A concert of relative rarities by American composer Aaron Copland

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Most classical music listeners know the name of composer Aaron Copland (1900-1990) through three or four frequently performed works, among them *Fanfare for the Common Man*, *El Salón México* (composed after he spent time in Mexico in the early 1930s), and a number of orchestral suites based on ballets, among them *Billy the Kid* and *Appalachian Spring* .

These works, dating from the mid-1930s to the mid-40s, deserve their popularity, but pieces by Copland that are far less frequently performed should not be overlooked, as they often are. While Copland essentially stopped work on new compositions nearly 20 years before his death, by that time he had already produced, in the course of nearly five decades, an impressive range of works for orchestra, ballet and piano, as well as songs, chamber music and choral compositions.

When the San Francisco Symphony under the direction of Michael Tilson Thomas came to New York's Carnegie Hall earlier this month, the entire first half of one of its programs was devoted to some of Copland's lesser-known works. Thomas, or MTT as he is usually known, has led the San Francisco Symphony for more than 20 years. He is known for his programming of American composers, and has recorded many of the works of Copland, whom he knew in the composer's later years.

The Carnegie Hall program included Copland's *Orchestral Variations* (a 1957 arrangement of the composer's 1930 *Piano Variations*); *Inscape*, one of his last major compositions, dating from 1967; and the *Piano Concerto* (1926), from early in the composer's career. The second half of the evening was devoted to one of the staples of the 19th century Romantic repertory, Robert Schumann's Symphony No. 2 (1845-46). This review will discuss only the first half of the program.

The *Orchestral Variations* include more than 20 brief sections traversed in the span of about 15 minutes. The orchestration includes—in addition to the more usual strings and members of the brass, winds and percussion families—a harp, an English horn (part of the woodwind family, unlike the French horn) and a tuba. The work is based on a four-note motto that immediately makes an almost menacing appearance and dominates throughout, although in very distinct moods. The San Francisco players' rendition of this rarely played work was an intriguing introduction to it.

Inscape is one of the relatively few works in Copland's oeuvre influenced by the twelve-tone technique pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg. The American composer decided, in the post-World War II period, to experiment with Schoenberg's technique, although *Inscape* also makes use of traditional harmonies. The piece did not make a particularly strong impression in the Carnegie Hall performance.

The *Piano Concerto* , at least to this listener, belongs in a somewhat different category than the works that preceded it. With Israeli-born pianist Inon Barnatan at the keyboard, the performance made a strong case for this jazz-influenced work. Like the other two Copland works on the program it is relatively small in scale, at about 16 minutes long. A YouTube video of a 1985 television broadcast of a performance with the New York Philharmonic is a good introduction for those who would like to listen to the concerto—and also to view an exciting performance.

Copland's use of jazz-inspired themes, rhythm and syncopation was not something for which he had to strain. He was born in Brooklyn to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, as was the slightly older Brooklynite George Gershwin (1898-1937). Both of these young musicians came of age in the era of ragtime and the birth of jazz, which spread rapidly, along with the Great Migration of African-Americans to the North, beginning around 1915.

In the early 1920s the young Copland traveled to Paris to study composition with famed French composer and teacher Nadia Boulanger. While in Paris he was introduced by Boulanger to the Russian-born conductor Serge Koussevitzky. Koussevitzky, then beginning what was to become a quarter-century tenure as the leader of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was impressed with Copland, and he premiered the young composer's *Piano Concerto* in January 1927.

Copland became prominent in musical circles at the age of 26, just as his younger colleague Leonard Bernstein was to achieve similar renown in his conducting debut in New York in 1943, at the age of 25. The *Piano Concerto* never achieved the popularity of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* or his *Concerto in F*, however, which burst onto the scene in 1924 and 1925, respectively. Copland did not become well known to a wider

public until much later in his career.

The *Piano Conc erto* consists of two movements, played without pause. The overall impression is one of urban bustle and vitality, with the second movement full of jazzy and lively passages that call to mind not only *Rhapsody in Blue*, but also other jazz-influenced classical compositions of the period, including Maurice Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G* and, a bit later, Dmitri Shostakovich's *Jazz Suites* from the 1930s.

The concerto's first movement is relatively slow, with contrasting thematic material quickly introduced. A brief introduction is dominated by the brass section, and flows uninterruptedly into a majestic, romantic theme for the strings. Then the piano enters, quietly at first. Over the next few minutes an attractive blues-influenced section is developed.

The second movement starts with a sudden outburst from the solo piano. The second idea in this movement, a little quieter but no less jazz-inspired than what has come before, is introduced by a soprano saxophone, a somewhat unusual addition to the orchestra. The saxophone makes a number of appealing solo appearances. The last eight minutes or so of the work unfold in exciting interplay between the piano and sections of the orchestra, with one lively passage featuring a competition of sorts between the piano and trumpet. The romantic theme of the first movement reappears toward the close of the work.

While a detailed assessment of Copland is beyond the scope of this review, the jazz influence in the *Piano Concerto* can be seen as an early attempt on the composer's part to develop his own style, one grounded in life in the US in the first half of the 20th century but which did not take a provincial or narrowly nationalist approach. As a first-generation American, the young Copland was very aware of his Jewish ancestry, while also embracing assimilation. Jazz, with its roots among African-Americans but also blending other cultural influences, was something to which Copland, along with a number of other Jewish composers of classical as well as popular music, was attracted.

As Howard Pollack explains in his thorough and objective biography of the composer, the *Piano Concerto*, even though it was not followed by many other compositions in a similar vein, reflected Copland's deep respect and admiration for jazz. One other work of Copland's in a jazz idiom was the *Clarinet Concerto* (1948). Written two decades after the piano work, it was commissioned by classically trained jazz clarinet virtuoso Benny Goodman, and it is also well worth listening to.

In the wake of the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler, Copland joined many other artists and intellectuals in moving to the left. Like others, he gravitated toward the American Communist Party, although he never joined it. Copland's work in this period reflects the contradictory role of creative artists who were used and miseducated by the Stalinists. They supported the Stalinist Popular Front line, which subordinated the working class to an alliance with Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. Politically speaking, the Popular Front had only reactionary consequences, but there were painters, musicians, photographers and others, sincerely devoted to what they saw as the fight against social injustice and inequality, who produced work of broad appeal, sophistication and integrity. Such works as *Appalachian Spring*, on which Copland collaborated with choreographer Martha Graham, fall in this general category.

There are those who turn up their noses at work of wide popular appeal, considering the jazz influence in the *Piano Concerto*, as well as later works such as *Appalachian Spring*, to be unwarranted concessions to popular taste. Critic Richard Taruskin, for instance, is quoted in Pollack's biography as writing that the composer was a "'left-leaning homosexual Jew from Brooklyn,' [who] cashed in on nationalism by creating 'an ingratiating white-bread-of-the-prairie idiom…'"

The role of Stalinism is sometimes used to tar all works written by composers under its influence. In a somewhat different set of circumstances, the same Taruskin has denounced much of Dmitri Shostakovich's music, including the towering "Leningrad" Symphony No. 7, because it was used by the Stalin regime for its own purposes.

In the course of a long career, Copland adopted a number of different stylistic approaches. Even when he experimented with the twelve-tone technique, however, he never abandoned his goal of reaching a wide audience while at the same time writing music of substance, intelligence and integrity. As Pollack writes: "Earthy, daring, expressive, and personal, [Copland's] music is also elegant, restrained, objective, and humane."

It is also instructive to note that Copland's *Piano Concerto* dates from the interwar years that saw such vibrant and vital competition between different musical schools, a period that was largely ended and aborted by the Second World War and its aftermath.

It is hoped that other orchestras will follow the example of the San Francisco Symphony in programming intriguing 20th century works that have often been overlooked between the attention given to the 19th century repertory, on the one hand, and the sometimes fruitless search for contemporary works of relevance and serious appeal, on the other.