

Re-Learning *Appalachian Spring*

By Aaron Sherber

The suite from Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* is a piece of music that most young conductors are quite familiar with. Requiring only thirteen players, it frequently shows up on audition lists, in workshops and masterclasses, and on conservatory recital programs. In 1998, when I first worked with the Martha Graham Dance Company, I already had ten years of experience with the *Spring* suite. Now, working on the ballet score with the company for which it was written, I discovered that I still had much to learn.

When Copland distilled the suite from the full ballet, he excised certain sections in which the music, as he put it, was primarily of choreographic interest. The longest of these sections, about seven minutes' worth, occurs in the middle of the well-known variations on the Shaker tune "Simple Gifts". Comprising agitated solos for the Revivalist and the Bride, this section contains music which is rarely heard in concert and which is quite different in style from the rest of the piece, relying more on repeated rhythmic figures than on melodies.

In some ways, learning this whole new section was the easy part for me. Elsewhere in the score Copland had removed a measure or two here and there in making the suite – where a repeated figure had worked well for the dance but didn't feel right just as music. This meant that I couldn't rely on my familiarity with most of the piece. It was a little like being told that I had to sing "Happy Birthday" like this: "Happy birthday to you you, happy birthday birthday to you."

Beyond the textual changes, there were questions of interpretation as well. One of the big differences between conducting an orchestral concert and conducting for dance is that certain aspects of what the conductor does are influenced (and sometimes constrained) by what is happening on stage. For example, in concert performances the opening pages of *Spring* are often taken quite slowly, giving a feeling of openness and stillness. The beginning of the dance, however, is a procession for the characters, in which they take one step for every two beats of music. So the natural pace of walking determines how fast the music must go — and it's noticeably faster than the usual concert tempo.

Copland himself found it difficult to adjust to some of these differences in his own music. On the occasions when he appeared with the Graham Company as a guest conductor, the fact that he had conducted the *Spring* suite in concert so many times over the years meant that certain tempos and interpretive gestures were deeply ingrained in his approach to the music. When he was forced to alter his usual practice for the sake of the dance, he would tell the orchestra that they would play it that way for now, but that they should play it the way they were used to when there were no dancers.

In other places in *Appalachian Spring*, the dance deepened my understanding of the music in ways that forever altered how I hear the piece. The last section of the music, with its hushed, hymn-like quality, had always been my favorite (and Copland's as well). In preparing for my first performances of the dance, I read Martha Graham's description of this section:

"The entire piece ends quite simply. It has the feeling of the town settling down for the night, the kind of thing that happens when one hears a call in the twilight, the voices of children in the distance, a dog barking, and then night."

And when I first conducted this section with dancers on stage, ending with the Husbandman and Bride sharing their first moments alone in their new house, what had been for me just a beautiful piece of music became an indescribably touching piece of theater. It remains that for me at every performance.



Aaron Sherber has been Music Director of the Martha Graham Dance Company since 1998. He has prepared several new editions of pieces written for Martha Graham, working from original and intermediate sources, and these editions have been featured in his performances with the Company. Mr. Sherber's previous positions include Music Director of the Branford Chamber Orchestra and Staff Conductor for the Peabody Conservatory Opera Department. Mr. Sherber holds degrees in philosophy from Yale College and in conducting from the Peabody Conservatory, where he studied with Frederik Prausnitz. He is on the faculty of the Peabody Elderhostel and is a recipient of a Peabody Career Development Grant.