

Notes by Thomas May © 2019

Suite from Billy the Kid

AARON COPLAND

Born November 14, 1900 in Brooklyn, New York

Died December 2, 1990 in North Tarrytown, New York

The simplicity and directness of Aaron Copland's best-loved works from the 1930s and 1940s—a period that saw the creation of his iconic trio of ballet scores: *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo*, and *Appalachian Spring*—represent a “populist” style at which the composer arrived only after an adventurous period of experimenting with modernism and the then-fashionable “symphonic jazz.”

The lingering Great Depression intensified Copland's urge, shared with many of his artistic peers, to communicate with a broader audience. Another pragmatic basis for the development of Copland's forthright “American sound” can be found in the contexts for which he was writing, including dance. It was largely in tandem with collaborative projects involving specifically American subject matter, in the genres of ballet, theater, and film, that Copland evolved this language. *Billy the Kid*, which premiered in 1938, marked a major breakthrough toward the later ballets.

The idea for *Billy the Kid* was pitched by the ambitious young impresario Lincoln Kirstein for his newly formed Ballet Caravan, a touring company that was a forerunner of the New York City Ballet. Playing a sort of American Serge Diaghilev, Kirstein fixed on Copland as the Stravinsky with whom he would partner to establish a thriving indigenous ballet that held its own in comparison to the standard Franco-Russian traditions of the time.

Billy the Kid was designed as a one-act ballet, with choreography by Eugene Loring, drawn from a semi-fictional treatment of the notorious outlaw Henry McCarty (1859-1881)—also known as William H. Bonney. Billy appears as a quasi-mythical figure, a romanticized emblem of the passions and dangers of the Wild West. Copland recalled that he approached the prospect of this “folk-ballet” with “a firm resolve to write simply,” believing that as part of a stage work, “music should play a modest role, helping when help is needed, but never injecting itself as if it were the main business of the evening.” In the process, he produced music that has held its own as a beloved concert staple.

Copland frames the story with widely spaced harmonies that vividly conjure a sense of the open prairie and, importantly, its associated sense of loneliness, all set amid the context of westward migration. “Street in a Frontier Town,” where we first encounter Billy as a boy of twelve, cleverly recomposes bits of cowboy tunes in a way that adds much more than “flavor.” During a drunken brawl, Billy witnesses his mother accidentally being shot in the crowd and instantly stabs those responsible.

This sets the pattern for Billy's criminal career as an adult. “Card Game at Night” establishes a lonely, reflective mood “under the stars.” In dramatic contrast, violence erupts once more in the percussion-heavy “Gun Battle” as Billy is ambushed by his former friend, Sheriff Pat Garrett. In a local saloon, complete with out-of-tune piano, a tipsy crowd celebrates the outlaw's capture. The Suite omits the ballet's episode of Billy escaping from jail into the desert, where he romances his sweetheart, but cuts to the scene of Billy's death after he has been caught for the last time. The opening prairie music returns, transformed so as to convey, as Copland put it, “the idea of a new dawn breaking.”

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, “From the New World”

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, (now Czech Republic)

Died May 1, 1904, in Prague

The question of what it means to write “American music” had preoccupied artists in the century before Copland. The musicologist Douglas Shadle points out that “American composers were wrestling with national identity long before” Antonín Dvořák arrived in the New World in 1892 to direct the newly established National Conservatory of Music located in New York City’s Lower East Side—the brainchild of the philanthropist Jeannette Thurber. Her ambitious dream was to foster an authentically American art when Eurocentric cultural values predominated. Thurber’s forward-looking ideas extended to opening up the Conservatory to welcome and support women, African-Americans, and other minorities as students.

Himself a minority within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czech Dvořák shared in Jeanette Thurber’s progressive vision of music as a power to enable those without a voice. He was understandably sensitive to the spirit of what he considered indigenous American folk music. Soon after arriving in New York, he observed that America possessed rich raw material in its own folk idioms, remarking that “the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies.”

Yet the mistaken belief that inexperienced prospective composers had to wait for Dvořák to light the way toward even thinking about an authentic style in a benighted America is one of several myths around his Ninth Symphony. Indeed, it was one of the composer’s black students at the Conservatory, Harry Burleigh, who exposed Dvořák to a range of African-American spirituals. Dvořák’s “original purpose” in writing this symphony, argues Shadle, was “to acknowledge contributions black musicians had already been making to the American cultural landscape.”

The Symphony “from the New World” (as Dvořák titled the score) was a triumph at its premiere at Carnegie Hall in 1893. While it is often discussed in terms of its stimulation by new American surroundings—musical, social, and scenic—as well as of influences from Native- and African-American sources, the composer’s characteristic Bohemian flavors also pervade this score. And scholars continue to ponder evidence of hidden subtexts from both literary works and the composer’s own life as well.

Dvořák himself disclaimed quoting actual American melodies in this score (whether from spirituals or ritual Native American music) and pointed out that he wrote “original themes” touched by the flavor peculiar to indigenous American elements but treated with all the “modern” resources of symphonic writing. The famous flute tune in the first movement, which seems to quote “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” is actually a cousin of the main theme. First played by the horns following a brief introduction and an eruption of almost Beethovenian fury, this theme binds the entire work, recurring in all of the other movements.

Long intrigued by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s epic poem of 1854, *The Song of Hiawatha*, Dvořák remarked that the Largo grew from a sketch for an operatic treatment of the story (though that project was never realized); he added that the Scherzo had been inspired by a scene “where the Indians dance.” Whatever the half-hidden programmatic elements, the Largo is music of deeply engaging beauty, clothing the beloved melody stated by the English horn in changing orchestral colors. Magical, “fairy-tale” chords heard at the outset frame the movement.

The Scherzo pushes forward with a rhythmic impulse typical of Dvořák. The first-movement theme recurs in the middle and again at the close. With a rousing brass fanfare, Dvořák launches the finale,

which over its course recalls music from the preceding movements—including the Largo tune in more-dramatic guises —and the main themes are recombined in the final moments.