

11 Composers of Great Band Works

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Aaron Copland (1900 - 1990)

Lifeline

- born in Brooklyn, New York (November 19).
- was the youngest of five children (two brothers, two sisters)
- received his earliest music instruction (piano lessons from his sister) at age 7.
- by age 8 he started to improvise and make up tunes on the piano.
- at 13 his father allowed him to study piano with a local teacher.
- when 15, he was inspired to pursue a career in writing music after attending a concert by Paderewski.
- at age 16 he acquired a “mail order” course on harmony.
- began formal composition lessons during his senior year in high school (age 17).
- after graduating high school, he continued private music studies while living at home.
- at 20, spent a year in France where he met Nadia Boulanger, with whom he studied for 3 years.
- returned to New York at age 23, determined to make a living as a composer.
- at 39 was able to obtain some fame and financial success by writing film and ballet scores.
- at age 45 won a Pulitzer Prize for *Appalachian Spring*.
- royalties from publications and recordings of his works gave him financial security as early as age 46.
- began conducting in his mid-50’s, earning top dollar for guest appearances.
- by 70, his estate was worth several million dollars.
- continued to conduct until the age of 82, when his memory losses created too great a challenge.
- died (December 2) of respiratory failure in a New York hospital at the age of 90.
- in accordance with his will, his large estate established the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, whose purpose was to “encourage and improve the public knowledge and appreciation of serious American contemporary music.”



Anecdotes and Trivia

- both parents immigrated to the US at different times; both came from Eastern Europe.
- his father (Harris) owned a prosperous mercantile store in Brooklyn.
- his mother (Sarah) attended high school in Dallas and considered herself a Texan.
- he was sensitive about his crooked teeth and avoided smiling for photographs.
- regretted that he never attended college.
- preferred to compose at night, saying “Music is largely emotions and I can’t get emotional early in the day.”
- his composition style is characterized by collage, once saying “I don’t compose; I assemble materials.”
- was a frequent lecturer and writer about music.
- his 1939 text for music appreciation classes, “What to Listen for in Music,” is still in print.
- many of his early works were booed and hissed by audiences, conductors, and musicians alike.
- was particularly fond of composers Mahler, Ives, and Nielsen.
- enjoyed playing tennis, but his true passion was reading (“not to learn anything, but from the pure love of it”).
- liked cats and dogs; once had a Great Dane named Nadja (in honor of his teacher, Nadia Boulanger).
- arranged his popular “Simple Gifts” (extracted from the ballet *Appalachian Spring*) for band in 1956.
- his sole original work for band, *Emblems* (1964), was commissioned by the College Band Directors National Association.



Sources

Aaron Copland by Howard Pollack (1999)

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (1980)