

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT
Andrew Gourlay, conductor**

January 6 and 8, 2017

AARON COPLAND **Suite from *Billy the Kid***
The Open Prairie
Street in a Frontier Town
Mexican Dance and Finale
Card Game at Night
Running Gun Battle
Celebration on Billy's Capture
Billy's Death
The Open Prairie Again

AARON COPLAND **Piano Concerto**
Andante sostenuto
Molto moderato (molto rubato) – Allegro assai
Inon Barnatan, piano

INTERMISSION

ANDREW NORMAN ***Suspend***
Inon Barnatan, piano

GEORGE GERSHWIN ***An American in Paris***

COPLAND AND GERSHWIN

Aaron Copland and George Gershwin were the most popular American composers of the first half of the twentieth century, and they had similar careers. Both grew up in New York City, both were excellent pianists, both studied with Rubin Goldmark, both made use of jazz, both lived in Hollywood for a time and wrote for movies, and both became very successful. They should have become good friends and colleagues. But they didn't. Not out of animosity – they admired each other's music, and Copland performed and conducted Gershwin's music – but Copland reported that when the two of them finally met, they had "nothing to say to each other." It was mutual admiration, but from a distance.

Suite from *Billy the Kid*

AARON COPLAND

Born November 14, 1900, Brooklyn

Died December 2, 1990, North Tarrytown, New York

Early in 1938 Aaron Copland was approached by Lincoln Kirstein, director of the Ballet Caravan, who wished to commission a ballet based on the life of Billy the Kid. While Copland was happy to write a ballet score, he was not drawn to this subject, and he felt a particular aversion to cowboy music. He was frank about this in a note written for the eventual premiere of *Billy the Kid*: “I have never been particularly impressed with the musical beauties of the cowboy song as such. The words are usually delightful and the manner of singing needs no praise from me. But neither the words nor the delivery are of much use in a purely orchestral ballet score, so I was left with the tunes themselves, which I repeat, are often less than exciting. As far as I was concerned, this ballet could be written without benefit of the poverty-stricken tunes Billy himself must have known.”

Kirstein assured Copland that he need not use actual cowboy tunes in the ballet, but as the composer left to spend the summer of 1938 in Paris, Kirstein gave him several collections of cowboy songs to look over. As Copland settled down to work on the score, a strange thing happened: “Perhaps there is something different about a cowboy song in Paris. But whatever the reason may have been, it wasn’t very long before I found myself hopelessly involved in expanding, contracting, rearranging and superimposing cowboy tunes on the rue de Rennes in Paris.” Copland’s symphonic transformation of these cowboy tunes is one of the triumphs of *Billy the Kid*. He never quotes directly but instead uses theme-shapes, intervals and bits of rhythm from them; we sense their origins and distinctive flavor without ever hearing the tunes in their original form. Copland drew on a number of favorite cowboy songs but did not use the most famous of them, “Home on the Range” – “I had to draw the line somewhere,” he noted wryly.

Copland began work on *Billy the Kid* in Paris in June 1938 and completed it in September at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire. The Ballet Caravan gave the premiere (accompanied by two pianos) in Chicago on October 6, 1938; the premiere with orchestra took place in New York on May 24, 1939. The ballet proved an instant success, and Copland quickly arranged an orchestral suite from its music, preserving about two-thirds of the original ballet score. This was first performed on November 9, 1940, by the NBC Symphony Orchestra under

the direction of William Steinberg, and it has remained (deservedly) one of Copland's most popular works.

The choice of subject for the ballet may seem curious. It is a quirk of the human imagination that the psychopathic murderers of one century are sometimes transformed into the folk-heroes of the next, and this was the case with Billy the Kid, who once bragged that he had killed a man for each of his twenty-one years, "not counting Indians." Kirstein drew his story from Walter Noble Burns' *The Saga of Billy the Kid*, a revisionist history that transformed Billy (by contemporary accounts hot-tempered, buck-toothed, and dim-witted) into victim, gentleman and quintessential outsider. It was as if Charles Starkweather had been transformed into James Dean, and the canonization of Billy remains a matter of sharp dispute among historians of the Old West.

The figure of the outsider, however, is an American archetype, and choreographer Eugene Loring (who danced the part at the premiere) worked out a scenario that made Billy a misunderstood youth and rebel against a corrupt society. The ballet begins on the open prairie, and in a lively frontier town we meet Billy at age twelve. In this first scene the boy murders the man who killed his mother. The events of the rest of his brief life are truncated into a few well-focused episodes: Billy participates in a card game at night on the plains but is accused of cheating; he is pursued by Pat Garrett and imprisoned after a gunfight; he escapes into the desert and rests with his girl, but now the posse catches up to him and kills him. The ballet concludes, as it began, on the vast prairie.

Copland's marking for the beginning of *The Open Prairie* is *Lento maestoso*, and this music is in fact slow and majestic: the bare fifths of the woodwinds and strings suggest great space, and the steady tread of two French horns marks the appearance of humans within this vastness. This grows to a climax, and suddenly we are in a frontier town, full of dizzy human energy. Copland's awareness of cowboy songs shows up here: he quotes "Old Grandad," "Whoopie-Ti-Yi-Yo" and "The Old Chisholm Trail," and a solo trumpet memorably performs a Mexican *jarabe*. The section comes to its conclusion on an extended treatment of "Old Paint," which finally rises to an aggressive climax. A reprise of the opening prairie music leads to the *Card Game at Night* – a nocturne for woodwinds, trumpet, and strings – and this proceeds directly into the *Gun Battle*, with its booming drums and spatters of gunfire. *Celebration* depicts the town's relief at Billy's capture: Loring had encouraged Copland to include a "macabre polka" as part of the ballet, and this was Copland's response. Danced by "Cowboys and

Gun-Girls,” this *Celebration* is built on dotted rhythms and the sound of a honky-tonk piano, but what gives this music its “macabre” dimension is its bi-tonality: Copland sets the dance-tune in C Major and its accompaniment in C-sharp Major.

For the orchestral suite, Copland made a large cut at this point, removing the music that depicts Billy’s escape, his betrayal, his dance with his Mexican sweetheart and his confrontation with Pat Garrett. This makes a more concise suite, but the *Waltz*, danced as a *pas de deux* by Billy and his sweetheart, is wonderful music, and its exclusion from the suite is unfortunate. The suite resumes at just the point Billy is dying – his final breaths are heard in the *quasi tremolando* solo violin. In the suite, Copland moves directly from Billy’s death to a reprise of the music for *The Open Prairie* that began the ballet, and *Billy the Kid* concludes out under the open sky of the vast prairies.

Copland’s *Billy the Kid* might profitably be compared with another evocation of the American West that appeared at exactly the same moment, John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939). That classic film not only introduced John Wayne but managed to create virtually every stereotype of the western: the soiled dove, the crooked banker, the drunken doctor, the last-second rescue by the cavalry, and so on. It became a feeding-ground for every subsequent western. In a similar way, Copland’s score for *Billy the Kid* set the gold standard for music about the West. Its epic sense of space, use of cowboy tunes and concise evocation of a raw frontier town, honky-tonk revelry, gunfights and the lonely hero have become part of the imagination of every subsequent composer who writes music about the American West.

Piano Concerto AARON COPLAND

It was F. Scott Fitzgerald who nicknamed the twenties “The Jazz Age,” and in that decade jazz moved into the mainstream of American life with musicians like Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller and Duke Ellington as well as groups like Paul Whiteman’s band, all often headlining in the clubs of Chicago and New York. Jazz quickly began to appear in “classical” music, and composers as diverse as Debussy, Stravinsky, Krenek, Martinů and others incorporated some of its techniques into their own works. In the mid-Twenties, George Gershwin composed two magnificent works that seemed to bridge the worlds of classical music and jazz: *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) and the Piano Concerto in F (1925).

Young composers in search of something authentically “American” began to turn to jazz,

and in these years Aaron Copland felt that pull, particularly in his *Music for the Theatre*, premiered by Serge Koussevitzky in 1925. When Koussevitzky asked Copland for another piece, he suggested: “If you write a piano concerto, you can play it yourself.” Copland said “that temptation was too great to pass up,” and he set to work late in the summer of 1926, which he spent in a village in southern France. Copland returned to the United States and completed the score at the end of November, and he was indeed the piano soloist when Koussevitzky led the premiere in Boston on January 28, 1927.

The reviews were vitriolic, almost sulphurous. *The Boston Herald*: “We found little to attract, little to admire, much to repel.” *The Boston Evening Transcript*: “The Copland Piano Concerto is a harrowing horror from beginning to end... There is nothing in it that resembles music except as it contains noise.” *The New York Telegram* described the concerto as “gargantuan dance movements as a herd of elephants engaged in jungle rivalry of the Charleston and dances further south.”

It is hard to imagine how music this youthful and fun could have produced reactions like those that greeted its premiere; nearly a century later, we are more apt to hear it not as a monster but rather as a pleasing memory of that dynamic decade. Copland’s Piano Concerto is concise. It is in two movements that span only about 18 minutes, and the composer has left a useful description: “The Concerto is to be played without interruption, but it is actually written in two contrasting sections, linked together thematically. The first is slow and lyrical; the second fast and rhythmic. Two basic jazz moods are incorporated in each section – the slow blues and the snappy number.” Copland did not regard the piece as a traditional concerto, but as something quite different: “The piano is as the main character in a play, carrying on a dialogue with the orchestra and conversing with the other instruments.”

The opening “blues” movement begins with a three-note brass fanfare that will return in many forms throughout the concerto. The solo piano makes its entrance on those same three notes and then leads the way through this varied movement, which is built on syncopated rhythms and shifting meters. Piano alone opens the second movement with a spiky solo that swings attractively (and which bears some connection to the opening fanfare). Into this “symphonic” movement Copland from time to time will sneak in a small jazz band consisting of soprano sax, piccolo, E-flat clarinet, trumpet, trombones and drums, and during these interludes we seem to have moved from the concert hall into a smoky club. Near the end, Copland brings back the opening fanfare in all its power before concluding on a vigorous three-octave rush up

the scale.

After the angry reactions at its premiere, the *Piano Concerto* pretty much dropped out of sight for two decades, and when it was revived in New York after the war, it found much friendlier audiences: one reviewer then called it “a relic of Le Jazz Hot,” while another described it as “the best roar from the roaring twenties.” After writing this music, Copland looked in new directions: “With the Concerto I felt I had done all I could with the idiom, considering its limited emotional scope. True, it was an easy way to be American in musical terms, but all American music could not possibly be confined to two dominant jazz moods – the blues and the snappy number.”

NOTE: Those interested in this music should know that – despite its unfamiliarity – the Copland Piano Concerto has had a number of good recordings. Two are particularly notable: a 1964 performance with the composer at the piano and Leonard Bernstein leading the New York Philharmonic and another – made in 1961 – with Earl Wild at the keyboard and the composer conducting the Symphony of the Air.

Suspend

ANDREW NORMAN

Born October 31, 1979, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Program Note provided by the composer:

Suspend is a 20 minute fantasy for piano and orchestra. It began, at the behest of Emanuel Ax, as an exploration of two melodic fragments, F-A-E (frei aber einsam, free but lonely) and F-A-F (frei aber froh, free but happy), that were significant to Johannes Brahms. From there it developed into an extended rumination on the ideas of freedom and solitude, a dream-like journey inspired by the creative, conflicted, lonely spirit of Brahms and the ever-present tensions in his (and my) life and music between spontaneity and control, sentiment and structure, indulgence and restraint.

Like many of its forebears in the long tradition of keyboard fantasies, *Suspend* is intended to sound as if it is being made up on the spot, a single meandering but unbroken thread of thought spun out by the pianist from beginning to end. The piece follows a simple scenario: the pianist – perhaps a solitary, Brahms-like figure – sits down at the keyboard and slowly begins to improvise. At first the sounds exist only in the pianist’s own mind, but little by little they become real to the rest of us. The pianist very gradually imagines an orchestra into

existence, and over the course of many minutes that imaginary orchestra assumes its own voice and identity, transforming from a shadow, a resonance, an echo of the piano into a powerful and distinct musical entity that threatens, at the work's climax, to swallow up the pianist. The piece ends with a coda in which the pianist freely meditates on the F-A-F motive and the orchestra, player by player, is released into a world of free, uncoordinated playing.

Suspend was premiered by Emanuel Ax, Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic on May 1 and 3, 2014, at Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, California.

An American in Paris

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born September 28, 1898, Brooklyn

Died July 11, 1937, Beverly Hills

The acclaim that greeted *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) and the Concerto in F (1925) made Gershwin more anxious to be taken seriously as the composer of “concert” music, and he resolved to write a work for orchestra alone, without the starring role for piano that had helped make the earlier two works so popular. The composition of this music took place in the spring of 1928, when Gershwin, his sister Frances, his brother Ira and Ira's wife Leonore took an extended family vacation to Paris. Happily ensconced in the Hotel Majestic, Gershwin composed what he called a “Tone Poem for Orchestra” – a musical portrait of an American visitor to the City of Light – between March and June 1928. It was first performed by Walter Damrosch and the New York Philharmonic on December 13 of that year.

This is *fun* music, and from the moment of that premiere it has always been one of Gershwin's most popular scores, winning audiences over with its great tunes, breezy charm and Gershwin's obvious affection for Paris. Musically, *An American in Paris* is a series of impressions strung together with great skill. Gershwin – anxious to insist on his abilities as a classical composer – tried to argue that the piece was in sonata-form, and he pointed to such general areas as exposition, development and recapitulation. But such arguments protest too much. It is far better to take *An American in Paris* as a set of polished episodes – a collection of sunny postcards from Paris – than to search too rigorously for resemblances to classical forms.

For the New York premiere, Gershwin and Deems Taylor prepared elaborate program notes, explaining what was “happening” at each moment in the music. These were probably written with tongue slightly in cheek (in fact Gershwin had made sketches for this piece several years before going to Paris), and they should not be taken too seriously. But it is worth noting

that Gershwin structured the music around the idea of an American walking through the streets of Paris, and he included three of what he called “walking themes.” That program note describes the very beginning: “You are to imagine, then, an American visiting Paris, swinging down the Champs-Élysées on a mild, sunny morning in May or June. Being what he is, he starts without preliminaries and is off at full speed at once to the tune of The First Walking Theme, a straightforward diatonic air designed to convey an impression of Gallic freedom and gaiety.”

Along his way come piquant moments: a snatch of a Parisian popular song in the trombones and the strident squawk of Paris taxi horns. (Gershwin had four of these imported for the premiere in New York.) One moment – Gershwin called it “an unhallowed episode” – is rarely mentioned: the American is approached by a streetwalker, who bats her eyes at him seductively in a violin solo marked *espressivo*. Our hero wavers briefly, then makes his escape on one of the walking tunes. At about the mid-point comes the famous “blues” section, introduced by solo trumpet: the American is feeling homesick, and his nostalgia takes the form of this distinctively American music. Matters are rescued by the sudden intrusion of a pair of trumpets that come sailing in with a snappy Charleston tune. The cheerful final section reprises the various “walking” themes, and *An American in Paris* dances to its close on a great rush of happy energy.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PERFORMANCE HISTORY by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, Symphony Archivist

Although Robert Shaw conducted a couple of excerpts from *Billy the Kid*, in the summer of 1957, the wonderful Suite by Copland was given its first complete performance here under Morton Gould in 1969. It has been programmed here six more times since then, including a performance conducted by the composer in the 1978-79 season. Murry Sidlin led the most recent performance by this orchestra in the 1992-93 season. Two pieces on this program are being given their first performances in San Diego by this orchestra. These are Norman's *Suspend* Piano Concerto and the Piano Concerto by Aaron Copland. In contrast, Gershwin's brilliant and very popular tone poem, *An American in Paris*, has been presented at these concerts ten times since Fabien Sevitzky conducted it during the summer of 1952. Jahja Ling led it here most recently during the 2013-14 season, when he also took it with him to play it during the orchestra's China Friendship Tour.