



The United States Army Field Band

*The Musical Ambassadors of the Army
Washington, DC*

An Educator's Guide to the Music of Aaron Copland

GENERAL PERFORMANCE TIPS AND TECHNIQUES FOR THE BAND MUSIC OF AARON COPLAND

INTRODUCTION

The United States Army Field Band and Soldiers' Chorus have recently completed an ambitious recording project to celebrate the centenary of the "Dean of American Music," Aaron Copland. With the 100th anniversary of his birth on November 14, 2000, ensembles throughout the nation and around the world are programming Copland's music now more than ever. Our *Legacy of Aaron Copland* reference recordings and our online resources are intended to make his music more accessible to students and to assist conductors and educators in preparing for their own performances.

During our recording sessions and the rehearsals that led up to them, the members of the Field Band learned much about Aaron Copland and his music. We have chosen to share some of those insights through *An Educator's Guide to the Music of Aaron Copland*.

JUDICIOUS EDITING

One of the first lessons any performer learns is that the printed music is only a guide to the sounds which the composer wishes to have recreated. Students should realize that professional musicians use their experience to judiciously edit printed parts; this makes things easier to play, or better reflects the composer's original intent.

Seemingly small changes can often result in much cleaner execution of parts. They can also reduce the technical requirements for most of the sections, while maintaining the rhythmic pulse. Educators can greatly improve the performance of their ensembles by judicious editing, allowing their strongest players to carry the load, while easing the burden for less-experienced students. Keep in mind that even minor editing can have great impact when heard in the context of the full ensemble.

ARTICULATIONS

Copland was the first to admit that he loved composing, but was bored with orchestration. Although the majority of his masterworks were written for orchestra, there are obvious weaknesses in his concert band scoring. Many inherent problems occur because of the expanded size of the band's woodwind and brass sections, and the different capabilities of instruments he substituted for the strings.

Although the concert band clarinet section may seem to have a direct relationship to the orchestra's violins, the limitations of fast articulations are soon apparent. As the Field Band's concertmaster appropriately points out: "The only thing worse than hearing one clarinet player trying to tongue faster than possible is to hear an entire woodwind section exceeding the limits."

A good example of inappropriate articulation occurs in the woodwind counterpoint at rehearsal #10 in Copland's familiar *Variations on a Shaker Melody*. Even with a professional ensemble, if these sixteenth-notes are played as written, the section will sound muddy and tend to bog down. Although an alternative is simply to reduce the tempo for the entire work, this changes the style, and lessens the energy of the piece. However, the tempo and the sweeping effect Copland intended can be maintained by simply slurring all the sixteenths. This not only cleans up the line and decreases the adrenalin rush of the woodwinds, but allows them to be rhythmically precise over the brass melody.

Many other articulation problems occur throughout the Copland band repertoire. These most often result from reassigning string parts to single-reed instruments. Downbows and upbows on string instruments do not readily translate to tonguing motions! One solution to this problem is to allow the clarinets and saxophones to slur the first two of each beat of sixteenth-notes. With the trumpets and flutes double-tonguing over the top of the altered single reed articulation, the percussive staccato effect is still maintained.

There are several other options for altering written articulation. Depending on the passage, the players can change repeated articulation to tonguing two, then slurring two. In some cases, alternating these two options—having half the section slur the first two sixteenths while the others slur the second—achieves an acceptable compromise.

In other cases, even Copland himself altered rhythms between parts; one part may be tonguing an eighth-note followed by two sixteenths, while the other is tonguing two sixteenths followed by an eighth. If all notes are played staccato, it will sound as if all four sixteenths are tongued cleanly, while giving each group of performers that extra sixteenth to reset for the next beat.

BALANCE AND BLEND

Although Copland wrote only one original work for band, he adapted many of his own works and authorized several transcriptions by others. Unfortunately, because his initial concept was orchestrally-based, a number of balance issues occur, particularly for the brass section. While orchestral brass usually are assigned one person per part, large bands may have as many as three to four players covering the same lines. Conductors and performers must keep this in mind as they adjust dynamics and limit the number of players in order to achieve a proper

balance and blend. Because the trumpet, trombone, and tuba sections in bands are substantially larger than in orchestras, they will frequently need to reduce volume levels.

In the performance of Copland works, the Field Band frequently adds a second tuba down an octave from where written in the printed tuba parts. With the majority of tuba players on the bottom, the lower octave (where a section of string basses would normally play) is reinforced.

While low brass sections may not be as overpowering in some school bands where their numbers are minimal, be aware of the other extreme. The high range of Copland works is often thickly scored and can be not only a balance problem, but an intonation nightmare.

In transcribing for band, the clarinet section usually bears the brunt of the violin parts. It was previously noted how string articulations can challenge the clarinetists. The literal transcription of the first violin parts can also cause balance problems, because the altissimo register of the clarinet projects much more readily than the violin. There are numerous examples of altissimo clarinet writing in *Emblems*, *An Outdoor Overture*, *The Red Pony*, and *Inaugural Fanfare*. Music educators can eliminate many unrealistic challenges by scanning the clarinet range of Copland compositions and reducing the number of players on the top parts. By cutting many of the highest portions to one solo clarinet, the balance will improve dramatically. Along with this, proper intonation becomes a more real possibility.

COPLAND'S CHARACTERISTIC SOUND

When Aaron Copland returned from France in 1924, after studying with Nadia Boulanger, he was intent upon creating an American style of classical music. The characteristic sound that he developed over the next half century is easily identified through his use of open intervals, unusual orchestration, and familiar tunes.

The sound of open fourths and fifths is heard throughout Copland's compositions. We all immediately recognize the open intervals of his famous *Fanfare for the Common Man*. That sound is an established Copland trademark, which he also used throughout many other pieces.

He also frequently combined common timbres to create unique sounds. Works such as *Lincoln Portrait* are full of examples where themes are passed around from instrument to instrument, then combined in new tone colors.

Another interesting device which Copland used to alter timbre is to employ mutes. Unlike many composers, who occasionally write for muted trumpet or trombone, Copland loved to exploit the muted colors of all brass instruments. In *Grandfather's Story from the Red Pony*, he calls for not only muted horns and trombones, but also euphoniums and tubas. It is well worth the investment to ensure that all low brass have mutes for this selection. While some trombonists may have mutes, it is unlikely that all tuba and euphonium players will. However, having only the trombones use mutes is not a solution. Even if the bass voices lower their dynamics to match the muted trombones, the sound Copland desired cannot be achieved. When the muted brass are combined with the low woodwinds and melancholy trumpet solos, the sound is typical Copland.

One of the difficulties encountered when using mutes is making quick, quiet changes from muted to open and back again. Consider splitting parts, allowing one player to play muted sections, while another is always ready to play the open passages. Although this may require some cutting and pasting and redistribution of parts, it is well worth the effort to first attend to

all of the mute concerns before beginning rehearsals.

To help establish a national style, Copland often drew upon our country's past, incorporating pre-existing tunes into his compositions. When he realized that the harmonic structure for his original band commission *Emblems* paralleled *Amazing Grace*, he decided to include it in the work. In the midst of the harsh tonalities and strident dissonances of *Emblems*, the lyrical *Amazing Grace* brings order and harmony.

In 1944, when Copland was composing the ballet *Appalachian Spring*, *Simple Gifts* was a relatively obscure hymn tune. It has since become a part of our national heritage—thanks to the popularity of Copland's ballet and his vocal setting in the suite of *Old American Songs*. He also adapted a portion of the ballet for band, using *Simple Gifts* as the theme for his popular *Variations on a Shaker Melody*.

In other works, Copland incorporated existing American tunes to help establish a time period. In *Lincoln Portrait*, he introduced fragments of the Stephen Foster tune *Camptown Races*, heard first in the oboe and flute. This material becomes the melodic germ which Copland develops throughout much of *Lincoln Portrait*. It is important for music educators to acquaint their students with not only the original songs from which these fragments come, but the historical significance which led up to each of Lincoln's statements quoted in this work. As teachers are well aware, music education goes far beyond getting students to play the right notes and rhythms. By tying music into other subject areas such as history, sociology, and speech, students can begin to understand the overlap of academic disciplines.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR INSTRUMENTAL SECTIONS

PICCOLO

- Perhaps the most challenging aspect of playing Copland's music for the piccolo player is intonation. Thinly scored parts and doublings in the high register require the piccolo player to have a good ear and excellent control of the instrument. Copland's music looks deceptively easy. Often the most difficult things to play well on piccolo are those that look the easiest. The need to have strong players on both piccolo and Eb clarinet cannot be overemphasized.
- Dynamic markings on solos should not always be taken verbatim. A solo marked *mezzo piano* and played *mezzo forte* will still sound *mezzo piano* in context. Also, solos occurring in the middle and low register do not project as well as those written in the upper octave.

OBOE

- Copland frequently turned to the principal oboist for solo passages, introduction of new themes and restatements of old ones, and for expressive interludes between sections. As

in most orchestral works, there are few characteristics which call for section playing.

- The difficulty in Copland's writing for oboe is related to the range and dynamic flexibility required, rather than technical difficulty. The writing is very exposed with little or no room for error.
- Copland unfortunately chose keys that display some of the worst characteristics of the oboe. For example, the modulation to Gb major in *Variations on a Shaker Melody* places the instrument in one of the worst possible keys for intonation and technique.
- In most of the Copland works, the oboe is in a subservient position and is only minimally important.

CLARINET

- Two problems repeatedly occur when attempting to perform Copland transcriptions for band: 1) writing for full section or numerous players in the altissimo register 2) extremely fast passages to be played tongued. The reason for this is somewhat obvious in that the clarinet section often receives the exact same part as the violin section in the orchestral original. Unfortunately, a clarinet section does not sound like a violin section in the upper register or when playing rapidly tongued passages. Usually, cutting down the number of players playing in the altissimo register can help, but that cannot be an automatic action every time there are high As. One must carefully pay attention to the orchestration of the entire ensemble in order to determine what effect Copland was after. In the very loud, *tutti* passages, consider leaving everyone on the altissimo parts. However, there are times when cutting down to three, two, or even one player is what is necessary to avoid extreme intonation and tonal problems.
- With the repeated tonguing required to play transcribed violin parts, the clarinet section usually ends up playing out of time and behind the rest of the ensemble. Usually the composer's desired effect is that of a long, musical sweep, which can often be achieved by slurring the entire passage. However, sometimes Copland wants to have the staccato effect in a rapid passage, such as in *Hoe Down*. At those times, if the clarinet section is playing with other instruments that can and are double-tonguing, then the judicious adding of some slurs will keep the section from bogging down while the more percussive articulations of the trumpet and/or oboe will carry the desired effect.

HORN

- **Copland Coloration–Muted Horn:** When passages are marked muted, then open in close proximity, the horn section should split parts so that all the notes can be covered; this involves copying lines and passing them to other players in section. This eliminates quick changes and reduces excess noise during performance.
- **Stopped Horn:** Markings are often not clearly indicated in the Copland publications. It is frequently difficult to determine if the passages are to be stopped (hand muted) or muted. Use colorations of other parts to determine which is the best choice; it may be necessary to use the opposite of what is indicated by mute or "+."
- **Note Lengths:** Duration of notes is often not marked, but arbitrarily decided by the

conductor. Give special consideration to the fact that the horn is not a directional instrument, but needs to sound directional to match styles with the trumpets and trombones. In many cases, it may be necessary to lengthen notes to match one section, while shortening them to match another.

- **Volume:** Dynamics may need to be altered in many instances. Generally, in order to balance with the rest of the brass section, horns must play louder. However, to play with the woodwinds, play softer with a lighter attack. Copland was very innovative at combining different instruments to create unique tone colors; horns get the best of both worlds, playing with both brasses and woodwinds.
- **Articulations:** When playing with the brass, a harder attack is usually necessary to compensate for not being a directional instrument. When playing with the woodwinds, particularly in softer sections, articulations must be lightened.
- **Slurring and Intervals:** Copland often requires the horns to slur over wide intervals. Although the P4s and P5s are hard enough to negotiate, spend extra time working on the larger intervals to ensure accuracy and connection.
- **Intonation:** Copland frequently eliminates the internal intervals of chords, leaving open P4s and P5s, which make intonation problems extremely apparent. Ensure that proper tuning is a priority, exercise extreme care, and work diligently to adjust each chord.
- **Orchestration:** Along with the awkward intonation resulting from open intervals, Copland voices lines in unusual combinations of instruments. Always be aware of who is playing with the horn section in order to identify unique problems of pairings with other instruments.

TROMBONE

- In most of the Copland transcriptions, the trombone section is performing the same parts as in the original orchestral editions, with a few new portions added. Because most bands have more than one instrument per part, it is essential to listen and adjust to balance with other sections and the entire ensemble.
- As with other instruments, the trombone section is required to play many open harmonies and tune wide intervals. Careful listening and slow practice can help trombonists negotiate these problems.