Aaron Copland
[1900 - 1990]

Of all American composers, Aaron Copland has probably done the most, and in the greatest variety of ways, to further the cause of contemporary music. He has worked hard to advance the status of the serious American composer, and to bridge the notorious "gap" between composer and audience. In pursuit of these goals, Copland has written books about music for the layman, lectured, taught numerous courses, organized many concerts and festivals of American music, and has helped to improve the serious composer's economic situation as well, through the founding of the American Composers' Alliance.

Copland's career as a composer further illustrates his genuine concern for communicating with the music-loving public. As a young man, he became the first of many American composers to study in France with Nadia Boulanger, and for a number of years thereafter composed in a sharply dissonant, dispassionate Stravinsky style. His musical language gradually changed, however, as he became more interested in American music and the diversity of American musical culture—folk music of various regions, popular music, jazz, and the musical theatre. As many of these elements were absorbed into Copland's own style, his music became more accessible to the larger listening public. He emerged as one of the leaders of a group of American composers, including Harris and William Schuman, seriously concerned with the expression of American character—distinctively American—in symphonic music.

In recent years Copland's style has again become more abstract. Influenced in part by the twelve-tone technique. His music still retains its power to communicate, and he remains a lyricist, primarily concerned with the expressive powers of music. The essay reproduced here demonstrates the wide scope of this concern.


The Creative Mind and the Interpretative Mind

In the art of Music, creation and interpretation are indissolubly linked, more so than in any of the other arts, with the possible exception of dancing. Both these activities—creation and interpretation—demand an imaginative mind—that is self-evident. Both bring into play creative energies that are sometimes alike, sometimes dissimilar. By coupling them together it may be possible to illuminate their relationship and their interaction, one upon the other.

Like most creative artists, I have from time to time cogitated on the mysterious nature of creativity. Is there anything new to be said about the creative act—anything really new, I mean? I rather doubt it. The idea of creative man goes back so far in time, so many cogent things have been written and said—acute observations, poetic reflections, and philosophic ponderings, that one desairs of bringing to the subject anything more than a private view of an immense terrain.

Still, the serious composer who thinks about his art will sooner or later have occasion to ask himself: why is it so important to my own psyche that I compose music? What makes it seem so absolutely necessary, so that every other daily activity, by comparison, is of lesser significance? And why is the creative impulse never satisfied; why must one always begin anew? To the first question—the need to create—the answer is always the same—self-expression; the basic need to make evident one's deepest feelings about life. But why is the job never done? Why must one always begin again? The reason for the compulsion to renewed creativity, it seems to me, is that each added work brings with it an element of self-discovery. I must create in order to know myself, and since self-knowledge is a never-ending search, each new work is only a part answer to the question: "Who am I?" and brings with it the need to go on to other and different parts. Because of this, each artist's work is supremely important—at least to himself. But why does the artist presume to think, and why do other men encourage him to think, that the creation of one more work of art is of more than merely private import? That is because each new and significant work of art is a unique formulation of experience; an experience that would be utterly lost if it were not captured and set down by the artist. No other artist will ever make that particular formulation in exactly that way.
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And just as the individual creator discovers himself through his creation, so the world at large knows itself through its artists, discovers the very nature of its Being through the creations of its artists.

Jacques Maritain has summarized this idea of the necessity and uniqueness of the work of art in these terms: it is the artist’s condition, he says, “to seize obscurely his own being with a knowledge that will not be conceived to anything, save in being creative, and which will not be concept and brought to fruition. This gives a dramatic aspect to the composer’s situation

Up to this point, the situation of the musical interpreter is not so very different from that of the creator. He is simply the intermediary that brings are radically different. The interpretative mind can exercise itself on the given object; it cannot itself supply that object. The making of some

But now let us consider the essential way in which creation and interpretation are radically different. The interpretative mind can exercise itself on the given object; it cannot itself supply that object. The making of some

how long its duration one can never foretell. Inspiration may be a form of superconsciousness, or perhaps of subconsciousness—I wouldn’t know; but I am sure that it is the antithesis of self-consciousness. The inspired moment may sometimes be described as a kind of hallucinatory state of mind: one half of the personality emotes and dictates while the other half

That describes, of course, only one kind of inspiration. Another kind involves the personality as a whole, or rather, loses sight of it completely, in a spontaneous expression of emotional release. By that I mean the creative impulsion takes possession in a way that blots out in greater or lesser degree consciousness of the familiar sort. Both these types of inspiration—if one can call them types—are generally of brief duration and of

Mere length in music is central to the composer’s problem. To write a three-minute piece is not difficult; a main section, a contrasting section, and a return to the first part is the usual solution. But anything that lasts beyond three minutes may cause trouble. In treating so amorphous a material as music the composer is confronted with this principal problem: how to extend successfully the seminatural ideas and how to shape the whole so that it adds up to a rounded experience. Here, too, inspiration of a kind is needed. No textbook rules can be applied, for the simple reason that these generative ideas are themselves live things and demand their individual treatment. I have sometimes wondered whether this problem of the successful shaping of musical form was not connected in some way with the strange fact that musical history names no women in its roster of great composers. There have been great women musical interpreters, but thus far—emphasize, thus far—no examples of women composers of the first rank. This is a touchy subject, no doubt, but leaving aside the obscure and various reasons for the historical fact, it appears to indicate that the conception and shaping of abstract ideas in extended forms marks a clear boundary between the creative mind and the interpretative mind.

In all that I have been saying about creative thinking there is implied the strongly imaginative quality of the artist’s mentality. I stress this now rather on the artist as craftsman, with much talk of the composer’s tech-
tique. The artist-craftsman of the past is held up to us as the model to be emulated. There is a possible source of confusion here: amidst all the talk of the craftsmanlike approach we must always remember that a work of art is not a pair of shoes. It may very well be useful like a pair of shoes, but it takes its source from a quite different sphere of mental activity. Roger Sessions understood this when he wrote recently: "The composer's technique is, on the lowest level, his mastery of the musical language... On a somewhat higher level... it becomes identical with his musical thought, and it is problematical in terms of substance rather than merely of execution. On this level it is no longer accurate to speak of craftsmanship. The composer is no longer simply a craftsman; he has become a musical thinker, a creator of values—values which are primarily aesthetic, hence psychological, but hence, as an inevitable consequence, ultimately of the deepest human importance."

It is curious that this concern with craftsmanship should have affected an art that has developed no successful large-scale primitive practitioners, in the sense that there are accepted primitive painters. Music boasts no Henri Rousseau, no Grandma Moses. Naivety doesn't work in music. To write any sort of a usuable piece presumes a minimum kind of professionalism. Moussorgsky and Satie are the closest we have come in recent times to a primitive composer, and the mere mention of their names makes the idea rather absurd.

No, I suspect that the stress placed upon the composer as craftsman, especially in teacher-pupil relationships, comes from a basic mistrust of making private aesthetic judgments. There is the fear of being wrong, plus the insecurity of not being able to prove that one is right, even to oneself. As a result an attitude is encouraged of avoiding the whole messy business of aesthetic evaluation, putting one's attention on workmanship and craft instead, for there we deal in solid values. But that attitude, to my mind, side-steps the whole question of the composer's own need for critical awareness and for making aesthetic judgments at the moment of creation. As I see it, this ability is part of his craft, and the lack of it has weakened, when it hasn't entirely eliminated, many potentially fine works.

The creative mind, in its day-to-day functioning, must be a critical mind. The ideal would be not merely to be aware, but to be "aware of our awareness," as Professor L. A. Richards has put it. In music this self-critical appraisal of the composer's own mind guiding the composition to its inevitable termination is particularly difficult of application, for music is an emotional and comparatively intangible substance. Composers, especially young composers, are not always clear as to the role criticism plays at the instant of creation. They don't seem to be fully aware that each time one note is followed by another note, or one chord by another chord, a decision has been made. They seem even less aware of the psychological and emotional connotations of their music. Instead they appear to be mainly concerned with the purely formal rightness of a general scheme, with a particular care for the note-for-note logic of thematic relationships. In other words, they are partially aware but not fully aware, and not sufficiently cognizant of those factors which have a controlling influence on the success or failure of the composition as a whole. A full and equal appraisal of every smallest contributing factor with an understanding of the controlling and most essential elements in the piece, without allowing this to cramp one's freedom of creative inventiveness—being, as it were, inside and outside the work at the same time; that is how I envisage the "awareness of one's awareness." Beethoven's genius was once attributed by Schubert to what he termed his "superb coolness under the fire of creative fantasy." What a wonderful way to describe the creative mind functioning at its highest potential!

It is one of the curiosities of the critical creative mind that although it is very much alive to the component parts of the finished work it cannot know everything that the work may mean to others. There is an unconscious part in each work—an element that André Gide called la part de Dieu. I have often felt familiar, and yet again unfamiliar, with a new work of mine as it was being rehearsed for the first time—as if both the players and I myself had to accustom ourselves to its strangeness. The late Paul Rosenfeld once wrote that he saw the steel frames of skyscrapers in my Piano Variations. I like to think that the characterization was apt, but I must confess that the notion of skyscrapers was not at all in my mind when I was composing the Variations. In similar fashion an English critic, Wilfrid Mellers, has found in the final movement of my Piano Sonata "a quintessential musical expression of the idea of immobility." "The music runs down like a clock," Mellers writes, "and dissolves away into eternity." That is probably a very apt description also, although I would hardly have thought of it myself. Composers often tell you that they don't read criticisms of their works. As you see, I am an exception. I admit to a curiosity about the slightest cue as to the meaning of a piece of mine—a meaning, that is, other than the one I know I have put there.

Quite apart from my own curiosity, there is always the question of how successfully one is communicating with an audience. A composer who cannot in advance calculate to some extent the effect of his piece on the listening public is in for some rude awakenings. Whether or not he ought to take this effect upon an audience into account at the time of composing is another matter. Here again composers vary widely in their attitude. But whatever they tell you, I think it is safe to assume that although a conscious desire for communication may not be in the forefront of their minds, every
move toward logic and coherence in composing is in fact a move toward communication. It is only a slight step when a composer tries for coherence in terms of a particular audience. This idea of music directed to a particular public is usually a bit shocking to the music-lover. It doesn't matter how many times we tell the familiar story of Bach writing each week for the honest burghers of Leipzig, or Mozart's relations with the courtly musical patrons of his day; audiences still prefer to think of the musical creator as a man closeted with his idea, unsullied by the rough and tumble of the world around him. Whether or not contemporary composers think about this matter of communication with their audience, they haven't been signally successful at it.

The subject of communication with an audience brings us quite naturally to a consideration of the performer's role, and the interaction of the creative and the interpretative mind which is crucial to the whole musical experience. These two functions—creation and interpretation—were usually performed, in pre-Beethoven days, by a single individual. The composer was his own interpreter; or, as frequently happened, interpreters wrote music for their own instrument. But nowadays, as we all know, these functions are more usually separated, and the composer is in the position of a man who has lost his power of speech and consigns his thoughts by letter to an audience that cannot read words. Consequently they both have need of a middleman, a talented reader who can arouse response in an audience by the public reading of the composer's message.

A prime question immediately presents itself: what does the composer expect of his reader, or interpreter? I think I know what one of the main preoccupations of the interpreter is: elocutionary eloquence, or, to put it in musical terms, the making of beautiful sounds. All his life long he has trained himself to overcome all technical hurdles and to produce the most admirable tone obtainable on his instrument. But there's the rub; the composer is thinking about something quite different. He is concerned not so much with technical adequacy or quality of tonal perfection as with the character and specific expressive nature of the interpretation. Whatever else happens he doesn't want his basic conception to be falsified. At any moment he is ready to sacrifice beauty of tone for the sake of a more meaningful reading. Every performing artist has something of the elocutionist in him; he wants the words to shine, and the sound of them to be full and right. Every composer, on the other hand, has something of a playwright in him; he wants above all to have his "actors" intent upon the significance of a scene or its import within a particular context, for if that is lost, all elocutionary eloquence becomes meaningless—irritating even, since it hinders the creative mind from getting across to the audience the whole point and purpose of the work of art.