the heroic theme that is often thought to reflect Sibelius' expression of Finnish heroism. I would tend to agree with Sibelius who denied this, because the melody can be heard as nothing more than a beautiful romantic melody. In fact, some commentators have noted the theme is close to one of Sibelius' most admired predecessors, none other than the great Russian, Tchaikovsky. There is another major theme in this movement which is in a sad minor key heard in the winds above agitated strings. Sibelius' wife said that this theme was in remembrance of her sister who had died. The juxtaposition of these two themes carries the movement to a heroic climax. There is no holding back, and again the nationalists proclaim proudly that it is the ultimate expression of a great Finland, free at last from all oppression.

