

Notes by Thomas May © 2019

## **Suite from Billy the Kid**

**AARON COPLAND**

*Born November 14, 1900 in Brooklyn, New York*

*Died December 2, 1990 in North Tarrytown, New York*

The simplicity and directness of Aaron Copland's best-loved works from the 1930s and 1940s—a period that saw the creation of his iconic trio of ballet scores: *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo*, and *Appalachian Spring*—represent a “populist” style at which the composer arrived only after an adventurous period of experimenting with modernism and the then-fashionable “symphonic jazz.”

The lingering Great Depression intensified Copland's urge, shared with many of his artistic peers, to communicate with a broader audience. Another pragmatic basis for the development of Copland's forthright “American sound” can be found in the contexts for which he was writing, including dance. It was largely in tandem with collaborative projects involving specifically American subject matter, in the genres of ballet, theater, and film, that Copland evolved this language. *Billy the Kid*, which premiered in 1938, marked a major breakthrough toward the later ballets.

The idea for *Billy the Kid* was pitched by the ambitious young impresario Lincoln Kirstein for his newly formed Ballet Caravan, a touring company that was a forerunner of the New York City Ballet. Playing a sort of American Serge Diaghilev, Kirstein fixed on Copland as the Stravinsky with whom he would partner to establish a thriving indigenous ballet that held its own in comparison to the standard Franco-Russian traditions of the time.

*Billy the Kid* was designed as a one-act ballet, with choreography by Eugene Loring, drawn from a semi-fictional treatment of the notorious outlaw Henry McCarty (1859-1881)—also known as William H. Bonney. Billy appears as a quasi-mythical figure, a romanticized emblem of the passions and dangers of the Wild West. Copland recalled that he approached the prospect of this “folk-ballet” with “a firm resolve to write simply,” believing that as part of a stage work, “music should play a modest role, helping when help is needed, but never injecting itself as if it were the main business of the evening.” In the process, he produced music that has held its own as a beloved concert staple.

Copland frames the story with widely spaced harmonies that vividly conjure a sense of the open prairie and, importantly, its associated sense of loneliness, all set amid the context of westward migration. “Street in a Frontier Town,” where we first encounter Billy as a boy of twelve, cleverly recomposes bits of cowboy tunes in a way that adds much more than “flavor.” During a drunken brawl, Billy witnesses his mother accidentally being shot in the crowd and instantly stabs those responsible.

This sets the pattern for Billy's criminal career as an adult. “Card Game at Night” establishes a lonely, reflective mood “under the stars.” In dramatic contrast, violence erupts once more in the percussion-heavy “Gun Battle” as Billy is ambushed by his former friend, Sheriff Pat Garrett. In a local saloon, complete with out-of-tune piano, a tipsy crowd celebrates the outlaw's capture. The Suite omits the ballet's episode of Billy escaping from jail into the desert, where he romances his sweetheart, but cuts to the scene of Billy's death after he has been caught for the last time. The opening prairie music returns, transformed so as to convey, as Copland put it, “the idea of a new dawn breaking.”

**Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, “From the New World”**

**ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK**

*Born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, (now Czech Republic)*

*Died May 1, 1904, in Prague*

The question of what it means to write “American music” had preoccupied artists in the century before Copland. The musicologist Douglas Shadle points out that “American composers were wrestling with national identity long before” Antonín Dvořák arrived in the New World in 1892 to direct the newly established National Conservatory of Music located in New York City’s Lower East Side—the brainchild of the philanthropist Jeannette Thurber. Her ambitious dream was to foster an authentically American art when Eurocentric cultural values predominated. Thurber’s forward-looking ideas extended to opening up the Conservatory to welcome and support women, African-Americans, and other minorities as students.

Himself a minority within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czech Dvořák shared in Jeanette Thurber’s progressive

