

Three Indispensable American Composers: Gershwin, Barber, Copland

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AMERICAN CONCERT MUSIC: WHY INDIPENSABLE?

On March 7, 1928, a party was given in honor of **Maurice Ravel**, who was in New York for the start of his one and only North American tour. One of the guests in the home of American mezzo-soprano Eva Gauthier that evening was **George Gershwin** (1898-1937) a successful Broadway composer whose ***Funny Girl*** was a current hit at the time. At one point in the evening the young American was asked to entertain the guests with *Rhapsody in Blue*. Gershwin obliged and followed it up with a medley of some of his songs.

Ravel was amazed by Gershwin's technical command of the piano and by his melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic genius. When he finished playing Gershwin asked Ravel if the master composer would consider giving his much younger American colleague a few lessons in composition. Their conversation remained private, although Ravel supposedly replied in French: "***Je n'ai rien à vous apprendre, mon ami!***" (*I've nothing to teach you, my friend!*)

Ravel later consoled Gershwin in a letter, saying: "***Pourquoi être un Ravel de second ordre alors que vous êtes déjà un Gershwin de premier ordre?***" (*Why be a second-rate Ravel when you're already a first-rate Gershwin?*)

The point of that little story is to remind us of the – bluntly said – inferiority complex that American concert music and its creators overcame thanks to the genius of composers like George Gershwin. He and others, notably Samuel Barber and Aaron Copland defined with their works an authentically American and legitimately serious music that still utilized quintessentially American folk melodies and jazzy rhythms with no self-consciousness. Gershwin wrote for Broadway. Copland wrote for dance companies and film scores. Barber wrote for all kinds of instrumental and choral ensembles. They made a living writing music.

THE MUSIC IN THIS LECTURE

George Gershwin – *Rhapsody in Blue*

Samuel Barber – *Adagio for Strings*

Aaron Copland – *Appalachian Spring*



Guests at a party in the Manhattan residence of singer Eva Gauthier pose for the camera, with Maurice Ravel at the piano and George Gershwin to the right of the picture.

Listen for the use of Jazz and Ragtime riffs, Cuban “clave” rhythm, “stolen” time, blue notes, stride piano: Maurice Ravel was right! Commissioned and first performed by bandleader **Paul Whiteman** in 1924, ***Rhapsody in Blue*** was originally orchestrated for jazz band by **Ferde Grofé**. Gershwin himself was the piano soloist in the original performance.

Olin Downes, the N.Y. Times principal music critic wrote: *“This composition shows extraordinary talent, as it shows a young composer with aims that go far beyond those of his ilk, struggling with a form of which he is far from being master...Despite all this, he has expressed himself in a significant and, overall, highly original form... The audience was stirred and many a hardened concertgoer excited with the sensation of a new talent finding its voice”*

***Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) <https://youtu.be/Ce3OERuCY0E>**

Camerata Salzburg conducted by Lionel Bringuier - Aug 12 2016



Yuja Wang, piano



Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Alternatively worshiped by some and despised by other members of the music establishment, **Samuel Barber** was a holdout who fiercely walked to the beat of his own drum, writing melodic, Romantic, tonal music in the middle of the often musically dissonant 20th century. Those composers, who, like Barber, refused to write the kind of atonal music that followed the dictates of Arnold Schoenberg, the founder of the Second Viennese School, who summarily pronounced all tonal (melodic) music was dead, were derided as rubes and sellout retrogrades. Barber stuck to his guns. We are lucky to have had him.

In January 1938 Barber sent an orchestrated version of his *Adagio for Strings* to **Arturo Toscanini**, who returned the score without comment. The young Barber was heartbroken. Toscanini then sent word that he was planning to perform the piece and that he had returned it simply because he had already memorized it.



On November 5, 1938, Toscanini conducted by memory the first performance, a radio broadcast which was recorded for posterity. *Adagio for Strings* begins softly with a melody that first ascends, then descends with subtly changing rhythms. After four climactic chords the piece presents the opening theme again, and fades away.

Olin Downes, NY Times Music Critic wrote: “...we have here honest music, by an honest musician, not striving for pretentious effect...”

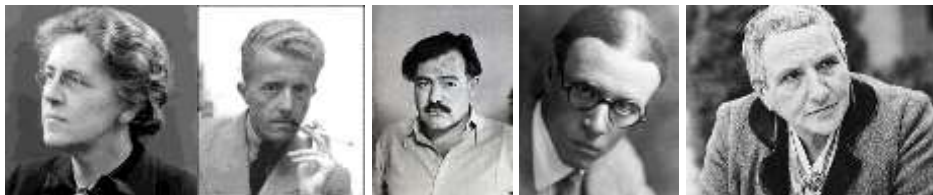
Adagio for Strings (1938) <https://youtu.be/N3MHeNt6Yjs>



Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Born into a working-class Jewish family in which the mother was the anchor and the father the provider, the young Aaron Copland was lucky to have some of the opportunities that some other composers lacked.

After the Great War and some initial musical training in New York he went to Paris to study with **Nadia Boulanger**. He remained in Paris for three years, coming under the influence of some of the great artists of his day, including American expatriates **Paul Bowles**, **Ernest Hemmingway**, **Sinclair Lewis**, and **Gertrude Stein**.



L to R: Nadia Boulanger, Paul Bowles, Ernest Hemmingway, Sinclair Lewis, and Gertrude Stein.



L to R: Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Walker Evans.

After his return to the United States in 1925, the young Copland fell in with **Alfred Stieglitz** and his circle, where he rubbed elbows with photographers **Paul Strand**, **Ansel Adams**, **Walker Evans**, and their muse **Georgia O'Keeffe**.



In New York Copland fell in love with the jazz of **Louis Armstrong** and the singing of blues singer **Bessie Smith**.



L to R: **Roger Sessions**, **Roy Harris**, **Virgil Thomson**, and **Walter Piston**

He then joined forces with four other American composers, **Roger Sessions**, **Roy Harris**, **Virgil Thomson**, and **Walter Piston**. They promoted and played each other's compositions, no matter how different from each other. But while other composers chose to follow the academic path, Copland remained first and foremost a free-lance composer and conductor, becoming a passionate advocate for a democratic form of music: American to the core, with the kind of tunefulness and vibrancy that made it readily comprehensible to a large audience.

Copland, a survivor if there ever was one, lectured, wrote musical criticism, taught, wrote for Hollywood, conducted, played, all the while living in very modest conditions in a one-room studio above Carnegie Hall.

Dance music by American composers – the vernacular kind of music that folks dance to in big city bars, cabarets, and saloons, and in small town square dances and high school proms, has been around for quite a while. On the other hand, music that professional dancers with perfect physiques dance to in the concert hall - the kind of dance favored by Europeans since the Paris of the 1600's wasn't readily embraced in America until the first generation of pioneers of American Modern Dance – **Martha Graham**, **Doris Humphrey**, **Charles Weidman**, and **José Limon** – stated unequivocally that it was OK to dance barefoot, often in everyday clothes, and swivel the hips and hop and jump and shimmy and swing to the rhythms of jazz and hoedown music.



L to R: Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman



L to R: José Limón, Busby Berkeley, and Fred Astaire



L to R: Gene Kelly, Donald O' Connor, Ginger Rogers, and Cyd Charisse

Hollywood gave opportunities and steady work to dancers and choreographers like **Busby Berkeley** and **Fred Astaire** and **Gene Kelly** and **Donald O' Connor** and **Ginger Rogers** and **Cyd Charisse**, and made composers like **George Gershwin** household names outside New York City, but on the other hand, artists like **Martha Graham** struggled for years.

The pioneers of American Modern Dance paved the way for succeeding generations of American-born and naturalized American choreographers who came on the scene and gradually re-invented the language of classical dance and made it 100% American.

New works had to be created for the *New York City Ballet* and for smaller companies springing up around the country and touring the hinterlands. All the while a new generation of dancers and choreographers

developed their art to feed a new audience hungry for the kind of dancing that spoke to it. Some of it was first composed and then dances were made for it. Some other works were conceived from the start to be danced.

Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* was commissioned by choreographer **Martha Graham** and premiered in 1944. The work originally featured a small ensemble of instrumentalists and was later re-orchestrated by the composer for chamber orchestra.

Shortly before the premiere, Graham suggested the title be changed to *Appalachian Spring*, rather than Copland's original *Ballet for Martha*. The title was inspired by Hart Crane's poem, *O Appalachian Spring!*

"I gained the ledge; Steep, inaccessible smile that eastward bends and northward reaches in that violet wedge of Adirondacks!"

When people told Copland how he had captured the beauty of the arrival of spring in the Appalachians, he graciously thanked them, even though the spring in Hart Crane's poem simply describes a source of water in the ground. But then, that's the beauty of music, as it creates unpredictable images in the mind of the listener.

The images: a spring celebration by a pioneer couple in the 19th century after building a new farmhouse... a preacher...his congregation... dancing...praying...celebrating the birth of a baby...

Appalachian Spring (1944) <https://youtu.be/ilwWfFQwLmE>

Choreography and Costumes by Martha Graham Music by Aaron Copland

Set by Isamu Noguchi Original lighting by Jean Rosenthal, adapted by Beverly Emmons

The Bride - Anne O'Donnell; The Husband - Lloyd Mayor; The Preacher - Lloyd Knight

The Pioneering Woman - Natasha Diamond Walker

The Followers - So Young An, Laurel Dalley Smith, Marzia Memoli, and Anne Souder.