Books

Copland's Party Music

Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland during the Depression and War, by Elizabeth B. Crist (Oxford University Pres, 253 pages, $35).

By
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In the spring of 1960, Aaron Copland came to Dallas to conduct the Dallas Symphony Orchestra in an all-Copland concert. In connection with the event, I asked him to spend some time with the composition students at the University of North Texas, where I was teaching. He accepted, and his visit was so successful that I invited him to come back the next year. “I appreciate your invitation, Sam,” he told me, “but I will never return to this part of Texas again.”

I wasn’t completely surprised. The John Birch Society, headquartered in Dallas, had contacted the Dallas Symphony Orchestra management and threatened to place a bomb beneath the conductor’s podium if they permitted Copland ’71HON to conduct the concert.

Aaron Copland! Was there a more American classical musician than the Brooklyn-born composer of Appalachian Spring, Old American Songs, and Billy the Kid?

But what the Birchers well knew — for it was no secret — was that in the 1930s and ’40s, Copland had been affiliated with numerous progressive and left-wing causes, including, to some extent, the Communist Party. Elizabeth B. Crist ’94CC, the author of the excellent Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland During the Depression and War, calls him “a communist with a lowercase c.”

The 1960 Dallas visit came a generation after his fellow-traveling, but his communist past haunted Copland for the rest of his life. The House Un-American Activities Committee, the FBI, and various conservative organizations constantly made Copland a whipping boy. His Lincoln Portrait (1942) was pulled from Dwight D.

Eisenhower’s inaugural program after complaints from Illinois congressman Fred Busbey that Copland stood less for the spirit of Lincoln than for “alien ideology.”

It is therefore welcome to have a book that isolates these early years in Copland’s intellectual and creative life. The great ferment that prevailed among artists and art critics of that time brought the desire to tailor the arts for “the people.” How different from the blasé attitude we find among the artistic establishment today. Crist writes in depth about the collaboration and close relationship between the creators and critics of diverse arts and their efforts at reaching a wider audience, even as they sought an aesthetic to embody a difficult historical period.

Copland was instrumental in organizing the Young Composers Group, made up of composers such as Henry Brant, Israel Citkowitz, Lehman Engel, Vivian Fine, Bernard Herrmann, Jerome Moross, and Elie Siegmeister. According to Copland biographer Howard Pollack, they “leaned heavily in the direction of Marx, and [were] fashioned in some degree on the Russian group, The Five, or the French, Les Six. Yet though these composers practiced much greater stylistic diversity than their Russian and French counterparts, they were brought together by Copland.”

Copland’s love of the Americas, in particular Mexico, and his endeavor to expand our understanding of “America” leads Crist to an excellent discussion of the origins of El Salón México, and the Danzón Cubano. Crist looks closely at the relationship between Copland and Carlos Chávez and the influence the Mexican composer had on his American colleague: She does a fine job analyzing Copland’s major compositions from this period, especially such accessible works as An Outdoor Overture (1938), written for the New York High School of Music and Art Orchestra, and the children’s opera The Second Hurricane (1937). Seldom performed today, The Second Hurricane is an important work, for it again “reflects an awareness of the contemporary American political, social, and cultural context and influence of the Popular Front.”

Crist comments that Copland was “slightly disappointed in the European attempt to write Gebrauchsmusik (music for use, or utilitarian music), especially the works of Kurt Weill and Paul Hindemith.” Copland seemed to agree with the assessment of Marc Blitzstein, who, in a 1934 article in Modern Music magazine, calls it “music which abjectly copied what the mob already learned to like. Instead of educating, it panders.”

I remember an interview that appeared when I was a student of Copland in the late 1940s. Copland was asked to comment on the fact that his music seems to perfectly evoke the feeling and ethos of America's West. "That is very strange," he answered rather sarcastically, "since I have never been west of Albany." It was an offhand remark, of course, and Crist poignantly discusses the origins of Billy the Kid and Rodeo. These ballets, both about the West, have sociological and liberal political ramificiations. Rodeo, Crist explains, "envisions frontier democracy as a negotiation of individual and civic welfare, of personal expression and public good." This is an "egalitarian, democratic West . . . entirely fit to serve as a usable past for present reform."

With the sudden alliance between Hitler and Stalin in 1939 and the United States' joining the war in 1941, America's Left, and with it Copland, were shocked into a new reality. Though they did not give up their social and political ideals, their concerns turned toward a distinct Americanism. Copland had already made use of American folk songs, but he now fused folk elements and gestures in a new way to create an American sound — a Copland signature — that we all recognize as his. Fanfare for the Common Man from 1942, which became the basis of the final movement of his Third Symphony, possibly his masterpiece, presents this sound at its majestic best.

Crist speculates on the reasons Copland's output slowed after the war. "His musical philosophy was repudiated by the cultural politics and aesthetic ideology of 1950s liberalism, and the progressive ideals that had proved so motivating in the era of Depression and war were, within the tenets of anticommunist ideology, considered at best naïve and at worst seditious."

Although Copland's popularity receded in the 1950s and '60s beause of the prevailing preoccupation with more complex musical styles, his is today probably the most performed American music in the concert hall. The reason is simple: Audiences love it and orchestras and choruses are eager to perform it.

Crist has written an excellent book, full of insight into the times and Copland's musical aesthetics. And while occasionally her concern with the political overwhelms the musical, this volume is, after all, not only for musicians or even for music lovers, but for all those who are interested in the struggles of the artists during one of the most trying and critical times of our national existence.

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