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CONSIDERATIONS

Copland—*Music and Imagination*: A Review and Commentary

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The prestigious Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry at Harvard University was established in 1925 and involves a one-year residency and the delivery of at least six lectures, which are often collected as books. The idea of "poetry" is broadly defined and really encompasses all the arts and the criticism of them. In the 1951–1952 academic year, Aaron Copland gave the Norton Lectures at Harvard. Paul Hindemith and Igor Stravinsky had given the lectures in previous years, but Copland was the first American-born composer to do so, perhaps a sign of the recognition of the increasing sophistication of American music in the postwar period.

A somewhat shy and self-contained man, Copland never attended college. Rather, his formative years were spent in Paris, where he studied with the renowned musical pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. He not only experienced Paris of the mid-twenties—then the center of the art world—but took in through all the senses the major artistic trends of the time. Copland thus mixed it up with the likes of Stravinsky, Picasso, Braque, Cocteau, Stein, Satie, Man Ray, and many others, either in person or by encountering their work. In this regard, he was an autodidact in many of these areas of intellectual and artistic endeavor.

Copland viewed himself in a slightly self-deprecatory manner for never having gone to college. He shouldn't have, though, for what he lacked in getting a university credential Copland made up for with natural intellect and curiosity, perhaps somewhat in the Lincoln and Whitman manner. He was a lifelong reader and prolific writer, a maker and observer of the scene. Copland spoke and wrote in a straightforward manner. He was, through his compositions, a witness

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of himself and his time, and through his writings, a proponent for his art and proselytizer for a serious engagement with music.

Copland's music also bears these qualities. It is clear in all musical domains, as in rhythm, pitch, and, of course, form. Nothing is forced, nor is there ever gratuitous padding. While his music is still highly regarded today, Copland has fallen somewhat out of favor. But then so has that other father of American music, Charles Ives. Why might this be?

The current musical scene is polarized, just as is our politics. The two major poles are perhaps best represented by John Cage and Elliott Carter. Both are men who started writing using their ears, produced some very decent work, and then were seduced into philosophies that raised the *idea* of music over the sonic result. Cage found chance, to reduce his ego participation in the process of writing, and Carter found European complexity, based on that Continental proclivity to speak at length without saying much at all. Copland for the most part continued throughout his career to write his own finely wrought works that belied pretension and ostentation—works that are well-heard and continue to offer the greatest aesthetic and aural pleasure, and that at their deepest, display a rugged and truthful beauty.

Copland wrote slowly and only what he heard, constantly testing his inner ear with the piano to confirm his correctness. While Ives sometimes wrote more than he could hear—as when setting different folk tunes at the same time—he knew that each part would be identifiable, and thus actually heard. Ives's most avant-garde experiments were just that, experiments, and often composed with a sense of humor. Copland's music is also filled with humor and zest—and the real stuff. The avant-garde that came to prominence in the post-WWII period is either humorless or presents a humor filled with a postmodern sense of the ironic, which tends not to be humorous at all. The avant-garde essentially raised thought or idea above the actual sound, the mind above emotion, deadly seriousness over a serious playfulness—and the musical results are, for the most part, arid and sterile.

In the 1950s, while the avant-garde was just gearing up, Copland was at the height of his prestige and popularity. Thus he was asked to give the Norton Lectures, which were published by Harvard University Press in 1952 in a tidy little book, *Music and Imagination*.[1] The book is still important for

[1]Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (1952, President and Fellows of Harvard College; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) . Further reference to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

us today, for it confronts issues and asks questions at the center of current artistic and cultural endeavors.

The book is divided into two parts of three chapters each. In part one, "Music and the Imaginative Mind," Copland discusses "The Gifted Listener," "The Sonorous Image," and "The Creative Mind and the Interpretative Mind." These more philosophical musings are followed by part two, "Musical Imagination and the Contemporary Scene," which includes a look at the particulars of the then current music scene in chapters titled "Tradition and Innovation in Recent European Music," "Musical Imagination in the Americas" (both North and South), and "The Composer in Industrial America."

As mentioned, the Norton lectures are presented in the guise of a poetry professorship. Copland begins by noting the commonalities of music and poetry, and that there is an essence that joins them, "an area where the meaning behind the notes and the meaning beyond the words spring from a common source" (1). Copland doesn't so much state what this is as allude to the possibility that both try to get past the limited understanding of the world that is provided only by the rational mind, that is represented by words in their most common formulation. Both poetry and music present the reality behind, or before, the words—the realms of wonder and the miraculous.

Music, Copland writes, does this by presenting an aspect of our inner life, "the part that *sing*s" (2, emphasis in original). He then makes a statement that appears simple and almost perfunctory, but holds a great meaning, or question:

> Purposeful singing to me signifies that a composer has come into possession of musical materials of related orders of experience; given these, the composer's problem then is to shape them coherently so that they are intelligible in themselves, and hence, communicable to an audience.…The musical work must be reinterpreted…re-created in the mind of the performer or group of performers. Finally the message reaches the ear of the listener, who must then relive in his own mind the completed revelation of the composer's thought. (p. 2)

Before we parse this statement, I should mention that Cage questioned the entire enterprise suggested here by Copland in asking what, in fact, do the activities of composition, performance, and listening have to do with each other? In other words, he questioned the very basis of the musical enterprise,

the notion of intent that underlies it and the idea that there should be a general common perception of what is heard.

Copland assumes a "purposeful singing." Neither mindless nor incoherent, it embodies an idea. This might be an inchoate emotional state at its inception, but it must take shape to be understood. And as the American composer George Rochberg said, why shouldn't it be something that can be appertained and retained in the memory? It is an individual idea, and is thus memorable, even if this necessitates multiple hearings. This usually means a short musical phrase or motive (like the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—da-da-da-dum) or a longer melody (as in Shubert's Unfinished Symphony) or an emotional or affective quality—like one of speed, relentlessness, loss, solitude—that is more abstract in its musical presentation.

The composer "has come into possession of musical materials" (2). Copland knows, as all true artists do, that the notion of idea creation is, at best, a most mysterious process. Because the word "possession"—like the word "possessed," as in "to be possessed"—acknowledges that what is created does not usually come from the side of rationality, but that of intuition. Thus an idea comes to the composer and is almost presented for his inspection. He can reject or accept it, acknowledge its veracity, and judge it, in order to find its strengths and weaknesses, to shape it into its best form and to find its essential nature. For Mozart, Schubert, and Mendelssohn these ideas seem to have sprung forth fully formed—there is little to judge or change—as they simply *appear* in all their glory. For Beethoven, Stravinsky, and Copland the birthing process is slower, more time intensive, and demands a constant shuttling between the rational and intuitive states.

The composer has come into possession of musical materials of "related orders of experience" (2). What is this experience? Is it purely musical—is the composer commenting on his experience of other music, on his experience as a sentient, living human being? The answer is yes to both. The two cannot be distinguished or untangled by the composer or the listener, nor for that matter, should they necessarily be separable. It is fine to step back, as the theorist or musicologist does, to take stock of particulars in the music. This moving into the workings of the music can certainly aid in understanding and appreciating it, but it can't define or contain the listening experience, which at its best must be done whole. In the visual arts we look at a painting or sculpture, witness it in its entirety, then start to analyze its

components, its texture, form, color, line, etc. But as we do this we are constantly referencing back to our experience of the whole. Experiencing music must be done in the same manner but with the added complication of doing this over time, which is why real listening takes numerous passes.

It should come as no surprise that the first chapter of *Music and Imagination* is "The Gifted Listener." While Copland led the young generation of composers in the United States, provided leadership for gifted composers in Mexico, Latin America, and South America, and taught at Tanglewood (from its inception), he was overwhelmingly concerned with the problem of communication. Copland sought out opportunities to educate, to spread the word of the great and beneficial power of music. In doing this, he endeavored to define and better understand the art of listening. While primarily interested in the amateur, but not unsophisticated listener, Copland was well aware that the other parties in the musical enterprise—composers and performers/interpreters—are listeners, too.

The composer must listen to the inner voice that directs him to create, to listen for that which he must hear, while the performer must listen for the voice of the composer, to that which is in the notes and that which resides between them. This is, of course, embodied in teaching music. As students (whether instrumentalists or eager listeners) discover the inner workings of the music and absorb its grandeur, their appreciation of the music increases, and their ability to make or hear the beauty is manifest. Thus, the good teacher brings students into the workings of the musical discourse while safeguarding their passion for the music.

But let's return to the gifted listener, that unknown person who sits in the concert hall (leaving out the problem of iPods and the like for now) and hears. What is it that Copland asks of him? He asks the listener to have an "imaginative mind"—"that the facts of music…are only meaningful insofar as the imagination is given free play" (7). He suggests that listening is a talent and that it involves two aspects—the ability to open oneself fully to the experience and then to be able to judge that experience. Copland also holds to the Kantian ideal that contemplation, or in this case contemplation as listening, is its own reward. "For there are few pleasures in art greater than the secure sense that one can recognize beauty when one comes upon it" (8). Copland also recognizes the sacred quality of music and our ability to be moved by it. "Recognizing the beautiful in an abstract art like music partakes somewhat of a minor *miracle*; each time it happens I remain slightly

incredulous" (8–9, emphasis added). Copland says that the "ideal listener… would combine the preparation of a skilled professional with the innocence of the intuitive amateur" (9)—a bit like Copland himself.

"The ideal listener…possesses the ability to lend himself to the power of music" (9). In so doing, the listener must concentrate on the music's emotional overtones. This idea seems to be especially problematic in our time, which is characterized by a lack of quietude and thus an inability to probe and understand one's internal emotive landscape. The pervasive background noise of our civilization makes introspection—time with the self—almost impossible. But this is one of music's goal. And the real listening of real music demands internal interaction and emotional discovery.

While this is problematic for all of us today, our young performers and listeners are especially affected: performers emphasize technical virtuosity and speed at the expense of real feeling; listeners struggle to understand the music's emotional basis because they haven't really experienced those emotions. However, the great performance of a fine piece can awaken what's sleeping or latent in the listener. Studying an instrument and playing a great or new and exciting piece of music can widen the emotional landscape of both player and listener.

This process is not easy. The deep musical experience has "the aspect of a very hazardous undertaking. It is hazardous because at so many points it can break down; at no point can you seize the musical experience and hold it" (2). Copland uses "hazardous" rather than other choices such as "fragile" or "delicate." The word implies a journey fraught with the possibility of losing one's way at any time. The composer may not capture the essence of the idea and thus the composition is compromised. The performer may not realize everything the work has to offer or simply give a dull and uninspired performance. Finally, the listener may not find it within himself to engage with, let alone understand, the work.

"Hazardous" also suggests danger, danger suggests survival, and this all suggests that something is on the line, and that this something has *meaning*. In this sense, the artistic process possesses such a deep meaning that our survival depends on our engagement with it—that the ability to attune to and process this artistry is fundamental and essential to our humanity. The capacity to accept a beginning, middle, and end, to perceive the connections among composer, performer, and listener, is in a way parallel to how we have

to understand our lives. The nature of the artistic enterprise—in all of its manifestations—like very few other human enterprises, gives our life a rich and textured meaning. It deepens our personal emotional landscape, our understanding of our relationship to the external world, and expands our sense of what humankind is capable of creating. It is, in the secular sphere, a miracle.

The listener is impelled to ask what this music "means." The answer, of course, is that the meaning is in the music itself. The music may connote something in the listener's mind, but this can vary. Singing is the feeling and meaning for the composer—the greater the intensity of the feeling, the more pure its expression. And here is the rub. "It is only the literary mind that is disturbed by this imprecision. No true music-lover is troubled by the symbolic character of musical speech; on the contrary, it is this very imprecision that intrigues and activates the imagination" (13). As individuals and as a civilization, we have trouble with such ambiguity.

In our scientific age we assume there are, and seek, definitive answers. Our paradigm is a binary world of yes/no, on/off. Music suggests that this way of perceiving the world isn't possible, and more important, isn't the manner in which humans fundamentally function. Or perhaps more to the point, that to function in this way represents a degradation of what it means to be human in all of its grandeur and messy complicatedness. For we are mind and body, thought and emotion, birth, life, and death. Music offers a glimpse of that state of perfect reconciliation of these aspects of human existence; it allows us to grasp at full and complete awareness, to touch the ineffable.

Like our lives, music is in a constant state of becoming. This is somewhat unnerving, because it corresponds to our deep-seated understanding of life's transience. Music is in a state of becoming until, like us, it stops. It is in our nature to seek significance in life's journey, and to plan for or anticipate its end. Aaron Copland, better than most, created music that corresponds to this fundamental aspect of the human journey.

Postscript: Let me suggest a few works by Copland that you might like to experience. These include his *Piano Variations*, *Piano Sonata*, and *Piano Fantasy*. I think these pieces represent the greatest American contribution to the piano literature of the twentieth century. They aren't easy listening, but repeated listening will pay off. The pieces are included on the extraordinary CD by pianist Robert Weirich, Albany Records No: ALB 989. You should

also listen to Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, *Short Symphony*, *Symphony No. 3*, and *Piano Quartet*. Good recordings of the first three are available with the composer conducting, or with conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, who has a great sensibility for this music. Lastly, don't miss *The Dickinson Songs*. Thereafter, continue exploring on you own.