

Program Notes

Aaron Copland (1900–1990)

Appalachian Spring (1944)

Composed during the final years of World War II, Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring stands as one of the most enduring expressions of American musical identity.

Aaron Copland wrote *Appalachian Spring* as a ballet score for choreographer Martha Graham and her dance company. The work was commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation and premiered in Washington, D.C., in 1944, with Graham herself dancing the central role of the Bride. Copland originally scored the piece for a small chamber ensemble of 13 instruments, a practical necessity during wartime; he later arranged it into the more frequently performed orchestral suite.

Despite its title, *Appalachian Spring* is not a literal depiction of the Appalachian Mountains, nor does it describe the season of spring in a strictly narrative sense. The title was suggested by Martha Graham after the music was completed, taken from a line in a poem by Hart Crane. Instead, the ballet evokes a broader sense of renewal, optimism, and spiritual clarity associated with the early American frontier.

The scenario portrays a young pioneer couple beginning their life together in a rural Pennsylvania community in the early 19th century. Other figures—a revivalist preacher and his followers—represent the social and religious fabric of the time. Copland's music does not attempt detailed storytelling; rather, it captures emotional states and ideals: innocence, faith, hope, and communal strength.

Musically, *Appalachian Spring* exemplifies Copland's "American sound." Open intervals, transparent textures, and gently shifting harmonies create a feeling of wide space and calm reflection. Rhythms are often simple and folk-like yet carefully shaped to support the ballet's pacing and mood. The score's most famous moment comes near the end, when Copland introduces the Shaker hymn "**Simple Gifts**." He presents the tune in a set of increasingly rich variations, transforming a humble melody into a powerful affirmation of simplicity and grace.

The work concludes quietly, with music that suggests peace, acceptance, and the promise of a shared future. In this closing section, Copland achieves remarkable emotional depth with the most economical means—an approach that has made *Appalachian Spring* a touchstone of American classical music.

Today, *Appalachian Spring* remains beloved not only for its historical significance, but for its timeless ability to convey calm, dignity, and hope—qualities that continue to resonate with audiences well beyond the circumstances of its wartime origin.

Many critics, including Terry Techout, feel that "Appalachian Spring" is Aaron Copland's finest work.

"It is the ultimate statement of his American musical language. In that piece, all of the elements come together and they're in perfect balance. It is probably the greatest piece of classical music composed by an American. Certainly, the greatest dance score composed by an American, completely comparable in quality to the great ballets of Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky. All that is best about mid-century American music is in this piece."