

ASO Program Notes

Billy the Kid Suite

Aaron Copland (1900 - 1990)

Aaron Copland was born in Brooklyn and grew up in his family's apartment over their general store on Washington Avenue. He went to school in Brooklyn and was the only musician in his family. His first exposure to composition was in high school, where he took lessons in the basics. It was enough to fire his imagination, and when he graduated he chose to go to Paris to study, staying four years and mastering the art of sophisticated composition. He was always interested in folk tunes and how they could be presented in fresh ways. In the mid-1930s he visited Mexico and adapted many of the tunes he heard into *El Salon Mexico*. This was so well-received that he was encouraged to do the same with American folk tunes. The perfect opportunity came when prominent director Lincoln Kirstein commissioned a suite of music for a ballet based on the young outlaw Billy the Kid. The result was an amazing evocation of the old west in America, incorporating old cowboy tunes, as well as original music, into a brilliant mix.

The suite of music that Copland pulled from the one-act ballet and adapted for orchestra was first performed in New York in 1941. "Street in a Frontier Town" is the most extensive section, where we first meet Billy as a boy of twelve. He and his mother encounter a street brawl which turns ugly, and Billy's mother is killed. Billy quickly grabs a knife from a cowhand's belt and stabs his mother's attackers. He runs away, beginning his brief career of crime, and the music describes crowd scenes, card games, gunfire, and reflective moments. In the section called "Running Gun Battle", Billy is ambushed by his former friend, Sheriff Pat Garrett. The music reflects a crowd of townspeople celebrating the outlaw's capture, complete with an out-of-tune piano. The ballet tells of his escape from jail and eventual death when he is once again caught by "the law", but Copland chose to omit this ending from his orchestral suite.

The account of Billy's life is fictional, of course. The real Billy, Henry McCarty, was born in New York as was Copland, headed west with his family in search of silver. His mother died of tuberculosis, not a gunshot, and his father abandoned him, after which he fell in with bad company and began his infamous criminal career. His life ended in a shoot-out at age 22. Legend has transformed him into a larger-than-life figure and the icon of the Old West we know.

Copland tells us he resolved to keep his music for the ballet simple - helping, but never pushing itself into the main event. Yet he clearly produced a work that has held its own as a beloved example of truly American music.

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