

Appalachian Spring

Aaron Copland (1900–1990)

Written: 1942-44

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: 23 minutes

Much of Aaron Copland's fame as a composer rests on his three brilliant scores for ballet: *Rodeo*, *Billy the Kid*, and *Appalachian Spring*. He didn't start out writing in the style found in those three ballets. As a young man, he was allied with the modernist movement in America. However, in the 1930's he

 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. Moreover, an entirely new public for music had grown up around the radio and phonograph. It made no sense to ignore them 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.

The success of *El Salon Mexico* (1936), *Billy the Kid* (1938), *A Lincoln Portrait* (1942) and *Rodeo* (1942) proved that Copland's newfound populism was the right course.

When Copland accepted a commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation to write a ballet for Martha Graham in 1942, the only restrictions that he knew of were that it had to be for a small enough orchestra to fit in the Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress—only 13 players—and be about thirty minutes long. He knew that the general subject of the ballet had to do “with the pioneer American spirit, with youth and spring, with optimism and hope.”

 As Martha Graham worked on the choreography with the music, the ballet grew into 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. 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.

Several years after the premiere of the ballet with the small pit orchestra, Copland extracted a large amount of the music and arranged it for a large orchestra, the version you will hear tonight.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Written: 1877

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 40 minutes

These days, the popular characterization of Brahms is that of a melancholy, forever-old man: balding, with a long, disheveled gray beard. We listen to his music as if he were always stuck in the autumn of his life. Still, Brahms was young once and, at the time he wrote his *Second Symphony*, even happy! In the summer of 1877, he was in southern Austria. There were inspirational views of snow-capped peaks towering over the lake, the eating was good and, as Brahms wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, “The melodies fly so thick here that you have to be careful not to step on one.”

This is undoubtedly Brahms’s cheeriest symphony. He was clearly in a playful mood when he wrote to his publisher, “The new symphony is so melancholic that you can’t stand it. I have never written anything so sad, so minor-ish: the score must appear with a black border.” (Maybe Brahms wasn’t being so impish: There are some dark moments, most notably near the beginning of the first movement when the timpani sound a roll like distant thunder, and the trombones play dark ominous chords. “I would have to confess that I am . . . a severely melancholic person, that black wings are constantly flapping about us,” he wrote.)

All of the movements of the *Symphony No. 2* follow the normal pattern for a symphony. The first movement presents the opening theme right away. In it, you’ll hear the motives which permeate the entire work. The second theme, played by the cellos and violas, is typical for Brahms: soaring and lyrical. The melody in the second movement is an extended one, again played by the cellos. After a contrasting middle section, it comes back at the end of the movement, this time ornamented by the rest of the orchestra.

The third movement is a gentle little Austrian dance with a kick on the third beat, known as a *ländler*. Two faster and more robust episodes interrupt the pastoral setting. The final movement begins in a hushed manner. As it progresses it becomes more ebullient until even the trombones, who were responsible for the only gloom in the first movement, join the merrymaking and go out in a blaze of glory.

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