Politics and Art: The Music of Aaron Copland

In the spring of 1949, Aaron Copland urged attendees of the World Peace Conference to realign their thinking about communism. Attempting to demonstrate the destructive effect of narrow-mindedness, he spoke out against the dichotomous thinking that characterized the Cold War-era (DeLapp-Birkett). What was significant, however, is that Copland was not well-known for being a politician. Rather, Copland was a musical composer, famous for his “Piano Variations”and his modernist adaptions of dance-band jazz (Wilentz). Copland’s legacy of fusing artistic values with partisan politics set a precedent for the role of musicians in politics, and for an exploration of the interaction between political atmosphere and art. From his early views on communism to his stance on the Cold War and on Pan-Americanism (the belief that North and South America share commonalities), Copland used his musical compositions as an aesthetic expression of political opinions.

Copland’s musical career demonstrates how his political beliefs transformed over a short period of time. The composer’s earliest political affiliations were decidedly leftist, with strong communist undertones. Although Copland never actually joined the Communist Party, he frequently spoke of themes such as the “common man” and befriended many young people who were avid socialists. Copland’s piece “Fanfare for the Common Man”*,* composed in 1942, is a solemn work that portrays a fanfare in all its regality. “Fanfare” “evokes stately power” and represents the strength of a government supported by a left-leaning public, what many see as a direct nod to communism (Wilentz).

Copland’s associations with communism, however, became drastically transformed just eight years after the composition of “Fanfare”*.* Cold War politics included a strong distaste of anything remotely representative of Soviet culture or of socialism. Copland’s earlier compositions and speeches, however, were suspiciously indicative of an affinity toward communism. This naturally constituted a danger for Copland, particularly with regard to his popularity as a composer (DeLapp-Birkett). It was just at this time – in the early 1950s – that Copland released “Quartet for Piano and Strings”*,* a work that would become one of his most famous pieces. The piece was especially significant as it was a twelve-tone composition, which was considered the archetype of democracy and freedom. In fact, the twelve-tone genre was so expressive of liberty that it was completely outlawed by the Soviet government. In this way, Copland’s “Quartet for Piano and Strings” was viewed as an open statement of anti-communist politics (DeLapp-Birkett). According to Jennifer DeLapp-Birkett, this was no accident; Copland had used the piece to his advantage in order to change negative perceptions of his political affiliation. Whether this was true or not, the political significance of the twelve-tone composition indicates Copland’s ability to merge music and politics in a consequential way.

Apart from his focus on communism, Copland was also famous for using his music to promote Pan-Americanism. Pan-Americanism fosters the belief that all American countries share core commonalities, and this was a perspective eagerly adopted by Copland. Although the composer always evidenced an affinity for Latin America, he visited Central and South America multiple times throughout the 1940s and the 1960s, and these visits enforced his interest in Latin American music and culture. In particular, Copland’s trip to Mexico garnered a long-lasting friendship with musician Carlos Chavez and inspired the composition of “El Salon Mexico”*,* a Mexican-inspired orchestral piece. At the same time, trips to Argentina and other countries resulted in many other Latin-themed compositions, including “Danzon Cubano”and “Three Latin-American Sketches”*.* Moreover, Copland actively wrote about Latin American music, with a specifics promotion of Latin American folklore. This interest in Latin American music, however, was not without its political context. Copland’s proliferation of Latin American art and culture came at a time in which Northern and Southern American ties were being actively encouraged the U.S. government. President Roosevelt, anxious about the emerging fascism in Europe and Russia, established an effort to engage in diplomacy with South American nations. The campaign was known as the Good Neighbor Policy, and was associated with both political and economic interests (Hess). According to Carol Hes), although Copland soon came to re-evaluate his initial enthusiasm about Pan-Americanism, “Copland was most at home—and is most remembered—for his efforts during [Pan Americanism’s] peak period during the Roosevelt years” (239). Indeed, it appears that Copland was able to use his musical abilities to promote his political views.

Copland’s compositions demonstrate the fascinating links between music and politics. At the same time, though, it is important to understand the art-politics association as a dynamic interplay between two fields. Although some authors contend that Copland used his musical compositions to further his political beliefs, in truth, it seems more likely that these two passions fueled one another, while simultaneously evolving along with Copland’s developing perspective on the world. For example, Pan-Americanism caused a move away from Copland’s previously modernist orientation to a more simplistic style, so that his Latin American-inspired works both expressed his politics and were the result of his politics (Hess). One can also see how Copland’s communist affiliations shifted toward anti-socialism, but this may have been an expression of the shifting politics of America rather than a calculated effort at deception on Copland’s part. By examining Copland’s work and how his music interacted with his politics, a greater understanding of the interplay between art and politics is achieved.

Works Cited

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