

**Aaron Copland (1900-90):****Rodeo • Dance Panels • El Salón México • Danzón Cubano****Rodeo – Ballet in One Act (1942):  
Four Dance Episodes**

Copland produced three ballet scores between 1938 and 1944, and all three helped to establish him as a vital and special voice in 20th-century American music, one who could reach out and touch the average listener in a way that no-one had done previously and few have done since. *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring* created a uniquely American sound by using indigenous rhythms and songs, along with a palette of wide open harmonies which somehow managed to suggest the frontier days of the early American West. His most popular works are now part of our everyday lives.

*Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo* are both celebrations of that American West, but *Rodeo* also managed to give us a new way of looking at ourselves and relations between men and women. When Copland was first approached by dancer and choreographer Agnes de Mille to write what would be his second “cowboy ballet,” he was initially reluctant, remembering the success which *Billy the Kid* had in 1938, and wondering if he could repeat it. In fact, their first meeting was decidedly unfriendly and antagonistic, but a seed of some sort was planted, and Copland called her back the very next day with a request to get together again. The result of this collaboration became a landmark in American dance history. The actual commission for the ballet came from a most unlikely source, namely the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, a company with a solidly classical repertoire grounded in 19th-century European tradition, and which had moved to the U.S. during World War II. This was part of Copland’s initial hesitation, as he could not imagine this company handling a modern American style of dancing. (For the record, Antal Dorati, former music director of the DSO, was at one time music director of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.)

*Rodeo*, subtitled *The Courting at Burnt Ranch*, was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in October of 1942, and was a huge success,

garnering no fewer than 22 curtain calls from a standing, cheering audience. The ballet tells the story of the Cowgirl, a tomboy in search of love. Agnes de Mille later admitted that this character, who is a misfit among the people in her community, was based on her own life as a young woman. As she said, the Cowgirl “...acts like a boy, not to be a boy, but to be liked by the boys.” This Cowgirl, who is accomplished in all of the skills of a cowboy, wants to be attractive to the Head Wrangler on a ranch, and initially tries to impress him by being one of the boys. He is unimpressed by this, but at the end of the ballet, when she changes from her cowboy clothes into a lovely dress and shows a decidedly more feminine character, he falls for her in a big way. The ballet ends with the two of them engaging in a flamboyant kiss in the middle of the dancing. In de Mille’s words, it was “*The Taming of the Shrew* with cowboys,” and it is worth noting that she danced the role of the Cowgirl in the original production. In a later television interview, she said, “The theme is old, American and basic: how to get a suitable man.”

Enough cannot be said about how much de Mille’s stunning, ground-breaking choreography contributed to the enormous success of *Rodeo*, and in so doing, revolutionized the whole concept of what ballet could be. The niece of legendary film director Cecil B. de Mille, she created a unique and eye-popping style of dancing for the men derived from horseback riding and cattle roping. She initially had great difficulty finding dancers for the new work because the technique of classical ballet did little to prepare them for the vigorous and sometimes awkward movements her choreography demanded.

The ballet as originally staged consisted of five segments: *Buckaroo Holiday*, *Ranch House Party*, *Corral Nocturne*, *Saturday Night Waltz*, and *Hoe-Down*, along with some connecting material between the segments. When Copland created the very popular *Four Dance Episodes* from the ballet, he omitted the *Ranch House Party* segment and the connecting music, leaving the other four segments mostly intact.

**Dance Panels: A Ballet in Seven Sections  
(1959, rev. 1962)**

Copland wrote six ballets in the course of his illustrious career, three of which have become American classics: *Appalachian Spring*, *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*. By contrast, the other three (*Grohg*, *Hear Ye! Hear Ye!* and *Dance Panels*) are hardly known at all. Of these works for the dance, *Grohg* was the first (1925) and *Dance Panels* the last (1959, revised in 1962).

The origins of *Dance Panels* go all the way back to 1944, when the celebrated choreographer Jerome Robbins, following on the great success of Leonard Bernstein’s ballet *Fancy Free*, approached Copland about the possibility of a collaboration on a work which was to be titled *Bye-Bye Jackie*, all about a young lad who joins the Navy. This project came to naught, but in 1954 Robbins directed the première production of Copland’s opera *The Tender Land*, at which time he again proposed a ballet, this time all about a bullfight, but the idea was never seriously considered. Then, in early 1959, the two men got together with a shared concept about a full-length ballet without a story line which would be based on a series of dances, mainly waltzes. Robbins formally commissioned the work from Copland in that year, and with the tentative title of *Theater Waltzes*, described the proposed work as follows: “The originating idea is to do a ballet which presents the style, youth, technical competence, theatrical qualities and personalities of the company [Robbins’ short-lived company called Ballets: U.S.A.] in pure dance terms. The technique is essentially classic ballet (in the way that Americans employ it) and to make the whole ballet a declarative statement – open, positive, inventive, joyous (rather than introspective) – a parade; a presentation; perhaps elegant, witty, tender and with a sure technique... It should say, this is Dance; it’s the way we use our European heritage (classic technique) in America.”

Copland set to work on the ballet immediately, and hoped that it would be given its première at the famous Spoleto Festival in Italy that summer. Robbins asked that the orchestra be a small one, and Copland obliged by utilizing what is essentially a chamber ensemble with only

six woodwinds and five brass. Then, a curious thing happened. Copland played the score on the piano for Robbins who went into rehearsal right away, but when he began working with the company he could not remember the music – only the rhythmic counts – and became captivated by what the dancers were doing without the music. So it was that he continued in this vein and did not use Copland’s score at all. As Robbins later recalled, “I was sorry I wasn’t able to do *Dance Panels*, but in a very real way, Aaron’s music was the accidental genesis of my ballet without music, *Moves*.” Nothing more happened until 1962, when the Bavarian State Opera in Munich asked Copland if they could mount the work as part of the celebrations surrounding the opening of their new house that November.

Copland was asked to conduct the performance, and although he and the Opera’s management tried to get Robbins to do the choreography, he declined to do so. Two other choreographers were approached, including Eugene Loring (who had done the original production of *Billy the Kid*), but nothing worked out. Finally, Heinz Rosen, the music director of the Opera, decided to stage it himself, and brought in two principals outside the company, one from the New York City Ballet and the other from the Paris Opera. Unfortunately, a whole string of problems ensued which undermined the performance, which was not a success, and as Copland sadly wrote in his diary, “Somebody, some day will make a good ballet out of the piece – it’s so very danceable, but I’m afraid it’s a lost cause here.” In 1965 the New York City Ballet mounted a version of the ballet with a bizarre story line under the title *Shadow’d Ground*, but it found no favor with audience or critics.

Because of the fact there was no plot to the original, and because it is marvelously well-constructed, *Dance Panels* works beautifully as a concert work, and with the original title was given its first performance in this way as part of the Ojai Festival in California in May of 1966 conducted by Ingolf Dahl. The work consists of seven contrasting sections, each one of which has its own individual character, and the first and last sections which mirror each other are slow, quiet waltzes.

**El Salón México (1932, rev. 1936)**

During a visit to Germany in 1927, Copland wrote to a friend, “It seems a long time since anyone has written an *España* or a *Boléro* – the kind of brilliant piece that everyone loves.” It was almost 10 years before he produced *El Salón México*, but it quickly became one of the most popular and frequently-played short orchestral works by any American composer. It was first performed in a two-piano version in New York in October of 1935, with Copland and John Kirkpatrick at the keyboards. Then, its orchestral première came in August of 1937 in Mexico City with Carlos Chávez conducting the Orquesta Sinfónica de México. The first U.S. performance was part of an NBC radio broadcast in May of 1938 with the famous NBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by – of all people – Sir Adrian Boult. The first actual U.S. concert performance was given by Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in October of that year.

About this brilliantly-scored and dynamic work, Copland wrote:

“During my first visit to Mexico in the fall of 1932 I conceived the idea of writing a piece based on Mexican themes... From the very beginning, the idea of writing a work based on popular Mexican melodies was connected in my mind with a popular dance hall in Mexico City called *Salón México*... All that I could hope to do was to reflect the Mexico of the tourists, and that is why I thought of *Salón México*, because in that ‘hot spot’ one felt, in a very natural and unaffected way, a close contact with the Mexican people... Something of [their] spirit is what I hope to have put into my music.” When Copland first visited the dance hall he was quite taken aback when he was frisked by a guard before entering, but greatly amused by a sign on the wall which read: “Please don’t throw lighted cigarette butts on the floor so the ladies don’t burn their feet.”

As he was writing the work he became concerned that as an “outsider” he might not be able to do what he intended: “I felt nervous about what the Mexicans might think of a ‘gringo’ meddling with their native melodies.” These fears were quickly put to rest when, “at the first of the final rehearsals I attended... as I entered the hall the orchestral players, who were in the middle of a Beethoven symphony, suddenly stopped what they were doing and began to applaud vigorously.” That première performance on August 27, 1937 was a great critical and popular success, one local critic writing that “Copland has composed Mexican music... embodying the very elements of our folk song in the purest and most perfect form.” The work is based on several authentic Mexican folk tunes from two major collections he was given (not from any of the tunes he heard in the dance hall), but “based on” is the operative phrase, as Copland had no qualms about changing and adapting the originals as he saw fit. As he mentioned to Vivian Perlis for her remarkable two-volume biography of the composer, “My purpose was not to quote literally, but to heighten without in any way falsifying the natural simplicity of the Mexican tunes.”

**Danzón Cubano (1942, rev. 1945)**

In 1941, when it seemed likely that the U.S. might become directly involved in the armed conflicts in Europe and Asia, our government embarked on a scheme to strengthen the ties which already existed with our neighbors to the south. As part of this effort, Copland was dispatched as a kind of cultural ambassador on a friendship tour of nine Latin-American countries. In 1937 he had happily visited Cuba on the way home from the première of *El Salón México* in Mexico City, and the fond memories he had of that country made him eager to return to Havana. While there in 1941, he went to a large dance hall (rather like a Cuban version of *Salón México*) in which there were two orchestras playing at both ends of the hall. Copland decided to sit right in the middle so he could hear both ensembles at the same time, an arrangement which Charles Ives would have loved!

During this visit Copland made quite a number of sketches of popular Cuban dance music.

What eventually became the *Danzón Cubano* resulted from a commission from the League of American Composers for a concert in 1942 marking that organization's 20th birthday. The original, two-piano version of the piece was given its première by the composer and Leonard Bernstein in December of that year in New York's famous Town Hall. Copland came up with several titles for the work before settling on *Danzón Cubano* for the première of the orchestral version given by Reginald Stewart and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in February of 1946. Just as he had done with *El Salón México*, Copland wanted to utilize authentic native forms, rather than the commercialized Cuban ballroom dances of the day. Again, to quote Copland from the Vivian Perlis biography, "[the work] is based on Cuban dance rhythms, particularly the *Danzón*, a stately dance quite different from the rhumba, conga and tango, and one that fulfills a function rather similar to that of the waltz in our own music, providing contrast to some of the more animated dances. The special charm of the *Danzón*

is a certain naïve sophistication. Its mood alternates between passages of rhythmic precision and a kind of non-sentimental sweetness under a nonchalant guise. Its success depends on being executed with precise rhythmic articulation." Because of the demands of the orchestral version, Copland asked for a slower tempo than that of the two-piano original, and in so doing brought into sharper focus many of the intricacies and rhythmic complexities which make the work so fascinating. As to the overall concept of the piece, Copland has written, "I did not attempt to reproduce an authentic Cuban sound, but felt free to add my own touches of displaced accents and unexpected silent beats. In fact, I arranged one of the tunes in the traditional 'blues rhythm,' giving the final product something of an inter-American flavor."

Charles Greenwell

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## Detroit Symphony Orchestra



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## Leonard Slatkin



Photo: Victor Mangona

Internationally renowned conductor Leonard Slatkin is currently Music Director of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and of the Orchestre National de Lyon and Principal Guest Conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. He is also the author of a new book entitled *Conducting Business*. His previous positions have included a seventeen-year tenure with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, a twelve-year tenure with the National Symphony as well as titled positions with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl, Philharmonia Orchestra of London, Nashville Symphony Orchestra and the New Orleans Philharmonic. Always committed to young people, Leonard Slatkin founded the National Conducting Institute and the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra and continues to work with student orchestras around the world. Born in Los Angeles, where his parents, conductor-violinist Felix Slatkin and cellist Eleanor Aller, were founding members of the Hollywood String Quartet, he began his musical studies on the violin and studied conducting with his father, followed by training with Walter Susskind at Aspen and Jean Morel at the Juilliard School. His more than 100 recordings have brought seven GRAMMY® Awards and 64 GRAMMY® Award nominations. He has received many other honours, including the 2003 NATIONAL Medal of Arts, France's Chevalier of the Legion of Honour and the League of American Orchestras' Gold Baton for service to American music.



# AMERICAN CLASSICS



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