Aaron Copland: Fanfare for the Common Man

Japan’s surprise attack on the Pacific Fleet of the United States Navy at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 caught an entire nation off guard. The United States was unprepared to wage war on a global scale, either militarily, logistically, or psychologically. The earliest days of the war were bleak, replete with military setbacks and very little encouraging news from the Pacific theater. In the meantime, the other Axis powers (Germany and Italy) declared war on the United States, forcing the US military to prepare for battle on two widely separated fronts.

In an effort to improve morale on the home front, Eugene Goossens, music director of the Cincinnati Symphony, commissioned eighteen composers to compose fanfares to open each concert in the orchestra’s 1942-43 season. Most of the works commissioned were of a decidedly military character: Walter Piston’s Fanfare for the Fighting French, Paul Creston’s Fanfare for Paratroopers, and Felix Borowski’s Fanfare for the American Soldier, among others.

Aaron Copland responded to the Cincinnati commission with one of his most iconic works: Fanfare for the Common Man, first performed by Goossens and the Cincinnati Symphony on March 12, 1943. Of the eighteen commissioned fanfares, Copland’s has been the only one to remain a staple of the orchestral repertoire, transcending the circumstances of its original performance. It has come to represent the egalitarian ideals of the nation, and the simplicity and directness of its utterance still resonates with Americans from a broad spectrum of backgrounds and experiences.

The fanfare opens with weighty thunderclaps from timpani and bass drum, reinforced with strokes of the tam-tam. The first bold declamatory statement in the trumpets rises an octave in its first three notes, issuing both a manifesto and a challenge. The horns soon join with the trumpets, answered by trombones and tuba. Each statement varies slightly from the last, but with the same essential features each time, presented either in chorale-like block harmonies or in canon. Each proclamation gains strength and intensity, and the fanfare concludes with a rising crescendo of brass and percussion.

Dmitri Shostakovich: Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 99 (77)

Shostakovich’s original clash with Soviet bureaucracy is well known and well documented. The 1936 article in Pravda, “Muddle Instead of Music,” was a thorough denunciation of both Shostakovich and his compositions, purportedly written by Stalin himself after the Great Leader and Teacher attended a performance of the young composer’s opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District. For months after the Pravda article, Shostakovich feared for both his own life and that of his family. He redeemed himself with the Soviet authorities with the premiere of his Fifth Symphony in 1937, even though the work was more an outpouring of sorrow than of bombastic triumph. For the next decade, Shostakovich served as the musical poster child for Socialist Realism, tossing off the occasional bit of patriotic fodder to keep Stalin’s henchmen away from his door and keeping most of his more abstract compositions out of the public eye. His loyalty during the Great Patriotic War (World War II to the rest of us) was unquestionable
the Soviet Air Force airlifted the score and parts for his epic “Leningrad” Symphony (Symphony No. 7) into that artillery-ravaged city for a heroic performance by a starving and bedraggled Leningrad Radio Symphony as the Soviet army prepared to break the German siege.

Yet after the war, even the most patriotic Soviet artists lived under the constant threat of the question “What have you done for The People lately?” In 1948, political apparatchiks in the Union of Soviet Composers, led by their chairman, Tikhon Khrennikov (a third-rate composer with a fourth-rate sense of decency) persuaded the head of the Supreme Soviet, Andrei Zhdanov, to issue an official decree denouncing Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khachaturian and several other prominent composers as “formalists” and for displaying “anti-Soviet tendencies” in their music. Khrennikov and his cronies escaped unscathed; unsurprisingly they gave their full support to Zhdanov’s resolution for Soviet composers to write music for the proletariat, and to continue to work to eliminate all “decadent” influences from their music.

To add insult to injury, the Soviets trotted out Shostakovich and his fellow “formalists” before the news media to subject them to public humiliation. The authorities forced them to renounce their dangerous “formalist” tendencies, and to confess that their previous music was worthless. Shostakovich lost his teaching position at the Leningrad Conservatory, his works were suddenly unwelcome in the Soviet Union’s concert halls, and the government withdrew the privileges of better food and housing granted to the favored artists of the Soviet Union.

From 1948, until the death of Stalin in 1953, Shostakovich and his disgraced colleagues led double lives as composers. For public consumption, he produced “proletarian” works like Song of the Forests, celebrating Stalin as the “great gardener.” He held back works that might have provoked the ire of the government (like the song cycle From Jewish Folk Poetry), waiting for a thaw in the Party’s attitude towards more serious composition.

Among the works that needed to await a more receptive political climate was the Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor, written for the Russian virtuoso David Oistrakh. At the time of the Zhdanov proclamation, the concerto was still a work in progress, and Shostakovich chose not to schedule a public performance of such an abstract piece, fearing further criticism or retaliation. Over the next seven years, Shostakovich and Oistrakh revised the work, and the composer finally gave permission for its world premiere on October 29, 1955 (over two years after Stalin’s death) with Oistrakh as the soloist and Yevgeny Mravinsky conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic. Critics and audiences gave the concerto a warm reception, though it took Oistrakh’s unwavering advocacy to establish it in the violin repertoire. Shostakovich had originally labeled the concerto as his Op. 77 in his catalog of works, but because of its subsequent revisions and delayed premiere, it eventually bore the opus number 99.

The concerto is in four movements, employing an orchestra that omits trumpets and trombones, but includes a tuba. In the opening Nocturne, the violin weaves a sinuous and plaintive melody over a dark, brooding accompaniment. The music builds in intensity and then subsides, but the atmosphere of unease and discomfort never really dissipates.

The subsequent Scherzo sounds like music tempered in acid; the soloist barks out brusque chords underneath an acerbically grotesque woodwind dance, later taken up by the soloist and abetted by brittle pizzicato strings. The middle section is a stomping duple-meter dance of an exotic ethnic
character, like a Russian hopak gone mad. It is in this Scherzo that we first hear Shostakovich’s four-note signature: D – E-flat – C – B. In English, this sequence of notes may not seem significant, but when read in German, these notes become D – Es (or “S”) – C – H (the German notation for B natural; “B” is used to designate B-flat). Read that way, this becomes DSCH, or D. SCH; shorthand, if you will, for “D(mitri) SCH(ostakowisch), the composer’s name in German. This “autograph” appears in many guises throughout Shostakovich’s later works, most notably in the Tenth Symphony and the Eighth String Quartet. The main body of the scherzo returns, as does a reminiscence of the hopak, before terminating abruptly.

The heart-wrenching Andante is one of Shostakovich’s most masterful uses of the passacaglia form, a structure that he employed throughout his career, from Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk (1932) to his Violin Sonata (1968). Introduced by mournful brass fanfares over the stark and sinister passacaglia theme in the cellos and basses, the violin sings a long lament over each subsequent repeat of the bass, interweaving its sorrowful melody in counterpoint to similar lines in the woodwinds. The music rises to an impassioned climax, where the soloist pounds out the passacaglia in octaves, fortissimo. Its energy spent, the solo violin retreats, hesitantly uttering short motifs of several themes from the movement as though exhausted and out of breath.

The passacaglia segues directly into a lengthy and virtuoso cadenza, where the soloist rhapsodizes on ideas from the three earlier movements. At the end of the cadenza, the pace and the virtuoso fireworks intensify, ushering in the breathless intensity of the Burlesque finale. Given the frenetic tempo and virtuoso fiddling involved throughout this movement, it is easy to miss the subtle references to the earlier movements that pop up both in the solo violin and in the orchestra. As in the Scherzo, raw energy abounds, but true joy seems to be in very short supply. A ferociously mechanical quality pervades the movement, intensified at the end by a headlong rush to the abrupt final chord.

Antonín Dvořák: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, “From the New World”

In 1891, Antonín Dvořák received an offer from the New York socialite Jeanette Thurber to come to the United States and become the Director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City for the (at that time) lavish salary of $15,000 per year. In his tenure in New York (1892–1895), Dvořák met and taught young American musicians, including the African-American composer Harry Burleigh (1866–1949) who introduced him to spirituals and other music indigenous to America.

The music he heard through Burleigh and others bore marked similarities to the folk music of his own Bohemian homeland. In writing about the melodies of indigenous American music, Dvořák said:

“...These can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed in the United States. These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them.”

Dvořák spent his winters in New York, but his summers in the Czech immigrant community of Spillville, Iowa, where some of his cousins had settled several years earlier. Surrounded by people who spoke his language, Dvořák felt at home enough to write music both inspired by the United States (the American Quartet, Op. 96, the Sonatina for violin and piano, Op. 100) and reminiscent of his homeland (the magnificent String Quintet in E-flat major, Op. 97 and the Cello Concerto). Eventually a dispute over
salary and the potential for greater fame in Europe enticed Dvořák to return home to Prague, where he became Director of the Conservatory there from 1901 until his death in 1904.

The Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, “From the New World,” was composed in the winter and spring of 1893 in New York on a commission from the New York Philharmonic Society. Anton Seidl conducted its first performance in Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893. Rapturous applause broke out at the conclusion of each movement. Dvořák felt obliged to stand and acknowledge the acclaim; as he wrote to his publisher Simrock, the applause continued long enough that there was "no getting out of it, and I had to show myself willy-nilly."

The inspiration and character of the melodies of the “New World” Symphony have been the subject of debate from the first performance onwards. Some musicologists claimed that Dvořák had included the melodies of spirituals and Native American music into the work, but the composer refuted this idea:

"I have not actually used any of the [Native American] melodies. I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of the Indian music, and, using these themes as subjects, have developed them with all the resources of modern rhythms, counterpoint, and orchestral color."

He went on to mention that the Largo second movement was a preliminary work that would be expanded into a cantata or opera based upon Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s The Song of Hiawatha; for whatever reason, that project was never realized. Dvořák also indicated that the scene at Hiawatha’s feast “where the Indians dance” inspired the canonic melody of the Scherzo. Pentatonic melodies abound throughout the opening movement as well: the arpeggiated horn call hinted at in the introduction and expanded into the principal theme of the movement, the second theme, heard in the low register of the flutes, and the exposition’s closing theme, in which some commentators have found echoes of the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”

In listening to the work without explanation, the melodic character seems as Czech as it is American. It is interesting that Dvořák chose the title “From (as opposed to “Of”) the New World” – perhaps an acknowledgement that the work is more a palimpsest of American music on the imagination of a Czech composer rather than a specifically American symphony.

The work is cyclical in structure: the main themes from the opening movement (the Allegro’s initial horn call and the second theme heard on the solo flute) appear throughout the work, as do both the opening chorale and English horn melody from the Largo. Yet for all of the symphony’s Romantic and folk-like influences, it retains the structure of the four-movement Classical symphony: the first movement is a textbook sonata-form movement, complete with exposition repeat. The slow movement is notable for both its serenely beautiful English horn melody but also for the climactic appearance of music from the first movement just before the English horn returns. While the scherzo’s pentatonic melodies contain the hint of an American accent, the melodies of the central trio section could easily be mistaken for music from the composer’s two sets of Slavonic Dances. The finale unleashes a huge burst of orchestral energy, begun by the strings and then taken over by horns and trumpets. Themes from previous movements return, leading to the final tragic-triumphant peroration and the questioning final chord.