

Four Dance Episodes from *Rodeo*

Aaron Copland

Born: November 14, 1900 – New York, NY

Died: December 2, 1990 – Sleepy Hollow, NY

Piece Length: Approximately 18 minutes.

In 1938, the ballet *Billy the Kid* was premiered in Chicago. The score by Aaron Copland was one of the first to incorporate cowboy tunes and American folk songs and would be, along with *El Salón Mexico*, his first widespread success that would help launch the direction of his work over the next couple of decades into what has been described as his Populist period. Moving away from the more avant-garde, dissonant music that characterized his work in the 1920s, Copland wished to compose works that were more accessible for audiences. Many of his most famous works are from this period, including *Appalachian Spring*, *Fanfare for a Common Man* (which Copland would later incorporate into his Symphony No. 3), and tonight's score *Rodeo*.

When Copland was first approached by the choreographer Agnes de Mille to compose a ballet on the subject of the American cowboy, he was very hesitant to accept. He was resistant to the idea of writing, as he called it, "another Cowboy ballet" after *Billy the Kid*. He eventually agreed, and on October 16, 1942 the ballet was premiered by the Ballet de Monte-Carlo at the old Metropolitan Opera in New York City. The premiere was a sensational success, some accounts stating that there were 22 curtain calls! The following year, Copland extracted four scenes of the ballet to make a suite. Three of the Episodes were first performed by the Boston Pops Orchestra under Arthur Fielder on May 28, 1943. Two months later, the New York Philharmonic conducted by Alexander Smallens premiered the entire suite.

The story of the ballet was described by de Mille as follows: "The theme of the ballet is basic. It deals with the problem that has confronted all American women, from earliest pioneer times, and which has never ceased to occupy them throughout the history of the building of our country: how to get a suitable man." The ballet is distinctive in the history of dance for a couple of reasons. First, it is considered one of the earliest examples of true American ballet by combining ballet and Broadway dance techniques. The work featured men who are required to pantomime riding and roping along with dancing while dressed in western outfits. The ballet's story also is distinctive as it goes against the stereotypes of many ballet scenarios. While many ballets have a sort of boy-meets-girl storyline, this ballet is the opposite. The main character is the American Cowgirl, an awkward, vulnerable, yet strong character that de Mille described as one who "acts like a boy, not to be a boy, but to be liked by boys." Set at Burnt Ranch, the cowgirl competes with city girls for the affections of local cowboys, particularly the Head Wrangler. Her numerous attempts to get his attention come to no avail. However, by the end of the ballet, she has found true love with another cowboy, the Lead Roper, while the Head Wrangler and the Rancher's Daughter end up together.

Unlike other works of Copland's that use traditional American folk tunes that are greatly altered, *Rodeo* features tunes with very little change. This may be in part because de Mille had already planned some of the dances before the music was written and had ideas of what folk tunes she wanted to use.

The spirited opening of "Buckaroo Holiday" features two musical ideas that will be used throughout the episode: an energetic descending scale in the winds, trumpet, and strings and a syncopated answer in the brass and timpani. Soon, the Cowgirl enters the stage to a more gentle, elegant melody first presented by the flutes and horns. She is trying to win the affections of the Head Wrangler, who is more interested in the Rancher's Daughter. The cowboys enter shortly after to the tune "Sis Joe", a heavily

syncopated melody first heard in the flute and clarinet. The music then launches into an energetic section that develops the opening musical ideas. A rather comedic section follows with a trombone solo (marked in the score "with humor") that presents the tune "If He'd Be Buckaroo by His Trade"-a song from the viewpoint of a girl who longs for a boy and the lengths she would go to win his love, an appropriate choice for the Cowgirl to dance to. Heading towards the climax of the work, Copland employs numerous contrapuntal techniques including canon (think of multiple people singing "Row, Row Row Your Boat") and juxtaposition of musical ideas that reveal Copland's love of Stravinsky's music before the first Episode comes to an energetic conclusion.

The peaceful "Corral Nocturne", in ternary form (ABA), is the one Episode that does not contain folk music. It is music that depicts the mood of the lovesick Cowgirl. De Mille described the Cowgirl's actions during this scene as her running "through the empty corrals intoxicated with space, her feet thudding in the stillness."

The elegant "Saturday Night Waltz" opens with the string section playing music that seem to imitate an orchestra tuning before presenting the folk melody "I Ride an Old Paint" as the cowboys and girls pair off to dance. The Cowgirl is left to her own until the Champion Roper approaches her.

The most famous movement of the suite concludes the work: the "Hoe-Down", used in commercials for beef for many years (its what's for dinner!). After an energetic introduction, the main theme of the Episode is presented-a reworking of fiddler William Stepp's performance of "Bonaparte's Retreat". This is developed from the transcription of the work by the brilliant composer and ethnomusicologist Ruth Crawford Seeger was studied by Copland while composing the piece. A contrasting middle section, featuring the tune "Miss McLeod's Reel" contrasts the wild energy of "Bonaparte's Retreat" before the first theme returns, wrapping up the composition with bold energy.