Aaron Copland (1900-1990)
“An Outdoor Overture”

First performance: 1938, after Copland composed it for a youth orchestra at New York’s High School of Music and Art. First Tanglewood performance: August 16, 1940, Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, Leonard Bernstein cond. First Tanglewood performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra (also the first BSO performance): August 11, 1965, Eleazar de Carvalho cond., as part of a gala concert celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Berkshire Music Center. Most recent Tanglewood performance by the BSO: August 13, 1983, Leonard Bernstein cond., as part of that summer’s Koussevitzky Memorial Concert, though there have been two subsequent performances here by the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, on July 24, 1985, Giselle Ben-Dor cond., and on August 20, 2000, Alexander Mickelthwate cond.

Copland first made his mark as a composer of the most advanced tendencies in the 1920s. The Organ Symphony, Music for the Theater, the Piano Concerto, and the Symphonic Ode were hailed by supporters of the newest music, but they were not in any sense “popular”—all of them remained difficult for performers and audiences alike, and only the steady support of Serge Koussevitzky, recently named music director of the Boston Symphony at the time of Copland’s return from his studies in Paris, and who would appoint Copland head of the composition faculty at Tanglewood in 1940, kept his work before the public. His Short Symphony (1932-33) made such complex rhythmic demands that even Koussevitzky found it unworkable in the rehearsal time at his disposal; the piece was given a premiere in Mexico, but remained unperformed by the BSO until 1970.

Soon after this, Copland, along with many American composers of the 1930s, began to recognize the need to address a wider audience. Orchestral music, by its very nature, should be music for a larger community of both players and listeners than chamber music. During the course of the ’30s and into the ’40s, his style became more populist, sometimes drawing on folk or traditional song as a way of achieving the common touch, but always transmuting it with his precise rhythmic sense and his characteristic ear for sonority. These years saw the creation of such popular works as El Salón México and the ballets Billy the Kid, Rodeo, and Appalachian Spring, the Fanfare for the Common Man, and a number of film scores.

Another aspect of Copland’s desire to address a large audience was an interest in writing for young musicians. Two Copland works of the late ’30s fall into this category: the 1936 school opera The Second Hurricane (which was also an expression of social concern, of the importance of communal endeavor, written—significantly—at a time of worldwide economic and political crisis) and the 1938 Outdoor Overture, composed for the talented young musicians of New York’s High School of Music and Art. As its title implies, the overture is bright and engaging, filled with vigorous rhythms and confident melodic gestures. It is purposely easier to play than the orchestral music Copland had been writing before this, but there is nowhere a sense of the composer’s having to rein himself in while fulfilling this assignment. Rather the overture celebrates its composer’s musical personality at every point.

STEVEN LEDBETTER

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