

Aaron Copland...



Family:

Father: Harris Morris Copland

Mother: Sarah Mittenthal Copland

Siblings: Four older siblings

...was one of the most loved American classical composers of the twentieth century. He blended popular forms of American music such as jazz and folk into his compositions to create exceptional pieces. Copland had contributed a lot to the music industry — both as a composer and as a speaker, who made the Americans aware of the importance of music. Through his compositions, writing, promotions and plain hard work, Copland established American concert music. He had a distinct American style of composition and was often referred to as the “**Dean of American Composers**”. Copland wrote ballets, orchestral music, chamber music, vocal works, operas and film scores. This talented musician was a boon to the American music industry as he travelled abroad to elevate the status of American music. (Classical music had been dominated by European composers for centuries, so serious “American” music was something new and fresh.) His commitment to music and the country made him one of the most prominent and remembered composers.

Childhood & Early Life

Aaron Copland was born to a conservative Jewish family of Lithuanian origin on 14 November 1900, in Brooklyn, New York. His parents were Harris Morris Copland and Sarah Mittenthal Copland. Among their five children, Aaron was the youngest one. His parents ran a department store in Brooklyn, called Copland’s, which was an important part of the neighborhood, and a big influence on young Aaron’s life. He watched his parents work hard to build this large, successful enterprise, and that work ethic rubbed off on him in his own career.

Their original family name was ‘Kaplan.’ His father had changed it earlier due to certain reasons, though Aaron himself was unaware of the fact for a long time. Unlike his father, who was not interested in music at all, his mother liked to sing as well as play the piano, and she arranged musical classes for the children too. Among his siblings, his older brother Ralph was the most talented in music, having become proficient in violin at a very young age. It was Aaron’s sister Laurine, who was the closest to him among all his siblings. She supported and encouraged him in his career.

At the early age of eight, Copland started writing songs, and at the age of eleven, he composed his first notated music for an opera scenario. Later, he studied under Leopold Wolfsohn for a period of four years. Later, he studied under Rubin Goldmark in Manhattan and also attended classical music performances.

He then continued his studies in Fontainebleau, France, where he was taught by the famous French musician Nadia Boulanger. Her broad taste in music had a deep influence on him, and she promoted him to important people in the business, which helped get him established in his early days.

Career

After studying under many reputed European composers abroad, Aaron Copland came back to the US. His debut work 'Symphony for Organ and Orchestra' was released on January 11, 1925. This work was written for and premiered by his beloved teacher, Nadia Boulanger. (pronounced "Boo-lawn-szjay")



Later on he was drawn to jazz and popular music, genres which he had explored previously as well while he was in Europe. Several of his works, including 'Four Piano Blues' had a Jazz influence.

As an author he wrote the book *What to Listen for in Music* in 1939. In the book he gives the reader a proper guidance on the appreciation of music. He also wrote and published *Our New Music* (1941) and *Music and Imagination* (1952).

Aaron Copland spent his time in other countries during the 1930s. He went to Europe, Africa, and then to Mexico as well, where he got acquainted with the Mexican composer Carlos Chavez. He composed several musical works using Mexican folk music including his famous 'El Salon Mexico' for orchestra.

He is also remembered for composing film scores. The films he worked on include 'Mice and Men' (1939), 'Our Town' (1940), and the 'North Star' (1943). He also worked on 'The Heiress' in 1949 for which he was awarded an Oscar for Best Film Score.

His later works included the use of the twelve-tone system of Aaron Schonberg, though he didn't fully embrace it. He was also inspired by the French composer Pierre Boulez, who showed him various other ways to use this technique. The clashing dissonances weren't too popular with audiences, and he soon lost interest in this "cutting edge" style.

During his career, he also assisted hundreds of young composers who admired his talent in music. However, the young musicians he taught were his students only for brief periods. He advised his students to focus on expression rather than on technical points. He also encouraged them to have their own personal style.

From around 1970, he decided to stop composing and focus more on teaching instead. From the 1960s, Copland turned increasingly to conducting. He remarked that he had run out of ideas for composing, saying "It was exactly as if someone had simply turned off a faucet." From 1960 to his death, he resided at Cortlandt Manor, New York. Known as Rock Hill, his home was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2003.



It was further designated a National Historic Register of Historic Places in 2003 and further designated a national Historic Landmark in 2008.

Copland's health deteriorated through the 1980s, and he died from respiratory failure due to Alzheimer's disease on December 2, 1990, in North Tarrytown, New York (now Sleepy Hollow). Following his death, his ashes were scattered over the Tanglewood Music Center near Lenox, Massachusetts, where he has spent many summers teaching, composing and conducting.

Much of his large estate was bequeathed to the creation of the Aaron Copland Fund for Composers, which bestows over \$600,000 per year to performing groups.

Major Works

A significant orchestral work of his was *El Salon Mexico*, composed during one of his visits to Mexico. It uses pure Mexican folk music. The work, which comprises three different musical styles, depicts an imaginary dance hall in Mexico City. Copland had started working on it from 1932 and completed it in 1936. In the process he became close friends with Mexican composer Carlos Chavez.

One of his most popular works was *Rodeo* which was premiered in 1942. It was a ballet consisting of five sections: 'Buckaroo Holiday', 'Corral Nocturne', 'Ranch House Party', 'Saturday Night Waltz', and 'Hoe-Down.' Considered as one of the earliest examples of a true American ballet, 'Rodeo' can be regarded as the combination of Broadway music with a classical ballet. People asked him how a Jewish composer born and raised in Brooklyn could write "Cowboy" music so well. His answer was that many of his relatives on his mother's side had migrated from New York out west (Texas, Oklahoma, etc.) so he was more familiar with the west than people thought.

Another very popular ballet is *Billy the Kid*. There is a great video in the listening portion below which talks about this work. It was written in 1938. The next year he arranged an orchestral suite to be played in concert without dancers. He uses folk songs like "Goodbye, Old Paint," "Git along, Little Dogies," and "The Chisholm Trail" to add an authentic western flavor to the composition.

Symphony No. 3 which was Aaron Copland's third and final symphony, is among one of his significant works. It was premiered on October 19, 1946, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitzky. It was written at the end of the Second World War, and it is regarded as the essential American symphony as it fuses Copland's distinct 'Americana' style with the form of the symphony.

His opera, *The Tender Land*, was premiered at the New York City Opera on 1 April 1954. It was initially poorly received, and so Copland set about making revisions. It is still part of the standard opera repertory.

Awards & Achievements

- For his music in the film 'The Heiress' (1949), Aaron Copland was awarded an Oscar by the Academy Award for Best Original Music Score.
- In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.
- Aaron Copland was awarded the prestigious 'University of Pennsylvania Glee Club' award in 1970 because of the immense influence he had on American music.
- Copland was awarded Yale University's Sanford Medal.
- Copland was the honorary member of the Alpha Epsilon chapter of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia in 1961 and was awarded the fraternity's Charles E. Lutton Man of Music Award in 1970.
- Copland was honored with the National Medal of Arts in 1986.
- The United States Congress awarded Copland with a special Congressional Gold Medal in 1987.

LISTENING

Please watch this short video clip – a brief documentary about Aaron Copland (Hear Copland play piano, conduct orchestras and talk about composing.) There is also a clip of the ballets *Appalachian Spring* and *Rodeo*, plus a brief excerpt of his ballet *Billy the Kid* (orchestral version only...no dancing) along with an excerpt from his Clarinet Concerto, his Fanfare for the Common Man, and one of his symphonies. Also, you'll hear Copland's music in a television commercial, and there is a documentary film excerpt from Berkshire Summer Music Festival at Tanglewood with Copland and Leonard Bernstein along with several aspiring young student conductors.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRVJqVqAN6M> (approximately 13 minutes)

The Cat and The Mouse is his first published work and it was based on Jean de la Fontaine's fable of *The Old Cat and the Young Mouse*. He made approximately \$40 by selling it to the internationally known publishing house DURAND in France. (Durand published music of Debussy, Ravel, Satie and other French composers). He later realized that he would earn more money if he agreed on a percentage of the sales, rather than making an outright sale. (Known as earning "royalties." This is what copyright is all about, and why it is illegal to only photocopy music and never buy a published work...it is like stealing from the composer when you do that.)

This is a piece of programmatic music, which means the music tells a story. See if you can follow the story line. Do you think the mouse gets away in the end, or does he get eaten? Remember it is based on the fable The Old Cat and the Young Mouse...maybe the cat limps away? You decide. (3:14 minutes long)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9J9TM1BPsA>

Fanfare for the Common Man is one of Copland's best-known pieces for brass and percussion (not full orchestra):

- four horns (in F)
- three trumpets (in B \flat)
- three trombones
- tuba
- timpani
- bass drum
- tam-tam

Copland wrote in his autobiography: "Eugene Goossens, conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, had written to me at the end of August about an idea he wanted to put into action for the 1942–43 concert season. During World War I he had asked British composers for a fanfare to begin each orchestral concert. It had been so successful that he thought to repeat the procedure in World War II with American composers." A total of 18 fanfares were written at Goossens' behest, but Copland's is the only one which remains in the standard repertoire.

Initial trumpet notes from *Fanfare for the
Common Man*, Copland Memorial
Garden, Tanglewood



It was written in response to the US entry into World War II and was inspired in part by a famous 1942 speech where vice president Henry A. Wallace proclaimed the dawning of the "Century of the Common Man." (2:42 minutes long)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKgk6G0lekQ>

Four Piano Blues was composed between 1926 and 1948 and shows Copland's interest in jazz throughout his career. When he lived in Paris in the 20s, jazz reigned supreme. He took a break from jazz but came back to it in later years. The four movements are titled by their tempo markings:

1. Freely Poetic
2. Soft and Languid
3. Muted and Sensuous
4. With Bounce

Hear Copland perform: (8:15 minutes long)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NskI2cR09H8>

Lincoln Portrait (also known as ***A Lincoln Portrait***) is one of Copland's well-loved orchestral works. The work involves a full orchestra, with particular emphasis on the brass section at climactic moments. The work is narrated with the reading of excerpts of Abraham Lincoln's great documents, including the Gettysburg Address. An orchestra usually invites a prominent person to be the narrator. Conductor Andre Kostelanetz commissioned Copland to write a musical portrait of an "eminent American" for the New York Philharmonic. Copland chose President Abraham Lincoln, and used material from speeches and letters of Lincoln, as well as original folk songs of the period, including "Camptown Races" and "On Springfield Mountain". Copland finished *Lincoln Portrait* in April 1942, four months after the USA entered WWII.

The link below of *Lincoln Portrait* showcases Leonard Bernstein and the NY Philharmonic in 1976 in London's Royal Albert Hall. The narrator is William Warfield, a famous singer. Fun fact: Mr. Warfield appeared in the movie *Showboat* as Joe, and he made the song *Old Man River* famous with his beautiful, rich baritone voice. (16:16 minutes long)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZGiYfExbMM>

Here is a link about the amazing William Warfield if you are interested:

<https://www.williamwarfield.org/biography/>

(No links to Leonard Bernstein, since he is our November composer! More about him soon!)

Old American Folk Songs Copland selected folk songs from around the country and arranged them for voice and piano, then reset them for voice and orchestra. As a pianist, I'm partial to the voice/piano version, but the orchestra does add certain colors that the piano cannot provide. Feel free to google both versions and compare/contrast. Here is his list:

Set 1

- The Boatman's Dance (minstrel song from 1843)
- The Dodger (campaign song)
- Long Time Ago (ballad)
- Simple Gifts (Shaker song)
- I Bought Me a Cat (children's song, Roud Folk Song Index No. 544)

Set 2

- The Little Horses (lullaby)
- Zion's Walls (revivalist song)
- The Golden Willow Tree (Anglo-American ballad)
- At the River (hymn tune)
- Ching-A-Ring Chaw (minstrel song)

Hear Mrs. Stacy Andrews, soprano, and Dr. Holly Hughes perform the Appalachian folksong *I Bought Me a Cat*. Mrs. Andrews is the wife of Mr. Paul Andrews (our ensemble team director and theory chair) and she teaches elementary music at Coder Elementary School in Aledo. (2:04 minutes long)

<http://www.burchschool.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/I-Bought-Me-a-Cat.mp3>

Hear Gerald Findley, beautiful baritone singer, and Julius Drake, fine pianist, perform *Ching-a-Ring Chaw* at the famous Wigmore Hall in London. Mr. Findley accidentally enters in one place a couple of measures early. Can you detect his slipup? I'm sure he was nervous, but if he had simply kept singing at the early entrance his accompanist would have jumped the two measures and covered up the mistake, and we would be none the wiser. Now you can see that even professionals make mistakes, because we ALL make mistakes. 😊 And you can also see what **not** to do when you do make a mistake! (Watch his reaction at the end...he telegraphs to the audience by his actions that he made a mistake.) Side note: Can you hear how Copland "paints" the banjo sounds in the piano part? (1:48 minutes long)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKgePx3qeNQ>

Billy the Kid 1938 ballet written by the American composer Aaron Copland on commission from Lincoln Kirstein. It was choreographed by Eugene Loring for Ballet Caravan. Along with *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*, it is one of Copland's most popular and widely-performed pieces. It is most famous for its incorporation of several cowboy tunes and American folk songs and, although built around the figure and the exploits of Billy the Kid, is not so much a biography of a notorious but peculiarly appealing desperado as it is a perception of the "Wild West", in which a figure such as Billy played a vivid role. The link below is a fantastic way to become familiar with Copland's writing style and the ballet plot. Plus, it will help you answer one of the quiz questions. (9:00 minutes long)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrWdp6MjdT8>

Rodeo (1942) Pronounced "ro-**DAY**-o" (not "RO-de-o)

Copland collaborated with choreographer Agnes de Mille to mount the ballet, *Rodeo*, in 1942. Agnes de Mille was firmly rooted in classical ballet. She had to teach the dancers to move in traditional ways while wearing western wear, which took some getting used to. The premiere was staged at the Met Opera House in NYC, and it received 22 encores! De Mille choreographed and starred in the production. Rodgers and Hammerstein were in the audience, and they were so impressed with her that they hired her to choreograph their new musical *Oklahoma!* Copland's ballet consists of five movements: Buckaroo Holiday, Corral Nocturne, Ranch House Party, Saturday Night Waltz, and Hoedown.

Please scroll down the Wikipedia article about *Rodeo* to "Structure and Analysis" where you will get to the plot synopsis. There are very short excerpts from each movement.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodeo_\(ballet\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodeo_(ballet))

If you like what you hear, you can listen to the entire ballet (just under 30 minutes) played by the LA Philharmonic (no dancing...just music) (25:42 minutes long)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du4DrdGp9vM&t=414s>

Or you can watch highlights from the Houston Repertoire Ballet production: (2:13 minutes long)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDCoTJKMoTY&t=4s>

This work is so popular, you may have heard some of it on TV. Every time I hear Hoedown, I think of the commercial for beef. A man with a booming, deep voice says, "BEEF! It's what's for dinner!" (:28 seconds long)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvijAIS9c_U