

Our Town Musical Research

Appalachian Springs

- Composer: Aaron Copland (14 November 1900 -- 2 December 1990)
- Orchestra: Ulster Orchestra
- Conductor: Thierry Fischer
- Year of recording: 2006

Appalachian Spring, Orchestral Suite, written in 1944-1945.

The original ballet, scored for a thirteen-member chamber orchestra, was created upon commission of choreographer and dancer Martha Graham with funds from the Coolidge Foundation; it premiered on Monday 30 October 1944, at the Library of Congress in Washington DC, with Martha Graham (1894-1991) dancing the lead role. Copland was awarded the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for Music for his achievement.

In 1945, Copland rearranged the ballet work as an orchestral suite, preserving most of the music. The ballet and orchestral work were well received. The latter was credited as more important in popularizing the composer. In 1972, Boosey & Hawkes published a version of the suite fusing the structure of the orchestral suite with the scoring of the original ballet: double string quartet, bass, flute, clarinet, bassoon, and piano [which is the version I used in this video because the score is more readable in a Youtube screen than the full orchestral score]. All three versions continue to be performed in full.

Originally, Copland did not have a title for the work, referring to it simply as Ballet for Martha. Shortly before the premiere, Graham suggested Appalachian Spring, a phrase from a Hart Crane poem, "The Dance" from a collection of poems in his book "The Bridge." O Appalachian Spring! I gained the ledge; Steep, inaccessible smile that eastward bends And northward reaches in that violet wedge Of Adirondacks!

Because he composed the music without the benefit of knowing what the title was going to be, Copland was often amused when people told him he captured the beauty of the Appalachians in his music, a fact he alluded to in an interview with NPR's Fred Calland. Little known is that the word "spring" denotes a source of water in the Crane poem; however the poem is a journey to meet springtime.

The story told is a spring celebration of the American pioneers of the 19th century after building a new Pennsylvania farmhouse. Among the central characters are a bride, a groom, a Pioneer Woman, a preacher and his worshippers. The orchestral suite is divided into eight sections, Copland described each scene thus:

[00:00](#) - 1. Very slowly. Introduction of the characters, one by one, in a suffused light.

[03:06](#) - 2. Fast/Allegro. Sudden burst of unison strings in A major arpeggios starts the action. A sentiment both elated and religious gives the keynote to this scene.

[05:54](#) - 3. Moderate/Moderato. Duo for the Bride and her Intended -- scene of tenderness and passion.

[09:18](#) - 4. Quite fast. The Revivalist and his flock. Folksy feeling -- suggestions of square dances and country fiddlers.

[12:45](#) - 5. Still faster/Subito Allegro. Solo dance of the Bride -- presentiment of motherhood. Extremes of joy and fear and wonder.

[16:48](#) - 6. Very slowly (as at first). Transition scene to music reminiscent of the introduction.

[18:14](#) - 7. Calm and flowing/Doppio Movimento. Scenes of daily activity for the Bride and her Farmer husband. There are five variations on a Shaker theme. The theme, sung by a solo clarinet, was taken from a collection of Shaker melodies compiled by Edward D. Andrews, and published under the title "The Gift to Be Simple." The melody borrowed and used almost literally is called "Simple Gifts."

[21:08](#) - 8. Moderate. Coda/Moderato - Coda. The Bride takes her place among her neighbors. At the end the couple are left "quiet and strong in their new house." Muted strings intone a hushed prayer-like chorale passage. The close is reminiscent of the opening music.