Aaron Copland
Third Symphony

AARON COPLAND was born in Brooklyn, New York, on November 14, 1900, and died in New York on December 2, 1990. He composed his Third Symphony on a commission from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, working on the piece over a two-year period from the summer of 1944, completing the orchestration while staying on in the Berkshires after the 1946 Tanglewood season (see below), and dedicating the score “To the memory of my dear friend Natalie Koussevitzky” (the conductor's wife). Serge Koussevitzky led the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the first performances on October 18 and 19, 1946. Koussevitzky also led the BSO's first Tanglewood performance, on July 26, 1947. The second edition of the score, published in 1966, removed ten measures of music from the finale, based on a cut made by Leonard Bernstein in 1948 and formally sanctioned by Copland in 1954. However, because of thematic recurrences from the first and fourth movements that are lost due to the cut, the latest printing, from December 2014, gives the original as the preferred version, and the cut version as an "alternative ending." The present performances under Andris Nelsons are of the original version.

THE SCORE OF COPLAND'S THIRD SYMPHONY calls for three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, tam-tam, cymbals, xylophone, glockenspiel, tenor drum, woodblock, snare drum, triangle, slapstick, ratchet, anvil, claves, tubular bells), two harps, celesta, piano, and strings.

Aaron Copland had already produced two symphonies, in 1924/28 and 1934, when in March 1944 the conductor Serge Koussevitzky extended a commission for another major orchestral work, which he hoped to introduce at the outset of the Boston Symphony's 1946-47 season. Already a champion of Copland's music in the 1920s, Koussevitzky had by then also invited Copland to head the Tanglewood composition faculty beginning with the Berkshire Music Center's inaugural session in 1940. In Copland: Since 1943, the second volume of the impressive oral history prepared by Vivian Perlis with the composer, Copland provided many details about the genesis and early history of this work.

"While in Bernardsville [New Jersey] in the summer of 1945," he told her,

I felt my Third Symphony finally taking shape. I had been working on various sections whenever I could find time during the past few years. My colleagues had been urging me to compose a major orchestral work.... Elliott Carter, David Diamond, and Arthur Berger reminded me about it whenever they had the opportunity.... They had no way of knowing that I had been working on such a composition for some time. I did not want to announce my intentions until it was clear in my own mind what the piece would become (at one time it looked more like a piano concerto than a symphony). The commission from Koussevitzky stimulated me to focus my ideas and arrange the material I had collected into some semblance of order.

Copland, by the way, employed the locution "Third Symphony" as a sort of specific title for this work, preferring it to the more generic implication of "Symphony No. 3."

In the summer of 1944, Copland retreated to the remote village of Tepoztlán, Mexico, in order to work on the symphony's first movement in relatively uninterrupted isolation. The second movement waited until the following summer, which he spent in Bernardsville. "By September, I was able to announce to [the composer] Irving Fine, 'I'm the proud father— or mother— or both— of a second movement. Lots of notes — and only eight minutes of music— such are scherzi! It's not very original— mais ça marche du commencement jusqu'au fin— which is a help.' Having two movements finished gave me the courage to continue, but the completion seemed years off."

In the fall of 1945 he retreated to a rented property in Ridgefield, Connecticut. "Again, I told almost no one where I could be found. I felt in self-exile, but it was essential if I was to finish the symphony. By April I had a third movement to show for it. With Tanglewood reopening in the summer of 1946, and an October date set for the premiere, I headed to the MacDowell Colony for the month of June to work on the last movement." Copland enjoyed a bit of a head start in that he had decided that the finale would incorporate the Fanfare for the Common Man, which he had written three years before as part of a project instigated by the conductor Eugene Goossens and the Cincinnati Symphony, who commissioned a series of fanfares from eighteen composers to help bolster morale during World War II. (Copland’s Lincoln Portrait, from 1942, was another work specifically related to the war effort.) In the Third Symphony, however, the Fanfare serves as little more than an introduction to the rest of the movement, although its general contours do seem to pervade a fair amount of the symphony's material. Copland made progress at the MacDowell Colony but did not complete his work before being again distracted by his teaching obligations at Tanglewood. "After Tanglewood, I stayed on in the Berkshires to work on the orchestration. It was a mad dash! The finishing touches were put on the score just before rehearsals were to start for the premiere, 18 October 1946. It was two years since I had started working on the piece in Mexico."

Copland’s Third Symphony was warmly received at its premiere, and it was awarded the New York Music Critics
Circle Prize as the best orchestral work by an American composer played during the 1946-47 season. Koussevitzky, George Szell, and Leonard Bernstein all championed the work early on, although Copland's feathers were considerably ruffled when Bernstein decided to cut ten measures from the finale, without bothering to discuss the matter with the composer first. After eventually coming around to Bernstein's point of view on the cuts—declaring that “his conducting of the Third Symphony is closest to what I had in mind when composing the piece”—Copland authorized replacement of the original ending (published in the initial 1947 printing of the score) by the shorter one in the second, 1966 printing. Only in the third printing of December 2014 was the original ending restored, the cut version now being provided as an alternative.

Copland often proved eager to write about his compositions, and the Third Symphony was no exception. He prepared an extensive program note for the Boston Symphony’s premiere, some of which he condensed and revised to be included in the narrative of Vivian Perlis’s Copland: Since 1943:

In the program book for the first performance, I pointed out that the writing of a symphony inevitably brings with it the questions of what it is meant to express. As I wrote at the time, if I forced myself, I could invent an ideological basis for the Third Symphony. But if I did, I’d be bluffing—or at any rate, adding something ex post facto, something that might or might not be true but that played no role at the moment of creation.

The Third Symphony, my longest orchestral work (about forty minutes in duration) is scored for a big orchestra. It was composed in the general form of an arch, in which the central portion, that is the second-movement scherzo, is the most animated, and the final movement is an extended coda, presenting a broadened version of the opening material. Both the first and third themes in the first movement are referred to again in later movements. The second movement stays close to the normal symphonic procedure of a usual scherzo, while the third is freest of all in formal structure, built up sectionally with its various sections intended to emerge one from the other in continuous flow, somewhat in the manner of a closely knit series of variations. Some of the writing in the third movement is for very high strings and piccolo, with no brass except single horn and trumpet. It leads directly into the final and longest of the movements: the fourth is closest to a customary sonata-allegro form, although the recapitulation is replaced by an extended coda, presenting many ideas from the work, including the opening theme.

One aspect of the Third Symphony ought to be pointed out: it contains no folk or popular material. Any reference to either folk material or jazz in this work was purely unconscious. However, I do borrow from myself by using Fanfare for the Common Man in an expanded and reshaped form in the final movement. I used this opportunity to carry the Fanfare material further and to satisfy my desire to give the Third Symphony an affirmative tone. After all, it was a wartime piece—or more accurately, an end-of-war piece—intended to reflect the euphoric spirit of the country at the time. It is an ambitious score, often compared to Mahler and to Shostakovich and sometimes Prokofiev, particularly the second movement. As a longtime admirer of Mahler, some of my music may show his influence in a general way, but I was not aware of being directly influenced by other composers when writing the work.

James M. Keller

JAMES M. KELLER is the longtime program annotator of the New York Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony, and served as Leonard Bernstein Scholar-in-Residence at the New York Philharmonic. This program note on Copland’s Third Symphony is derived from an essay originally published in the program book of the San Francisco Symphony and is used with permission.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCE—ALSO THE WORLD PREMIERE—OF THE COPLAND THIRD SYMPHONY was conducted by Serge Koussevitzky on October 18, 1946 (see page 52). Koussevitzky also gave subsequent performances that fall and winter in Boston, Brooklyn, New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and then again in Boston and New York, following these with the first Tanglewood performance on July 26, 1947. Later BSO performances were given by Leonard Bernstein (in August 1952 at Tanglewood on the Koussevitzky Memorial Concert), Michael Tilson Thomas (in January 1973 in Providence, Boston, Hartford, and New York, followed by a Tanglewood performance that August), Yoel Levi (at Tanglewood in 1989), Hugh Wolff, and Leonard Slatkin. Leonard Bernstein led the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra in Copland’s Third Symphony in the Koussevitzky Memorial Concert of August 14, 1990, anticipating a 1990 TMCO/Bernstein tour to Europe that was cancelled due to Bernstein’s final illness. Stefan Asbury led a TMCO performance on July 23, 2018, as part of last summer’s Tanglewood activities celebrating the centennial of Bernstein’s birth.