
divine art
Aaron Copland
music for piano
Passacaglia
Variations
Sonata
Fantasy
Raymond Clarke

COPLAND - PIANO MUSIC

1	**Passacaglia (1921-22)**	**[7:12]**
2	**Piano Variations (1930)**	**[11:18]**
	Piano Sonata (1939-41)	
3	**I:** ***Molto moderato***	**[8:27]**
4	**II:** ***Vivace***	**[4:34]**
5	**III:** ***Andante sostenuto***	**[11:42]**
6	**Piano Fantasy (1955-57)**	**[33:20]**
Total playing time (including pauses)		**[76:52]**

Recorded on 1 September 2001 at King's Hall, University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Recording engineer: Douglas Doherty
Editing/Post-production: Paul Baily
Producer: Stephen Sutton
Piano Technician: Kelvin Nettleship
Piano by Steinway (model D)
With thanks to the Music Department, University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Cover photo: New York bridges, taken from the top of the World Trade Center, destroyed by terrorism ten days after this recording session. *In Memoriam.* ©Stephen Sutton

Passacaglia published by Editions Salabert
Variations, Sonata & Fantasy published by Boosey & Hawkes

AARON COPLAND (1900-1990)

Copland was one of the most versatile composers of the twentieth century. In his lectures entitled *Music and Imagination* (1952), he talked of "this desire of mine to find a musical vernacular, which, as language, would cause no difficulties to my listeners… my old interest in making a connection between music and the life about me", but he added that this "did not by any means lessen my interest in composing in an idiom that might be accessible only to cultivated listeners."

As might be expected from these comments, the character of his music varies widely, and although superficially his works can be seen as dividing into two categories, 'popular' and 'serious', elements of his style are common to both, vindicating Copland's stated view that all of his music stemmed from a single, consistent artistic vision.

It is significant that Leonard Bernstein, who harboured reservations about some of Copland's 'serious' scores, nevertheless recognised the unity of the two supposed 'categories'; after the first performance of Copland's orchestral piece, *Inscape* (1967), he commented to the composer, "Aaron, it's amazing how, even when you compose in a completely 'foreign' idiom, the music *still* comes out sounding like you!"

It took some time for the merits of the 'serious' works such as *Inscape* to be appreciated; this was Copland's last major piece before Alzheimer's disease curtailed his composing career, and at the first performance he commented to Bernstein, "Do you realise there isn't one composer here, there isn't one musician who seems to be at all interested in this piece – a brand new piece I've laboured over?" Bernstein concluded that "when the musical winds blew past him, he tried to catch up – with twelve-tone music – just as it too was becoming old-fashioned to the young".

Yet in hindsight, we can now see that Copland's twelve-note composing in his later years was foreshadowed in his earlier works (there is a parallel with Stravinsky here) and the production of scores such as *Inscape* was not merely a bid to be regarded as an up-to-date intellectual. His 'popular' pieces, such as the ballets *Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942), are artistically equally sincere, and it is salutary to rehear these top-quality works after so much commercial promotion of the cynical, self-consciously 'anti-élitist' works with which some contemporary American (and some British) composers have patronised audiences in recent years. In a brief introduction to the published score of his short piano piece entitled *Proclamation* (completed in 1982), Copland acknowledged that his less-accessible idiom "has not inappropriately been termed my 'laying-down-the-law' style", and his three most important piano works, all presented on this CD,

each include passages which are uncompromising for the listener.

The precise titles which Copland gave to his three most important piano works place as much emphasis upon the instrumental medium as upon the composition genre: to designate a work as a *Piano Sonata* (rather than as a 'Sonata for piano') is common enough, but to choose the more unusual titles of *Piano Variations* (instead of 'Variations for piano') and *Piano Fantasy* (as opposed to 'Fantasy for piano') may be significant, implying that the characteristics of the instrument have, to a greater extent than is inevitable, been exploited as fundamental components within the compositional process itself, an approach quite the opposite of adapting abstract musical ideas to the instrumental medium.

These piano works are idiomatically laid out for the keyboard, although when one first looks at the score their bald textures, often consisting simply of plain block chords, may initially seem primitive in comparison with more-conventional piano writing. However, listeners who appreciate the highly-individual sound world of his orchestral output will soon find this 'primitive' quality in his piano music manifesting itself as an asset, such economical writing stemming from Copland's directness of expression, which employs a seemingly-inexhaustible variety of original spacings of both simple and complex harmonies to achieve sonorities unlike any other composer.

Many of these sonorities are quiet and poetic, but others may be uncomfortable listening for the faint-hearted: in addition to being an outstanding conductor, Copland was a good pianist who was not shy about making a harsh sound at the keyboard, when his music required it, and if an experienced composer with knowledge of piano technique stipulates that he wants (for example) loud playing within a thin texture without the use of the sustaining pedal, then it can be assumed that he is fully aware of the unconventional effect which this will produce (when recording these pieces, a highly-skilled piano technician was present throughout the session, and there were periods when he seemed to be spending as much time retuning the Steinway as I was spending playing it).

Many of the textural effects in Copland's piano music violate time-honoured pianistic principles regarding quality of tone production which are rightly taught in conservatories ('rightly' because all pianists need to learn how to play conventionally before they venture to play *un*conventionally) but when listeners allow themselves to be drawn into the musical experience it becomes apparent to them that this is no self-conscious iconoclasm on Copland's part, rather that standard pianistic values sometimes have little relevance to his expressive intentions. There are plenty of refinements within the compositional processes below the surface, but the surface itself is often rugged.

The directness mentioned earlier extends to the vernacular verbal comments in the printed scores, which contain descriptions of the sonority required, such as 'freely sung', 'crystalline', 'threatening' and 'clangorous', as well as instructions such as to play scales 'not evenly', to 'strike each note sharply' or to 'start each trill slowly'; nowadays it is common for composers to indicate such performance directions, but when these pieces were published it was more unusual to have scores supplemented with advice which is so informally worded as to be the next best option to having the composer sitting next to the piano, giving guidance whilst one is practising.

In contrast with these precise requirements, the composer states that his metronome markings were intended only as approximate tempo indications, and he modified tempi when recording his own music. Some ambiguities remain: for example, it is interesting to note that although he wrote *meno mosso* near the beginning of all three movements of his *Piano Sonata* – in bars 10, 54 & 46 respectively – he did not write it when the same passages reappear, transformed, later in each movement. Was this an accidental oversight, or did he assume that performers would not need to be reminded that the *meno mosso* markings apply when the material reappears, or was it (as I believe it was in the third movement) an intentional discrepancy, so that the music presses on when the listener expects it to relax, as it did previously?

The *Passacaglia*, dedicated to Nadia Boulanger, was composed when Copland was studying with her in Paris. There is no evidence here of Copland's later individual style, but it is a fine work which should not be underestimated on the basis that its composer was a student at the time. The doleful eight-bar theme, in G sharp minor, is stated in bass octaves. Considerable compositional ingenuity is demonstrated in subsequent variations: for example, after the first eight-bar variation, the theme is heard again, disguised by transposition of its first two bars up a fifth, the remaining six bars up a fourth. Moreover, in these sixteen bars, Copland adds a long rising line in the treble (spanning nearly three octaves) which blends both variations into one phrase.

Later, he augments the theme's note values, spreading them over sixteen bars, contracts them into a two-bar ostinato, develops fragments of the theme and even uses it backwards. Such handling of variation form in this early work foreshadows the compositional processes of the later *Piano Variations*.

The choice of tonality for the *Piano Variations,* C sharp minor, was perhaps subconsciously influenced by the related key of G sharp minor used for most of the *Passacaglia* (another subconscious influence may have been that of Bach: Leo Smit pointed out to Copland that the opening of the piece is remarkably similar to that of the

fugue in C sharp minor from the first book of Bach's *Forty-eight Preludes and Fugues*). The theme's preoccupation with four pitches (E natural, C natural, D sharp and C sharp) accounts for the obsessive character of the entire work.

The opening music, with its dramatic pauses and resonance from notes which are depressed silently, is really the first variation, although in the score it is designated as the theme; the music which follows, although designated in the score as the first variation, is really the theme itself. Copland explained that he reversed standard procedure by preceding the theme with a variation so as to provide a more striking opening.

The percussive use of the piano throughout most of the twenty variations recalls the *Piano Concerto* (1926), though the character of the music is different: the concerto is a rowdy, but ultimately good-natured jazz-inspired work, whereas the variations are vindictive and spiteful. The treatment of the theme's pitches suggests an idiosyncratic use of serialism, described by Copland as "an aid in refreshing the way I wrote at a time when I felt the need of change. It forced me into a different, more fragmented kind of melodic writing that in turn resulted in chords I had rarely used before. Thus, my harmonic writing was affected in the *Piano Variations*... more dissonant than my earlier works, yet I did not give up tonality."

From the *Quartet for Piano and Strings* (1950) onwards, some of Copland's music assimilated serialism to a greater extent than before (although this did not prevent him from continuing to compose works in the more-accessible idiom for which he remains best known; his opera, *The Tender Land*, dates from the early 1950s and is one of the mildest and most relaxed of all his works).

The techniques in the *Piano Variations* must at that time have seemed particularly relevant to the more adventurous of his current compositional concerns, so for the Louisville Orchestra in 1957 he made a fierce orchestration of the piece, which he entitled *Orchestral Variations* (another stimulus for Copland to create his own orchestral work in variation form may have been the same orchestra's world premiere in April 1956 of Elliott Carter's *Variations for Orchestra*). The piece was originally so tailor-made for the potentialities of ten fingers and a keyboard that substantial rethinking must have been necessary in order to transform its musical material into an viable orchestral piece. An unexpected enthusiast of the piano version who conducted the orchestral version was Pierre Boulez, and one of the earliest advocates of the original piano version was Leonard Bernstein, for whom it was a "synonym for modern music – so prophetic, harsh and wonderful, and so full of modern feeling and thinking. I knew the *Piano Variations* backward and forward and used to play them at parties, emptying rooms by the dozens."

Bernstein was 19 when he played them to their composer, whose approval marked the start of their lifelong friendship.

Near the start of his career, Bernstein made a remarkable recording for RCA of the *Piano Sonata*, a work now firmly established in the repertoire. Like many of Copland's works, its overall design outlines a slow-fast-slow pattern, as does the first movement in isolation. This movement's simple chordal writing renounces superfluous decoration to convey the music's epic declamation with greater impact than would a richer, more 'pianistic' layout.

The second movement begins with a fidgety quaver pattern (marked 'delicate, restless') over static harmony, and this figuration recurs during the unpredictable, volatile music which follows. At one point the music becomes bogged down by stubborn repeated dissonances, marked 'crudely'. The fidgety quavers finally peter out, leaving the listener with an impression that this short movement, rather than attempting to say anything positive itself, was merely trying to interrupt the serious tone of the opening movement.

The last movement seems to want to return to the issues of the first movement, but it begins as though it has no sense of direction, with unconventional cadences and meandering counterpoint, marked 'hesitant'. It gains confidence, but when the opening theme of the sonata interrupts just before the movement's climax, this sounds like the posing of a question, not the affirmation of unity between movements which such a gesture traditionally implies. The allusion to the first movement lasts for ten bars before being pushed aside by more *fff* chords, but on the last page the same theme returns to haunt the final stages of the movement as the sonata winds down towards immobility, *pppp*, with music which suggests the contemplation of a distant horizon.

The *Piano Fantasy* (which several sources claim was begun as early as 1952, three years before the commencing date given on the published score) was commissioned by the Juilliard School of Music on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary celebration, and was dedicated to the memory of the American pianist, William Kapell (1922-1953), who had been killed in a plane crash near San Francisco. In a letter to the pianist's widow, Aaron Copland described Kapell's playing as possessing a "fire and abandon that alone can arouse an audience to fever pitch... he was passionate, intense, restless, devoted, and in love with perfection as a goal". In the *Piano Fantasy*, Copland incorporates again elements of serialism within an essentially tonal style, and his judicious use of the technique leads him down new paths, producing a work of an adventurous, questing nature, whose music seems to roam, free of constraints.

The sense of an improvisation taking place is fostered by static passages where small fragments are repeated, usually with variants, as though the pianist is spontaneously exploring the potential of new ideas which have come to him. One would not expect this manner of composing to be an appropriate way to construct a long movement such as this, yet the *Piano Fantasy* emerges as a towering work whose total is more than the sum of its parts. Securing such large-scale coherence through the calculated interplay of episodes of unrelated characters, with many tempo changes and abrupt transitions, shows remarkable intuition, a form of intellect which goes beyond mere rationalism. The nearest parallels to Copland's achievement here are perhaps Messiaen's later similar-scale improvisatory piano works: *La Rousserolle Effarvatte* and *La Fauvette des Jardins*.

RAYMOND CLARKE

Raymond Clarke was born in Bournemouth, England, in 1963. He was awarded an academic exhibition to read Music at Selwyn College, Cambridge University. After graduating, he studied with Ryszard Bakst at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, and he is now a recognised teacher of piano at the University of Bristol.

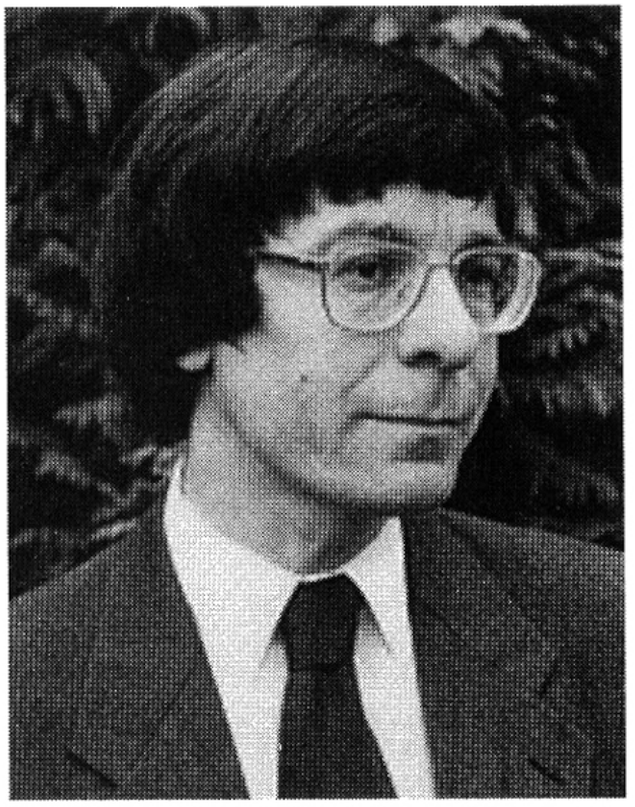
His début at London's South Bank Centre in March 1988 was sponsored by the Havergal Brian Society and concluded with Ronald Stevenson's *Passacaglia on DSCH*. He premièred Robert Simpson's *Variations and Finale on a theme by Beethoven* at the same venue in September 1991 and his Hyperion CD of this composer's complete solo piano music was featured in *Gramophone*'s "Critics' Choice" survey of the best recordings issued in 1996 (Hyperion has invited him to record Simpson's Piano Concerto, which he broadcast "live" with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Grant Llewellyn in March 2001). Similarly, Raymond's CD of the three Szymanowski sonatas was featured in *Gramophone*'s "Critics' Choice" survey of the best 1999 releases. His other CD recordings include the complete piano music of Havergal Brian, the two sonatas and Opus 34 preludes by Shostakovich, plus a disc coupling the two William Mathias sonatas with John Pickard's remarkable Piano Sonata, of which he gave the first performance in January 1988. Although Raymond's CD recordings have been devoted exclusively to twentieth-century music, this is not representative of his concert programming, which has included all of the sonatas by Mozart and Schubert.

Aaron Copland's piano works have been in Raymond's repertoire since the 1980s, and to commemorate the composer's 90th year he gave an all-Copland evening recital at King's Hall, Newcastle (the same venue as was used for this recording) in

February 1990: this long programme included all of the works which Leo Smit had played in the composer's presence at a recital in Harvard in November 1977. The four piano works included on the present disc were taped by Raymond in 1998 for another label, but these recordings were not released, and the versions on this disc are new recordings made three years later.

Five other short piano pieces by Copland have been recorded by Raymond for The Divine Art Record Company as part of a compilation of music composed for children, also featuring works by Bartók, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian & Webern (25022). His other CD for this label (25018) offers the first commercial recordings of Andrzej Panufnik's *Twelve Miniature Studies*, *Reflections* & *Pentasonata*, coupled with early pieces by Shostakovich, including the *Aphorisms, Opus 13*.

The above is the original biography from the 2001 booklet. For a current biography visit https://divineartrecords.com/artist/raymond-clarke/



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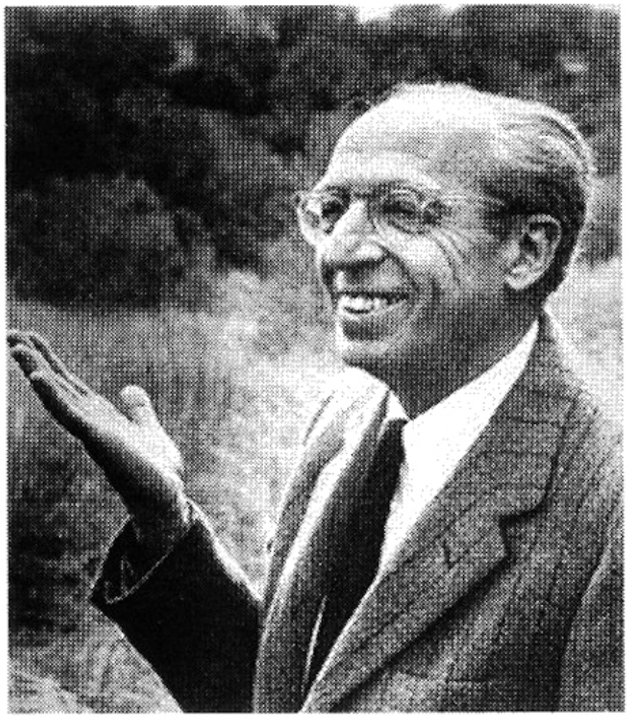

Aaron Copland

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