

Tempo

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COPLAND AT 70

In this birthday issue for Aaron Copland several of the contributors have touched on his position in relation to Ives. Copland himself has made an interesting reference to Ives, illuminating this relationship, in his book *Music and Imagination*, where he asks: "Do both Ives and Villa Lobos suffer from an inflated style? Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited our shores in the 1830s, reported that the 'inflated style' was typical for orators and writers. There must be something about big countries . . . that encourages creative artists to expand beyond all normal limits." Whether or not this proposition will hold water, it might be argued that Copland's own music shows a marked though perhaps not wholly conscious resistance to any such native tendency. The only inflation in it occurs in those compositions where he is deliberately aiming at a certain grandioseness of style, such as the Third Symphony and the *Lincoln Portrait*.

It is a far cry from these to the economy of the Piano Variations, and part of the distinction of Copland's achievement is that he is able to embrace both styles with conviction. Even more remarkable is his ability to combine extreme pithiness of statement with largeness of form, free from any hint of inflation but sustained with a concentration that never lapses for a moment. Such a work is the Piano Fantasy, one of Copland's later masterpieces, exemplifying par excellence those qualities which he admires in the contemporary to whom, in many respects, he stands closest—Stravinsky: "With Stravinsky", he writes, "one senses that the place of each note in each melody and chord has been found for it only after a process of meticulous elimination, and the place found is usually so unexpected and original that one can imagine the notes themselves being surprised at finding themselves situated where they are—'out of place', so to speak".

These words equally well define a quintessential characteristic of Copland's own music, one that gives his work its unique and distinguished place not only in the history of American Music but in twentieth-century music altogether. He has not been prolific and he has not been a notable innovator, but he is one of the great classicists of our time, in that he has conspicuously avoided both the hysteria and the complacency of much of the music of his generation, without withdrawing into triviality. It is this highly individual classicism that probably constitutes the essence of what we regard as Copland's Americanism, but when we consider that Americanism in relation to Ives's, and observe how unlike they are, it seems truer to suggest not that America has found her voice through Copland but that he has given her a voice—not so much a national as a personal voice, original and universal enough to be accorded pre-eminence, both at home and abroad, over all others that have yet spoken for her.