



AARON COPLAND
Piano Sonata • Piano Fantasy
Benjamin Pasternack



Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Piano Sonata · Piano Fantasy

Other than for orchestra, solo piano music is the most extensive area in the output of Aaron Copland. It also covers the largest timespan, from *Scherzo Humoristique: The Cat and the Mouse* of 1920, written towards the end of Copland's study with Rubin Goldmark, to *Proclamation*, which, begun in 1973 and realised nine years later, was to remain his last original composition. Although featuring numerous occasional pieces and miniatures, three works occupy crucial positions in the context of his composing. Together they give a telling overview of the intensely serious side of a figure whose more 'popular' music inevitably typifies him to the wider public.

Having spent the latter 1920s pursuing a fusion of jazz idioms with the neo-classical techniques refined during his period of study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, Copland changed tack at the end of the decade, adopting a formidably abstract and concentrated approach. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the *Piano Variations*, composed during January-October 1930 and first performed by the composer, himself a fine pianist, at a League of Composers Concert in New York on 4th January the following year. There the music's uncompromising austerity polarised the reactions of critics and audience alike. Much of its rigour and concision is determined by the theme, a five-note motif first heard in the eleven-bar idea that opens the work and which, as Copland pointed out, is actually the first variation. The twenty variations

follow each other with minimal disruption, contrasts between them being absorbed into the musical flow as it follows an inevitable and intensifying trajectory. Much is made of the differing emphasis on four- and five-note figures, as also with the frequent changes of time signature, while the massive chords which end the work ideally need the third, sustaining pedal if their impact is to be fully conveyed.

Copland's shift to a more populist and approachable idiom in the mid-1930s, in line with the more inclusive social and cultural outlook adopted in the United States during that period, quickly led to his becoming the leading American composer of his generation, typified by such pieces as the orchestral showpiece *El Salón México* (1936), the ballet *Billy the Kid* (1938) and the tone poem *Quiet City* (1939). In 1939, however, he began a work which is very different in its musical preoccupations, one which took him almost two years to complete, and which stands appreciably apart from the music of this period. First given by the composer in Buenos Aires on 21st October 1941, and dedicated to the playwright Clifford Odets, the *Piano Sonata* is among Copland's most inward and personal statements.

The three movements of the sonata follow the slow-fast-slow format often favoured in the twentieth century. The *Molto moderato* first movement opens with two commanding 'motto' ideas - the initial descending motif spawning a lyrical theme which acts as the second subject in what is

basically a sonata-form design. The development section adopts a livelier manner, before the music regains its pensive initial mood. The *Vivace* second movement is a scherzo in which the jazz influences of Copland's earlier years are deployed in intricate and subtle ways. Its central trio stems closely from the opening bars and, for all its greater inwardness, scarcely disrupts the prevailing motion. The *Andante sostenuto* finale draws on ideas from its predecessors in a sustained threnody of quiet grandeur, arriving at a coda which, audibly derived from the opening of the first movement, crystallizes the harmonic and rhythmic content of the work in an aura of transcendental calm.

The decade after the *Piano Sonata* saw the production of some of Copland's most successful pieces, including the ballets *Rodeo* (1942) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), the *Clarinet Concerto* (1948) and the two sets of *Old American Songs* (1952). The culmination of what might be termed his American idiom was the opera *The Tender Land* (1954). He then embarked on a series of works that, conflating serial technique with tonal procedure in imaginative and individual ways, confirmed his awareness of the wider compositional picture. Around this time, Copland planned a piano concerto for the young American virtuoso William Kapell, but the latter's death through a plane crash in 1953 effectively put paid to the project. Existing sketches instead found their way into the *Piano Fantasy* which, begun in 1955 and completed two years later, was dedicated to Kapell's memory.

At just over half-an-hour in duration, this is among Copland's most ambitious works in any genre, and the single-movement format places notable demands on the performer's stamina as well as on the listener's concentration. Serial procedures are freely employed, such that the overall feel is discernibly, though far from 'classic-ally' tonal. The opening features a ten-note scale (four descending and six ascending notes) that, along with the two omitted notes of the chromatic scale which act as a punctuating cadence, forms the motivic nucleus of the whole piece. The first part of what is effectively a three-part design continues with a more lyrical section, then a fast toccata-like passage which itself is rounded off by a tranquil pastorale. The second part is an extensive scherzo, of a rhythmic fluidity which recalls Copland's music of the early 1930s, and with a central trio whose playfulness disguises some exacting interplay between the two hands. A varied recall of the scherzo music leads straight into the work's dynamic and emotional apex, following which, the third part returns to the material of the first in a far from literal reprise. A quiet coda then touches on aspects of the initial scale, before reaching a calm and fulfilled close.

All three works included here display an acute awareness of classical precedent, together with an intellectual toughness which, though unlikely ever to achieve widespread popularity, amply confirms Copland's standing as among the most significant creative figures of the twentieth century.

Richard Whitehouse

Benjamin Pasternack

Among the most experienced and versatile musicians today, the American pianist Benjamin Pasternack has performed as soloist, recitalist and chamber musician on four continents. His orchestral engagements have included appearances as soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Orchestre Symphonique de Québec, the Tonhalle Orchestra of Zurich, the New Japan Philharmonic, the Pacific Symphony, the New Jersey Symphony, the Orchestre National de France, the SWR Orchestra of Stuttgart, the Bamberg Symphony and the Düsseldorf Symphony Orchestras. Among the many illustrious conductors with whom he has collaborated are Seiji Ozawa, Erich Leinsdorf, David Zinman, Gunther Schuller, Leon Fleisher and Carl St. Clair. He has performed as soloist with the Boston Symphony on more than a score of occasions, at concerts in Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, in Athens, Salzburg and Paris on their European tour of 1991, and in São Paulo, Buenos Aires and Caracas on their South American tour of 1992. He has been guest artist at the Tanglewood Music Center, the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, the Seattle Chamber Music Festival, the Minnesota Orchestra Sommerfest, the Festival de Capuchos in Portugal, and the Festival de Menton in France, and has been featured as soloist twice on National Public Radio's nationally syndicated show 'SymphonyCast'. A native of Philadelphia, Benjamin Pasternack entered the Curtis Institute of Music at the age of thirteen, studying with Mieczyslaw Horszowski and Rudolf Serkin. He was the Grand Prize winner of the inaugural World Music Masters Piano Competition held in Paris and Nice in July 1989. Bestowed by the unanimous vote of a distinguished panel of judges, the honour carried with it a \$30,000 award and engagements in Portugal, France, Canada, Switzerland and the United States. An earlier competition victory came in August 1988 when he won the highest prize awarded at the Fortieth Busoni International Piano Competition. After fourteen years on the piano faculty of Boston University, he joined the piano faculty of the Peabody Conservatory of Music in September 1997.

Playing
Time:
63:08

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AARON COPLAND

(1900-1990)

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|---|--------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Piano Fantasy (1955-57) | 29:19 |
| | Piano Sonata (1939-41) | 21:56 |
| 2 | I Molto moderato | 7:59 |
| 3 | II Vivace | 5:00 |
| 4 | III Andante sostenuto | 8:57 |
| 5 | Piano Variations (1930) | 11:53 |

Benjamin Pasternack, Piano

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Engineer: Norbert Kraft • Editor: Bonnie Silver

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(American artist, 1904-81) (Courtesy of Vance Kirkland

Studio, Denver, Colorado, U.S.A.)

American flag, folk artist, 1880s



AMERICAN CLASSICS

Solo piano music was as important to Aaron Copland as his more widely known and recorded orchestral music. Copland's first major work for the instrument, the *Piano Variations*, was Bernstein's favourite piano work as a Harvard undergraduate. Variouslly described as "craggy" and "granitic", it was considered by Copland himself to have a "rightness", and he gave its première performance. The *Piano Sonata* (1939-41) is among Copland's most personal and profound statements, the rhythms of its dynamic central movement inspired by jazz. The single-movement *Piano Fantasy*, one of Copland's most evocative and virtuosic works in any genre, was likened by the composer himself to "a spontaneous and unpremeditated sequence of 'events' that would carry the listener irresistibly (if possible) from first note to last."

Booklet notes in English

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