Aaron Copland (1900-1990)
“Quiet City,” for trumpet, English horn, and strings

During his lifetime, Aaron Copland was well-known as composer, writer on music, lecturer, pianist, conductor, and teacher. His music is distinctively American, drawing frequently upon cowboy songs, Mexican tunes, Shaker hymns, and jazz. Among his most popular scores are the ballets Appalachian Spring, Rodeo, and Billy the Kid; Lincoln Portrait, which provides evocative musical background to a reading of Lincoln texts culminating with words from the Gettysburg Address; and of course the Fanfare for the Common Man, composed in 1942 as one of ten patriotic fanfares (by various composers) written at the request of the conductor Eugene Goosens for the Cincinnati Symphony, and which The New Grove Dictionary of American Music describes as being “better known than [Copland’s] name.”

Composed in 1940, Quiet City is very different music from Copland’s rousing, brassy Fanfare. The Fanfare’s brief span is filled with a patriotic assurance capturing the expanse not only of the American landscape, but of the American dream. Quiet City, befitting its basis in a play conceived in the disquieting period just before World War II, is reflective in attitude, the plangency of the two solo instruments serving to heighten, personalize, and individualize the prevailing mood.

Quiet City originated in a score of incidental music composed by Copland for a socially conscious play of that name written by the novelist Irwin Shaw, and produced in 1939 by the Group Theatre in New York, whose principal founder, the composer’s close friend Harold Clurman, convinced Copland to write the music. The play’s protagonist has a trumpet-player brother, David Mellinkoff, whose music, as described by Copland biographer Howard Pollack, “represents the fear and restlessness—alternately associated with sexual repression, material deprivation, and anti-Semitic violence—felt by David and the other characters.” At the end of the play, one hears, according to the stage direction, “the trumpet, wonderfully clear, wonderfully promising, wonderfully triumphant.” Though the play closed after just a few performances, Copland’s ten-minute musical distillation has proved to be one of his most popular scores. Like Barber’s Adagio for Strings, Quiet City has also served to memorialize: this is music that touches both the heart and the mind, music filled with wisdom, solace, and promise.

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