

Aaron Copland

Composer (1900 – 1990)



The Brooklyn-born Copland was known as “the dean of American composers,” a creator of concert and film music, as well as an accomplished pianist. At age 15, after attending a concert by composer-pianist IGNACE PADREWSKI, Copland decided to become a composer, and he took formal lessons in harmony, theory, and composition. He went to Paris for further study, intending to stay abroad for one year, but he stretched it to three, returning to America in 1925.

In the late 1920s, he and his friend Roger Sessions began the Copland-Sessions concerts, dedicated to presenting the works of young composers. About the same time his plans for an American music festival materialized as the Yaddo Festival of American Music (1932). By the mid-30s Copland had become not only one of the most popular composers in the country, but a leader of American classical musicians.

In his search for the widest audience, Copland began composing for the movies. Among his most popular compositions for film are those for *Of Mice and Men* (1939), *Our Town* (1940), and *The Heiress* (1949), which won him an Academy Award. Copland began composing for ballet with his highly successful *Billy the Kid* (1939), and followed that with two more popular ballet scores: Agnes DeMille’s *Rodeo* (1942) and Martha Graham’s *Appalachian Spring* (1944), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. An important and successful composition from this time was *A Lincoln Portrait*, followed by *Fanfare for the Common Man* (both 1942), both patriotic standards. His *Third Symphony*, composed in the mid 40s, is the most popular American symphony of the 20th Century.

Copland’s *Clarinet Concerto* (1948), scored for solo clarinet, strings, harp, and piano, was a commissioned piece for bandleader BENNY GOODMAN, and a complement to Copland’s earlier jazzy work, *The Piano Concerto*. In 1954, Copland was commissioned by RICHARD RODGERS and Oscar Hammerstein to create music for the opera *The Tender Land*, based on James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

He did more conducting and less writing in the 1960s and 1970s, and by 1980, his health began to deteriorate. He died of respiratory failure in North Tarrytown, New York in 1990, a Centurion for four decades.