

[On Copland, Blitzstein, and Gershwin]

“Plain fare from the farm house”

“Aaron Copland and His World”

The Summerscape Festival, Bard College, July-August

Aaron Copland and His World, edited by Carol A. Oja and Judith Tick (Princeton University Press), 503 pp.

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Great things were expected of Aaron Copland and his colleagues of the 1930s and '40s. They were widely understood – not least by themselves – to comprise the “come-of-age” generation of American composers, ready to cut the umbilical cord to Europe. Their sponsor Serge Koussevitzky, whose Boston Symphony tirelessly championed Copland alongside Roy Harris, William Schuman, Walter Piston, and Howard Hanson, predicted, “The next Beethoven vill from Colorado come.” Many dozens of candidates for the “great American symphony” were auditioned. A little later, Leonard Bernstein, a protégé of Copland and Koussevitzky both but more a man of the theater, breathlessly predicted a great American opera or opera-equivalent: “All we need is for our Mozart to come along . . . And this event can happen any second.”

In retrospect, the great American symphony, if there is one, had already been composed: by Charles Ives, whose Second and Fourth – original, capacious, iconic – predate 1920. And the closest thing to a great American opera, predating Bernstein’s 1956 prediction, remains George Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess” of 1935.

Ives and Gershwin fell outside the Copland/Koussevitzky orbit. Neither had gone to finishing school in Europe. Not for them were the modernist refinements Copland had absorbed from Nadia Boulanger in Paris. And Gershwin was of course infected by Broadway and Tin Pan Alley. It is true that Koussevitzky commissioned Gershwin’s Second Rhapsody, but he was never an Ives or Gershwin man. It is true that Copland championed some of Ives’ songs and wrote approvingly (if condescendingly) of jazz; but from his high perch both Ives and Gershwin looked amateurish. He omitted Gershwin from his various surveys of important or promising American composers.

At Boulanger’s American Conservatory at Fontainebleau, modernism furnished a source of identity, prestige, and self-esteem. It set technical standards and charted a progressive direction. It did not preclude a conscious nationalism, even populism, among its New World adherents. But it was also a constraining factor for Americans in search of an indigenous musical identity.

“Aaron Copland and His World” was the 2005 topic at the most intellectually ambitious of America’s summer music festivals: the one at Bard College, three hours north of Manhattan. Six days of concerts and lectures were the centerpiece of a larger exploration

also including a Clifford Odets play, a William Wyler film festival, the Martha Graham Dance Company, and a book edited by festival consultants Carol A. Oja and Judith Tick. A high point of the entire seven-week exercise was an exceptional presentation of an important American opera that, like “Porgy,” more challenges than supports the Copland enterprise. Like “Porgy,” it is unabashedly steeped in the American vernacular. Like “Porgy,” it has its seams and flaws. But, as Bard’s production gloriously confirmed, it is a gripping grand opera in the American vein – and, as such, illuminates what Copland was and was not.

The work in question is “Regina,” composed in 1946-49 by Marc Blitzstein. Like Copland, Blitzstein was stirred by the thirties to adopt a more socially engaged stance. But whereas Copland’s alignment with the left was often covert or ambivalent, Blitzstein became an activist. Though he had studied with Boulanger in Paris and Schoenberg in Berlin, it was the Bertholt Brecht/Kurt Weill “Dreigroschenoper” that eventually anchored his creative identity. Fired by contact with Brecht and Hanns Eisler in New York, he achieved fame and notoriety in 1937 with “The Cradle Will Rock,” a brisk, schematic, and defiant “play in music” siding with Labor against Capital. His 1952 translation of “The Three-Penny Opera” launched that work’s American career. “Regina,” in three substantial acts, originated as a Koussevitzky Foundation commission for Tanglewood. But Blitzstein decided to make it a Broadway opera – a genre it shares with “Porgy,” and with lesser works by Weill (“Street Scene”) and Gian Carlo Menotti. Though its Broadway run was short, three major US companies -- New York City Opera, Chicago Lyric Opera, and Houston Grand Opera -- have presented it. There was also a Scottish Opera production (which generated a stillborn studio recording).

Blitzstein’s libretto, a collaboration with Lillian Hellman, adapts Hellman’s 19xx play “The Little Foxes,” a saga of greed and materialism set in 1900 in the industrializing South. The nouveau riche Hubbards, of whom the regal Regina is most savage, claw their way to the top; black servants succor those white masters whose goodness is salvageable. As with “Porgy,” both the moral dimension and its American setting are vividly drawn. The many ingenious ensembles potently amplify the impact of the play with authentic operatic panache. No fewer than five larger-than-life main characters are compellingly differentiated. Blitzstein’s socio-political critique adds urgency and scope. William Wyler’s entertaining 1941 film version of “The Little Foxes,” with Bette Davis as Regina, is by comparison melodrama verging on camp.

That Blitzstein is wholly at ease with Americana is crucial to his achievement. His gift for colloquial word-setting facilitates the integration of a range of influences: Dixieland, blues, and spirituals; Old World arias and ariosos. He also moves seamlessly from dialogue to recitative to song. If he lacks Gershwin’s human depth and melodic genius, “Regina” surpasses “Porgy” in ease and unity of construction.

One fascination of the Bard festival was that Copland’s 1954 opera “The Tender Land” was mounted concurrently with “Regina.” The two works have points in common. “Regina” was originally intended for Broadway, “The Tender Land” for TV. Copland called it “closer to musical comedy than grand opera.” He also said he chose “material that would be natural for [young Americans] to sing and perform,” that he tried to combine “traditional operatic set pieces” with “a natural language” – goals that equally fit “Regina.” The Faulknerian South of Hellman and Blitzstein is an American trope. So is Copland’s Midwest farm house. In “Regina,” Regina’s daughter Alexandra rejects her mother and sets out on her

own. In “The Tender Land” Laurie, having graduated high school, leaves her mother rather than accept the inhibitions of a hard and inbred prairie existence.

At Bard, Alexandra’s departure was shattering. But it was difficult to care about Laurie, her mother, and their small, thin lives. In fact, the opera reveals Copland’s own inhibitions. He can’t get it up for Laurie’s love duet with the drifter xxx. His tunes pale beside the traditional ballad “Long Time Ago,” interpolated in the Bard production. Arid patches of words-to-music invite the awkward question, Why are these people singing?

Of course the comparison is unfair to Copland – no one would pretend that “The Tender Land” evokes “America” as poetically as “Appalachian Spring” or “Billy the Kid.” For those who prefer their modernism in purer form, there is the Piano Variations of 1930 – the jackhammer music that put Copland on the map – and his sequel Piano Sonata of 1941. A high point of the new Oja/Tick Copland compendium is a keen, elegant, and impassioned exegesis of the latter work by Larry Starr – a music historian with a gift for words. Starr correlates the tolling bells and sad processions of the outer movements with the dark days of World War II and finds a “poignant gift to troubled times.” The Copland Sonata was not performed at Bard. But a new recording by Benjamin Pasternack on Naxos makes credible Starr’s recourse to an Emily Dickinson poem Copland later set: “I felt a funeral in my brain.” As once recorded by the young Leonard Bernstein, the Copland Sonata is athletic, muscular, hyper-energetic. In fact, too much so: by accentuating the jazziness of the scherzo, Bernstein paradoxically makes Copland sound bottled up. In Pasternack’s dour reading, the movement’s stuttering repetitions convey an existential futility. Copland’s characteristic leanness of address is found to pack a message equally stark.

That said, it is not only in “The Tender Land” that Copland’s modernist leanness accompanies self-conscious constraint. His appropriations of jazz and folk tunes are often burdened with validating signatures of intellectual input. In his Piano Concerto (1926) – a response to “Rhapsody in Blue” – the shifting meters cancel the intended illusion of improvisatory abandon; the piece also lacks a good tune. In “El Salon Mexico,” the dissection and recombination of dance-hall songs is Copland’s solution to what he considered a “formal problem” – that “most composers have found that there is little that can be done with such material except repeat it.” Writing of “Billy the Kid,” Copland confessed, “I have never been particularly impressed with the musical beauties of the cowboy song as such. . . . I find myself . . . involved in expanding, contracting, rearranging and superimposing cowboy tunes.” For some listeners, these tactics rescue vulgar materials transferred to the concert stage. For others, a work such as Gershwin’s Cuban Overture does just fine without them.

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In fact, for all his conscious populism and nationalism, Copland lacks an unadulterated popular touch. He could never – like Gershwin or Blitzstein, or (to cite a comparably peripatetic artist in another field) George Balanchine – have attempted Broadway. His sojourn in Hollywood was a mixed success. His spare scores to “The Red Pony” and “Of Mice and Men” had a bracing effect on Western soundtracks to come. But for his most prominent assignment – William Wyler’s “The Heiress,” set in old New York – Copland’s spare idiom was incongruous, at least to Hollywood ears. Wyler felt the need to

bowdlerize it; Copland, notwithstanding an Academy Award for the very music Wyler re-upholstered, felt the need to abandon southern California. Significantly, Copland's highest achievement as a movie composer predated his Hollywood films. This was "The City," a socially conscientious documentary for the 1939 World's Fair in collaboration with such non-Hollywood types as Lewis Mumford.

Copland was at all times the recipient of advice and exhortation from his adherents: "too Jewish," "too jazzy," "too commercial," "too folksy," they exclaimed, endorsing a view wickedly encapsulated by Roger Sessions when he quipped that Copland was "more talented than he realized." Arthur Berger, whose complete correspondence with Copland, edited by Wayne Shirley, is valuably reproduced in the new Oja/Tick volume, was an unusually close and supportive composer colleague. "I would like to see you write the big work: a concerto, a cantata, or symphony," Berger urges in April 1943. "Someday I'll write that big symphony you asked for," Copland replies. But symphony was no more Copland's metier than opera: the "big symphony" he composed – the Third of 1944-46 – is a tub-thumper.

In addition to the high expectations with which he was encumbered, Copland had conflicting needs, predilections, and aspirations of his own. Bernstein emphatically characterized him – his music, his taste, his temperament, his attire – as "plain, plain, plain!" His aesthetic, greatly shaped by France and by Stravinsky, was thrifty. A child of immigrants, he was fired by a need to define himself as an American. A modernist, he equally needed to embrace the new. He eschewed a public political voice, but was keenly attuned to social injustice. And he mistrusted music that earlier American composers had cherished as indigenous.

Antonin Dvorak, a central player in the Romantic phase of American musical nationalism, had accurately predicted that plantation song would gird a future American music. "In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music," he famously told the New York Herald in 1893. "They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay, or what you will. It is music that suits itself to any mood or any purpose." A prescient understanding that American music and African-American music were indissolubly bound was pervasive in Dvorak's New York. How much more circumscribed was Copland's endorsement of jazz half a century later. It had, he wrote in 1941, "only two expressions: the well-known 'blues' mood, and the wild, abandoned, almost hysterical and grotesque mood so dear to the youth of all ages. . . . Any serious composer who attempted to work within those two moods sooner or later became aware of their severe limitations." He compared "interest in jazz" with "interest . . . in the primitive arts and crafts of aboriginal peoples." Listening to jazz as a stunted art music, Copland was more Eurocentric than such Europeans as Stravinsky, Bartok, Weill, Ravel, or Milhaud. As Martin Brody observes in "Copland and His World."

He rehearsed an incongruous trope of nature versus culture: while African rhythm comes directly from the human body, European rhythm has been entirely sublimated into the body of mature musical forms. Transported by a mythic vision of the African rhythmic "gift," he described "a conception of rhythm not as mental exercise but as something basic to the body's rhythmic impulse . . ." He contrasted this attribute of lower consciousness to an entirely genteel European counterpart.

While this kind of racial analysis is merely symptomatic of another time, it remains ponderable that Copland's take on black musical roots, supporting his unsuccessful quest for a usable musical past, is more invidious than any I have encountered from Dvorak or his distinguished New York advocates Henry Krehbiel (of the New York Tribune) or W. J. Henderson (of the Times). Copland's most prestigious adherent among New York writers, Paul Rosenfeld, was certainly no friend of "negro melodies." Assessing "Rhapsody in Blue" in *The New Republic*, Rosenfeld detected in Gershwin the Russian Jew a "weakness of spirit, possibly as a consequence of the circumstance that the new world attracted the less stable types." In New York, Copland steered clear of Gershwin (and vice versa); in his writings, Gershwin simply does not come up. In the *Oja/Tick* volume, however, Melissa de Graf uncovers a rare nugget. Asked at a 1937 New York City Composers Forum event how he would compare his music "to Mr. Gershwin's jazz," Copland replied: "Gershwin is serious up to a point. My idea was to intensify it. Not what you get in the dance hall but to use it cubistically – to make it more exciting than ordinary jazz." (Copland's appreciation of Gershwin subsequently deepened to a degree.)

Is Copland's Piano Concerto more exciting than "Rhapsody in Blue"? Rosenfeld thought so. As never in the "hash derivative" compositions of Gershwin, he opined, jazz had in Copland's treatment at last "borne music."

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That at Bard "Regina" was more exciting than "The Tender Land" was certainly not a function of the performances. Both were exemplary. Heading a cast exceptionally strong from top to bottom, the much admired American soprano Lauren Flanigan was an indelible Regina. Leon Botstein – president of Bard College, music director of the American Symphony Orchestra (in the pit), and mastermind of the Bard festival since its inception in 19xx – was the capable conductor. A flaw in the opera is the Angel Band – a Dixieland group Blitzstein clumsily interpolates by way of forecasting black redemption for the soiled South. Some productions have eliminated the Band. The Mauceri recording gives it full rein. I thought Bard restored rather too much of this material, but no matter.

The Summerscape festival defined "Copland's world" as a panoply of American music, including not only Blitzstein, but Gershwin and James P. Johnson, Antheil and Ornstein, Varese and Cowell, and Richard Rodgers and Jerome Kern. The companion book, by comparison, parochially frames Copland's world as a space with Aaron Copland at its center; one contributor's assessment of Copland as "perhaps the most prominent American composer of the twentieth century" sets the tone.

The wisdom of hindsight suggests that modernism, however necessary to Copland's "come-of-age" project, was also a sanitizing buffer against popular strains that the world regards as a more notable twentieth century American musical gift. Hindsight likewise infers that the great hope for American classical music in Copland's time was not that a Copland or Harris would compose a mighty symphony, but that a serendipitous interloper might synergistically connect Copland's world with the world of Ellington and Armstrong. Now that modernism has waned, now that American classical music has relaxed a bit, it may become apparent that not Copland but Gershwin embodied this hope – and so, to a lesser degree, did Blitzstein. The first was a natural genius, still learning when he died of a brain

tumor at the age of 38. The second was a late starter who had embarked on an opera for the Met when he was slain in a bar at the age of 58. Neither lived to produce what was rightfully expected of him.

There is symbolism in the Boston Symphony's performances of "An American in Paris" last season, and of the Gershwin Concerto in F this coming fall. It is a legacy of Koussevitzky that these works, demoted as "Pops" repertoire, were never before given on a BSO subscription concert. The orchestra's new music director, James Levine, was also responsible for the Met's first, belated "Porgy and Bess," in 1985. I do not notice him programming Copland, Harris, or Hanson at Symphony Hall. It may not even be too much to hope that the Met gets to "Regina" while Lauren Flanigan is still around to sing it.