



From the Top at Carnegie Hall
Episode 13: "Interlochen Arts Academy Chamber Orchestra"
Airing on PBS (check local TV listings)
Available online at pbs.org

Learning Activity

Title: *Copland Tells a Story*

Description: Through this writing activity students will explore how Aaron Copland uses music to convey a sense of landscape and time.

Grade Level: 9-12 (may be adapted for different levels)

National Music Standards: **6** Listening to, analyzing, and describing music, **8** Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts, **9** Understanding music in relation to history and culture

Background

Composer Aaron Copland (1900-1990) was hugely influential in the development of American music. He incorporated the musical styles that inspired him: western European classical, Mexican folk, American folk, and jazz. His unique blend of genres, the simplicity of his melodies, and the emphasis he placed on slowly changing harmonies gave a musical voice to the landscape of the Western frontier and the culture of the time.

The piece performed by the Interlochen Arts Academy Chamber Orchestra is "Simple Gifts" from the ballet *Appalachian Spring*. Aaron Copland composed *Appalachian Spring* at the request of the great choreographer and dancer, Martha Graham. The ballet tells the story of a newlywed couple establishing a home in the western Pennsylvania frontier in the early 19th century.



Interlochen Arts Academy Chamber Orchestra performs "Simple Gifts" at Carnegie Hall

Materials: Computer with media player, projector and speakers if needed, paper and pencils

Activity Description

- 1) **Explain** to students that they will be watching a performance of "Simple Gifts" from the Aaron Copland ballet *Appalachian Spring*. The ballet takes place in the early 19th century (around 1830) on the western Pennsylvania frontier. **Ask students** what they know about that time period and setting: historical events, westward expansion, the farm-based economy.
- 2) **Explain** to students that part of the significance of Copland's work is his ability to conjure a place and time with his music. Copland wrote this piece based on a narrative outline he received from the choreographer and dancer Martha Graham. **Explain** that they will be **developing their own story** that could have served as Copland's outline for the music.
- 3) While **watching** "Simple Gifts" have students **listen carefully, brainstorm, and jot down** images and activities that come to mind.
- 4) Have students **organize and write** their images into a story, one that Copland might have used to translate the images into musical ideas.

Find out more!

About Aaron Copland

For basic biographical information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaron_Copland



Copland in his studio, 1946
Photo by Victor Kraft, courtesy Library of Congress

A collection of digital resources including Copland's letters and scores can be found at the Library of Congress:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/copland/>

About American music

Leonard Bernstein describes the development of American music and what makes a work quintessentially American in the book *Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts*. (Amadeus Press: Milwaukee, 2005)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_the_United_States

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americana_\(music\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americana_(music))

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