

An Outdoor Overture—Aaron Copland

By his very nature Copland was completely dedicated to the cause of the creation and encouragement of an indigenous American music—in every manifestation of the idea. So it came to pass that relatively early in his stylistic move to a more “accessible” musical style that explored American indigenous elements, he composed *An Outdoor Overture*. The title is a bit misleading, for it played nothing in the creation, nor is it reflective of anything specific in the music itself. In 1938 he was urged by the head of the music department of the High School of Music and Art in New York City to compose a work for the school’s orchestra to more or less kick off a campaign promulgating “American Music for American Youth.” Always a supporter of music education, Copland interrupted his scoring of “Billy the Kid” to write a concert overture for the school, one that was “optimistic” and which would appeal to the youth of the country. When it was finished, it was suggested that the work had an “open-air” quality to it, and so it was named.

In Copland’s best, straightforward, simple and angular style of the time, the overture begins with a stentorian musical motif that would see much use. It is soon transformed into a formidable, *cantabile* solo for trumpet over a kind of string vamp—a signature of the piece. A more vigorous, rhythmic section ensues in a kind of march style that eventually dissipates and yields to a quiet, lyrical solo in the flute, then clarinet, and finally strings. Another theme is introduced—also a march, but in a different mood from the other—to round off all of the important materials of the work. All of these ideas undergo some recapitulation, varied of course, before the composer brings them all back in combination to end in dramatic fashion. The overture was warmly received and has been in the standard repertoire since. It went on to be transcribed for concert band by the composer and is played just about everywhere in our country by orchestras and bands, alike.

Tales of Hemmingway—Michael Daugherty

Suffice to say that Michael Daugherty and his musical style springs directly from the heart of contemporary American culture. He now occupies an esteemed position as Professor of Composition in the music school of the University of Michigan, and has written compositions for just about anybody and everybody in the “official” world of classical music culture—major orchestras, music schools and conservatories, distinguished performers, enterprising conductors—you name it, he is clearly the current darling of progressive concert music. He has a “Zelig”-like persona whose musical roots and subsequent musical education seems to have touched most every base. But his background could not be more prosaic—in the best sense of the word. He grew up, like the average American kid, surrounded by the pervasive influence of television, rock and roll, rampant commercialization, cathartic political events, in short, just about everything

condemned by European intellectuals as typical of the “depravity” of American society. Growing up in a musical family of middle class tastes, he played in rock bands, accompanied country-western performers on the Hammond organ at county fairs, carried the bass drum in marching bands, studied at North Texas State, and played jazz piano, as well as cocktail piano, at a lounge on the Jersey Turnpike.

After moving to New York, where he hobnobbed with such *avant garde* intellectuals such as Milton Babbitt and Pierre Boulez, he moved to Paris where he studied electronic music, later studying in Germany with Ligeti and Stockhausen and, well, you get the idea. Along the way he received a doctoral degree from Yale, writing on Ives and Mahler.

Tales of Hemmingway for cello and orchestra was commissioned by the Nashville Symphony and a consortium of several other regional orchestras. The première was given in April of 2015 by that ensemble, with Zuill Bailey as soloist. As we observed, Daugherty is a composer who takes particular inspiration from the most disparate elements of the extra-musical world of his milieu. The history of music generally has been populated with composers who were more than comfortable writing music that was abstract and referred only to itself. But, starting roughly two centuries ago, and coinciding roughly with the Romantic Movement art in and literature, many composers—but certainly not all—sought stimulus from the world around, and Daugherty is without question “Exhibit A” in that regard. So, his cello concerto stems from his perception of Ernest Hemmingway’s life and literary style, and more specifically, four of the author’s published works. It must be said that, notwithstanding the potent inspiration of the details of these four stories on the composer, the astute listener really doesn’t need them. In reality, they are for the composer, not for the listener. The four movements stand more than adequately on their own musical foundations as adroitly crafted musical abstractions. So, you really don’t need a program to “tell the players.”

The first movement, inspired by the early Nick Adams stories of fishing in the secluded woods of upper Michigan, is a lush evocation of tranquility and repose. While the orchestra has its powerful moments in the limelight in this pursuit, there are eloquent moments where the solo cello—almost in recitative—sings in a human’s impassioned voice. In the second movement, the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War is the background of the drama. Therein, the protagonist of the story, Robert Jordan, accepts a suicide mission, and Daugherty accordingly composes a grotesque, variegated march that leads to death. The music plods, stumps, dashes and lurches—driven by a welter of tour de force writing for the cello. The deadly march is interrupted intermittently by existential musing of the cello. This nightmare of a march staggers to inevitable, cataclysmic demise, presaged by chimes, leading to the obvious: “For Whom the Bell Tolls.”

In the composer’s words, the third movement is “. . . an elegy to the struggle of life and death between man and nature.” The travails of old fisherman, Santiago, in *The Old Man and the Sea* become a musical meditation on the search for “the truths of man’s existence with dignity and grace.” Along the way, Daugherty can’t resist a few touches of Hispanic harmonies before the delicate and color-infused orchestration brings the meditation to a gentle, reflective close.

Hemmingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* is the genesis of the last movement, wherein Daugherty takes full advantage of the panoply of the running of the bulls and the violence of the bullring to generate his musical drama. The movement opens with an adroit

imitation of Flamenco guitar by the solo cellist, which soon moves into a vivacious Spanish-tinged dance. Rhythmic filigrees and introspective moments in the solo part from time to time yield to melodic episodes in the orchestra, in a brilliantly orchestrated weft of give and take. After a dramatic pause, *glissandi* by the cellist leads to a charge to the end, but in a bit of a surprise, the superficial blandishments of the bloody entertainment are abandoned for a brief moment of existential introspection by the soloist. That short contemplation, explains the composer, is a “musical illumination of the novel’s enigmatic epigraph.” From Ecclesiastes 1:5—“The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasten to his place where he arose.”

Transcend—Zhou Tian

Art is inescapably rooted in the experience of the artist—nationality, ethnicity, life events, gender, and much more—all contribute to the unique and personal perspectives that we value in the artistic vision. Today, our times—especially since the encounter of Western Europe with “orientalism” during the nineteenth century—have engendered closer and more vital connections with musical traditions from the entire globe.

Perhaps, no more striking of this phenomenon is the musical cross-fertilization wrought by our country’s engagement with China, its culture, and its musicians who have come to us. After the end of the “Cultural Revolution” and the subsequent loosening of its onerous restrictions, there has been a small migration of talented, imaginative, and highly successful composers to the US. Zhou Tian is exemplary of these folks; he was born in Hangzhou to a musical family—his father was a commercial composer. Trained as a classical pianist, he pursued a variety of musical interests, including arranging and jazz. After coming to this country he studied at Curtis, Juilliard, and the University of Southern California—receiving his DMA at the latter institution. The list of major awards and honors this young composer has already received, as well as the number of major commissions from important musical organizations is impressive. 2018-19 marks the première of not only *Transcend*, but also works commissioned by the Texas Music Educators Association, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Smithsonian, and the Shanghai Symphony. He is indeed a busy young artist.

Transcend is a musical commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. In May 1869, after seven years of monumental effort by thousands of laborers, at Promontory Point in northern Utah the nation was finally linked by rail from east to west across the continent. It was one of the greatest construction projects in our nation’s history. In a personal note, this writer was privileged to participate in the centennial celebration at Promontory Point in 1969—dressed in his Civil War uniform—and still wears his “Golden Spike” lapel pin, awarded for participation.

Commissioned by the Reno Philharmonic, and twelve other American symphony orchestras, including the Cheyenne Symphony Orchestra, *Transcend* is inspired by the national commitment, engineering prowess, and, perhaps, most of all, the human sacrifice and labor that made it all possible. The workforce included thousands of Irish immigrants (who worked for the Union Pacific, working westward from Omaha), and yet

more thousands of Chinese immigrants working for the Central Pacific, starting in Sacramento. The task of the Chinese was formidable, for unlike the Union Pacific, moving across the flat expanse of the Great Plains, the Central Pacific faced the herculean task of boring through the high Sierra mountains at a snail's pace, with much loss of life. Only recently has their sacrifice become more widely appreciated, including a newly published book, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain* by Gordon Chang. Zhou Tian's composition is in part a tribute to the sacrifice of his countrymen. Zhou writes that he was moved ". . . to tell a musical story, to celebrate human perseverance, to pay tribute to my own cultural heritage."

Transcend was given its world première by the Reno Philharmonic in April of this year. It consists of three movements, "Pulse," "Promise," and "D-O-N-E." "Pulse" opens quietly in the string section, with a tranquil invocation of the deserts of Nevada and Utah—a somewhat welcome relief, after the travail of the Sierra Nevada. But, the music gradually grows in intensity, and a frenetic pace ensues that features crashing, thumping percussion outbursts, which the composer compares to dynamite blasts: man versus nature. While the second movement is an eloquent, serene affair, it opens with a dramatic trumpet solo, accompanied by the percussion. But, it goes on to feature meditative woodwind solos, and incorporates traditional Chinese musical elements. In the finale, Zhou, has cunningly based its driving rhythmic motive on the exact rhythm of the letters of the Morse code message (DONE) that was sent out to a breathless nation upon the driving of the Golden Spike. The rhythm of the Morse code message is first heard in the solo trumpet, and soon is passed all around the orchestra as the climax of the ending arrives.

The work is a well-crafted, evocative, and thoroughly entertaining tribute to an era when our nation built monumental things—even in times of great national stress. And, in a larger sense it is a long overdue tribute to the Chinese who were so essential to its success. In the words of the Stanford University historian, Gordon Chang, "The labor of the Railroad Chinese is the purchase of, and the irrefutable claim to, American place and identity."

The Red Pony—Copland

Copland wrote the scores for eight films—including two documentaries—beginning in 1939. He was in the forefront of those who brought a modern musical style to a Hollywood that had been thoroughly dominated by pseudo-romantic film composers. His music for the film dramatization (1949—starring Myrna Loy and Robert Mitchum) of John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* was composed in 1948, and a suite of six movements for concert performance was subsequently extracted.

Steinbeck's work—an "episodic novella" of four short stories--was written in 1933. Each of the stories was subsequently published separately in various American magazines before joint publication in 1939. *The Red Pony* is a characteristic example of Steinbeck's narrative genius in telling simple stories about common people that nevertheless plumb the profound truths of humankind. In this case, the themes revolve around a few slices of the life of an adolescent, Jody, on a small ranch in the Salinas Valley of California after World War I. There, with his father, mother, grandfather, a

hired hand, and an elderly transient, the simplicities of Jody's childhood are confronted by the more sinister challenges of life. The stark realities of adult life that follow the naïve world of youth are examined here with Steinbeck's well-known probity. It is Jody's "initiation into a violent world where pain and death are everywhere and danger is always present." Steinbeck's novel is now a classic, and for many years was requisite reading in high school literature classes. Well over a half-century later, this writer well remembers the examination and discussion in class of Jody's world. The author's observation, "A boy becomes a man when a man is needed," has never been forgotten.

The first story, "The Gift," relates Jody's introduction to responsibility with his father's gift of a red pony. Unfortunately, his joy turns to tragedy, with the grotesque death of the beloved pony. In "The Great Mountains" Jody meets an old Mexican who, turned away from the ranch, steals a worthless nag and disappears into the mountains—leaving Jody to meditate over the encounter's meaning. The third story, "The Promise," is grim. Jody anxiously anticipates the birth of a foal, haunted by the death of his pony from the strangles. Tragedy sure enough ensues, as the hired hand has to kill the mare, and delivers the breeched, bloody foal by caesarean--more food for Jody's thoughts. Finally, "The Leader of the People" relates the bothersome, constant stories of Jody's grandfather, who, like so many, incessantly recounts his youthful adventures, to the annoyed boredom of all. Jody learns sympathy for the old here, and tolerance, as well. It must be said that Hollywood smoothed out some of the darkness, grimness, and violence of the book, adapting it for contemporary movie audiences.

With these life themes as inspiration, Copland, crafts a score whose style and attractive simplicities are well known to all who admire and enjoy all of the masterpieces that made Copland's reputation during the 1930s and 40s. The extracted suite of six movements begins tranquilly with "Morning on the Ranch", followed by "The Gift." The latter perfectly reflects Jody's joy in his red pony, with his excited schoolmates animating the middle section. "Dream March and Circus Music" are apt accompaniment to Jody's fantasies of riding the pony, first as a steed in glorious chivalric battle to a pompous little march that—like a dream—just peters out at the end. The second march finds Jody and the pony performing tricks in the circus to spiky, dissonance-laden musical clichés. "Grandfather's Story" gently, nostalgically—although with a bit of stamping--evokes the old man's obsession with distant memories of his trek along the Oregon Trail. The limping "Walk to the Bunkhouse" drolly depicts the hired hand, Billy Buck, who was an aging, bandy-legged, real horseman. Finally, "Happy Ending" is just that, a scampering, effervescent affair in Copland's best upbeat manner, and recaps the mood and music of the opening.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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