Concerto for Clarinet and String Orchestra with Harp and Piano
Aaron Copland
Note by Anna Reguero

Aaron Copland's music is a motion picture reel of mid-century Americana, with intervallic leaps that span the heights of the Appalachian Mountains and bouncy rhythms that seem plucked right from a rodeo horse's hoofs. Indeed, Copland sought to develop a uniquely American style of composition, which when combined with the notion that concert music should entertain the common man, produced iconic works such as *Appalachian Spring*, *Rodeo*, *Billy the Kid*, and *Fanfare for the Common Man*—all ubiquitous across popular culture, heard in television commercials, movies, and more.

In fact, his nationalistic music is often mistaken today for reflecting conservative American values—exampled most recently by a copycat of Copland's style in a 2011 anti-gay ad by Texan governor Rick Perry—when in truth, the composer was famously gay and liberal, to the extent that he was flagged for communist sympathies in the McCarthy era. Despite any unsubstantiated accusations (and continued misappropriations of his music), Copland rose to fame and remains one of the most celebrated and represented American composers across classical music history.

The composer developed his nationalist style of music largely through the incorporation of vernacular musics—particularly American popular music, folk music, and jazz. Copland's reputation caught the attention of famous bandleader and jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman, whose early classical music training led him to commission a number of clarinet works from composers such as Bartók (the *Contrasts*, commissioned in 1938) and Hindemith (the Clarinet Concerto, commissioned in 1947). Looking to commission an American composer, Goodman approached Copland about a clarinet concerto in 1947, paying $2000 for its creation, which also bought Goodman a two-year exclusivity agreement to performing the work.

While Goodman gave the official premiere on November 6, 1950 over the radio airwaves with the NBC Symphony under Fritz Reiner, he waited so long to perform the work that the agreement ran out and another clarinetist, Ralph McLane, gave the first public concert performance of the concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra merely weeks later.

Once the piece was completed, Goodman suggested revisions to pare down the difficulty. Goodman, a jazzer, lacked some of the technical chops to pull off the higher notes written into the score. Copland later wrote, "I knew Benny could reach that high because I had listened to his recordings. He explained that although he could comfortably reach that high when playing jazz for an audience, he might not be able to if he had read it from a score or for a recording." In a letter to Copland in 1952, Copland's former student Leonard Bernstein expressed criticisms about Goodman's capabilities, calling a recording of Goodman's performance "student-like." None the less, Copland attributed the concerto's success, over multiple performances together, to Goodman's authentic style.

The work lasted past the novelty stage to become standard repertoire for clarinetists today. Additionally, the work inspired choreography by Jerome Robbins for the New York City Ballet in 1951, "The Pied Piper" (with accounts of George Balanchine miming the clarinet part on stage for a performance during an international tour).

The Clarinet Concerto is structured in two movements, bridged by a punchy, jazz-infused cadenza. The opening movement, unusually in a ¾ meter, is slow and pensive, requiring the clarinet to effortlessly glide across extreme registral spans while maintaining a shimmering,

weightless tone quality. The second movement is a largely jazzy, free rondo filled with rollicking syncopations. The work's instrumentation is for strings, harp, and piano. "I did not have a large battery of percussion to achieve jazzy effects, so I used slapping basses and whacking harp sounds to simulate them," Copland told biographer Vivian Perlis. At the time of the commission, Copland was traveling in Latin America and appropriated a popular Brazilian folk tune heard in Rio as the secondary motif. Following a nervous coda, the concerto comes to a finish with a wailing, show-stopping glissando.