

Aaron Copland
Complete Solo Piano Works, Volume 1



*David
Northington,
piano*



As one of America's greatest composers, Aaron Copland communicates effectively through his music to a wide range of audiences. Copland was concerned, especially in the mid-1930s, about the growing gulf between the general music audience and the living composer. He realized that modern composers "were in danger of working in a vacuum." He felt that it "made no sense to ignore [the public audience] and to continue writing as if they did not exist." Thus, he made a concerted effort to communicate not only to the musicians in academia but also to the music lovers in the general public.

Copland's music is often classified in two categories: the abstract and the accessible. While Copland's more abstract works for piano contain idiomatic writing for the instrument (Copland was a pianist himself and often performed his own works), they are not "pianistic" in the traditional sense of conventional writing for the piano. The works are characterized by striking dissonances, polychords, emphasis on single tones, exploitation of the extreme pitch and dynamic ranges of the keyboard, doubling of materials in both hands, use of major and minor harmonies as coloristic effects, an economical use of musical material, and the overarching theme of open space- both physically (extreme range of keyboard) and aesthetically (broad and grand gestures utilizing open octaves and open intervals of 5ths, 4ths, 3rds, etc). In general, his piano works are more of an orchestral nature, with many layers of colors and sounds occurring simultaneously.

Copland's more accessible music is characterized by a compositional approach Copland himself termed "imposed simplicity." This kind of music contains a melodic idiom that often incorporates material of the folk song genre; features diatonic, singable melodies; and champions a home-spun, easily listenable rhetoric. These more accessible works also often contain jazz elements, as Copland viewed jazz as an essentially "American" idiom that could be drawn upon as another kind of "folk song" source.

It must be made clear, however, that Copland never viewed his more accessible works as less "serious" than his more abstract compositions. He insisted that the dichotomy suggested by scholars and listeners between his "severe" and "simple" compositional styles was rather overemphasized. Copland concluded, "I prefer to think that I write my music from a single vision. When the results differ it is because I take into account with each new piece the purpose for which it is intended and the nature of the musical materials with which I begin to work." All of Copland's works represent his continuing attempt to forge a relationship between composer and audience- between modern music and contemporary life. His music truly speaks to everyone- common man and uncommon man alike.

Even through all the different styles written for various audiences- film and ballet scores arranged for solo piano, abstract works for the "serious" musician in academia, music for young students, music for the

Van Cliburn competition- there is always something uniquely *Copland* about the compositions. The compositions may sometimes be lyrical, sometimes strident and searing in harmonies, tone, and sound; sometimes declamatory, sometimes introspective; sometimes diatonic, sometimes strikingly dissonant with 9ths, 7ths, and even 12-tone techniques. Whatever the particular case, however, it is always apparent that Copland's style is a seamless blend - a very *American* blend - of the lyrical, the stark, the jazz, and the folk melody.

Scherzo Humoristique:

The Cat and the Mouse (1920)

This clever, programmatic work was written in the spring of 1920 when Copland was studying composition with Rubin Goldmark in Brooklyn. It shows the influence of Debussy and contains many coloristic flourishes up and down the keyboard (depicting the skittish activities of the sly creatures) that are not necessarily easy to execute. The final outcome between the cat and the mouse is for the listener to decide.

Three Moods (1920-1921)

Dedicated to pianist and composer Leo Smit, the *Three Moods* are just that: three short pieces colorfully depicting three different moods. *Embittered* is to be played rashly- in an animated manner; it features two main rhythmic motives, an energetic glissando, and large chords that move in rapid succession across the keyboard. *Wistful* is mostly soft (p-ppp),

rising to a forte level only once, and is predominated by the dotted rhythmic motive. Copland indicates that it should be played "feelingful." *Jazzy* is a lively fox trot with a contrasting middle section that is "quite slow" and rather "bluesy"; overall, this mood is characterized by an edgy humor. In all three moods, if not in a clear-cut ternary form, there is always at least some sense of return at the end of each piece.

Petit Portrait (ABE) (1921)

This very petite (one page) homage to his friend Abraham is based on a theme that uses just the notes A, B, and E. Copland explores various combinations of these notes with other pitches in a solemn, mostly subdued manner.

Passacaglia (1922)

As Copland's first "serious" piano work, it is a reflection of his time spent studying with Nadia Boulanger, who was known for her firmly established value of the art of disciplined writing. In addition to the dedication of the work, the clear-cut architecture and controlled handling of thematic material are homage to his teacher's influence. The work is based on the initial statement which consists of an eight-measure theme in G# minor; the eight variations are comprised of various treatments of the ground bass theme, including a variety of dissonant contrapuntal devices that culminate in a grand and expansive climax.

Sentimental Melody (1929)

Marked as a “slow dance,” this unhurried, yet captivating miniature is characterized by a lilting triplet figure and is in a one part form that is repeated with slight alterations. It relies heavily on the dominant seventh cadence and the diminished octave that enhance the jazzy and “bluesy” nature of this piece.

Variations (1930)

It is with this work that Copland first felt secure that he had his own writing style; the *Variations* is considered to be one of his most influential works. It has been used for both ballets (John Neumier) and solo dance compositions (Martha Graham), as well as an arrangement by Copland himself for orchestra. The piece is dedicated to his friend and American writer, Gerald Sykes.

The overall mood of the work is dramatic, stark, and percussive. The initial statement is a grave, ten-measure theme that explores aspects of serial composition adapted to Copland’s personal style. Ten of the twelve tones are utilized in the theme itself (including melody and harmonization), but the main motif consists of four tones: E, C, D#/Eb, and C#. Twenty continuous variations and a coda follow, with the overall structure being one that builds architecturally and cumulatively in effect, each texture building solidly and quickly after another. In each of the tightly organized, economical variations, the four-note motif and the intervallic relationships are inescapable to the listener even through the contrapuntally derived dissonance.

The Young Pioneers (1935)

Always concerned with young, developing musicians, Copland composed this piece at the invitation to contribute to an educational piano series published by Carl Fischer. The goal of the series was to broaden the musical horizons of the youth of the day and to attune their ears to contemporary music. “The Young Pioneers” refers not only to the American heritage but also to young students of music- pioneers exploring the new, “modern” compositional language of the early 20th century. Lively and fast, it is essentially a study in 7/8 time with its alternations between 3+4 and 4+3.

Sunday Afternoon Music (1935)

Also written for the Carl Fischer series, this piece serves as a direct contrast in style and mood to *The Young Pioneers*. Slow and lyrical, the entire piece is built around a single harmonic progression which is carefully explained at the top of the score. It is in the form of an extended, repeated phrase and serves as an excellent exercise in creating subtle color changes within the context of a soft dynamic.

Sonata (1939-1941)

Commissioned by playwright Clifford Odets, the *Sonata* is indisputably one of Copland’s greatest works for the piano. The composer himself asserted that it is a work that necessitates much careful, repeated study. He emphasized that while it does utilize dissonance, the work as a whole is predominantly consonant. The *Sonata* is set in a cyclic, three

movement form: slow, fast, slow.

The first movement is in a loose sonata-allegro form with an extensive exposition. The first theme of descending thirds is heard throughout the movement, while the second theme- similar in nature to the first- is more hidden in the texture. A tempo change to *Allegro* ushers in the development section which presents a lively, transformed second theme. A return to Tempo I marks a shortened recapitulation. The *Vivace* second movement is an animated rondo with a restless, agile first theme (reflective of jazz influences) and a thick, accented second theme of chords. A third theme is introduced in the middle of the movement and is later used as the melodic cell on which the final slow movement is based. The third movement is freer and more fantasy-like, with its long, slow chords that seem to flow continuously throughout the movement. The entire *Sonata* is tied together by the restatement of the principle theme of the first movement.

-Young Kim

At his debut recital, the *New York Times* called **David Northington** “an immensely gifted musician...who combines the technical mastery of a virtuoso with the musical sensitivity of a poet.” Such critical accolades have followed Northington throughout the world in concerts and concerto engagements. His tours have included the United States, eastern and western Europe, Canada, China, and Russia. David Northington’s masterful pianism has won him first prizes in the Concert Artists Guild Competition, the East/West Artists Competition, the American Music Scholarship Association’s International Competition, the unanimous Judges Prize at the Fourth Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition, and selection to the Artistic Ambassador Program sponsored by the United States Information Agency. As an Artistic Ambassador for the United States, Northington has toured extensively in France, Spain and Portugal. In addition to broadcasts throughout Europe on the Voice of America, he has filmed recitals for telecast on French National Television. The national honor society Phi Kappa Phi selected Northington for its 2010 triennial National Artist Award in recognition of his professional artistic accomplishments. Since receiving degrees at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and the Yale University School of Music, David Northington has taught on the faculties of several universities. Presently he is a Professor of Piano at the University of Tennessee School of Music. Mr. Northington has a previous recording on the Centaur label of the Chopin Waltzes (CRC2791).

Aaron Copland Complete Solo Piano Works, Volume 1

David Northington, piano

1 The Cat and the Mouse: Scherzo Humoristique (1920)	4:26
Three Moods (1920-21)	(4:44)
2 I Embittered	1:08
3 II Wistful	2:02
4 III Jazzy	1:33
5 Petit Portrait (1921)	1:39
6 Passacaglia (1922)	7:18
7 Sentimental Melody (1929)	1:48
8 Piano Variations (1930)	11:57
9 The Young Pioneers (1935)	1:01
10 Sunday Afternoon Music (1935)	1:56
Piano Sonata (1939-41)	(24:11)
11 I Molto moderato	8:14
12 II Vivace	5:22
13 III Andante sostenuto	10:34

Total Time: 59:07



CRC 3090

DDD



Recorded February – August, 2009 at the Alumni Building, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee. Produced by David Northington and William Ward. Engineered by William Ward. Piano Technician: Jim Coleman. Piano: Steinway D. Cover Photo: Donna Hundley. All works published by Boosey & Hawkes.