

"The Apotheosis of the Dance." Really? Let's see, where's my dictionary? Ah! "a-poth-e-osis: to raise something to its highest level of development. Impressive! The phrase was spoken by German composer, Richard Wagner, and constitute his enthusiastic judgement on Beethoven's Symphony No.7. But more about that later.

**Rota (1911-1979) "Suite of Dances for Small Orchestra" from the film *The Leopard* (1963)**

All of tonight's programme is "dance music" except the First Set of Old American Songs by Aaron Copland. It begins with an engaging suite of dances, part of the music Italian composer Nino Rota composed for the 1963 movie, *The Leopard*, directed by Luchino Visconti (*Rocco and His Brothers*, *Death in Venice* and many others). Rota (1911-1979), was a classically trained musician, and an impressively prolific composer of orchestral works, concertos, operas, ballets, and more—but he is known most widely for his film scores, of which there are over 150. Think Coppola's *The Godfather*, Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as movies by *avant-garde* directors Fellini and Rossellini.

Set in Sicily in the 1860s, *The Leopard*, like several other of Visconti's films, is long (over three hours), and its closing episode (lasting about 45 minutes) is a sumptuous aristocratic ball that forms the backdrop against which the film's themes of social and political change are played out. Rota's sequence of dances provides the musical structure through which the final events unfold. Interestingly, the first item, as its title suggests, is not by Rota, but is his arrangement of a hitherto undiscovered waltz by Giuseppe Verdi. The remaining dances such as the mazurka, quadrille and polka were standard items at such upper-class occasions. Rota's classical training made him skilled with pastiche, the deliberate imitation of the styles of other composers and periods, so we should not be surprised if we hear echoes of the Vienna of Johann Strauss Jr. The last dance, The Leave-taking Waltz, though seemingly liting and buoyant is edged with regret, which reminds us that Rota's music often has a wistful if not downright melancholy strain (recall the plaintive *Godfather* waltz), and which in the film foretells not just the end of the evening but the end of an era.

**Copland (1900-1990) "Saturday Night Waltz" from the ballet *Rodeo* (1942)**

For many music lovers, Aaron Copland (1900-1990), although an eclectic, European trained classical musician, is the quintessentially "American" composer whose most well known music reflects fundamental qualities of American history and values. Best known, perhaps, is the *Appalachian Spring* ballet suite the KSO played in May of last year. The two compositions by Copland on tonight's programme certainly confirm that reputation.

"Saturday Night Waltz" is the fourth of the five dances in Copland's immensely popular 1942 ballet *Rodeo*, commissioned, choreographed and danced by Agnes de Mille and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo., Even though *Billy the Kid* (1938) had been a great success, Copland wasn't altogether sure he wanted to compose a second "Cowboy" ballet. As it turns out, *Rodeo* too was a success, and remains popular, not so often as a ballet but as a symphonic suite Copland arranged from four of the five dance episodes. The tune he uses for this waltz is an adaptation of the traditional herding song, "I Ride an Old Paint." Here is the scene for you to imagine as it plays: the strings "tune up" noisily and the women and the cowboys pair off, but the Cowgirl finds no partner, that is, until the Champion Roper approaches her (having earlier failed to attract the Rancher's Daughter). Then, in the middle of the waltz the music changes key, the cowboys are called away, and the women dance alone, a moment that allows the two principals to get together. The change also acts as a musical interlude, the way the trio does in a classical Minuet and Trio

(Agnes de Mille had requested that Copland create “a Texas minuet”), then the waltz tune returns to close the scene.

### **Copland (1900-1990) “Old American Songs” Set 1 (1950)**

The “Old American Songs” (Set 1) are also the result of a commission, this time from English composer Benjamin Britten for his Aldeburgh Festival in 1950. This is not as surprising as it might seem: Copland and Britten had become friends during Britten’s stay in America 1939-1942, and among their shared musical interests were the folk and traditional songs of their countries.\* The songs Copland chose to arrange for male voice and piano (here with orchestra) come from many sources, but collectively they evoke a sense of nostalgia for the American past. The first, “The Boatmen’s Dance,” is a banjo tune from the 1840s, the verses and refrain powerfully describing the life and toil of the black boatmen working the Ohio River. “The Dodger” on the other hand is a political campaign song from the election of Grover Cleveland in the 1880s. Though humorous in tone the song exposes the deceitful inclinations of human nature, commenting particularly on the actions of candidates, preachers and lovers but also, the singer admits, of himself and the rest of us (“Yes we’re all dodgin’ Our way through the world”). Quite different in feeling is “Long Time Ago”, a minstrel song from the 1830s. It is a melancholy, reflective ballad of love and death, emotions which Copland helps evoke particularly with solo flute and oboe as well as the strings.

The fourth song should sound familiar in part because Copland used it in *Appalachian Spring*. “Simple Gifts,” is a hymn tune of the American Shaker sect from the 1840s which here Copland treats quite briskly, using mainly sparse chords for the accompaniment, thus allowing the singer’s flowing melody to be the focus of our attention. And, to end, something less serious, “I Bought Me a Cat,” one of those playful barnyard songs of the “Old MacDonald” type that we like to say are for children, but that the grownups delight in too. The refrain, which adds a new animal sound each time—cat, duck, goose, hen, pig, cow, horse and (wait for it) “wife,” provides the real test of the soloist’s vocal technique.

### **Beethoven (1770-1827) *Symphony No. 7 in A major* “(1813)**

The premier of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony in Vienna in December 1813 was triumphant. Even to an audience by then accustomed to the energy and drive displayed in his six earlier symphonies it must have seemed imbued with a remarkable primal rhythmic force flowing through all four movements. The beginning, *Poco sostenuto*, however, is slow, majestic, spacious, with a delicate oboe melody punctuated by full chords and rising scale passages in the strings. We sense that something quite remarkable is about to happen. A passage of hypnotically repeated octave E’s leads us into the *Vivace* that is driven almost entirely by the distinctive dotted rhythm of the main theme which Beethoven develops to a most impressive climax. Now we are “dancing.” Then, with a sudden shift in key, the coda begins, leading through a tense and extended build-up to an even more imposing climax at the end.

The *allegretto* that follows is one of Beethoven’s best known and most influential pieces of orchestral writing. It is structured like a rondo with variations, the main theme with a persistent rhythm, more march-like than dance-like. From its bare early statement in A minor Beethoven enriches it harmonically and melodically through to a climax with the full orchestra. Episodes in the major key follow, one featuring clarinets and bassoons. The main march theme returns in variation form, at one point as an eerie fugue, leading abruptly to a climax, then to a brief return of the major key episode. The march theme closes the movement, with Beethoven, always original, sharing the tune out between a variety of instrumental groups.

With the impetuous scherzo, *Presto*, we are dancing again. There are two main themes: one impulsive for the scherzo, the other for the trio a distinct contrast, said to be derived from an old Austrian pilgrim's hymn. Each section comes round twice, the scherzo characterized by abrupt contrasts in dynamics and shifts of rhythm, the trio emerging expansively and even majestically at times. Near the very end (**we** don't know it's the end), after the scherzo repeat, the trio starts up yet again. Just as we are asking ourselves: how many more times? Beethoven (he knows his audience) bluntly cuts it off—"Gotcha!" Then the finale, *Allegro con brio*, is upon us. Two introductory orchestral thunderbolts unleash a colossal rhythmic energy outdoing even that of the first movement. We begin to sense the aptness of Wagner's "apotheosis." The emphatic pounding of the first theme is shortly contrasted with a slightly more restrained second theme, and Beethoven develops all these materials toward the recapitulation with striking shifts in key, and with increasing lightness, but never with any decrease in pace. Likewise the recapitulation drives everything determinedly toward another climax that ushers in the coda where Beethoven, unrelenting, builds a massive crescendo leading to the symphony's explosive end. Even if we do not entirely agree with Wagner's assessment of the symphony's supreme embodiment of the dance, we can perhaps agree that the final movement at least justifies his raising the idea.

- Rod Michell, 2018