



AARON

COPLAND

The Life and Work
of an Uncommon Man



HOWARD POLLACK

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Uncommon Man

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藏书章

HOWARD POLLACK

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*In memory of my grandparents
Anna and Julius Malamed*

Introduction

For many years I took Copland for granted. Studying music at college, I may well have surmised his importance from Donald Jay Grout's *A History of Western Music* (the 1960 edition), which devoted more space to Copland than to any other American composer, and from Otto Deri's *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music*. Yet he remained a shadowy figure at some distance from the central concerns of myself, my classmates, and my teachers.¹

During my graduate studies in musicology at Cornell University, my appreciation for Copland deepened. My teachers included William Austin, who would write the Copland entry for the *New Grove Dictionary*, and Robert Palmer, a Copland protégé. My colleague, the composer Christopher Rouse, also furthered my knowledge of Copland's music. And in 1979, I met Copland, who had agreed to let me, a graduate student, interview him about Walter Piston, my dissertation topic. Still, the significance and drama of Copland's accomplishment eluded me.

In the early 1990s, while investigating the friendship between Copland and the Mexican composer Carlos Chávez, I grew dissatisfied with the state of Copland scholarship. The two pioneering and helpful studies by Arthur Berger (1953) and Julia Smith (1955) obviously needed updating;

Neil Butterworth's handy monograph (1985) was limited in scope; and the two-volume Copland-Vivian Perlis publications (1984, 1989)—a magisterial compilation of autobiography, biography, oral history, and photographs—offered little in the way of critical commentary and left important areas of the composer's personal life unexplored. The time had come for a more candid discussion of Copland the man as well as for some new critical thinking about the music.²

Toward this end I made repeated visits to the Copland Collection housed in the Music Division of the Library of Congress, where Wilda Heiss and other staff members kindly made materials available to me even before the collection had been fully processed. The Music Division of the New York Public Library, the publishing firm of Boosey & Hawkes, and other institutions offered further help, as did Stephen Luttman, Farhad Moshiri, and other resourceful librarians at the University of Houston.

I found letters, writings, sketches, drafts, and unknown pieces that shed new light on familiar and unfamiliar works alike; and I conducted interviews that helped me gain a better understanding of Copland and his world. I also came across widespread misconceptions about both the man and his music, in part the result of a lack of serious Copland research; as recently as 1994 the musicologist Larry Starr thought Copland "still widely underrated and insufficiently studied." Fortunately, this situation is rapidly changing, thanks to the scholarly interest generated by the opening of the Copland Collection.³

I decided not to write a straightforward chronological narrative, partly because many aspects of Copland's life cried out for more contextual study than they customarily have received. I further attempted to discuss the music without recourse to musical examples and with minimal technical jargon. Included at the end of this volume is a catalog of musical works that includes premieres and other information not necessarily found in the body of the text.

Many individuals aided me in various aspects of this project. A number of musicologists and theorists, including Elizabeth Bergman, Jessica Burr, Jennifer DeLapp, Terri Gailey Everett, Margaret Susan Key, Neil Lerner, Roberta Lindsay, Daniel Mathers, Mitchell Patton, and Marta Robertson, generously shared their ideas and findings with me.

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AARON
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A Copland Portrait

In maturity Copland stood just under six feet tall, a lanky figure weighing only about one hundred and fifty pounds. He had his mother's oblong face and craggy features, with sensitive pale blue-gray eyes that looked out from under heavy lids with a kind of bemused curiosity. When he was a young man, his spectacles, dark suits, and thinning brown hair made him look older than his years, whereas in old age his boyish grin gave him a remarkably youthful appearance. His countenance changed little over the years.

Interviewing Copland over the radio, the dance critic John Gruen pictured for his audience "this marvelous, strong, splendid Coplandesque face that we have all come to love and be familiar with." Minna Lederman, who for many years edited Copland's writings, concurred that artists and photographers found him "always the perfect subject, the face one could never forget—after Stravinsky's, THE face. A hawk, yet not predatory. Not what you would call good-looking—something much better, more striking." Others similarly described him paradoxically as "stunningly ugly," as "endearingly homely," as having a "wonderful ugly/beautiful Copland grin"—that toothy smile that even after one meeting the composer Robin Holloway found "unforgettable." More

than one person thought of Ichabod Crane; and by coincidence he spent his later years in Washington Irving country up on the Hudson.¹

Copland humorously deprecated his looks, finding in his gaunt physique, narrow face, prominent nose, and buckteeth a comic resemblance to a giraffe. He considered himself an "ugly duckling"; when his friends Irving and Verna Fine acquired a cubist painting of a clown, he told them, "I bet you bought it because it reminds you of me." Especially sensitive about his crooked teeth, he avoided smiling for the camera for years.²

He was likewise modest about his musical accomplishments. When honored or complimented, he reacted with almost disbelief, like a surprised, delighted child. He spoke about his work lightly, with a slight chuckle or sardonic inflection, and emphasized his good luck, never dwelling on any disappointment or sadness.

Copland's calm self-effacement struck many as extraordinary, especially in the context of the temperamental art world. "He is always perfectly relaxed," observed his lifelong friend Harold Clurman. Another friend, the Chilean composer Juan Orrego-Salas, wrote to him, "I admire greatly your serenity. You are a man and an artist at ease with yourself. I truly believe that it is exactly there from which the greatness of your contribution rises." "He exuded calm," agreed a painter friend, Richard Hennessy. When asked late in life what had "hurt him," Copland answered,

I don't hurt easily and I don't bear grudges without working at it a little bit. So that nothing immediately jumps to mind, as to what hurt me. I'm very sensitive I think to the atmosphere in which we all live. At the time of Hitler, Hitler hurt me, if that's what you mean. I was considerably upset. You see, I think it uses up a lot of energy to get really angry. And I save my energy [laugh] for moments where I think it's really worth extending all that energy.³

Only occasionally did he show strong emotions of any kind. He was, in general, extremely discreet and low-keyed. In his hundreds of letters to friends, he rarely alluded to his own feelings, and when he did, he did so almost apologetically, as in a brief admission of depression to Leonard Bernstein on the occasion of his mother's death. "He masks his feelings," said Bernstein, "and there's a great deal going on inside him that doesn't come out, even with his best friends." He kept cool even at the time of his McCarthy hearing, prompting his friend Edwin Denby to write, "It is extraordinary even now I can't detect a sign in you that you have

been through any trouble. I mean in the sense of wanting comforting. It is only by imagining how grueling it would be to me to be questioned by the police on suspicion, even if I were sure of my innocence, that I can imagine anything." David Diamond, Leonard Bernstein, and Phillip Ramey—three of his closest friends—all independently observed how strangely uncommunicative he appeared at the death of a beloved family member or friend. Diamond concluded, "There's never a scene with Aaron. He knows exactly what dignity means in the sense of how far you go emotionally."⁴

This temperament naturally paralleled his artistic taste, for example, his great affection for the composers Gabriel Fauré and Darius Milhaud and the essayist Michel de Montaigne. After Jean-Pierre Marty performed his Piano Sonata, Copland complimented this "brother spirit" on his "cold passion." In his journals, he wrote of hating "an emotion-drenched voice."⁵

In reminiscences by friends, the word *tact* in particular recurred, as in William Schuman's assertion that "Aaron was always tactful." Harold Clurman, recalling an episode in which Copland intervened during an argument between himself and Nadia Boulanger, observed,

Aaron is one of the most balanced persons I know; the most tactful, knowing exactly what to say to each person. He wouldn't yield to anything that he didn't want to do. He wouldn't declare anything he didn't mean. But he is never aggressive in any way, and he always knows exactly the right thing to say in the right circumstances. It has helped him not just as a composer but as a man of the world. The United States could send him abroad with full confidence that he would represent it well because he has an extraordinary sense of justness. He had it when he was young and he has it still. Boulanger recognized this immediately.⁶

Such tact made Copland a moderator *par excellence*, and in the course of his life he chaired innumerable organizations, committees, juries, and panel discussions. In two concert readings of Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*, he was the obvious choice to play the narrator, whether the Soldier and Devil were Roger Sessions and Virgil Thomson, as they were in one production, or Elliott Carter and John Cage, as they were in another. In his relationships with many younger composers and artists, his role even took on the earmarks of the psychotherapist. When on one occasion

Phillip Ramey said to him, "Aaron, you could have been a diplomat," he responded, "Or a psychiatrist."⁷

Although he was sometimes fidgety and skittish in his movements—he joked that he avoided Jell-O because the wobbly gelatin made him nervous—only a fear of heights noticeably disturbed Copland's equanimity. In 1932 the composer Vivian Fine accompanied Copland on a Ferris wheel only to find him, as the carriage reached the apex, terrified and clutching her for dear life. But it was precisely because he was so restrained that even the slightest confession or outburst took on a special intensity and a larger frame of reference. Verna Fine, for instance, never forgot her surprise when he responded to her request that he speak at her husband's funeral by saying, "I can't speak because I'm going to break down." And Minna Lederman felt ashamed of once provoking him to an "unbecoming display of anger" that "was so out of character." If he wished to communicate his disapproval or irritation, he usually did so with a glance that spoke volumes.⁸

Some close friends found Copland almost too reticent. Paul Bowles humorously reproached him for it in a 1933 letter: "You seldom write, you know, and when you do, you say nothing of importance. Sometimes I find an old letter of yours in a trunk, and upon reading it over, manage to imagine that it was written recently and is still valid." "Aaron, for once, tell me," pleaded Leonard Bernstein in reference to Copland's private life.⁹

Some even regarded his reserve suspiciously. In 1930, the writer Chard Powers Smith, who had met Copland at the MacDowell Colony, wrote to a mutual friend, "There is a strange hypocritically good-humoured aloofness about him which, unless he dislikes me, I must put down to a self-consciousness either of race, of humble origins, or perhaps of habits—all of which should be beneath Aaron." Virgil Thomson viewed Copland's reticence as a kind of Machiavellian career tool, while Ned Rorem saw it as a way of distancing people. A few rival composers and their wives simply thought him devious.¹⁰

But friends like Minna Lederman and Robert Cornell sensed in Copland's reserve nothing more nor less than a "mode of self-protection." "Copland had a way of being pleasant and affable and very noncommittal without being aloof," recalled Cornell. "There was a veneer of self-protection in the way he handled encounters with people that he was not intimate with. And he was very, very skilled at this." Another friend, Sylvia Goldstein, described him as "basically shy."¹¹

Copland's reserve, at the very least, was something of an idiosyncratic family trait inherited from his mother and maternal grandmother. "If ever she was depressed or irritable, she managed to hide it well," said Copland about his mother. "I can only conclude that I must have inherited some of my own comparative evenness of temperament from my mother." Copland's older brothers, Ralph and Leon, were similarly inscrutable. "Leon usually keeps his emotions inside," wrote Leon's third wife to Copland, "while I let them out which is good for *me* at least."¹²

Moreover, Copland's reserve should not be thought of as being in the least unfriendly or imperious. On the contrary, he encouraged a fun-loving, high-spirited atmosphere, often punctuating remarks with a laugh or giggle. His own conversation sparkled with a delightfully wry humor, made all the more winsome by his somewhat arch speech; John J. O'Connor, reviewing a televised appearance in 1976, observed that beneath the mild-mannered gentility he could be "almost devilishly droll." With women friends especially he showed physical warmth, cradling Rosamund Bernier consolingly after a difficult divorce and squeezing Verna Fine's hand during a memorial concert for her husband. Friends and colleagues typically described him as "warm," "sweet," and "lovely." He became "Aaron" to thousands of mere acquaintances, thus setting the precedent for Bernstein's adoption of "Lenny."¹³

Indeed, he maintained an extraordinary number of friendships, devoting a good portion of nearly every day to the reading and writing of letters. Moreover, he relished companionship. "He never, never liked to be by himself," remembered David Walker, his secretary for many years. He enjoyed traveling and sharing rooms with friends, hosting small parties, and introducing people to one another. "Copland bores himself without crowds of people which I consider an immense weakness," complained Paul Bowles to a friend. "Aaron loves parties more than any man I know," Bernstein would say.¹⁴

Aside from his family, with whom he stayed in regular but rather distant touch all his life, his social world largely consisted of artists or intellectuals of one sort or another—or at least art lovers. This included intimate friends, casual acquaintances, lovers, even cooks and secretaries. Only a few other composers could boast so dazzling an array of artist friends and acquaintances, both in and out of music. The apartments of Montparnasse, lofts of the Upper West Side, brownstones in Greenwich Village, and rustic artist colonies outside New York and Mexico City formed his natural habitat.

His relationships with friends—especially the younger men with whom he formed the bulk of his close friendships—could be, in their own way, highly volatile. One finds a recurrent pattern of a year or two of intense intimacy, a year or so of drifting apart, and the settling of the friendship onto a stable but cooler footing. While this often transpired in the context of romantic or would-be romantic relationships, it characterized more purely professional friendships as well. At the same time, Copland prized loyalty and, often over the objections of well-wishers, remained at least cordial to people who annoyed, used, or even betrayed him, as Oscar Levant humbly discovered.¹⁵

Copland lived simply and unpretentiously. He dressed modestly, often wearing a simple dark suit, white shirt, and tie or, more casually, an open sport shirt and corduroy pants. When friends teased him about his clothes, he would protest, “But what’s wrong with them? They’re comfortable.” “Can you imagine Aaron wearing a ring, a jeweled cufflink?” asked Leonard Bernstein. “It’s unheard of! Or wearing some kind of natty leisure suit? Plain, plain, plain! It goes with *Appalachian Spring* and *Our Town*, which I think of as a self-portrait of Aaron. No conspicuous consumption.” If he showed a greater interest in having stylish furnishings or nice wines in his later, more prosperous years, he did so usually to please younger friends.¹⁶

Some of these same friends were surprised and troubled to find that Copland, having become well-to-do, spent money so cautiously. But others contended that such habits derived from decades of poverty and from an instinctual sense of economy. “It was part of his plainness, it was part of thrift,” explained Bernstein. “One of those Puritan virtues like being fair—you’re thrifty.” Clurman even related Copland’s frugality to his tact: “He never spent more than was necessary on anything; but his economy was a sign not of parsimony but of an almost instinctive sense of measure.” “I adore extravagance,” Copland would tell his friend John Kennedy, “but I abhor waste.”¹⁷

In fact, he was very generous. “When Aaron traveled all over the world as a conductor,” remembered Verna Fine, “he always brought back gifts—a Yemenite necklace from Israel for me, books for Irving, and toys for our three daughters. We never saw the thrifty side of Aaron that everyone talks about.” Even during his impoverished years, he supplied loans and cash gifts for friends in need. By the end of his life, he was supporting whole families. If he occasionally hurt a friend like Richard