

AARON COPLAND

Gay US Composer (1900-1990)



He graduated from the Fontainebleau School of Music in 1921, having earned a reputation as a radical young composer. His first major composition, the Symphony for Organ and Orchestra (1924), was premiered by the New York Symphony. In the late 1920s, Copland turned to creating music with an American accent and, by the 1930s, he had become the acknowledged leader of young American composers. He is acclaimed for his balletic scores for Billy the Kid (1938), Rodeo (1942) and Appalachian Spring (1944) and for his film scores including Of Mice and Men (1939), Our Town (1940), The Red Pony and The Heiress (both 1948). Among Copland's most enduring works are A Lincoln Portrait and Fanfare for the Common Man (both 1942). The Third Symphony (1946), his most famous, is regarded by many as the greatest American symphony ever written. Copland was an affable, modest and mild-mannered man who valued friendships and thrived in social settings. Like many of his contemporaries, he guarded his privacy, especially in regard to his homosexuality, but was one of the few composers of his stature to live his life without pretense, often appearing in public with his male lovers. Copland is one of the most recognized 20th-century composers of classical music in the US. His honors, fellowships and awards include the Prix de Paris, the Congressional Gold Medal, The Kennedy Center Honors, The Pulitzer Prize, Grammy, Emmy and Oscar nominations and awards, Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowships, the Medal of Arts and the Medal of Freedom. He died of respiratory failure in 1990.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: Before today what did you know about the American composer Aaron Copland?
2. Read the biographical information on the Legacy web site. <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/aaron-copland>
3. Group Discussion: Aaron Copland was one of the most recognized and prized classical composers of the 20th century. Discuss how a classical composer could win The Congressional Gold Medal, a Grammy, an Emmy and Oscar nominations and awards and a Pulitzer Prize.
4. Extend knowledge: What challenges may Copland have faced in making his particular classical music popular across various genres? Did being an out gay man inhibit or help his work?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Use this link to listen to Copland's music: <https://open.spotify.com/artist/0nJvyjVTb8sAULPYyA1bqU>
2. Make a list of the pieces you enjoyed. Discuss and compare lists with someone in your group.
3. Do you hear a link between Copland's work and the music you listen to everyday?
4. Map out Copland's works on a timeline. Insert prominent historical events (wars, presidents, inventions, social happenings). How does Copland's work in composing and work in movies and theater compare to what was happening in the world?

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Describe to a fellow student how you think Copland's social life may have played a role in his success in the different arenas that his music was utilized (concerts, ballet, movies, television).
2. From your readings, make a list of the ways Aaron Copland may have been a role model for younger composers.
3. Which do you think were more influential in his composing: the fact that he was a Jewish New Yorker, gay musician; well traveled or that he simply was good at his profession? Make a list of pros and cons for each characteristic. Discuss your lists with someone in your group.
4. If you play an instrument, try to play a small segment of one of Copland's compositions. Try it as a rap. Try it with a rock or heavy metal sound. How do these changes fit with what you know about the composer?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Do you think that Aaron Copland would be criticized today for living his life without pretense and appearing in public with his boyfriends?
2. Write a short biography that could be placed on the back of his new CD.
3. Write the five to ten lines of print that would be under the internet news headline: "Music Magazine publishes composer's secret letter: Aaron Copland says, "YES, I'm Gay!"
4. Due to the various "minorities" that Aaron Copland could be grouped with, from which advocacy group do you think he should ask for help if a problem arose?