

Season Premiere
The American Scene
October 8 & 9, 2011

Kurt Weill

Down in the Valley
Presented in Collaboration with the Colorado Springs Conservatory
Cast TBA:
Brack Weaver
Jennie Parsons
Thomas Bouché
The Leader
The Preacher
Guard
Peters
Jennie's Father
Men
Women
Chorus

INTERMISSION

Eric Ewazen

Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra
I. Allegro con Brio
II. Andante sostenuto
III. Allegro molto
Jerilyn Jorgensen, violin

Aaron Copland

Appalachian Spring ("Ballet for Martha") Suite
Orchestral Version

Overview: Kurt Weill

Born: March 2, 1900, in Dessau, Germany

Died: April 3, 1950, in New York City

Work Composed: 1945, with a libretto by Arnold Sundgaard, and originally conceived for radio.

Why It Matters: *Down in the Valley* was an important part of the movement to make opera accessible to Americans through radio and television. Although it was overlooked for years, it is one of the best, and the only one incorporating traditional American tunes.



I have never acknowledged the difference between serious music and light music. There is only good music and bad music.—Kurt Weill

With the rise of radio, many opera lovers saw the medium as a way to bring opera to new audiences. Limited radio stations and broadcast time, especially in rural areas, meant that full broadcasts of lengthy operas were not a viable option. New operas, preferably in English and with familiar plots and music, would be needed to introduce Americans to opera in an accessible way. Composers like Samuel Barber, Gian Carlo Menotti, and **Kurt Weill** made accessible American opera a top priority.

The idea of a series of radio operas came from *New York Times* music critic Olin Downes and businessman Charles McArthur. ***Down in the Valley***, with music by Weill and a libretto by Arnold Sundgaard, was to

be the first opera in the series, set to begin in 1945, but the radio idea fell through when sponsors got squeamish; even accessible opera was seen as too esoteric for American audiences. The original version of *Down in the Valley*, recorded with Maurice Abravanel conducting but never broadcast, was a mere twenty minutes. When the music publisher Schirmer approached Weill for a school opera, Weill simplified the piece somewhat but also expended it to nearly forty minutes. It was this version that was premiered in 1948 and remains the definitive version today. It was an immediate success. NBC television would broadcast it in 1950, firmly establishing it as an essential American opera.

Weill wanted *Down in the Valley* to speak to Americans in their own language, so he incorporated three well-known American tunes—“Down in the Valley,” “The Lonesome Dove,” and “Hop Up, My Ladies”—in the score, while shaping many of his original melodies to emulate American folk song. He managed to make the opera challenging for the orchestra and lead singers while building in lesser roles for student vocalists and speaking roles for non-musicians, making this one of the most accessible and inclusive operas. He also gave specific instructions in the score for concert performance as well as staged and semi-staged productions, always leaving the possibility of simpler productions for organizations with fewer resources.

Synopsis: The opera begins with the traditional American song “Down in the Valley.” It is the night before Brack Weaver is to be executed. The Leader calls the townspeople together to tell Brack’s story as the music draws the audience to Brack on his last night in jail. Dismayed that the girl he loves, Jennie Parsons, has not answered his last letter, Brack decides to bust out of jail. He finds her on her porch at 2:00 AM, sleepless at the idea of his execution the next morning. Brack whistles for Jennie, who joins him in the woods. Explaining that her father would not let her write, Jennie declares her love for Brack. In his happiness, he recalls their first “date,” when they walked home from a prayer meeting. The scene shifts back one year as the story is told.

Arriving at Jennie’s house after the prayer meeting, Brack asks Jennie to the dance at Shadow Creek; Jennie happily accepts. Entering her house, Jennie is confronted by her father and Thomas Bouché—a notoriously shady businessman and, unfortunately, Jennie’s father’s creditor. Bouché asks Jennie to the dance and she tries to decline, but he says he will return later for her answer and

subtly threatens her. When Bouché leaves, Jennie’s father presses her to accept Bouché’s invitation, believing that Bouché will help him financially if Jennie accepts. When Jennie refuses, her father forbids her to attend the dance with anyone else.

Jennie opts to meet Brack at the dance to honor her father’s wishes. Brack takes Jennie aside and declares his love for her, but a drunken Bouché arrives and orders Brack to get away from “his woman.” Bouché pulls a knife and a fight ensues. Bouché is killed by accident, but Brack knows that, in a small town, the death of a wealthy man is a very serious thing, so he flees, only to be apprehended and imprisoned.

The flashback ends. Jennie and Brack are together in the woods as search parties move all around, looking for him. Jennie begs Brack to run, but he knows he will get caught eventually. He decides to spend his last few moments with the woman he loves before he is apprehended. From his jail cell, he sings a verse of “Down in the Valley” as Jennie and the townspeople sing outside.

About Kurt Weill: Kurt Julian Weill (March 2, 1900 – April 3, 1950) was born in the “Sandvorstadt,” or Jewish Quarter of Dessau, Germany. His father was a church cantor, and Weill displayed musical talent at an early age. He started composing at 13 and then entered the Berliner Hochschule für Musik when he was 18, studying composition with Wagnerian composer Engelbert Humperdinck and also studying conducting. The hardships of World War I led him to abandon his formal studies so he could work as a vocal coach to earn money to support his family. This period was also very productive, as he started composing some of his first large-scale works. He returned to Berlin in 1920 to study with Ferruccio Busoni and worked as a pianist in a tavern. He quickly made friends with other intellectuals in Berlin, leading to a period of remarkable productivity and his most popular success, *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) featuring the hit song “Mack the Knife.”

Weill would become a target of the Nazis for his intellectual views and Jewish heritage, so he fled to Paris in 1933, London in 1935 and then on to the United States later that year. Closely studying American styles, Weill opted to write for Broadway, winning the inaugural Tony Award for Best Original Score. He joined the civil service during World War II, serving as an air raid warden and writing songs in support of the war effort. He became a United States citizen in 1943. He would continue writing for Broadway, Hollywood films, radio and television until his death from a heart attack in 1950.

Overview: Eric Ewazen

Born: March 1, 1954, in Cleveland, Ohio

Work Composed: 1997, commissioned by the Orchestra of St. Luke’s

Why It Matters: Ewazen’s Violin Concerto is one of many pieces he has written for diverse solo instruments and orchestra. Today’s performance is the local premiere. His energetic and accessible style has made him one of the most recognized living American composers.



Eric Ewazen’s tenure as composer-in-residence of the Chamber Orchestra of St. Luke’s (New York City) was extremely productive, with the **Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra** probably the most popular piece from that collaboration. It was premiered in May, 2000, with violin soloist Krista Feeney. Ewazen, whose compositional output in his early years was mostly for brass instruments, wanted to explore the expressive possibilities of the violin. He describes the piece as follows:

“The first movement has a crackling energy, with dynamic, sweeping gestures in both the solo part and the accompanying string

orchestra. Dramatic, rhapsodic motives are tossed back and forth and agitated accents permeate the movement. The energy creates a non-stop momentum through to the final chords, although there are moments of playfulness which contrast the more aggressive main themes. The second movement is a plaintive adagio, with the solo violin singing a somber, lyrical line. Contemplative and melancholy, this melody becomes the basis for a variation form in which it becomes ever more embellished and dramatic. A climactic middle section and quasi-cadenza lead to a final whispered statement of the opening theme. The final movement has a joyful energy. Contrasting the first two movements with their predominantly minor modes, the last movement is primarily sunny and bright with major modes and themes which skip and dance.”

About Eric Ewazen: Eric Ewazen received his formal musical training at the Eastman School of Music and the Julliard School, studying with Milton Babbitt, Samuel Adler, Warren Benson, Joseph Schwantner and Gunther Schuller. He joined the faculty at Julliard in 1980 and remains there today, also serving as a guest lecturer for other schools and the New York Philharmonic’s Musical Encounters Series.

Overview: Aaron Copland

Born: November 14, 1900, in Brooklyn, New York

Died: December 2, 1990, in North Tarrytown, New York

Work Composed: 1943 – 1944, commissioned by Martha Graham and originally for 13 instruments

Why It Matters: Winner of the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for Music, *Appalachian Spring* is the quintessential American orchestral work, incorporating the famous “Shaker Hymn” (“Simple Gifts”) and beautifully capturing the spirit and traditions of early America.



Inspiration may be a form of super-consciousness, or perhaps of sub-consciousness—I wouldn't know. But I am sure it is the antithesis of self-consciousness.—Aaron Copland

Following the success of *Rodeo*, **Aaron Copland** was commissioned by Martha Graham (with funds from the Coolidge Foundation headed by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge) to write what Graham called “music for an American ballet.” Copland set to work with no particular story in mind, included the famous Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts,” and trusted Graham to figure out the rest, saying, “She’s unquestionably very American; there’s something prim and restrained, simple yet strong, about her which one tends to think of as American.” The original version was for a small ensemble of thirteen instruments. Graham, inspired by a poem by Hart Crane that had nothing to do with Shakers, choreographed the piece and called it ***Appalachian Spring***. It was an instant success and the music would quickly be given the same name.

Appalachian Spring tells the story of a young farmer and his bride-to-be on their wedding day. The young couple deals with their excitement and apprehension at getting married, while older neighbors poke fun at their insecurities and try to calm their nerves. After the wedding, a revivalist preacher and his followers arrive, preaching about hell and damnation. The wedding party rejects this disturbing message, turns from the revivalists and sings, “’Tis a Gift to Be Simple.” At the end, the young couple enters their new home, optimistic and ready to start their new life.

In 1945, Copland re-orchestrated *Appalachian Spring* in the version for full orchestra that is generally known today. Though almost universally referred to as “*Appalachian Spring*,” Copland

called it “*Appalachian Spring Suite*,” noting the nine minutes of music cut from the original. Instead of the usual multitude of cuts, removing primarily choreographic music to create a suite for concert hall performance, Copland made one cut—the entire revivalist preacher scene. Many consider this unfortunate, as it changes the meaning of “Simple Gifts,” discarding the message of a strong belief in simple faith and exchanging it for a statement of faith alone. In 1954, Eugene Ormandy asked Copland to expand the Suite to include the missing music. This version was recorded by Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony in 1999, but the sheet music remains unavailable for use by other orchestras.

About Aaron Copland: Aaron Copland was born on November 14, 1900 in New York City. His musical works ranged from ballet and orchestral music to choral music and movie scores. For the better part of four decades Aaron Copland was considered the leading American composer.

Copland learned to play piano from an older sister and then quickly went through a series of piano teachers, learning different skills from each of them. By the time he was fifteen he had decided to become a composer. His first tentative steps included a correspondence course in writing harmony. In 1921, Copland traveled to Paris to attend the newly founded music school for Americans at Fontainebleau. He was the first American student of the brilliant teacher Nadia Boulanger. After three years in Paris he returned to New York with his first major commission—an organ concerto for the American appearances of Madame Boulanger. His *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra* premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1925.

Copland's growth as a composer mirrored important trends of his time. After his return from Paris he worked with jazz idioms in his *Piano Concerto* (1926). His *Piano Variations* (1930) was strongly influenced by Igor Stravinsky's Neoclassicism.

In 1936, he moved toward a simpler style. He felt this made his music more meaningful to the large music-loving audience created by radio and the movies. His most important works during this period were based on American folklore including *Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942). Other works during this period were a series of movie scores including *Of Mice and Men* (1938) and *The Heiress* (1948).

In his later years, Copland's work reflected the serial techniques of the so-called 12-tone school of Arnold Schoenberg. Notable among these was *Connotations* (1962) commissioned for the opening of Lincoln Center.

After 1970, Copland stopped composing, though he continued to lecture and conduct through the mid-1980s. He died on December 2, 1990 in North Tarrytown, New York.