

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR IN COPLAND: AN INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS  
OF HIS 1941 *PIANO SONATA*

by  
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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Aaron Copland's position in twentieth-century American musical culture afforded him opportunities not only as a composer, but also as a teacher, writer, critic, conductor, performer, and professional mentor of composers whom he favored. The result of such varied activities includes a body of writing that reveals his own thoughts on composition and music in general. His published work also includes discussion of music ranging far beyond his own era. Books including *The New Music*, *Music and Imagination*, *What to Listen for in Music*, *The Complete Copland*, and *Copland on Music* offer musical and biographical context for Copland's own compositions, an exploration of the role of imagination and interpretation in composing and performing, and an extensive discussion of the role of the listener in music.

Despite this wealth of material, Copland explicitly communicates very little about his own compositions. Examining his writing, therefore, raises an interesting question: what should we listen for in Copland? Through an exploration of his published writing, coupled with a thorough examination of his 1941 *Piano Sonata*, we can discover his views on musical interpretation, the ways in which his historical context impacts his ideas, and finally, the most interesting and important elements of the *Sonata*.

Creators of art in any form face the reality that the intent of their message and the meaning interpreted by the audience will likely be different. In the performing arts, however, this message is interpreted twice in the performance process, by the performer as well as the audience. To begin, I will explore the shared role of interpretation as Copland sees it. He believes that interpretation takes place through the creative process at

the composer's desk, and that this creative process is mirrored through the interpretive process. While these processes are vital to understanding Copland's music, the cumulative impact loses resonance if the listener does not approach the music with focus, intelligence, and an open mind. Copland is unequivocal on this point. We explore literary art and visual art with an active mind, observing and processing materials from the viewpoint of the artist as well as the time and place in which the artist works. Why, then, should we approach music any differently? If each participant in the interpretive process is appropriately involved, a shared interpretation in which the listener feels a connection with the composer as well as the performer should be possible.

Readers may note that the interpretive roles discussed above seem to exclude multiple groups, notably musicologists, music theorists, and music critics. In applying the framework of Copland's writing on interpretation (namely *What to Listen for in Music*), I will limit my discussion of roles to only those that Copland directly explores. I am not, however, suggesting that other musical disciplines do not have an effect on interpretation. Copland discusses analysis and historical context as vital parts of both the performer's and the listener's interpretive process. While I use the terms performer and interpreter interchangeably, it is worth noting that Copland chooses the word interpreter. He is writing about performing musicians, interpreting for a live audience. The concept of interpretation, however, applies equally to analysis, written commentary, and public lecture. I suggest that analysis plays an important role in interpretation, allowing us to and that it is not the exclusive property of either performers or theorists.

After exploring the interpretive process, I will outline the framing lens through which we can view the *Piano Sonata*. This lens provides the biographical background as

well as the cultural and historical context leading up to the years in which Copland composed the piece. Just as each member of the interpretive process has an effect on the resulting musical experience, the cultural and historical forces surrounding a composer exert a significant impact on the ideas they are trying to communicate through music. While I do not believe that the framing lens is necessary to enjoy Copland's music, I do argue that it provides an additional dimension of richness to the interpretive experience.

The framing lens will provide an appropriate context through which to explore Copland's *Sonata*, primarily examining the topics of rhythm, melody, sonority, and formal structure. I have sequenced these topics based on what Copland emphasizes in *What to Listen for in Music*. I suggest that this order also highlights the elements that make Copland's music most identifiable.

I believe that communication is a primary goal for any performer. For this reason, my analysis will focus on the musical details that I determine to be at the foreground of the interpretive process, most essential to the playing and listening experience. All of these musical aspects are linked to the basic question, *what do we want to hear when we listen to this music?* While this research is aimed primarily at pianists, listeners will indirectly benefit as well. With this in mind, I have included an appendix with suggested program notes designed to convey the ideas explored in this document to the listener.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Shared Role of Interpretation

*Music demands an alert mind of intellectual capacity, but it is far from being an intellectual exercise. Musical cerebration as a game for its own sake may fascinate a small minority of experts or specialists, but it has no true significance unless its rhythmic patterns and melodic designs, its harmonic tensions and expressive timbres penetrate the deepest layer of our subconscious mind. It is, in fact, the immediacy of this marriage of mind and heart, this very fusion of musical cerebration directed toward an emotionally purposeful end, that typifies the art of music and makes it different from all other arts.<sup>1</sup>*

“Art in any form communicates meaning.” Most readers will readily agree with this statement. But, if asked to assign specific meaning to a piece of music, it is far more difficult to reach a consensus. To further complicate things, consider who owns the process of assigning meaning to music. Is it the creator? Or, through interpretation, does the performer control meaning? Will the audience’s level of education, their mental and emotional state, and their preexisting biases toward the music or composer fundamentally distort the intended message?

Copland spent considerable time in his writings addressing the influence each of these elements has on interpretation. His aim was not to provide a specific answer to the above questions, but rather to explore the roles each participant plays in the process of assigning meaning to music. He addresses these questions early and often in his writing, before discussing musical specifics. Copland believes that, along with the musical details themselves, the ways in which the listener, composer, and interpreter participate in the musical experience exert a significant influence on musical meaning. The result is not a

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1. Aaron Copland, *Copland on Music* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 64-65.

single correct interpretation, but rather an interpretation that illuminates the composer's intent from a specific viewpoint.

### The Listener's Role

To Copland, the role of the listener in music requires emotion as well as intellect. First, listeners must be open-minded in their approach to a musical experience. This is especially important for the success of modern music. In a *New York Times* essay written in response to Henry Pleasants' 1955 book *The Agony of Modern Music*, Copland suggests that the perception of "agony" depends on the listener's approach. "Without generosity of spirit one can understand nothing. Without openness, warmth, goodwill, the lending of one's ears, nothing new in music can possibly reach us."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to approaching music with an open mind, intelligent listeners must listen with full awareness. Copland outlines three planes of listening in the opening chapter of *What to Listen for in Music*: the sensuous plane, the expressive plane, and the purely musical plane. Copland laments the amount of time listeners, including self-professed music lovers, spend in the sensuous plane. He considers sensuous listening to be counterproductive to enjoying and understanding modern music. "They use music as a couch; they want to be pillowed on it, relaxed and consoled for the stress of daily living...Contemporary music, especially, is created to wake you up, not put you to sleep. It is meant to stir and excite you, to move you—it may even exhaust you."<sup>3</sup> Copland urges listeners to leave the sensuous plane, ascend through the expressive plane, and

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2. Copland, *Copland on Music*, 260.

3. Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (1939; repr., New York: New American Library, 2009), 208.

reach the purely musical plane, which for him is synonymous with fully active, critical listening. To listen at this level requires awareness of distinct musical elements as well as recognition of their transformation. Copland suggests that the ability to follow musical development and relate it to formal structure leads to an experience that most closely connects with the composer's intent.<sup>4</sup> Copland, who relies on music to communicate, believes that understanding the composer should be the primary goal of listeners and performers.

The term "critical listening" may suggest an objective mindset, but Copland does not want us to approach music only with a dispassionate spirit. He acknowledges the pleasure inherent in the sensuous plane, the emotional richness of finding resonance with a composer's expressive voice. He encourages readers to explore both the sensuous and the critical side of listening. For Copland, this duality of listening comes from being "inside and outside the music at the same moment, judging it and enjoying it, wishing it would go one way and watching it go another."<sup>5</sup> Critical listening is especially useful because of instrumental music's abstract nature. Music exists not only on the printed page but also in the experience of listening or participating. While the composer creates music as a long-range structure, we often listen in the moment, hearing and reacting to a series of expressive gestures. Learning to listen critically allows us to gain what Copland sees as the intelligent listener's essential skill: recognizing when materials reappear, shift, or

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4. Ibid., 14.

5. Ibid., 16.

evolve, allowing us to place the immediacy of our feelings into the context of a larger composition.

Why does Copland write so extensively about the listener? Why is it essential that we consider the activity of listening before diving into an interpretation of the *Piano Sonata*? It is because Copland sees music as a uniquely human, expressive practice of communication. For him, composition solely as an intellectual exercise is insufficient. Music lays a substantial responsibility on the ears, minds, and hearts of the listener. A composition or performance only finds meaning when received by an alert audience. In *What to Listen for in Music*, Copland reveals the stakes for him personally, the weight of which is reinforced by William Schuman in the book's introduction: without listeners, there is no purpose for the modern composer.

In the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, Copland wrote to Mexican composer Carlós Chávez that music at a time of such cultural instability seemed unimportant to the people for whom he wrote.<sup>6</sup> The theme of isolation appears frequently in his writings from this time, as the challenges of the decade led him to pursue new endeavors (an opera for high school students, movie scores), and to almost stop writing completely at the dawn of the 1940s. His words in *What to Listen for in Music* must have felt unbearably prophetic when he published them in 1939. "Take seriously your responsibility as listener...Since it is our combined reaction as listeners that most profoundly influences both the art of composition and interpretation, it may be truthfully

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6. Aaron Copland & Vivian Perlis, *The Complete Copland* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2013), 102.

said that the future of music is in our hands.”<sup>7</sup> For Copland, the future of musical culture was inexorably tied to his professional activity, his personal voice, and his need to communicate through music.

### The Composer’s Role

Copland’s dedication to teaching people to listen only makes sense if we understand that composing was the most essential part of his life. When Copland writes about composition, he almost unfailingly emphasizes a deep, personal impetus to write music, a need for self-expression. This is not to say that he does not address the challenges as well. His serious piano works, namely the *Piano Sonata* and the *Piano Fantasy*, both took much longer to compose than expected, requiring diversions, pauses, and changes of venue in order to find the necessary clarity to complete them. Additionally, Copland does not shy away from discussing the practical matters that spawned many of his works: commissions, fellowships, competitions, and financial necessity. Yet, when he talks abstractly about the process itself, these extraneous elements are absent from the conversation. For Copland, a composition communicates the “central core of the composer’s being,”<sup>8</sup> the “fullest and deepest expression of himself as a man and of his experience as a fellow being.”<sup>9</sup> Active and critical listeners can discover insights into Copland’s essential character, voiced through his music.

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7. Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, 229.

8. Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (1952; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 16.

9. Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, 222.

The individual character of each composer represents half of the essential quality in their music. Copland's voice is unique in comparison to his contemporaries. At the same time, his shared historical context also speaks through his music. Copland writes that the amalgamation of unique character and cultural era combine to form a composer's style. "We are listening to a particular voice making an individual statement at a specific moment in history. Unless you take off from there, you are certain to miss one of the principal attractions of musical art—contact with a strong and absorbing personality."<sup>10</sup> Copland thought that the early years of the twentieth century brought about a cultural shift for which the musical language of the nineteenth century was no longer adequate. While musical audiences were (and in many cases still are) under the spell of pre-1900 approaches to harmony, melody, rhythm, and form, composers began to explore musical language that resonated harmoniously with their world. Copland recognized the challenges that this shift of voice posed to his listeners. While at certain times modern composers (Milton Babbitt, for example, in his 1958 article titled "Who Cares if You Listen"), have argued that the layperson is no longer the intended audience for advanced modern musical language, Copland wanted even his most complex works to communicate clearly. "No artist creates for himself alone. To be cut off from the vitalizing contact of an audience, to compose in a vacuum as it were, will of necessity profoundly influence the character of a man's work."<sup>11</sup> His effort to train listeners was

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10. Copland, *Copland on Music*, 33.

11. Aaron Copland, *The New Music*, Revised and Enlarged ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 112.

largely motivated by this need to communicate, the desire for his larger community to understand him through the language of his time.

### Listening to Modern Music

*What to Listen for in Music* especially, along with many of the published articles collected in *Copland on Music*, addresses a different audience than that of *The New Music* and *Music and Imagination*: the broad public, with specific attention toward listeners without specialized musical knowledge. Copland must have sensed an acute disconnect between the way the public interacted with modern music and their evaluation of what they heard. He was concerned that audiences listened to modern music through historical ears, applying the rules of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to contemporary pieces. To Copland, this approach represented a crime against his contemporaries, and the casualty was the very relevance of their artistic voices.

Copland asks listeners, first and foremost, to trust the composer, to listen and evaluate without making comparisons to nineteenth-century music. In many cases, Copland felt that the music of his time was more closely connected to the aesthetics of composers who predated romanticism. “The way of the uninhibited and personalized warmth and surge of the best of the romanticists is not our way...The self-evident truth is that the romantic movement had reached its apogee by the end of the last century and nothing fresh was to be extracted from it.”<sup>12</sup> We should note that modern music offers a greater diversity in sound and technique than earlier eras. There are certainly many exceptions to Copland’s claim, composers who combined nineteenth-century ideals with

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12. Ibid., 206.

modern musical techniques. The importance here lies not in whether or not we agree with Copland, but in the fact that he writes with such passion about the issue at all. Clearly, Copland believed that his contemporaries were trying to communicate in a way that was unique from their predecessors, and that this message is easily lost when listeners evaluate his music based on their understanding of romanticism. To apply an aural framework of eighteenth and nineteenth-century musical conventions fundamentally distorts the language of modern music.

When we listen to modern music critically, with relevant expectations, music which may otherwise have seemed inaccessible, emotionally cool or distant, or overly intellectual can instead communicate an immense range of expressive qualities. Listening with modern ears brings relevance to the music in relation to culture and history. Copland laments that audiences embrace new literary trends without an expectation that the writer communicates in the way of older authors, yet they do not bring the same intellectual approach to the concert hall. Audience and programming trends of his day meant that the public rarely encountered modern music, depriving them of an opportunity to resonate with musical expressions of their own times.

What we see produces wider extremes of tension and release, a more vivid optimism, a grayer pessimism, climaxes of abandonment and explosive hysteria, coloristic variety—subtleties of light and dark, a relaxed sense of fun sometimes spilling over into the grotesque, crowded textures, open-spaced vistas, ‘painful’ longing, dazzling brilliance. Various shades and gradations of these moods have their counterpart in older music, no doubt, but no sensitive listener would ever confuse the two... That is why the music lover who neglects contemporary music deprives himself of the enjoyment of an otherwise unattainable aesthetic experience.<sup>13</sup>

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13. *Ibid.*, 209.

Copland's lectures, articles, and larger publications were an effort to help the public learn how to connect with their contemporaries in the field of music composition. While he writes convincingly and accessibly, his case is ultimately most impactfully made by ambassadors in the field of music performance itself: interpreters who illuminate the expressive qualities of modern music through their skill of communication.

### The Interpreter's Role

The performer, or interpreter (as termed by Copland), is the necessary link between composer and listener. Copland writes that "The composer is in the position of a man who has lost his power of speech and consigns his thoughts by letter to an audience that cannot read words."<sup>14</sup> In this description, the interpreter occupies the role of a translator. Copland later writes that "the role of the interpreter leaves no room for argument. All are agreed that he exists to serve the composer—to assimilate and recreate the composer's message."<sup>15</sup> These quotes suggest that the interpreter is a vital participant, but a participant whose artistic voice is deferential to the needs of both the composer and the listener. However, further exploration of Copland's writing, examined below, brings forth a more nuanced and rich role for the interpreter. Faced with an imprecise music notation system, the abstract nature of instrumental music, and human nature itself, the interpreter enters a creative experience shared with the composer as they bring music to life.

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14. Ibid., 47.

15. Ibid., 224.

The idea of an interpreter approaching music completely objectively and with an unerring understanding of the composer's wishes is impractical, to say the least. Each interpreter possesses a distinct set of musical experiences, technical strengths and weaknesses, and unique artistic aims. When we acknowledge this fact, we can begin to imagine a more balanced relationship between composer, interpreter, and audience. Imprecision in music notation is a discussion better suited for framing an interpretation of the *Sonata* itself. Of more relevance to the relationship between each musical participant is the issue of human influences on interpretation, as well as the differing musical goals of the performer and composer. Copland recognizes the impossibility of playing a piece of music without allowing personal biases to influence the performance. And, just as the interpreter is living, so is the piece. "For a composition is, after all, an organism. It is a living, not a static, thing. That is why it is capable of being seen in a different light and from different angles by various interpreters or even by the same interpreter at different times. Interpretation is, to a large extent, a matter of emphasis."<sup>16</sup> This passage illuminates Copland's earlier suggestion that the performer serves to "assimilate and recreate the composer's message" (p. 12) in a new light. The message is actually a broad and abstract idea rather than a specific concept. A creative interpreter can highlight music in many different ways while staying close to the composer's intention.

Copland embraces the fact that interpreters will see his music from unique angles. At the same time, he voices concerns about allowing the interpreter too much liberty, concerns based in the ways in which the interpreter's goals differ from his own. In

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16. Ibid., 225.

Copland's estimation, the interpreter is naturally concerned first and foremost with sound production, while the composer is concerned with form. He explains that the difference stems from the ways in which composers and performers are trained, and consequently, the way they approach a piece of music. Performers work to overcome technical barriers in order to produce beauty in line, tone, and balance. Composers focus on the character and structure of a piece as a whole.

Every performing artist has something of an elocutionist in him; he wants the words to shine, and the sound of them to be full and right. Every composer, on the other hand, has something of a playwright in him; he wants above all to have his 'actors' intent upon the significance of the scene, on its import within a particular context, for if that is lost, all elocutionary eloquence becomes meaningless—irritating even, since it hinders the creative mind from getting across to the auditor the whole point and purpose of a work of art.<sup>17</sup>

I believe that these goals are not as discordant as Copland makes them sound. Performers and composers draw from a shared knowledge of theory, history, and culture. In reality each participant can serve both interests, enhancing the listener experience.

If we respect Copland's desire to be understood and acknowledge that the seemingly divergent goals of eloquence and narrative are, in reality, compatible, Copland's ideal of the performer as interpreter becomes clear. The performer "partakes of the same dedication of purpose, the same sense of self-discovery through each performance, the same conviction that something unique is lost, possibly, when his understanding of a work of art is lost."<sup>18</sup> Copland expresses openness to the idea of the performer and composer learning from one another, suggesting that a composer may

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17. Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 48.

18. *Ibid.*, 42.

actually hear mistakes or new angles in their own music while listening to a performance. Due to the imprecise nature of notation, as well as a composer's fallibility with certain indications such as tempo, interpreters should first rely on their musical intelligence. Through this process, we can discover what Copland terms the "essential quality" of a piece, a quality made up of three necessary components. The nature of the music, combined with the period of composition and the composer's personality, produce this essential quality. The concept is different from a singular "correct" reading, but no matter the interpretation, this quality must not be betrayed.<sup>19</sup>

Still another type of performer, whose sphere of action is somewhere in the neighborhood of the romantic, is the musician who gives a personalized reading of a work... When the work merits it, and the reading is truly convincing, we are left with the impression that whether or not what we have heard is the only possible interpretation, we have at least heard one of the essential ways that music is to be understood.<sup>20</sup>

The pianist Leo Smit affirms Copland's openness to interpretation, based on Smit's experiences playing Copland's music for the composer himself. Smit writes that he came to Copland expecting specific criticisms, closer to Stravinsky's demand of "strict adherence to his score." Copland, however, lounged on a couch across the room rather than hovering by the piano ready to critique and correct Smit's playing. Copland seemed, above all, interested in enjoying the music as a listener. Copland allowed for a wide range of expression, dynamics, and pacing, as long as the playing was "done with a power and conviction and technical backup."<sup>21</sup> As long as the essential quality or character is preserved, the interpreter has significant leeway to express the music as they see fit.

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19. Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, 26.

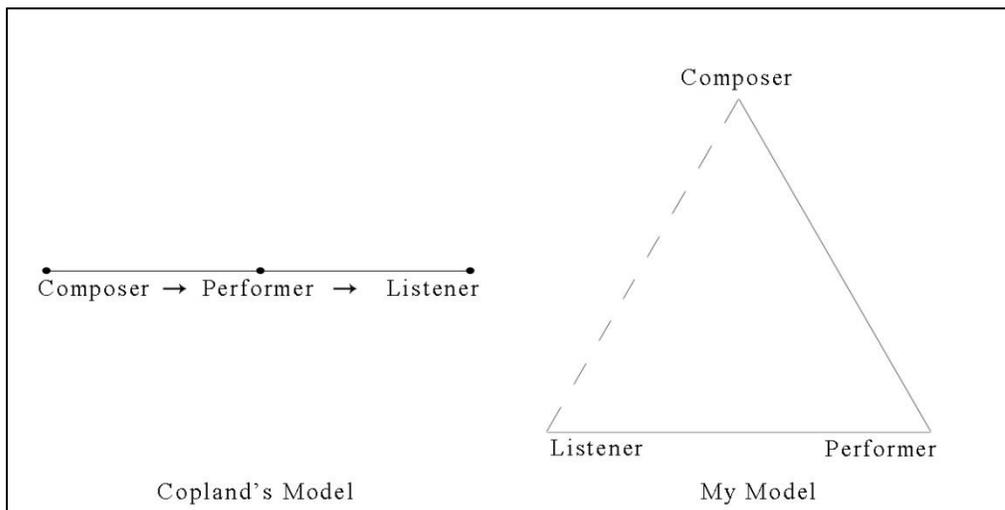
20. Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 53.

21. Copland & Perlis, *The Complete Copland*, 263-264.

In the remaining chapters of this paper, I will explore the three components that combine to create the essential quality. Copland's own words, combined with a discussion of his early life and the cultural context within which he lived, will help us connect with the last two components. We can understand the first component, the nature of the music itself, through an analysis of the score. This is best achieved by focusing on the musical elements that Copland believes are necessary for an active listening experience. When we understand in detail how Copland approaches these elements, we will be better equipped to communicate them with clarity in performance. I suggest that framing an interpretation with these elements in mind will allow us to highlight the larger framework of the piece and the musical thread that leads through the music, uniting individual moments into a performance that communicates Copland's ideas in a cohesive expressive voice.

### Interpretation through Collaboration

It is clear that Copland grants tremendous interpretive power to all three musical participants. The ways in which the creative and interpretive processes complement each other show how each participant meaningfully impacts the music. Copland sees this



*Figure 2.1*

relationship as a line, progressing from the composer through the interpreter to arrive at the listener. I suggest that, given an active and intelligent listener and a sensitive interpreter, this line actually forms a triangle (example 2.1). If the interpretive process can bring a performer close to the musical spirit of the composer, a performance that captures the essential quality of a piece can do the same for an active listener. The bond between listener and interpreter will remain the most concrete, but a thoughtful and faithful performance may allow a listener to imagine themselves alongside the composer as they interpret the music with intelligence and an open mind. The force of the imaginative mind is essential in music more than any other art. “Music provides the broadest possible vista for the imagination since it is the freest, the most abstract, the least fettered of all the arts...no strict limitation of frame need hamper the intuitive functioning of the imaginative mind.”<sup>22</sup> The imaginative mind, intelligently directed, can allow us to connect with the composer’s personality, the unique character of their music, and the cultural framework in which they composed.

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22. Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 7.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Framing Lens: Copland's Influences, Culture, and Historical Background

*Gradually, the idea that my personal expression in music ought somehow to be related to my own back-home environment took hold of me. The conviction grew inside me that the two things that seemed always to have been so separate in America—music and the life about me—must be made to touch.<sup>1</sup>*

When we consider the landscape of American composers during the first half of the twentieth century, no one occupies a position as influential as Aaron Copland. His voice took inspiration from international influences, yet his style is quintessentially American. A true modernist, he aimed to communicate to his peers as well as the larger public in a language firmly set in the spirit of his time and place. Copland humorously begins his autobiography by commenting on the way he sees himself as a thoroughly contemporary composer. “For a long time I harbored the pleasant notion that I was a child of the twentieth century, having been born on 14 November 1900. But some authorities claim that the twentieth century began on 1 January 1901. I calculate therefore that I spent my first forty-eight days in the nineteenth century—an alarming thought!”<sup>2</sup> From his early student days in New York City, Copland's activities as a composer, writer, and speaker made him an unofficial ambassador for modern music. Recalling his time as a young man studying piano with Clarence Adler, he writes about his first experience as musical commentator. In a group masterclass, Copland performed Maurice Ravel's *Sonatine*, later recalling that the music was so strange it required explanatory remarks before the performance. The year was 1921. Copland was about to depart for

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1. *Ibid.*, 99.

2. Copland & Perlis, *The Complete Copland*, 6.

Paris, where he would study with Nadia Boulanger. During these years, he would leave behind the conservative tastes of the New York of his youth, develop his mature compositional voice, and return to the United States a champion for the emerging language of the modern American composer.

In 1927, Copland began lecturing at the New School for Social Research in New York City, a position turned over to him by music critic Paul Rosenfeld. Copland continued these lectures for more than a decade, and in 1939 organized them into a book, *What to Listen for in Music*. Vivian Perlis writes that these lectures “provided an opportunity for Copland to observe and evaluate modern music, to consider antecedents and developments, and to view his own music in the context of history, all at a time when he was taking stock of his situation and considering his directions.”<sup>3</sup> In this way, the New School lectures serve as a metaphor for his larger professional life: a composer studying the past, considering his contemporaries, and developing his own compositional style. An analysis of this development through Copland’s own writing shows the importance he places on the historical context of music, the ways in which he took inspiration from European voices, and the effects of his own historical era on his writing as he approached the time of his 1941 *Piano Sonata*.

Copland’s view of his immediate predecessors’ music is not uncharitable, but it does demonstrate the ways in which he sees his compositions as fundamentally different, not just in technique and style, but in the relevance of his musical voice. In 1941’s *The New Music*, he assesses the musical landscape during the turn of the century, discussing

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3. Ibid., 60.

Mahler, Sibelius, and Debussy, among others. His main criticism is that the music of these composers speaks to a world fundamentally different from that of the middle twentieth century. For example, Copland says that the music of Jean Sibelius expresses “conclusions arrived at from old-fashioned premises, premises that no longer hold water in our own time.”<sup>4</sup> Sibelius would not be viewed as a modern composer by today’s standards, but Copland is specifically addressing those who in the 1930s viewed Sibelius as a great modern composer, an example of the incredible dichotomy between conservative voices born in the late nineteenth century and those of Copland and his peers. Even more surprising is his criticism of Debussy. He suggests that the passage of time removes the iconoclastic element of Debussy’s writing, and what is left has not always aged well. “Debussy was the hedonistic poet of a thoroughly bourgeois world. There is something cushioned and protected, something velvety-soft and overcomfortable about his music. It reflects a span of life when Europe thought itself most secure, between the years 1870 and 1914.”<sup>5</sup> To be fair, Copland continues the previous quote to highlight Debussy’s best music as “matchlessly poetic and touching and sensitive”, but these praises are saved for a few select pieces. Today, few would agree with Copland’s assessment, as Debussy’s music has remained firmly in the canon of musical masterworks. The important thing here is not the fact that Copland was wrong about Debussy’s continued relevance, but instead the separation that Copland saw between his generation and past composers, even those who lived only a few decades earlier. The

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4. Copland, *The New Music*, 39.

5. *Ibid.*, 31.

contrast between respect and relevance highlights the ways in which Copland saw himself and his contemporaries as existing without musical ancestors.<sup>6</sup>

Copland's concept of modern music was larger than just himself and his American contemporaries. It included European composers, most significantly Stravinsky and Schoenberg, as well as composers from throughout the Americas.

Carlós Chávez is one of the best examples I know of a thoroughly contemporary composer. His music embodies almost all the major traits of modern music: the rejection of Germanic ideals, the objectification of sentiment, the use of folk material in its relation to nationalism, the intricate rhythms, linear as opposed to vertical writing, the specifically 'modern' sound images. It is music created not as a substitute for living but as a manifestation of life. It is clear and clean sounding, without shadows or softness. Here is contemporary music if ever there was any."<sup>7</sup>

Much of this description resonates with Copland's own mature voice, which he significantly developed through the 1920s. This development began during his studies with Boulanger, and was refined through his major compositions beginning with the 1924 *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra* and arriving at the 1930 *Piano Variations*.

For Copland, the 1920s were a period of experimentation. He remembers the decade, between the end of World War I and the economic crash of 1929, as a unique period of renewal and optimism. He believes that the musical innovations of the 1920s had more significance than any other period of modern music, at least before 1950. "The air was charged with talk of new tendencies, and the password was originality—anything was possible. Every young artist wanted to do something unheard of, something nobody had done before. Tradition was nothing; innovation everything."<sup>8</sup> Musically, the first

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6. Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 106.

7. Copland, *The New Music*, 145-146.

8. Copland & Perlis, *The Complete Copland*, 23.

third of the 1920s is marked by his training with Boulanger, the middle third by his growing stature in New York beginning with the premiere of the *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra*, and the final third by performances of his *Piano Concerto*, his piano trio *Vitebsk*, the commission of his *Symphonic Ode*, and finally his work on the *Variations*. In this progression of works, he sees the *Ode* as a significant transitional piece, one that marks the end of his early development. “The works that follow it are no longer so grandly conceived. The *Piano Variations* (1930), the *Short Symphony* (1933), the *Statements* for orchestra (1935) are more spare in sonority, more lean in texture.”<sup>9</sup>

Copland’s style in the 1930s, most notably in his *Variations*, stands as an example of his fully realized compositional voice. While Copland writes of having no musical ancestors, his mature music features both a unique, American voice, as well as the influence of significant forces in his early adult life; namely Nadia Boulanger, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg. A detailed analysis of the way these influences affected Copland’s compositional style is large enough to fill another research paper entirely. We will focus on what Copland wrote about Boulanger, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg, for the purpose of understanding the ways in which he acknowledged their influence on his style.

It is difficult to separate the influence of Boulanger and Stravinsky on Copland in the early 1920s. Copland cites his teacher, along with conductor Serge Koussevitzky, as his primary influences while in Paris. Yet Boulanger’s close ties to Stravinsky drew Copland’s interest toward the Russian’s music. Jean Françaix, another gifted student of Boulanger, is quoted by Copland as saying “Nadia had two polestars, God and

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9. Copland, *The New Music*, 160.

Stravinsky. Of course, no one had any objection to the first. The trouble with the second one was that he was her close friend and the world's greatest living composer, so she tended to lead her students toward the Stravinsky style.”<sup>10</sup> This style impacted Copland in a variety of aspects, including texture, form, rhythm, and harmony. Copland writes specifically about Stravinsky’s influence in these final two aspects. Example 3.1 shows two of Stravinsky’s rhythmic innovations that also appear frequently in Copland’s music.

13 Tempo giusto  $\text{♩} = 50$

R.H. *mf* *simile* *sf* *sf* *sf*

14 *sf* *sf* *sf* *mf*

Stravinsky - Le Sacre du Printemps  
Les augures printaniers (Danses des adolescentes)

142  $\text{♩} = 126$  *sempre f e sf* *sf* 143

144 *piu ff*

Danse Sacrale (l'Élue)

Example 3.1 – Igor Stravinsky, excerpts from Le Sacre du Printemps

10. Copland & Perlis, *The Complete Copland*, 30.

The accents between beats in *Les Augures Printaniers* have a destabilizing effect on metric pulse, an effect found frequently in Copland's music as well. In *Danse Sacrale (L'Élué)*, Stravinsky uses frequent meter changes to move emphasis away from metric flow, instead placing emphasis on the smaller note value (in this case, the sixteenth note). The effect is a melodic line that unfolds naturally, but with varied rhythmic groupings. Melodic length is determined by motivic content, unbounded by barlines. Instead, the meter adapts to the musical material. To place these melodies within a simple time signature would destabilize their natural flow because starting and ending notes, as well as phrase focal points, would fall arbitrarily on a variety of beats within the measure. Flexibility of time signature allows the melodic unit and the barlines to match.

Copland felt that music should “look the way it sounds.”<sup>11</sup> His extended use of mixed meter, while comfortably within the technical abilities of today's orchestras, caused extensive difficulty for both musicians and conductor at the time. Copland remembers spending every evening at the piano with Koussevitzky, working on the polymetric sections of *Symphonic Ode* before the premiere. In some cases, orchestral versions of his music had to be rewritten with conventional meter and accents on strange beats or subdivisions in order to be successfully performed. Differences in the piano and orchestral versions of his 1936 *El Salón México* demonstrate the divide between how Copland thought the music should appear and the limitations of orchestras at the time (example 3.2).

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11. Copland, *Copland on Music*, 279.

El Salón México  
Piano Version  
mm. 1-16

El Salón México  
Orchestral Version  
(condensed)  
mm. 1-19

Example 3.2 – El Salón México, mm. 1-16, piano and orchestra versions

Stravinsky's use of harmonic dissonance is another area from which Copland drew significant influence. In *The New Music*, he highlights Stravinsky's early ballets as introducing the world to new harmonies.

Here for the first time we find that bold use of dissonance that is characteristic of so much later modern music. One can only marvel at the rightness of Stravinsky's instinct in handling these new and unprecedented chordal conglomerations. His deliberate choice of shrilly dissonant tonal mixtures shocked and delighted a new generation of music lovers, at the same time revolutionizing the composer's harmonic stock in trade.

Stravinsky's dissonances have very little relationship, of course, to the atonal writing of Schoenberg, except that both composers immeasurably widened our conception of harmonic possibilities. In the Russian's work the tonal texture is much more closely akin to that of our normal harmonic system. What he did was merely to extend that system.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Copland's use of dissonance is often deployed through the lens of tonal reference, as we will find throughout the *Sonata*. In the more spare *Variations*, the four-note motive is comprised of the pitch class set [0, 1, 3, 4]. Yet Copland orients the motive squarely around C# minor throughout the piece, and modulates to a new tonal inference only at significant structural moments. The most striking of these instances include the dynamic climax of the tenth variation, which marks the end of the first half of the piece (m. 123), the beginning of the rhythmic variations that mark the second half (variation 12, m. 144), and the final statement of the coda, beginning in m. 381, in which we hear an astonishing move to D-flat major.

While Stravinsky's influence can be seen as more significant in Copland's writing, it would be inappropriate to ignore the impact of Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone system. Schoenberg's approach to harmony appears extensively in many of

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12. Copland, *The New Music*, 47.

Copland's most serious and monumental works. Speaking about the *Variations*, Copland discusses the impact of Schoenberg on his writing.

I never rejected Schoenberg's ideas, even though I was closer to the French way of doing things. I believe that any method which proves itself so forceful an influence on the music of our times must be of considerable interest... For me, the twelve-tone method was a way of thinking about music from a different perspective, somewhat like looking at a picture from a different angle so that you see things you might not have noticed otherwise. It was an aid in freshening the way I wrote at a time when I felt the need of change, and so I view it as an enrichment.<sup>13</sup>

Out of Copland's three large-scale piano works, the *Variations* and the 1957 *Piano Fantasy* both feature quasi-serial techniques. His orchestral works surrounding the arrival of his mature style exhibit this musical language as well. Copland moved away from serial techniques in much of his music after 1940, although he never completely abandoned the practice.

With the arrival of the Depression years of the 1930s, Copland's approach to music changed. Gone was the progressive energy of the 1920s, replaced by a more sober, objective method of expression. Recalling his approach to composing, Copland writes that "Schoenberg was not the sole influence on my work at this time. Frugality and economy were the order of the day; social and economic conditions could not help but affect the musical world."<sup>14</sup> These influences can be seen most starkly in the *Variations*, but the *Sonata* also features a similar tone, albeit one weighted by the beginning of World War II. Additionally, Copland was concerned about a changing audience as well as the question of how a composer defines relevance in modern times. "One of the primary

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13. Copland, *The Complete Copland*, 78.

14. *Ibid.*, 79.

problems for the composer in an industrial society like that of America is to achieve integration, to find justification for the life of art in the life around him. I must believe in the ultimate good of the world and of life as I live it in order to create a work of art...I cannot imagine an art work without implied convictions.”<sup>15</sup> Copland noticed diminishing audiences, especially for modern music. Composers began to attempt contact through venues other than the concert hall. Radio broadcasts and movie scores offered a new medium that allowed music to reach a large audience, but with these technologies came logistical challenges which affected compositional approaches. American composers began writing for a variety of communities and practical needs throughout the country. In Copland’s case, this took the form of *The Second Hurricane*, an opera written to be performed specifically by high school students. Overall, the second half of the 1930s saw Copland producing significant music for specific purposes. The chapter chronicling this time in his autobiography is titled “Music for the People.” These were the years in which he wrote *El Salón México*, *Billy the Kid*, music for concert band, choir, and radio, and the film scores for *The City* and *Of Mice and Men*. Copland recalls a lecture given by American romantic composer Edward MacDowell, in which MacDowell characterizes the American spirit as full of “youthful optimistic vitality” and “undaunted tenacity of spirit.” Considering these ideals in the framework of the depression, Copland writes “But the times have caught up with us, and already mere optimism seems insufficient...it must be tempered...by a reflection of the American man, not as MacDowell knew him at the turn of the century, but as he appears to us with all his complex world around him.”<sup>16</sup>

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15. Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 111.

16. *Ibid.*, 95.

By the time Copland began writing the *Sonata* in 1939, his compositional style synthesized early musical influences, the freedom of the 1920s, and the challenges of the depression era. He had always desired a distinctly American voice, an idea that dated back to his time studying with Boulanger and inspired by the connection he saw between music, composers, and the larger culture in early 1920s France. The tenor of this American voice shifted significantly in the 1930s, a change reflected in Copland's writing and output. As the 1940s arrived and America moved ever closer to entering World War II, Copland's compositional activity slowed significantly. He was named a member of the President's Advisory Committee on Music in April 1941, a distinction which included a period of significant diplomatic travel in South America. It was during this time that he completed the *Sonata*, a serious and substantial piece. In it, we hear Copland's unmistakable voice, similar to the intensity and energy of the *Variations* but weighted with the seriousness of the time in which it was written.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The 1941 *Piano Sonata*

Aaron Copland began work on his *Piano Sonata* early in 1939. The composition process lasted nearly three years. The *Sonata* is his first solo piece written in nearly seven years as well as his first return to a large-scale serious solo work since the 1930 *Piano Variations*. The cultural context surrounding Copland's music changed significantly in the 1930s, as the weight of world events made composing difficult. Vivian Perlis notes that "Copland composed little after his return to New York in the fall of 1940. The atmosphere, so filled with uncertainty and turmoil, was not conducive to writing music...[Composer Mark] Blitzstein was already in uniform; and Copland worried about Nadia [Boulanger]—would she make it safely out of Europe in time?"<sup>1</sup> The idea of writing a sonata had been in Copland's mind for many years, since his first composition teacher Rubin Goldmark encouraged him to explore the form. His initial attempt, the 1921 *Sonata in G Major*, is unrecognizable compared to Copland's mature works, a bombastic piece of overwrought romanticism. The 1941 *Sonata* would be Copland's first mature exploration of the form.

Copland proposed the idea of a commission for the *Sonata* to American playwright Clifford Odets, a friend of Copland's since the 1930s. Odets, an amateur cellist and pianist, agreed in January of 1939 to a fee of \$500, and in turn received the *Sonata*'s dedication. Copland wrote in his autobiography that he proposed a timeline of only a few months. However, "one robbery, several interruptions, and almost three years later, the *Sonata* was ready. I have always been grateful to Odets for stimulating me to

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1. Copland & Perlis, *The Complete Copland*, 131-132.

compose the second of my three major piano works; moreover, he never showed any impatience about delays as the months turned into years.”<sup>2</sup> The aforementioned robbery occurred in Cuba in June 1941. Copland had gone to Havana for a period of rest and solitude before embarking on his South American tour as a member of the President’s Advisory Committee on Music. When leaving his apartment one evening, two suitcases were stolen from his car, one of which contained his manuscript of the *Sonata*. While a reward was offered and the thief was caught, the manuscript was never found. Copland had to reconstruct the music from memory with the help of pianist John Kirkpatrick, for whom he had previously played an early version of the piece. Copland finished the new manuscript in September 1941, during his South American travels. His first performance of the piece came at a party for the Faculty of Fine Arts in Chile, while the official premiere took place October 21<sup>st</sup> in Montevideo, Uruguay, as part of a chamber music concert featuring North American composers. Copland, in his typical understated manner, comments that “the impression was favorable.”<sup>3</sup> Boosey & Hawkes published the piece in 1942, and several pianists immediately began performing it in concert. Notably, John Kirkpatrick performed it on tour and played the New York premiere. Leo Smit and William Kappell were early champions of the piece, as was Leonard Bernstein, who called it his favorite of Copland’s compositions.

Many early interpreters and admirers of the *Sonata* spoke about the ways in which Copland’s character is felt throughout the piece. His longtime friend Harold Clurman, whom he lived with for much of his time in France, called the piece, along with

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2. Ibid., 139.

3. Ibid., 137.

Copland's other major piano works, "mysterious". "They reveal some things about him that he never would talk about. Deeply buried things. He said nothing in words that in any way reflects what is in the *Sonata* or the *Fantasy*."<sup>4</sup> Clurman also spoke to the simple, direct clarity with which Copland communicated. "I can get very assertive and just yell at the top of my voice. Aaron never expressed himself that way. But when he would say very quietly, 'I don't like it' about something, it was just as strong as when I yelled. He was able to find a word, one word maybe, and that's why he writes well. Finding what he's saying adequate to what he means."<sup>5</sup> Bernstein spoke of Copland as a dualist, in his playing and writing as well as in his personality. "Aaron's playing, I adored. It was bangy, but that's the way you had to play it. And it was delicate...He's a great dualist, you know, Aaron, almost in a Manichaeian way. He saw everything in terms of good and evil, light and dark."<sup>6</sup> Bernstein went on to speak of Copland as maintaining the middle ground, walking "the true path of plainness." This quality, according to Bernstein, applies to much of Copland's music, and was a word that Copland himself used a great deal. He would critique Bernstein's own music through a similar lens, complaining about the density of chordal textures or excessive chromaticism.

Copland's *Sonata*, while thoroughly modern in language, is marked by clarity of structure, widely spaced harmonies, and a less extensive use of dissonance than the *Variations*. When we read his description of Boulanger's teaching, it is easy to see the ways in which his training developed into the mature style that marks the *Sonata*.

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4. Ibid., 267.

5. Ibid., 24.

6. Ibid., 141.

At the time when I was her pupil, Boulanger had one all-embracing principle, namely, the desirability of aiming first and foremost at the creation of what she called ‘la grande ligne’ in music. Much was included in that phrase: the sense of forward motion, of flow and continuity in the musical discourse; the feeling for inevitability, for the creating of an entire piece that could be thought of as a functioning entity. Boulanger had an acute sense of contrast and balance. Her teaching, I suppose, was French in that she stressed clarity of conception, textures, and elegance in proportion.<sup>7</sup>

Copland’s own assessment of his *Sonata* focuses on the overall dramatic nature of the piece, spacious and serious, “a kind of play being acted out with plenty of time for self-expression.”<sup>8</sup> He writes in *Music and Imagination* that in composing he “derived profound satisfaction from exteriorizing inner feelings—at times, surprisingly concrete ones, and giving them shape.”<sup>9</sup> This instinct resonates through the *Sonata*, alive in its fully explored characters, divergent themes, expansive rhythmic spacing in the outer movements, and the nervous excitement of the middle *Vivace*. Now, by examining the distinct ways in which Copland approaches rhythm, melody, sonority, and form, as well as some of the distinct notational devices and score indications he uses, we will explore the expressive nature of the *Sonata*, with the goal of gaining a broad conception close to Copland’s own intent for the piece.

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7. *Ibid.*, 28.

8. *Ibid.*, 140.

9. Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 99.

## Rhythm

*Our rhythmic sense is less symmetrical than the European rhythmic sense. European musicians are trained to think of rhythm in its largest common denominator, while we are born with a feeling for its smallest units... We do not employ unconventional rhythms as a sophisticated gesture; we cannot avoid them.*<sup>10</sup>

-Roy Harris

Copland believed that the defining characteristic of the American composer was a distinct approach to rhythm and meter. He began exploring polymeter while still studying with Boulanger, remembering “the eagerness of Nadia’s curiosity”<sup>11</sup> with his rhythmic choices. As he worked to connect his music with the movement and lifestyle of industrial America, rhythm was at the forefront of his efforts. Writing in *Music and Imagination*, he isolates rhythm as the only logical pathway of inventiveness for the modern American composer. The extended quote beginning this section, spoken by American composer Roy Harris and included by Copland in *Music and Imagination*, defines how the American approach differs from European practice. I suggest that Copland’s approach to rhythm is both distinctly American and also inspired by certain contemporary European rhythmic traditions. Polymeter and uneven rhythmic groupings are not tools invented by Copland, but his extensive use of them elevated rhythm to be one of the most significant defining characteristics of his music.

In the *Sonata*, as in many of his other works, Copland explores the idea of emphasizing rhythm in its smallest units by highlighting the eighth-note without regard to the rhythmic hierarchy of strong and weak beats within a measure. We hear this

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10. Ibid., 83.

11. Copland & Perlis, *The Complete Copland*, 28.

technique in the *Allegro* section of the first movement's development, beginning in m. 133, where Copland writes a three-note motive within a 5/8 measure. He immediately repeats it twice, each time lengthening it by adding neighbor tones to expand the intervallic range of the motive. The resulting thrice-repeated motivic grouping features an initial group that is five eighth-note pulses in length, followed by two groups of seven. The first occupies a complete 5/8 measure, while the second fills two 4/8 measures and the third begins on the eighth note pickup to a 3/4 measure. Accents on the initial note of each motive, rather than the bar line, communicate rhythmic emphasis (example 4.1)



Example 4.1 – Piano Sonata, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm.133-136

To contrast this complex rhythmic idea, Copland introduces a rising four note motive in 2/4 time. Again he lengthens the repetitions, now within the context of simple meter. Copland marks this section *marcato*, in contrast with the earlier *ritmico* marking at the beginning of the *Allegro* section. This suggests a stronger downbeat emphasis, created through a longer and heavier articulation, allowing us to hear a contrast from the first motive (example 4.2). *Ritmico*, unlike *marcato*, asks the performer for a rhythmically precise execution with crisply articulated notes, fully realized rests, and a metric flow that transcends the bar line. Little to no pedal should be used, with the exception of a slight touch on the accented beginning note of each motive, as any sustain will disrupt the

rhythmic sense. Performers should consider the instrument and acoustics of the performance space carefully before deciding to enhance the motivic accents with pedal.



Example 4.2 – Piano Sonata, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm. 141-147

When approaching complex rhythmic portions of the *Sonata*, performers may have concern about a listener’s ability to comprehend the constantly shifting polymeter. With clarity of performance, this fear is unnecessary. Copland’s goal is “an unparalleled ingenuity in the spinning out of unequal metrical units in the unadorned rhythmic line.”<sup>12</sup> When discussing earlier explorations of polyrhythm in the *Piano Concerto*, he speaks of a “transparent and lucid texture and a feeling of spontaneity and natural flow”<sup>13</sup> as his primary goals. When performed correctly, these uneven measures should sound as natural as speech rhythms, full of articulation and energy. The short motives and ample spacing allow for clear punctuation between ideas and space for the ear to stay focused as each new idea unfolds.

The *Sonata*’s second movement is a prime example of Copland’s natural deployment of rhythmic ideas. Written mostly in 5/8, 6/8, and 7/8, with frequent meter changes (a total of 26 in the movement’s 53-measure opening section), Copland’s

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12. Ibid., 84.

13. Copland & Perlis, *The Complete Copland*, 56.

treatment of the rhythmic motive is similar to the first movement's *Allegro*. The angular melody consists of three rising melodic intervals, each expanding outward (example 4.3).



Example 4.3 – Piano Sonata, 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, mm.1-3

A tail motive is added onto the fourth sounding of the opening melody, widening and lengthening on each subsequent sounding (example 4.4). Each iteration of the opening motive ends with a sustained note as the left hand plays a short response in harmonic sixths. This response actually foreshadows the rhythm of the tail motive in the right hand, and itself is rhythmically foreshadowed by the 5/8 *Allegro* motive from the first movement.



Example 4.4 – Piano Sonata, 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, mm. 6-15

While Copland has not used accents to indicate motivic impulse in this movement, he does give the performer clues as to how to hear the melody's rhythmic groupings. He beams the seven eighth-note melody in a 2-3-2 grouping, shifting weight toward the center of the motive. To maintain tempo, great care must be taken to avoid rushing the triple note grouping. It should feel full and lengthy in comparison to the surrounding beats. Adding dynamic shaping to the motive will add musical interest, but the performer should take care to avoid accenting single notes, as these accents will disrupt the larger rhythmic flow. The clarity of texture and repetition of materials will help to solidify the theme for listeners at the beginning of the movement. Additionally, a secure rhythmic pulse without rushing will greatly aid in accuracy later in the movement, when the intervals are displaced at the octave, requiring a series of difficult leaps in the treble register.

As the opening section unfolds and the registral range and dynamics increase, the space between motives is shortened. This increasingly rapid deployment adds intensity and forward-moving energy. Copland uses this technique throughout the movement, most notably in the relentless central section (mm. 126-177), which climaxes in a thirteen measure stretch of continuous eighth notes at the *forte* and *fortissimo* dynamic levels. In this section, the performer can highlight the rising rhythmic motive in the left hand (m. 157-163) and the related rising motive in the right hand (m. 164-169) to provide the listener a framework to follow within the incessant eighth-note drive (example 4.5).

Example 4.5 – Piano Sonata, 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, mm. 156-170

Copland does not confine his technique of shifting meter to fast, rhythmic sections. He uses changing meter, along with shifting note values when a melodic motive returns, to create movement within slower tempos as well. The first movement’s opening theme consists of a five measure phrase, immediately repeated. The first two measures are in 3/4 time, while the final three measures are in common time. The lengthening of the consequent portion adds expressive weight to the end of the motive. Performers should note that any slowing of the tempo within the phrase will result in an overly vertical, disconnected melody, especially with the dotted half note in m. 2 and with the approach to the final chord in m. 4. However, excessive forward motion will counteract the sonorous effect of the texture as well as obscure the changing note values (example 4.6). The indication *freely expressive* should not be interpreted to simply mean “rubato,” but should instead be applied to dynamic shaping as well as variation in voicing. One

possible solution is to voice the top note more emphasis in the opening chords, creating a bright *marcato* sound, while giving weight to the lower notes in the final, *sforzando* chord. This challenge of creating a musical line through slow tempos, long note values, and homophonic textures is common in Copland's piano writing, appearing throughout the first and third movements of the *Sonata*.



Example 4.6 – Piano Sonata, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm.1-5

In the *Sonata*'s outer movements, Copland provides the performer places to push forward with the tempo, adding momentum to the melodic line. It is in these moments that he shortens melodic note values in comparison to earlier iterations of the phrase in order to assist with motion. Copland often marks these sections *pressing forward*. If the performer's *accelerando* is too sudden or excessive, the rhythmic shading will be lost. To assist listeners in hearing these rhythmic shifts, a precise balance between moving ahead and rhythmic precision is imperative. A prime example of this technique occurs in mm. 26-43 of the first movement (example 4.7).



Example 4.7 – Piano Sonata, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm. 26-37

The melody is based on a two measure rising phrase, which, while lasting eight beats, is barred as a 5/4 and a 3/4 measure, again demonstrating Copland's willingness to shift meter to achieve a natural melodic declamation. As this melody repeats, the half notes become dotted quarters, aiding the *pressing forward* effect. Copland also shortens the arrival note from three beats to two in m. 40, giving an anticipatory effect to the subsequent, and final, rising phrase toward the climactic *fortissimo* in m. 44.

When Copland wants to stop any sense of motion, he turns to more regular note values and meters, with significantly less rhythmic variation. This is a key characteristic of the final *Andante Sostenuto* movement. Copland subverts our instinct to employ metric accents on the downbeat of each measure (often in common time) by avoiding the downbeat whenever possible. The movement opens with a three-chord phrase moving downward, repeated three times, and contrasted with a single note melody (example 4.8). Both of these elements begin on the second beat of the measure every time, with the

exception of the final chordal iteration in m. 17. In this phrase, however, Copland lengthens the melodic note durations to three beats rather than two, destabilizing any sense of metric accent that might otherwise have occurred. Pianists should carefully allow for a full beat of silence on the downbeat of each measure, including m. 1, and should avoid any inclination to press forward in terms of pulse. *Sostenuto* is an important tempo modifier in this movement. Instead of creating rhythmic motion, the performer should accentuate sonority, drawing audience attention to the relationship between these chords and similar themes in both the first and second movement.

Andante sostenuto (♩=76)

ff f ff mf f p

pmp

semplice poco declamando

f p mf mf

p mp pp p hesitant delicate

Example 4.8 - Piano Sonata, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, mm. 1-20

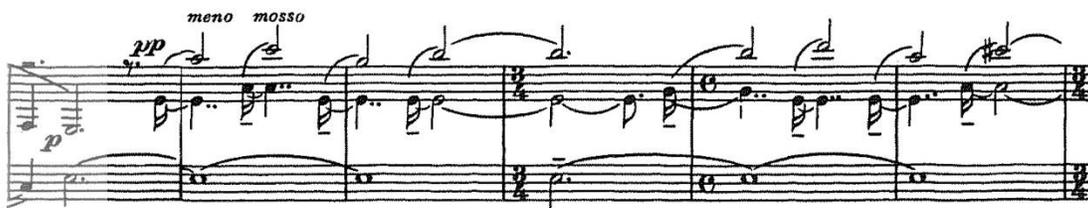
The second way Copland evades the downbeat in the third movement is through the dialogue of rhythmically similar voices. In mm. 55-62, and again later in the movement, Copland juxtaposes a melodic phrase in the soprano voice with a dialogue between the tenor and alto voices. These lower voices respond not only to the soprano voice, but also to each other, displaced by a single beat (example 4.9).

Example 4.9 – Piano Sonata, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, mm. 51-64

Copland uses *tenuto* markings on both voices to show their equal importance, but performers should be careful to differentiate between the two by voicing one slightly more than the other. Otherwise the texture sounds like a single voice, moving disjunctly through the middle range of the keyboard. To aid in the weakening of metric impulse, I recommend slightly voicing the alto, sounding on the second half of beats two and three

within a 3/2 time context, over the tenor, which sounds on the second and third beats. Listeners will hear a gliding, weightless *sostenuto* countermelody supported from below by bass and tenor.

The final way that Copland creates a feeling of immobility is through rhythmic repetition. The second theme, which returns later (m. 109) and is then transformed into the closing material for the coda, is a simple four-note motive sounded in the soprano and then repeated in variation twice (example 4.10).



Example 4.10 – Piano Sonata, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, mm. 45-50

Rhythmically, the motive is uninteresting, simply a series of half notes with the final note extended by three beats (in the coda, it takes a similar form but within a different metric structure). Performers should not mistake the tenuto markings for accents. They indicate equal importance of the middle voice. These notes should be played with enough weight that they sustain audibly for their entire duration. The top voice should sound clearly but without excessive voicing. If done correctly, the listener should be able to hear the legato connection between these notes and the high voice, and the resulting interval will sound clearly.

In the final movement's second theme (seen above), the long note values and lack of rhythmic variety remove much of the forward-moving, narrative impulse. Instead, we experience an immersive, atmospheric effect of stillness. As in the first movement, the performer should avoid slowing down, and should not adopt a tempo slower than is

suitable for the overall linear requirements of the section. If the tempo is too slow, the link between the four melodic tones is lost, the melody becomes fragmented and vertical, and the atmosphere is destroyed. Performers should actually explore tempos in the outer movements that are slightly faster than those indicated by Copland. Copland unequivocally gives us permission for this exploration.

Composers rarely can be depended upon to know the correct tempi at which their music should proceed—they lack a dispassionate heartbeat. The proof is simple: Ask any composer if he believes his own freely chosen metronome marks are rigidly to be adhered to, and he will promptly say, ‘Of course not.’ A composer listening to a performance of his music when the pacing is inept is a sorry spectacle indeed! He may be unable to set the right speed but he certainly can recognize the wrong one.<sup>14</sup>

As long as the performer does not distort or lose the essential character of the music, varying tempos are completely appropriate, even necessary, based on the instrument and the acoustic space.

If we accept Copland’s assertion that rhythm is the defining characteristic of the American composer, or at least agree that rhythm is an extremely significant element of “the Copland sound”, the implications of the rhythmic devices discussed here are essential to our interpretation of the score. Rhythm is often used to serve a larger expressive goal. It differs somewhat from melody in this way, in that the listener may not always be aware of the specific rhythmic processes at play. What is important is not a comprehension of rhythmic devices on a micro-level, but rather the cumulative expressive effect that rhythm creates in the music. Understanding the ways that Copland

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14. Copland, *Copland on Music*, 136.

uses rhythm, meter, and tempo to emphasize his musical intent will help the performer to communicate the *Sonata*'s essential nature.

### Melody

*Melody is only second in importance to rhythm in the musical firmament... If the idea of rhythm is connected in our imagination with physical motion, the idea of melody is associated with mental emotion.*<sup>15</sup>

Rhythm may be the defining feature of much American music in the first half of the twentieth century, but it is far from the only important element when it comes to interpreting Copland's music. Copland writes in *Music and Imagination* that melody connects with rhythmic content to produce a distinct American voice. "We wanted to find a music that would speak of universal things in a vernacular of American speech rhythms. We wanted to write music on a level that left popular music far behind—music with a largeness of utterance wholly representative of the country that Whitman had envisaged."<sup>16</sup> Copland's approach to melody, while formed from the exacting approach of Boulanger's studio, sounds distinct and modern in the *Sonata*. Boulanger's influence regarding the primary importance of *la grande ligne*, a continuous melodic thread which links the entire work, is evident throughout the piece. For the intelligent listener, thematic development will likely be easier to grasp than rhythmic processes, at least at first. This emphasizes the necessity for performers to highlight how melodies relate to each other, how they evolve, and how they connect between movements.

Copland transforms his melodies through additive processes (applied to rhythm and register in addition to the notes themselves), modulation, development, and

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15 Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, 41.

16. Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 104.

fragmentation. His themes show distinct relationships through all three movements. He writes regarding melodic unity that the melody “may disappear momentarily, withdrawn by the composer, in order to make its presence more powerfully felt when it reappears.”<sup>17</sup> The extent to which this occurs in the *Sonata* is remarkable, providing both performer and listener a guiding element through which to hear continuity in the piece.

The *Sonata*'s first movement features two distinct themes from which the rest of the melodic material in the movement is drawn. The opening theme, seen earlier in example 4.6 (p. 40), includes both triadic material and stepwise motion spanning a minor third (although the final note is displaced by an octave). These two elements are important to recognize because they are each used independently as primary motivic material later in the movement. The antecedent section of the opening melody, marked by a descending triad, is developed into the rising melody in m. 26, seen in connection to Copland's instruction of *pressing forward* in example 4.7 (p.41). The consequent part of the phrase, marked by stepwise motion, is immediately explored after its initial sounding, in mm. 11-22. In these measures (example 4.11), Copland extends and enhances the motive with each iteration by augmenting rhythm and melodic range (mm. 13-14), using registral displacement (mm. 15-16), and through transposition (mm. 17-22). He also combines these materials in different ways, as we see in mm. 19-22. In these measures, Copland takes the final motivic iteration before the transposition (mm. 14-16) and reintroduces it as a countermelody in mm.19-22, blending the two motives into one expressive gesture. Pianists should clearly voice the primary motivic material, but must recognize that the accompanying material is also based on melodic ideas. Both voices

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17. Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, 50.

should be played with expressive weight and dynamic shaping, rather than treating the supporting material as purely ornamental.

Example 4.11 – Piano Sonata, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm. 6-25

Copland deploys the melodic phrases in mm. 11-22 in groups of three, augmenting and extending the material each time. The technique of adding and enhancing musical materials appears in every movement of the *Sonata* as the primary way in which Copland creates linear momentum through a section. In the second theme of the opening movement, as well as the primary theme of the *Vivace*, this happens through melodic extension (example 4.3-4.4, p. 37). In the first movement development

(example 4.1, p. 35), Copland adds upper and lower neighbor tones to extend the initial melodic framework. The listener needs to be able to hear a connection between each distinct phrase, recognizing when the same materials are being repeated and enhanced. Performers should identify these phrase relationships, moving forward through each phrase toward the end of the grouping, creating cohesion and highlighting *la grande ligne*.

The opening movement's second theme is an interesting example of development through the additive process. This technique occurs both within each phrase and also in the relationships between phrases. The essence of the theme is a four-note sighing gesture (example 4.12), marked *with sentiment*. Somewhat reminiscent of the consequent portion of the primary theme, it weaves back and forth in stepwise motion through a narrow framing interval (the overall intervallic span of the motive). This interval, however, is a perfect fourth, while the primary theme moves within a minor third, an important distinction once the development arrives.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system is marked *P with sentiment* and features a four-note sighing gesture in the right hand, moving stepwise within a perfect fourth interval. The second system is marked *mp (mark the grace note)* and shows a similar gesture with a grace note, illustrating the development of the theme through the additive process.

Example 4.12 – Piano Sonata, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm. 58-69

Copland repeats the motive three times, extending it in intervallic range as well as overall length with each repetition. Then, transposed up a major third, he sounds it again, augmenting it with octave displacement. A third exploration features eighth note ornamentation of the basic theme. Here, Copland writes *mark the melody, legato (warmly)*. Performers should take care to provide richness and melodic weight to the eighth note additions, treating them as extensions of the melody rather than mere decoration. A fourth and fifth treatment add additional octaves, continually increasing dynamics, and more motion through a *poco piú mosso* marking. Within the theme, and also within the larger structure of the section, Copland is using additive processes to create linear motion and dramatic tension.

The first movement's development section draws primarily from the second theme, but also introduces elements that will take on more motivic weight in the second movement. The *allegro* portion (example 4.1, p. 35), is based on the same framing interval as the movement's second theme, but with the second note replaced by a rest. The beginning of the development in m. 123, marked *piú largamente, poco rubato*, is also an exploration of the second theme, sounded here as a single unit of four eighth notes (rather than the short-long rhythms of the theme itself). Here we see another example of Copland evading metric accents in the way that he separates the theme and its countermelody in the bass clef into three distinct voices, rhythmically displaced from each other (example 4.13).

In m. 128, Copland begins to break apart the rising countermelody into a series of repeated melodic intervals in steady eighth notes, transitioning into the *allegro* portion of



Example 4.13 – Piano Sonata, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm. 123-130

the development. These intervals (mm. 129-130) are actually a development from the climactic portion of the exposition’s primary theme in mm. 44-47, and appear again later in the *marcato* section of the development as primary melodic material, as seen in example 4.2 (p. 36). In the *più largamente* section, the rising intervals strongly foreshadow the recurring countermelody of a rising sixth found throughout the second movement, seen most significantly in example 4.15. This motive appears throughout the second movement, including in the initial measures, establishing its significance both as the framing interval of the right hand melody and through the accompanying harmonic sixths in the bass clef (example 4.4, p. 37).

The second movement’s *vivace* features melodic ties to each outer movement in two other significant ways. The first is in the movement’s second theme, which interrupts the rhythmic flow of the opening page. In the A section, a single melodic line is

developed and expanded over 52 measures. Copland increases dynamic levels, expands the overall register, and combines distinct polyphonic voices into a rhythmically-unified duet. At the apex of this gathering of energy, the music abruptly stops, with a full measure of silence in m. 53. This silence prepares the second theme, harmonized in enormous blocks of vertical sonority (example 4.14).



Example 4.14 – Piano Sonata, 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, mm. 54-56

These chords, directly linked to the texture of the *Sonata*'s opening page, are a re-sounding of the primary theme's rhythmic motive. The melodic content is different, but the increasing note values of each chord, as well as the octave doublings, create a sense of thematic unity between the two movements.

The second way that the the *vivace* connects to the outer movements occurs in mm. 204-213, when Copland overtly foreshadows the primary theme of the third movement. Here we find a complete first sounding of the third movement's theme, accompanied by the rising sixth motive that first appeared in the opening movement (example 4.15). This moment, structurally near the center of the entire *Sonata*, is marked not by expressive weight but rather by a tender *cantabile* melody. Texturally, it is among

the most simple and clear sections of the movement.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a piano sonata. The first system begins with a piano introduction in 2/4 time, featuring a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include *f*, *p*, and *pp*. A marking *mp espress. e cant.* is present. The second system continues the piece, with dynamics *f* and *mp*. The third system includes a marking *p l. h. as above*, indicating a change in the left hand's accompaniment.

Example 4.15 – Piano Sonata, 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, mm. 201-216

The *cantabile* theme spans a much larger framing interval than the opening movement's themes, and is both less jagged and more rhythmically varied than the second movement's other motives. In order for listeners to connect this theme to the final movement, the performer must make it stand out. A slight tenuto on the initial note, breaking up the inevitability of the movement's rhythmic drive, along with a flexible, vocal interpretation of the melody, will help to highlight this new theme. The accompanying motive should be played from the fingertip, as staccato as possible, and pianissimo. The pianist can choose either equal dynamic weight between the left hand notes or can use a slight diminuendo, but should not increase the dynamic other than in the marked *forte* and *mezzo forte* iterations that follow each melodic phrase. In order to

bring attention to Copland's expressive voice, pianists should use rubato in the *cantabile* melody, while keeping the accompaniment figure in strict time. The result is a contrast between the expressive, human core and rigid structural elements of Copland's writing style.

Copland's pursuit of thematic unity continues in the third movement. The movement opens with three descending chords, matching the texture and dramatic intention of the *Sonata's* opening theme. Imposed against these blocks of sound is the third movement's primary theme, sounded as before without harmonic context (example 4.8, p. 42). Copland develops this theme over two distinct sections. First, in m. 19-33, he explores the theme through a dialogue between the two hands. Marked *hesitant, delicate*, the character of this theme grows in confidence over time, starting in fragments and becoming more complete. The dotted eighth to sixteenth note rhythm is a diminution of the theme's initial rhythm.

In the second section of the development (mm. 33-45), Copland cultivates another emerging motivic element. The closing notes of the movement's primary theme are a series of descending half notes in wide intervals. Mostly quartal in nature, they do not reference a harmonic center, but instead create a feeling of spaciousness that later takes over the expressive core of the movement. In the second section of thematic development, these notes evolve into an ostinato bass accompaniment outlining a diminished chord (example 4.16). As the movement gains dramatic weight in the middle section, this ostinato becomes the primary melody driving the movement toward its climactic center. Pianists can draw attention to the importance of this diminished melody through careful use of rubato when it first appears in m. 34. Instead of basing pacing

decisions solely on the theme in the middle voice, slight flexibility can be used in between iterations of the diminished melody. By moving forward through each left hand five-note phrase, pianists can emphasize the low voice at the time it begins to develop into primary melodic material.

Line 1: Primary theme ending, mm. 30-33

Line 2: Bass ostinato, mm. 34-39

Line 3: Building toward return of the first movement theme, mm. 79-85

*mf* *dim.* *p*

*pp* *mf* *molto espress.* *pp* *pp* *mf*

*mf* *a trillo faster*

Example 4.16 – Piano Sonata, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, demonstration of developing theme

The emotional core of the *andante sostenuto* is a dramatic return of the *Sonata*'s primary theme from the first movement, sounded in full and developed in mm. 89-98 (example 4.17). It takes on both the powerful sonorous character of the *Sonata*'s opening, and the forward motion found in the *pressing forward* section of the second page. Framed on both sides by intense iterations of the ostinato motive (from lines two and three of example 4.16), it occupies the center of the movement, both in terms of linear structure and expressive weight. To give listeners the full impact of this arrival, the performer

should carefully pace the dynamic buildup and quickening tempo of the movement's first half so that the appearance of this theme feels like an inevitable moment of arrival, creating a cyclic unity for the entire piece.

Example 4.17 – Piano Sonata, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, mm. 87-96

The expressive quality of Copland's melodies is often abstract, but sometimes Copland uses descriptive text to aid in interpretation. In the third movement's opening pages, performers should examine the situations in which Copland uses either Italian or English expressive terms. In mm. 6-9, he writes *semplice* and *poco declamando*, but in m. 19 he writes *hesitant, delicate*. I suggest that Copland uses Italian terms to indicate more practical instructions to the performer, or to give general character directions. He saves English for moments of great expressive importance, moments that seem more connected to his personality. *Hesitant, delicate* suggests an expressive core both more specific and more difficult to describe. These are the "deeply buried," "mysterious" parts of Copland's personality that Harold Clurman describes. Even Copland's indications of rubato have expressive depth depending on language. For a localized forward motion, *poco accelerando* is adequate, as we see in the first movement's transition into the *allegro*

section (example 4.12, p. 49). But, tempo indications on a broader scale (often covering entire sections) again use English and carry more expressive content. In example 4.16 (p. 55), we see *a trifle faster* to indicate the new tempo in m. 79. The term suggests a tentative, exploratory feeling of moving forward, which relates to the *hesitant, delicate* nature of the preceding section. In all of these examples, Copland uses his native language to evoke a more vibrant expressive character.

### Sonority

*The plain fact is that the composer of our century has earned the right to be considered a master of new sonorous images. Because of him music behaves differently, its textures are different—more crowded or more spacious, it sings differently, it rears itself more suddenly and plunges more precipitously. It even stops differently. But it shares with older music the expression of basic human emotions, even though at times it may seem more painful, more nostalgic, more obscure, more hectic, more sarcastic. Whatever else it may be, it is the voice of our own age and in that sense it needs no apology.<sup>18</sup>*

Copland, in 1960, included in his book *Copland on Music* a chapter titled “Liszt as Pioneer,” in which he praises the sonorous appeal of Liszt’s music as its most distinctive and original element.

The type of sonorous appeal we take so much for granted—the sonority chosen instinctively for its sheer beauty of sound—is partly the invention of Liszt. No other composer before him understood better how to manipulate tones so as to produce the most satisfying sound texture ranging from the comparative simplicity of a beautifully spaced accompanimental figure to the massive fall of a tumbling cascade of shimmering chords.<sup>19</sup>

Copland and Liszt may seem miles apart in terms of approach, Copland valuing economy of material and direct, unadorned communication. Yet the excerpt above reveals their connectedness in a shared pursuit of what Copland terms “the sonorous image”. In

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18. Copland, *Copland on Music*, 255.

19. *Ibid.*, 120.

modern music, as weight is shifted away from traditional tonal organization, sonority often replaces tonality as a more impactful musical feature. This is not to say that triadic harmony is not an important element in Copland's compositional language. However, in the *Sonata*, sonority, local harmonies, texture and registral range often possess a level of significance that makes these elements more important than long-range tonal implications.

Copland's writing reinforces the concept that sonority holds an elevated importance in modern music. His description of this idea, as seen in the quote that opens this section, resonates with the content of his *Sonata*. The outer movements, spacious and resonant, contrast with the crowded energy of the scherzo. Dynamic shifts, often executed by changing sonority through chordal density, register, or spacing, lend significant linear motion to the *moderato* sections of the first movement. Contrasts of plainness and power between the singing melody and massive chords of the final movement communicate a battle between equally expressive forces. Each movement presents a few unique features that require care and decision-making on the performer's part in order to create the intended sonority of each section.

Copland combines sonority with register and tonal center to create structure throughout the opening movement's exposition. The opening tonal center of B-flat minor is fairly consistent through mm. 1-25. The melody arrives at its lowest point in terms of register almost immediately, in m. 11, after the initial thematic statement. The entire exposition is sonically designed around a thickening of texture, either by doubling the melody at the octave, filling the octave with harmonic context, or adding notes to accompanimental chords and countermelodies. Harmonically, as the music rises in



significant sections in the second theme (octaves) and the recapitulation (thirds). The sonorous effect of this rise and fall is a palpable, almost desperate sense of struggle, attempting to ascend, only to be dragged back down. Performers who recognize these larger forms can make use of Copland's changes in sonority to help shape the expressive arc of the movement.

The opening movement features two sonic challenges that are somewhat common to Copland's music. Both appear in the *Variations* as well, and careful consideration of the technical approach required will allow these sections to sing musically, without breaking the melodic line. The first is the polyphonic octave dialogue at the beginning of the development, shown in example 4.12 (p. 49), similar in design to the *Piano Variations* ninth variation (example 4.19).

The image shows a musical score for the ninth variation of the Piano Variations. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is in bass clef and includes a circled number '9' and the instruction 'warmly'. The music features a polyphonic octave dialogue with markings for 'mf cantabile' and 'f'. The second system is in treble clef and continues the musical texture. The score is written in 3/4 time and uses various dynamics and articulations to create a sense of struggle and connection between notes.

Example 4.19 – *Piano Variations*, mm. 110-122

In these textures, the upper voice of each octave requires careful voicing and shaping. Pianists should move laterally, without undue vertical or percussive motions, creating as much connection between melodic notes as possible. The illusion of legato is difficult to

create, as most left hand melody notes will be played with the thumb. However, the right hand can sometimes combine the third, fourth, and fifth finger for physical legato. Pedal changes should be planned not only around management of overall sonority but also based on the arrival of sustained octaves. These often do not occur on downbeats, so metric pedaling will not work. If the pedal is changed too early following a sustained octave, resonance will be lost, negatively affecting clear communication of the line.

The second sonorous challenge in the first movement appears at the beginning of the recapitulation. A similar sonority appears twice in the *Variations*, in the tenth variation and again in the coda (example 4.20). The melody, doubled at the octave and harmonically filled, is deployed in the upper register of the piano. It is marked *fff* and punctuated by low *sff* chords. Due to the crescendos in most of the phrases, pedal changes are necessary for each harmonic shift, clearing out sound to allow the pianist to generate a dynamic increase. The low chords must not interrupt the melodic line, yet must punctuate with power. Overvoicing the top note of the low chord will break the line above, which cannot compete with the amount of dynamic sound generated in the piano's lowest registers. Finding the appropriate dynamic balance while still giving heft to the punctuating chords is a frequent challenge in Copland's writing, and one that, if handled carefully, will allow the audience to hear drama and melodic direction within the frequently vertical texture.

Tempo I.

Piano Sonata, 1st Movement  
Recapitulation, mm. 195-198

⑩ Più largamente (♩ = 76)  
marcato legato

Piano Variations  
Variation 10, mm. 123-127

Poco largamente (♩ = 66)

r. h. molto marcato

l. h. molto marcato

Piano Variations: Coda, mm. 371-376

Example 4.20 – Piano Sonata and Piano Variations: Comparative sonority challenges

If the opening movement’s defining sonority is marked by the resonant, monolithic chords that pervade the slower sections, the second movement explores a completely different type of sonority, one that Copland attributes to Stravinsky. He terms it “the nonvibrating piano”. This sound, which embraces the percussive, rhythmic element of the instrument above all else, is unique to the contemporary era of classical music. While certain repertoire from earlier eras is also performed with spare, judicious pedal usage, the effect in Copland’s writing shares little commonality with earlier music. He discusses this technique in *What to Listen for in Music*. “The nonvibrating piano is the

piano in which little or no use is made of the pedal. Played thus, a hard, dry piano tone is produced which has its own particular virtue. The feeling of the modern composer for harsh, percussive tonal effects found valuable outlet in this new use of the piano, turning it into a kind of large xylophone.”<sup>20</sup> This dryness of texture was a hallmark of Copland’s own playing, as heard in recordings and referenced by Bernstein, Smit, and others.

Within the nonvibrating sonority, Copland requires a great deal of subtlety in attack. We have already discussed the contrast between *ritmico* and *staccato*, as well as the reduced significance of metric accents, in the earlier section on rhythm. In the beginning of the second movement, Copland gives us a more detailed indication, writing “*half staccato, delicate, restless*”. The appropriate tone in this instance is rounder than the crisp staccatos of the first movement’s development section. It should be soft, rhythmically precise, with enough body to hear the linear shape of the jagged melodic line. Additionally, this portion of the *Sonata* provides context for an earlier marking of *half legato*, seen in the second theme of the first movement exposition. While the final iteration of that theme is marked with frequent tenuto and staccato indications, the overall effect should be more connected and lyrical when compared to the *half staccato* theme of the second movement.

In addition to his descriptions of different articulations, Copland in *Copland on Music* discusses his belief that the accent sign lacks the precision composers require to communicate tone color and dynamic relationships between individual notes.

It is common knowledge that an accent, taken by itself, is an unsubtle sign. Notes have light, strong, and medium accents. There are accents on up-beats as well as down-beats. There are accents that even allow the bar-line to be ‘felt.’ All these are now symbolized by the simple sign >, (Sheer desperation must have mothered

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20. Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, 72.

the addition of the sforzato sign for very strong accents.) It is obvious that we badly need an enlarged system of musical symbols to serve our greater rhythmic complexities.<sup>21</sup>

When interpreting tenuto, *sf*, and accent signs within the context of the nonvibrating piano texture, the performer should consider the shape and duration of the musical motive, the specific sonorous challenges associated with each texture (for example large accompanying chords against a single line melody), and the way Copland beams the melodic notes. With these elements in mind, clarity of line and motivic structure can be easily understood.

In the second movement, tonal center becomes unimportant as the framing interval takes on primary significance. While the key signature indicates B Major, the opening theme begins on a D natural. The most prominent melodic note is G sharp, which ends the motive, but the opening does not suggest G-sharp minor either. There are hints of Lydian mode originating from the E sharp in the left hand countermelody, but the melodic material is most easily interpreted without being connected to a long-range tonality. As the first theme modulates and inverts, different arrival notes are highlighted and their relation to the pitches of the rest of the melody changes. As the theme is sounded in different pitch areas, Copland begins to juxtapose these areas against each other, either at the same time or in conversation (example 4.21), a treatment he also applies to the second theme. The movement's ending is rather curious, as the second theme is sounded bitonally, in dialogue (example 4.22). Rather than providing tonal closure to this movement, Copland instead draws us back to the opening rhythm from the first movement.

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21. Copland, *Copland on Music*, 278-79.

Example 4.21 – Piano Sonata, 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, mm. 26-35

Example 4.22 – Piano Sonata, 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, mm. 306-310

The final movement's sonority is notable primarily for its spaciousness and clarity. While the opening movement establishes a powerful tone through strong dynamics, constant harmonization of melodies, and increasing thickness of texture, the final movement systematically removes these elements. The result is a sense of stillness, the aftermath of the dramatic impact that listeners experience in the first fifteen minutes of the *Sonata*. Copland embraces textural simplicity more than anywhere else in the piece, choosing not to add harmonic context to most of the melodic lines. The opening theme is a prime example of this texture, as see earlier in example 4.15 (p. 53), when it

first appeared in the second movement. This choice, combined with his use of wide registral spacing, creates a stark and unique atmosphere.

Meno mosso

*pp* *p* *elegiac*

*ppp* *ppp* *ppp*

*rit.* *ppp* *ppp*

*dim. e rit. poco a poco*

*pp* *ppp*

Example 4.23 – Piano Sonata, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, mm. 151-171

In the *Sonata*'s final page, Copland uses thinning textures and longer note durations to create an expressive sonority that establishes the concluding tone of the piece (example 4.23). Marked *elegiac*, it should have a still, mourning and reflective quality, as if some part of the character's spirit has been lost forever.

Earlier, we explored Copland's use of English terms at especially expressive moments of his music. In addition to melodic expression, these terms are frequently used in connection with sonority. Earlier in the third movement he uses *transparent* to indicate

stillness, in a moment where all rhythmic direction has ceased (example 4.24). Here, the performer should communicate nothing but sonority, without emphasis of meter or rhythm. Slight voicing on the top note is a possible interpretation, but because Copland indicates tenuto on both the left and right hand, the overall effect should be blocks of sonorous color rather than a harmonized melody.



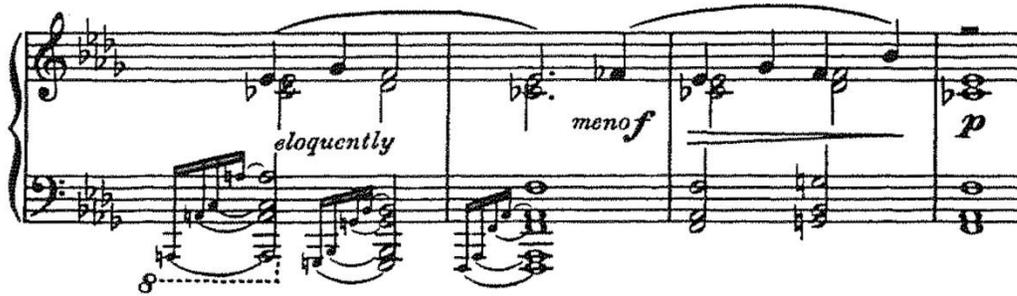
Example 4.24 – Piano Sonata, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, mm. 55-56

The other examples of English text related to sonority occur in the first movement. The first, *crystalline*, should be explored similarly to the *transparent* section, but with more pronounced voicing on the top note, indicated by Copland’s direction to “mark” the left hand. This contrasts with the tenutos of the *transparent* section. The high register in this section will allow the left hand note (crossing over the right) to shimmer on top of the underlying harmony (example 4.25).



Example 4.25 – Piano Sonata, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm. 106-108

The second term, *eloquently*, suggests a fluent, assured delivery of the melodic line (example 4.26). The registral placement of the accompanying rolled chords in this phrase can create voicing problems, and must be managed carefully. Achieving clarity and steady pacing are integral components of an interpretation that honors Copland's score indication.



Example 4.26 – Piano Sonata, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm. 203-206

I began my discussion of sonority with a quote from Copland which highlights the diversity of sonorities that has developed in contemporary composition. Copland seems to believe that the extreme range of sounds and textures opens the door to a richer palate of expressive communication. I suggest that sonority is the most visceral, easily graspable element for an unexperienced listener of contemporary music. The melodies may challenge their preconceptions, and the rhythms may be too complex to grasp at times, but the vast dynamic and textural range found in the *Sonata* is impossible to miss, even for the most casual of listeners. Performers should be sure that their use of sonority is true to the score. But, within Copland's indications, the most important thing is that the music meets Copland's larger intent, that the sound communicates broadly and powerfully.

## Formal Structure

*One of the principal things to listen for, when listening more consciously, is the planned design that binds an entire composition together. Structure in music is no different from structure in any other art; it is simply the coherent organization of the artist's material.*

*But the material in music is of a fluid and rather abstract character; therefore the composer's structural task is doubly difficult because of the very nature of music itself.*<sup>22</sup>

The *Piano Sonata* is one of only two mature works by Copland bearing the title of “sonata”, the other being his 1943 *Sonata for Violin and Piano*. To truly understand what to listen for in Copland, it is useful to explore the larger structure of the *Sonata*. Copland sees musical form as being a result of musical materials, rather than the starting structure for which he creates music. “Rightly understood, form can only be the gradual growth of a living organism from whatever premise the composer starts... It is musical content that determines the form.”<sup>23</sup> If we understand formal structure as serving the expressive requirements of musical content, then we will see the necessity of understanding the *Sonata*'s form, as well as the ways in which Copland thinks about formal structure. It is useful at this point to remember that Copland sees an awareness of formal structure as a piece unfolds as an essential skill of intelligent listeners. “It is insufficient merely to hear music in terms of the separate moments at which it exists. You must be able to relate what you hear at any given moment to what has just happened before and what is about to come afterward.”<sup>24</sup> If the music is to communicate the composer's voice effectively,

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22. Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, 95.

23. *Ibid.*, 96.

24. *Ibid.*, 5.

we must listen with the larger structure in mind. The interpreter's duty, therefore, is to clearly highlight this structure during performance.

Copland describes the essential quality of musical material fit for sonata form as “the juxtaposition of one group of themes denoting power and aggressiveness with another group which is more relaxed and songlike in quality,”<sup>25</sup> going on to discuss the psychological drama that this juxtaposition creates. The *Sonata*'s first movement certainly serves as a clear example of this juxtaposition, but there are some unique elements present, both in the sonata-allegro movement and in the others, that are worth noting as performers plan a long-range narrative arc. The first unexpected element is the return of the primary theme before the development. On first hearing, this may suggest a rondo form, but the rest of the movement does not follow suit. Perhaps Copland is foreshadowing the cyclic quality of the work as a whole, relating this return to the later instance of the theme appearing at the center of the final movement. The performer should lend this return appropriate weight and significance, but avoid playing the theme like a closing section or a recapitulation. Moving through the passage into the development is necessary in order to maintain the narrative arc. The development itself is unique due to the ways in which Copland works with his materials. He writes in *What to Listen for in Music* that the development “challenges the imagination of every composer.”<sup>26</sup> Copland's decision to use rhythmic variation, shift the tempo conception of the movement, and foreshadow significant themes from other movements all contribute

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25. Ibid., 155.

26. Ibid., 157.

to a unique example of the form, one that employs nontraditional tools to create narrative drive.

The second movement loosely takes the form of a rondo with variation processes, with a middle section which possesses enough dramatic weight that it can almost be heard as a development section within a sonata-allegro form. The uniqueness of the movement comes in the way that Copland develops and expands his musical materials each time they return. The A section (mm. 1-53) possesses more initial weight than the B section (mm. 54-78) through virtue of being twice as long, with more repetition of ideas. This makes the B section sound more like an interjection than a section of equal weight. Additionally, the A section melody appears in the B section as an interjection between motives. The return of A (mm. 79-120) features modulation and inversion of the melodic material, as well as an initial extension of the left hand countermelody, a process that will be continued later in the movement. This second A section also features a brief development of B (mm. 90-99), reaffirming the relative importance of B as an interruption in comparison to A. The development-like C section (mm. 121-177) explores the A section's rhythmic motive through melodic material that is only distantly related to A. The developmental nature is enhanced by fragmentation and inversion of ideas, with far fewer rhythmic breaks between statements. The third A section (mm. 178-222) again features an inverted melody. As before, it is interrupted. However, the interruption this time comes from the insertion of the closing movement's primary theme (mm. 204-213), rather than the second thematic area. The last B section (mm. 223-273) is doubled in length from previous iterations, exploring the motive through rhythmic development. Finally, the second theme is given equal weight to the first. The scherzo closes with a

final A section (mm. 274-310) which mirrors the initial A. While the opening of the movement is marked by an increase in intensity, dynamics, and rhythmic motion, the final A features reordered materials and a dissipation of musical energy. The reflective structure of the movement as a whole naturally fits the motivic material, and mirrors the dramatic structure of the *Sonata* as a whole. The opening theme, perfect for variation, expands and contracts, and seems to determine the overall formal structure for the entire movement.

Roger Sessions, quoted in Copland's *Music and Imagination*, discusses the controlling factors of tonal music as follows: "First, the sense of progression or cumulation; second, the association for repletion of ideas; third, the feeling for contrast. Given these requisites, a piece of music may be constructed without reference to any established set form and yet have a tight, precise, and logical shape".<sup>27</sup> Commentators note that the *Sonata*'s closing movement lacks a distinct form. The movement evolves fluidly, as the melody continually develops before fading out, while the accompanimental ostinato rises to melodic prominence. Copland ends the piece with an extended closing section modulated downward by a half-step. The form, at its most basic level, could be outlined A-B-C-B, but this structure does not begin to illuminate the way Copland develops and combines materials, especially as he introduces themes from the first movement. However, when we view the movement through the lens of this quote, we see the way in which musical materials can provide coherency without regard to formal norms. We have already discussed much of this material, including the ways in which the melodic elements connect to previous movements, as well as the ways in which they

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27. Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 64.

evolve to form the motivic basis for later sections of the movement (the descending half notes of the primary theme becoming the diminished ostinato, for example). This discussion satisfies Sessions' concepts of progression and repletion of ideas. The thematic return of the first movement creates contrast, signifying the end of a cumulative dramatic process. What, then, should we make of the closing 55 measures of the piece, which make up approximately one third of the movement?

When contemplating the quieting effect of the *Sonata's* conclusion, unique within the great piano literature, we should consider the second theme in particular, shown in example 4.9 (p. 43). This theme, reminiscent of the first movement's second theme due to its four-note melodic contour weaving within the interval of a perfect fourth, gains more and more expressive weight as the movement progresses. The closing page seamlessly mixes together this theme with an echo of the first movement's primary theme. This final return of the opening theme arguably possesses more expressive weight than the more overt return at the center of the movement. Simple, quiet, clear and direct, it reminds us of Copland himself. This section is a postlude to the *Sonata*, although it occupies an expressive weight far greater than the term would suggest. Performers should carefully pace any *ritardando* or *diminuendo* effects, saving these expressive gestures for the final six measures. Care should be taken to link short motivic gestures through legato shaping and forward movement, prioritizing the long line. Throughout the closing *meno mosso*, a continual release of tension lends an atmospheric effect. The conflict has already run its course. Our aim in the movement's closing is simply to exist in the aftermath, considering the result of what has taken place.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

Copland's ideas about music, extensively available in his writing, provide us a unique exploratory context through which to interpret his music. Interestingly, his writing also raises the question of whether the *Sonata* is even relevant to audiences today. When we read his thoughts on Debussy, his question of whether modern music will remain relevant once its iconoclastic coloration has faded away invites a disconcerting idea into our minds. Copland saw himself as a modernist, communicating the artistic truths relevant to his era through a vibrant and progressive point of view. The issue of harmonizing his compositional voice with life in industrial America was a concern that weighed heavily on him, whether faced with the depression of the 1930s, the war of the 1940s, or McCarthyism in the 1950s. How, therefore, would he view the relevance of his own music in the twenty-first century? The answer, I believe, lies in Copland's belief in the myriad interpretive shadings possible within any great piece of music.

What is the essential nature of the *Sonata*? Is it possible to define, and is that definition rooted in a specific place and time? Or is the piece's essential nature a broader truth, one that transcends historical era? Copland acknowledges the universality of musical truths while writing about Beethoven. "A masterwork awakens in us reactions of a spiritual order that are already in us, only waiting to be aroused. When Beethoven's music exhorts us to 'be noble,' 'be compassionate,' 'be strong,' he awakens moral ideas that are already within us. His music cannot persuade: it makes evident."<sup>1</sup> When we examine the *Sonata* through the lens of Copland's ideas, essential elements certainly

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1. Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 17.

become clear. The feeling of striving to rise, grow, and move ahead, only to be resisted by larger forces, permeates the opening movement. The vibrant rhythmic energy, full of life and optimism, makes the second movement dance. The juxtaposition of a single voice against the enormous weight of the world that opens the third movement, with human expression becoming subsumed into the environment during the final pages of the piece, provides closure through profound stillness. It is easy to hear the looming clouds of World War II in the *Sonata*, a symbolism expressed by many commentators. Yet, Copland wrote passionately against the idea of burdening a piece of music with an overt programmatic message. Is there a conflict here? I do not believe so.

I propose that the essential nature of the *Sonata* is more abstract, inspired by time and place and yet essentially untethered. Hearing the piece as an image of World War II is one possible listening experience. But war and violence are not confined to Copland's time. Nor are they the only interpretations of the piece. The composer himself encourages us to travel down the interpretive paths that present themselves to us, no matter where they lead. "In the field of music it seems to me important that we keep open what William James calls the 'irrational doorways...through which...the wildness and the pang of life' may be glimpsed."<sup>2</sup> Our aim should not be to translate a singular message. Instead, we should allow our analysis of the score, in combination with an understanding of Copland's personality and cultural context, guide our own unique interpretation. In all cases, we as interpreters, whether performing or listening, should strive for the essential listening experience most resonant with us: an interpretive experience seen through the eyes of the composer, heard through the ears of our own time and place.

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2. Ibid., 66.

## APPENDIX A

### PROGRAM NOTES

Aaron Copland's *Piano Sonata*, written between 1939 and 1941, is the second of his three major piano works. Larger in scale than the 1930 *Piano Variations* and more tonal than both the *Variations* and his 1957 *Piano Fantasy*, the *Sonata* is an immersive and challenging piece, fitting for its time in history. Composed at the confluence of the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II, the *Sonata*'s expressive tension represents the unrest of Copland's world.

Copland's *Sonata* explores the opposition of small and large forces. The music suggests a conflict between the hope of the human spirit and the oppressive power of an ominous environment. Copland saves his most lyrical melodies for moments of great beauty and joy. Throughout the first movement, these melodies rise upwards, only to be overpowered by percussive chords that overwhelm the smaller voice. In the first movement, listen to the first theme's brooding melody and violent crashes of sonority, contrasted with the second theme's lyrical and intimate emotion. In the hushed closing measures of the movement, you will hear the return of this second theme as it accompanies a melody that soars above the rest of the texture, one of the most beautiful moments in the piece. In the middle (development) section, when the tempo becomes fast and rhythmic, Copland gives us joyful staccato melodies and constantly changing rhythms, which foreshadow the character of the *vivace* second movement.

The second movement design is a combination of rondo and variation forms. As the first melody returns again and again, listen to the ways that Copland changes the tune, including flipping it upside down and widening the small intervals into large, daunting leaps. The roaring chords of the second section remind us of the first movement's powerful opening, and we remember that the storm lurks close by, even in the music's most exuberant moments. At the movement's center, just over three minutes in, a relentless buildup of energy gives way to a section of near-stillness. Listen for a song-like melody high in the right hand, accompanied by four staccato notes leaping upward in the left hand. This new melody becomes the primary theme for the third movement. Enjoy the cheerful, expressive character of this melody, and consider how the emotion changes when it returns.

As the final movement begins, notice the combination of three crashing chords followed by an unaccompanied melody. This combination is a perfect snapshot of the dramatic tension represented by the *Sonata*. By this time you have probably noticed the ways that melodies or emotions from each movement appear in other movements. The most powerful example of this comes five minutes into the final movement, when the melody from the very beginning of the piece returns in full. Copland is creating an expressive connection that ties the entire piece together. As the music moves toward its closing page, we hear fragments of this theme hidden within the widely spaced and sparse sonorities. The lyrical human voice, now timid and fragmented, slowly dissolves from the music. Copland writes *elegiac*, suggesting a somber, mournful emotion. The ending is marked by stillness but not peace, a stark landscape that remains at the conclusion of a powerful struggle.

## APPENDIX B

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