

## BEING AMERICAN

Folk Origins of Appalachian Spring

by Gail Levin

Aaron Copland's interest in Igor Stravinsky, whom Copland met through his teacher Nadia Boulanger during those first years in Paris in the early 1920s, also reveals his own musical agenda: Copland recalled that Stravinsky "borrowed freely from folk materials, and I have no doubt that this strongly influenced me to try to find a way to a distinctively American music." "This extraordinary rhythmic puissance," Copland noted, "Stravinsky owes to his Russian heritage—to the folk songs of his country." There are many significant links of American folk art to modernism in New York. The most important was a show entitled *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America 1750-1900*, organized in 1932 for the Museum of Modern Art by folklorist and curator Holger Cahill. That year, Carl Van Vechten photographed Copland's distinctive profile in front of a patchwork quilt to evoke rustic Americana and pioneer virtues of thrift and ingenuity. Van Vechten had clearly heard Copland's call for an American music. Copland would recall: "The desire to be 'American' was symptomatic of the period."

Copland drew upon the folk culture of the Shakers, adopting a motif from their hymn, "Simple Gifts" for his *Appalachian Spring* ballet music, which he composed in 1944 at the request of Martha Graham. During the course of their collaboration, Graham sent Copland several scripts. She outlined a scene inside and outside a house with a doorway, a front porch, and a swing. On the porch was to be "a Shaker rocking chair with a bone-like simplicity of line."

In imagining the overture for the ballet, Graham evoked American Folk painting when she compared the character of the Mother to "an American Primitive, small and perfectly drawn in costume and position." She has the Mother say: "Spring comes early this year, daughter. About time for spring planting, son."

This evokes several of Grant Wood's paintings with which Graham must have been familiar; surely she had seen his *Spring in Town* reproduced on the cover of the April 18, 1942 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*. In one script, Graham remarked on "the spare beauty of fine Shaker furniture," noting, too, that "Grant Wood has caught it in some of his things." His *Young Corn* (1931), *Spring Turning* (1936), and *Spring in Town* (1941) all address this theme. The latter work, according to Wood, "was inspired by a new appreciation of an America tranquil in a warring world, of democracy free and hopeful, of a country worth preserving." Wood had earlier emphasized American folklore for patriotic reasons in his painting of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree, *Parson Weems' Fable* of 1939, about which he commented: "In our present unsettled times, when democracy is threatened on all sides, the preservation of our folklore is more important than is generally realized." Wood then cited an article by the scholar and professor Howard Mumford Jones entitled "Patriotism—But How?" which argued that

America needed to promote patriotism through its national mythology. Both Wood and Graham sought patriotic images of renewal in a war-torn world.

Like the story in Graham's script, Wood depicted a small town, where connections to American tradition and rural life remain unbroken. A man plants his garden, while a woman is seen hanging out on a clothesline her patchwork quilts, a folk art form practiced even today in rural Appalachia. Graham's taste for folk culture coincided with Copland's own longstanding interest. Just two years before *Appalachian Spring*, Constance Rourke's book of essays, *The Roots of American Culture*, had extensively discussed the Shakers, a utopian religious sect, which at its height in 1840, boasted of six thousand members spread over eighteen communities in the United States. She observed: "Music played a conspicuous role in Shaker life from the beginning..." Not surprisingly, a number of Copland's American contemporaries, most notably the painter and photographer Charles Sheeler, shared his fascination with the Shakers. The subject of a Rourke biography, Sheeler may have stimulated Rourke's interest in the Shakers.

To create the sets for the ballet, Graham commissioned sculptor Isamu Noguchi, who noted: "*Appalachian Spring* was in a sense influenced by Shaker furniture, but it is also the culmination of Martha's interest in American themes and in the puritan American tradition." Copland commented about Graham: "she's unquestionably very American... *Appalachian Spring* would never have existed without her special personality. The music was definitely created for her, and it reflects, I hope, the unique quality of a human being, an American landscape, and a way of feeling." Copland's musical interests parallel developments in the visual arts—especially his fascination with folk culture. It becomes ever clearer that his remarkable talent developed together with powerful concerns that shaped the times.

Gail Levin, Professor of Fine and Performing Arts and Art History at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, was Guest Curator for *Aaron Copland's America*, a recent exhibition at the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington, NY. We are grateful to Professor Levin for excerpting and adapting this article from Gail Levin and Judith Tick, *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000).



Copland and Graham taking a curtain call after a 1960's *Appalachian Spring* performance



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## COPLAND HOUSE DEDICATION

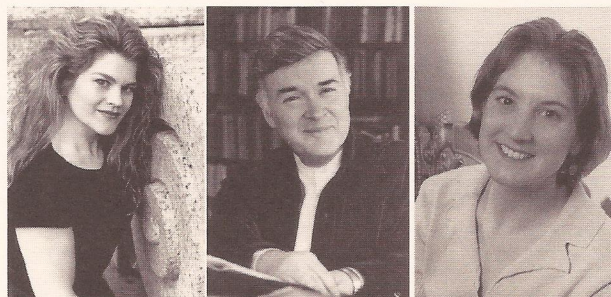
150 guests attended the Dedication of Copland House, officially marking its re-birth as a creative center for American music. Political and civic leaders and Copland House Board members gathered with Copland House supporters, executives from the New York Philharmonic, Library of Congress, Boston Conservatory, American Symphony Orchestra League, Chamber Music America, and other organizations, as well as neighbors and townspeople for wine and hors d'oeuvres, House tours, and performances by members of *Music from Copland House* and guest baritone André Solomon-Glover of music by Copland, Bernstein and Fine. (See photos, page 2.)

## COPLAND AWARDS ANNOUNCED

### "Year Of The Woman" Comes To Copland House

The 2000 Aaron Copland Awards bring the "Year of The Woman" to Copland House, with four women among the six gifted composers selected: Penka Kouneva, (33, North Hollywood, CA); Lisa deSpain (35, New York, NY); Joanne Metcalf (42, Durham, NC); Lisa Bielawa (31, Bronx, NY); David McMullin (29, New York, NY); and Robert X. Rodriguez (54, Richardson, TX).

"This year's awards reflect the emergence of creative women in the music world today," said Copland House Board of Directors President Florence Stevens. "We're also happy that men were not overlooked!" Projected compositions will include a work for the Da Capo Chamber Players, a jazz symphony for the U.S. Air Force Band, and a work for the Dayton (OH) Philharmonic commemorating the centennial of the Wright Brothers' first flight.



Above (left to right): deSpain, Rodriguez, and Bielawa.  
Below (left to right): jurors Beglarian, Singleton, Rochberg, and Mackey at ASCAP, which again generously made its offices available for The Aaron Copland Awards.



Dan Becker, Nicholas Brooke, DJ Sparr, and Arthur Jarvinen—who would be invited to Copland House if a Copland Award recipient was unable to fulfill his or her residency. (Timothy Melbinger, a 1999 Alternate, was offered a residency when Dan Coleman's visit was rescheduled for 2001.)

Copland House Board of Directors has also named Richard Danielpour Guest Composer for this year. During his one-month residency in Fall 2001, he will collaborate on an opera with Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, and appear on *The Composer's Hour* series.

## COPLAND HOUSE NAMED "AMERICAN TREASURE"

This fall, Copland House was designated an Official Project of *Save America's Treasures*, a public-private partnership between the White House Millennium Council and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Copland House joins an elite group of some 600 sites and projects around the nation, and is the only composer's home in America so recognized. *Save America's Treasures* is "dedicated to identifying and rescuing the enduring symbols of American traditions that define us as a nation [and] to the preservation of our nation's irreplaceable historic and cultural treasures for future generations."



SAVE AMERICA'S  
TREASURES  
OFFICIAL PROJECT