

PROGRAM NOTES

by Daniel Maki

Suite from *Appalachian Spring* (Version for 13 instruments)
by Aaron Copland (1900 – 1990)

Duration: Approximately 23 minutes

First Performance: October 30, 1944 in Washington DC

Last ESO Performance: April, 2011; Robert Hanson, conductor

The first performance of the ballet *Appalachian Spring* took place on 30 October 1944 in a small auditorium at the Library of Congress. The producer, choreographer, and lead dancer was the redoubtable Martha Graham, widely considered to be the most powerful creative force in American modern dance. Music for this “Ballet for Martha”, as it was subtitled, was, of course, by Aaron Copland, who had provided a score for 13 players, primarily because that was the maximum number that the small orchestra pit would accommodate.

Public as well as critical response to the new work was overwhelming and in 1945 Copland received the Pulitzer Prize for his score. Responding to a commission by Artur Rodzinski, conductor of the New York Philharmonic, the composer arranged a suite for full symphony orchestra with enlarged wind section and added percussion, omitting the music that was primarily of choreographic interest. This suite was premiered by the Philharmonic in October 1945. Although it is in this version that the music has become most widely played, the composer himself said that he preferred the simplicity and clarity of the smaller scaled version. In 1972, a new arrangement of the suite was published, scored for the original group of 13 players, but allowing for added strings as desired. It is this version that we hear on these concerts.

Appalachian Spring was jointly commissioned by Martha Graham and Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, one of this country’s leading arts patrons. Ms. Graham had intended for years to commission a ballet from Copland, and beginning in 1941, had sent him a number of scripts. These included several that were set in New England, one strongly influenced by Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*, as well as a possible pantomime on scenes from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Gradually, these various scenarios evolved into the final version, a synopsis of which, vague on detail, is printed in the score:

“... a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the last century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites. An older neighbor suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end, the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house. “

This setting of quintessential Americana had moved to western Pennsylvania (Ms. Graham grew up near Pittsburgh), and, despite the mention of early nineteenth century, seems to be during the Civil War. Thus, the “strange and terrible aspects of fate” would seem to suggest the possibility that the young groom might be called off to war. The characters stand as prototypes of American life, Everymen and Everywomen, evoking comparison with any number of different characters from American life, mythology and literature.

Somehow, this slice of American life, what Graham called “a legend of American living”, is miraculously mirrored in the music. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that the spirit of Appalachian music should be so beautifully captured by a composer such as Copland, who was, after all, a highly sophisticated city fellow, born and bred in Brooklyn as the son of immigrant Jewish parents and educated in New York and then Paris, where he studied with that high-priestess of European music, Nadia Boulanger. Further irony is added by the fact that he wrote most of the score without being fully aware of its Appalachian setting. The working title for most of the gestation process was simply “Ballet for Martha” and title *Appalachian Spring* was added as an afterthought, being decided upon just a few weeks before the premiere. The phrase came from a poem by Hart Crane, where, incidentally, the word “spring” refers to water rather than the season. When Copland asked Ms. Graham if the poem had any connection with the poem, she replied “No, I just liked the title and took it.”

Copland himself put it this way: “I gave voice to that region without knowing that I was giving voice to it.” It is now a commonplace to say that Copland, more than any other composer, discovered the “American voice” in art music. Probably in no other work did he so successfully or effortlessly give expression to rural America. Using a musical language that is deceptively simple, he creates a style that might be called “rustic noble” which conveys such sentiments as the plain rugged nobility of the frontier spirit and the shyly tender love of the young couple. In the more picturesque scenes, he can suggest such staples of Americana as country fiddling and the chivari celebrating the wedding day without resorting to cliché. (If imitation be the sincerest form of flattery, Copland has been flattered by innumerable Hollywood hacks who have shamelessly copied his style in film and television scores.)

The folk quality is achieved, amazingly, by the use of only one real folk melody, the now famous Shaker tune, “Simple Gifts”, which is used as a basis for a theme and variations. Even though there were never any actual Shaker settlements in Pennsylvania, Graham referred to Shakers several times in her various scripts and was quite happy to have their spirit invoked when Copland suggested using the melody. The Shakers, incidentally, were among this country’s earliest communists, and were, at one time, reviled and persecuted. Unfortunately, they disapproved not only of private property and war, but also of propagation of the species, and their celibate ways have inevitably led to their virtual extinction.

The composer himself provided the following outline as a guide to the listener.

1. Very slowly. Introduction of the characters, one by one, in a suffused light.
2. Fast. Sudden burst of unison strings in A major arpeggios starts the action. A sentiment both elated and religious gives the keynote to this scene....

3. Moderate. Duo for the bride and her intended- scene of tenderness and passion.
4. Quite fast. The Revivalist and his flock. Folksy feelings- suggestions of square dances and country fiddlers.
5. Still faster. Solo dance of the Bride- presentiment of motherhood. Extremes of joy and fear and wonder.
6. Very slow (as at first). Transition scenes reminiscent of the introduction.
7. Calm and flowing. Scenes of daily activity for the Bride and her Farmer – husband. There are five variations on a Shaker theme.
8. 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 passage. We hear a last echo of the principal theme sung by a flute and solo violin. The close is reminiscent of the opening music.

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Symphony No.11 in G minor, op.103 (*The Year 1905*)
by Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 -1975)

Duration: Approximately 55 minutes

First Performance: October 30, 1957 in Moscow

Last ESO Performance: These are the first ESO performances of the work

In 1898, James Gibbons Huneker, one of this country’s leading music critics, wrote the following: “The most profound truths, the most blasphemous things, may be incorporated within the walls of a symphony, and the police be none the wiser. It is its freedom from the meddlesome hand of the censor that makes of music a playground for great, brave souls.” Although that statement was written by a man who would never know the music of Dmitri Shostakovich, it was both a valuable comment on the nature of instrumental music as well as an uncannily prescient insight into that composer’s life work.

We are quite accustomed these days to hear the lament that serious music in our culture is taken seriously only by a small, select audience. The music of Dmitri Shostakovich represents the opposite situation - it was serious music written to communicate with an entire culture and it was taken very seriously indeed. As the preeminent composer who spent his entire creative life under the Soviet regime, Shostakovich produced a body of work that had a social and political significance undreamed of by any Western composer. The premiere of every Shostakovich symphony was a major event, and taken together, his work was, in the words of musicologist Richard Taruskin, “the secret diary of a nation.”

Despite attempts by recent Western critics to make Shostakovich out as a kind of closet dissident, there is no doubt that he remained to the end a patriotic Russian who believed in the ideals, if not the practice, of the Soviet system. He clearly took seriously what he considered his duty as an artist in a socialist society, and as the Russian people suffered through the many horrors of the twentieth century, he suffered with them, both

in his personal life as well as in his art. While serving the state, he abhorred, as any thinking person would, the many inhumanities that the Soviet system produced and he himself suffered terribly from them. There is no precedent in music history of a composer living as he did for a good part of his life in mortal terror of persecution lest his work fail to meet the criteria of state authorities, which in this case constituted the practice of so-called Socialist Realism. It remains something of a miracle that he was able not only to survive, but to retain his artistic integrity, producing a body of work which, since his death, has attracted ever increasing attention and interest. The inevitable result of his unique situation was music that retains a quality of “doubleness,” as Richard Taruskin, one of our leading scholars in Russian music, has called it. As Taruskin has pointed out, Shostakovich would be the only Russian artist who, by the end of his life, was lauded by the official Soviet establishment as an example of the glorious achievements of socialism, yet also held the respect of the new, dissident, counterculture.

Today, as we Westerners listen to a Shostakovich symphony, we can marvel at the enormous expressive power of the music while we ponder its many texts and subtexts. The inner meanings of the music seem to be sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit as though expressed in code, and very often ambiguous, due to the abstract nature of music as suggested by Huneker. Although “the meddlesome hand of the censor” did intrude from time to time, the composer was able to present his own ideas in such a way that the listener could provide his or her own interpretation. For those interested in the inner workings of the language of music (musical semiotics), there is no more fertile ground than a symphony by Shostakovich.

Although even the most casual student of history will recognize October 1917 as the date of the Russian Revolution, less well known is the Revolution of 1905, a struggle which lasted slightly more than two years and which, although achieving only some of its aims, laid the groundwork for the October Revolution. On January 9 (Old Style Julian calendar) 1905, a huge crowd of protestors, by some accounts as large as 150,000, gathered at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, to present a petition to the Tsar, pleading for the correction of any number of social evils. The Tsar was not present, but palace guards fired on the crowd, killing and wounding hundreds. Among those present on “Bloody Sunday,” as it has come to be known, was Dmitri Boleslavovich Shostakovich, an engineer who worked at the government Bureau of Weights and Measures in St. Petersburg. A year later, Shostakovich’s son, the composer Dmitri Dmitriyevich, would be born and he would grow up hearing discussions of the events of 1905.

Although Shostakovich’s original plan was to complete his Eleventh Symphony in time for the 50th anniversary of the 1905 Revolution, for various personal reasons it was finished only in time to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution. The premiere took place in Moscow on 30 October 1957, with another performance a few days later in St. Petersburg (called Leningrad at the time.) The new work was a great success with the Soviet establishment and the next year, Shostakovich was awarded a Lenin Prize. After two decades of living in fear of persecution, Shostakovich was well on the way to “rehabilitation” with the Party. Particularly pleasing to the authorities was the inclusion of numerous revolutionary and jail songs which would have been familiar to most Russians.

The symphony is laid out in four large movements which are played without pause. The work has a kind of cinematic quality, depicting four strikingly different

scenes and moods. (Shostakovich wrote a good deal of movie music throughout his career.) The opening movement, “The Palace Square”, acts as an atmospheric prologue for the events to come. Much of the movement is eerily quiet, with mysterious drum rolls and bugle calls in the distance, depicting the crowd waiting anxiously in the bitter cold. Two flutes introduce the first of the revolutionary songs, “Listen”, which then moves on through the orchestra. A second revolutionary tune, “The Prisoner,” appears later, first in cellos and basses and then in the full orchestra. The music then quiets down, with bassoons playing “Listen “one more time and returning again to the opening eerie palace music.

The second movement, “The Ninth of January,” begins with agitated rhythms. Two new melodies are heard, “Oh Tsar, Our Little Father,” and “Bare your Heads on This Sad Day” and the music grows in turbulence. The music reaches two enormous climaxes as these two melodies are repeated obsessively time and time again. After a brief quiet passage, all Hades breaks loose into a violent fugue accompanied by gunshots in an amazingly realistic depiction of violence. Then, after a brief silence the opening eerie palace music returns, this time using the mechanical, chilly sound of a celeste. At the end we hear a poignant repeat of “Listen” in the flutes as well as a part of “Oh Tsar, Our Little Father” as the music dies away.

The third movement, called “Eternal Memory,” is a dirge, employing a beautifully poignant melody that appeared often in Soviet films, “Funeral March of the Workers.” The brass introduce another melody, “Hail, Free word of Liberty,” and fragments of tunes already heard in earlier movements reappear. The music builds to a huge climax expressing an enormous outpouring of grief and rage at the horrible events. Finally, the funeral march returns and the movement ends quietly.

The finale, called “The Tocsin” (Alarm), is essentially a wildly sinister march, showing the strong influence of one of Shostakovich’s favorite composers, Gustav Mahler. Two new tunes appear, “Rage Tyrants” and “Varshavianka,” accompanied occasionally by fragments of tunes heard earlier. After a frantic climax, the opening quiet palace music returns for the last time. Then an English horn is heard, playing “Bare Your Heads on This Sad Day.” (Is there another composer who could make a single instrument sound as lonely and desolate?) Finally, the music erupts into an explosively tragic ending.

The preceding account was taken at face value by the Soviet establishment and, according to oral histories of the period, there were listeners who were disappointed that the composer had sold out to produce a work that toed the Party line. Other listeners, however, heard deeper meanings. The Soviet intelligentsia had been horrified at their government’s brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, resulting in thousands of deaths. There is good reason to believe that the gunshots of the second movement of the symphony represented also the brutality of his own government in the composer’s mind. The lament that follows could also be very well taken as a lament, not only for the victims of the Hungarian uprising but for the millions of Russians who had had suffered in Stalin’s purges. (Stalin had died in 1953.) The ending of the Eleventh Symphony was not the triumphantly optimistic ending that Socialist Realism usually required, and it has been pointed out that this symphony is the most consistently tragic of any that Shostakovich wrote.

And so the question remains, is the Eleventh Symphony a celebration of the Russian Revolution or a critique of its excesses and abuses? Do we choose text or subtext? It is for each listener to decide, but if the political significance of his work remains ambiguous, what is not ambiguous is the enormous power and mastery of Shostakovich's art. Music was perhaps not a playground but rather a battlefield for this "great, brave soul."

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