

## Hoe-Down, from Rodeo

### Aaron Copland

A classical-music lover asked to describe what constitutes “the American sound” has some tough deciding to do. For two-and-a-quarter centuries, American composers have been producing music that is so distinctive in its character that it simply couldn’t come from anywhere else. Fuging tunes by William Billings and his colleagues in Colonial New England, antebellum ballads by Stephen Foster, irresistible marches by John Philip Sousa, fearless experiments by Charles Ives, boundary-breaking syntheses by George Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein, rhythmically vibrant effusions by William Bolcom and John Adams — they all play irreplaceable parts in what makes our nation’s “classical” music unique. And yet, boiling it down to just one composer, many music lovers would agree that the seminal summation of “the American sound” may be found in the scores of Aaron Copland.

To a certain extent, the identification of Copland with the American sound is a chicken-and-egg conundrum. Would his tones have sounded so American if they had not been attached to subjects that illuminated such a breadth of specifically American places — the urban landscape in *Quiet City*, the heartland in *Appalachian Spring*, the American West in *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*? Or is there something deeply, inherently, mystically American in Copland’s musical vocabulary, rich as it usually is in rhythmic point, in widely spread voicing, in disjunct intervals shaping its melodies and harmonies?

Copland composed *Rodeo* in 1942 as a ballet to be choreographed by Agnes de Mille for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. She initially described it to him as “the story of *The Taming of the Shrew* — cowboy style.” She continued:

It is not an epic, or the story of pioneer conquest. It builds no empires. It is a

pastorale, a lyric joke ... . There are never more than a very few people on the stage at a time ... one must be always conscious of the enormous land on which these people live and of their proud loneliness.

The ballet was received with enthusiasm. In the *Chicago Tribune*, the much-feared critic Claudia Cassidy wrote: “*Rodeo* is a smash hit. What Miss de Mille has turned out in this brilliant skirmish with Americana is a shining little masterpiece.”

To capture the profoundly national spirit of the subject, Copland drew directly from the well of American folk song, which was an obsession of composers at the time. Folk tunes (or melodies that mimic them) appear in quite a few Copland scores, but in *Rodeo* they play a role almost constantly, drawn largely from the collections *Our Singing Country* (by John A. and Alan Lomax) and *Traditional Music of America*

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### In Short

**Born:** November 14, 1900, in Brooklyn, New York

**Died:** December 2, 1990, in Peekskill

**Work composed:** The ballet *Rodeo* was written June–September 1942, on commission from the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

**World premiere:** the ballet, on October 16, 1942, at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Franz Allers, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** July 8, 1945, Leonard Bernstein, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** April 6, 2019, Jaap van Zweden, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 3 minutes

(by Ira Ford). *Hoe-Down* makes use of several traditional fiddle tunes, most specifically the square-dance number *Bonyparte* and, as Copland explained to the oral historian Vivian Perlis, “a few measures of *McLeod’s Reel* played in folk fiddle style.” He continued, “Pizzicato strings and xylophone add a comic effect to *Bonyparte*, and the music winds down before the tune returns for the last time.” Copland’s early biographer Julia Smith observed:

the polyrhythmic “vamps” (derived from jazz and rural American sources and, consequently, completely American in idiom) add humor, lightness, and zest. ... The composer does not permit the basic limitations of the folk songs to restrict him, but, on the contrary, he shapes and manipulates these materials into the general design of his formal structure. In this lies the difference between composing and arranging.

Curious music lovers may enjoy seeking out the *Four Scottish Dances* (Op. 59), an orchestral suite composed in 1957 by the English composer Malcolm Arnold. Its concluding movement is a reel (or a Highland fling, perhaps) that seems almost a twin to Copland’s *Hoe-Down*, probably a coincidence of two pieces with the shared musical ancestry of *McLeod’s Reel*.

Copland always pronounced the title of this ballet “RO-dee-o,” although many people seem to call it “Ro-DAY-o.” Its folk song-infused score was perfectly in sync with a spirit of nationalism during World War II, but it has stood the test of time without fading.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, cymbal, wood block, xylophone, triangle, piano, and strings.

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## Rodeo in Progress

Agnes de Mille recalled her first taste of Copland’s score for the new ballet on which they were collaborating:

Aaron was teaching at Tanglewood, and he called when the score was ready and came over with a young friend. I didn’t know who he was. ... While Aaron and his friend were at the piano, I looked around and realized there was nobody there to hear him. Not a soul but my



mother and me! I thought, “This is very odd.” But Aaron said, “I have got to do it and go. It’s getting late.” So we started. I got more and more excited and finally I was just screaming, yelling and dancing. He’d written the music on transparent paper that kept slipping, and during the waltz it fell to the ground. The boy with Aaron kept pushing the music back in place. Aaron said to him, “Could you play the treble part? I can’t play it.” This boy played wonderfully. I said in the waltz part, “Aaron, this section is pretty dull.” He giggled, and said, “I think it is, too. I’ll do something about it.” The friend said, “You’d better!” I remember thinking, “Of all the impudence! To talk to the Maestro like that!” The boy was Leonard Bernstein.

Agnes de Mille, choreographer of *Rodeo*, dancing the ballet’s lead role, the *Cowgirl*