Aaron Copland's *Emblems*: An Iconic Composer and his Misunderstood Masterwork

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ABSTRACT

Copland was an iconic American composer whose sound is instantly recognizable worldwide. This article presents the principal characteristics that define the composer's sound and compositional style and applies those to his only original masterwork for wind band: Emblems.This work was initially misunderstood and rejected with claims that it did not reflect the composer's popular style. However, Emblemsis stylistically consistent with the music he was composing in the 1960's and the work has, over decades, been embraced as a cornerstone work in the wind band repertoire. Suggestions for an authentic performance of Emblems are discussed informed by the composer's own insights.

KEYWORDS

Aaron Copland,
Emblems,
American,
Wind Band,
Masterwork.

Introduction

Aaron Copland (1900-1990) has been nicknamed "The Dean of American music" as stated by John Rockwell in Copland's obituary (New York Times, December 3, 1990). His compositional sound invokes an idealized concept of the spirit and geography of the United States in the imagination: open spaces; endless horizons; possibility; optimism, and individualism. What qualities imbue Copland's music with this spirit and which compositional traits evoke this sound? This article presents a personal perspective on what qualities define the Copland sound, informed by primary sources, Copland's writings, and multiple conducted performances. These qualities are investigated in relation to his singular composition *Emblems* (1964) for band. Suggestions based on contextual, historical, and aesthetic considerations are included for rendering an effective performance of this masterwork.

One cannot extricate a composer from the cultural surroundings from which he or she lives. Aaron Copland, raised by Russian Jewish immigrants in New York, was a product of an urban cultural environment in the early twentieth century reflected in such works such as *Music for a Great City* (1964) and *Quiet City* (1940), depicting urban life as well as the chant of the synagogue. His life as a gay person living during a challenging period in United States history, the McCarthy era, influenced his art. He was summoned on Tuesday, May 26, 1953 to testify in front of Joseph McCarthy and the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigation of the Committee on Government Operations for his suspected connections to the Communist Party.[1] This period in U.S. history, characterized by Cold War anxiety, discussed by David K. Johnson (in *Lavender Scare*, 2004), led to the persecution of homosexuals in the United States from the late 1940s. President Truman stated in 1946: "All the artists, the parlor pinks and the soprano voiced men are banded together…I'm afraid they are a sabotage front for Uncle Joe Stalin" (Sherry 2007, 292).

This event affected Copland's life and work. He resigned from leftist groups (Pollack 1999, 285), and he was guarded about his sexuality when speaking publicly. Howard Pollack states that "Copland was gay and came to an early acceptance and understanding of his sexuality. Like many at that time, Copland guarded his privacy, especially in regard to his homosexuality" (234). However, in spite of the risks involved, "Copland was one of the few composers of his stature to live openly and travel with his lovers."[2] He also mentored and supported other gay composers. His studies with

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[1] Transcript of the Testimony of Aaron Copland, legacy.npr.org, accessed November 20, 2020, https:// legacy.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2003/may/mccarthy/copland.htm

[2] Howard Pollack, as quoted in NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, Aaron Copland Residence at the Hotel Empire, nyclgbtsites.org, accessed November 26, 2020, http//nyclgtsites.org

Nadia Boulanger, Europe's leading composition teacher in the early twentieth century, and his travels to Mexico, South America, and the Western United States also made strong impressions on him and influenced his compositions.

Copland, Band, and the Genesis of *Emblems*

Copland would likely have been aware of the concert band tradition in the United States in both its populist incarnation (the town band concert in the park harkening back to the professional band movement at the turn of the twentieth century whose most famous proponent was John Philip Sousa), and the serious art music movement genre for which a number of his contemporaries were composing. Aaron Copland only wrote one original work for concert band, not including his re-working of his previously composed orchestral piece *An Outdoor Overture* (1938) and the numerous popular arrangements of his orchestra, operatic, and choral works for band.[3] *Emblems* is a major composition in the band genre, recognized by conductors worldwide as a masterwork reflecting the best of his compositional output from the period in which it was written.

Copland began composing Emblems in summer and completed the work in November 1964. Keith Wilson, then President of the College Band Directors National Association, commissioned Aaron Copland to compose a work as part of the organization's goal to enhance the repertoire by engaging well-known contemporary composers to write for wind band. Wilson wrote to Copland: "The purpose of this commission is to enrich the band repertory with music that is representative of the composer's best work, and not one written with all sorts of technical or practical limitations" (Copland and Perlis 1989, 343). The composer was promised at least 200 sales of *Emblems* before even beginning the work.

Copland kept Wilson's injunction in mind, while making *Emblems* both challenging and playable. William Schaefer, Director of Bands at the University of Southern California, conducted the premiere at the College Band Directors National Association National Convention in Tempe, Arizona on December 18, 1964. In his correspondence with Copland prior to the premiere, Schaefer recommended several instrumentation alterations after viewing a draft of the score: substituting bass clarinet for baritone saxophone and cueing the piano part. After receiving the final score, Schaefer wrote:

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[3] Aaron Copland, List of Works, Coplandhouse.org, accessed August 30, 2020, http://copland-house.org

> We find it challenging but hope to have it well prepared. The item of greatest resistance is the blending and resolution of intonation problems in the doubling of the high E♭ clarinet and flute. We trust that we shall live up to the honor of giving the first performance of the significant work (Towner 2011, 96).

Although he did not attend the premiere, Copland received a recording of the performance. Subsequent sales were insubstantial, and opinions that *Emblems* is disappointing to those hoping for a work in the composer's more populist vein persists to this day, based on the author's numerous discussions with listeners and performers. Compositions like *Appalachian Spring* (1944) and *Rodeo* (1942) from earlier in his career are considered iconic, whereas *Emblems* represents a different sound. These earlier works are more consonant and tonal, less varied and more straightforward formally, and reference more specific programmatic themes. *Emblems* is, however, typical in sound and compositional language to other works he was composing in the 1960's with a bolder, more dissonant harmonic language, more formal complexity, and aesthetically abstract. His two final works for large orchestra *Connotations* (1962) and *Inscape* (1967), composed in the same decade as *Emblems*, demonstrate his experimentation with serialism and formal design. While initially rejected, Emblems has become a staple in the repertoire of the wind band over a number of decades. In a 2011 survey by Clifford Towner of eighteen of the world's leading wind band conductors to determine works of highest artistic merit for wind band (Towner 2011, 96), *Emblems* was listed among the finest compositions with a ranking of ninety-three percent.

Copland's Sound World: Invoking the Spirit of His Homeland

The author has found six specific elements that define Copland's sound: 1) themes dealing with American ideals including the incorporation of hymns and folk songs, 2) jazz elements especially in relation to rhythm, 3) a unique approach to harmonic language and chord voicing, 4) treatment of melody, 5) formal structure, and 6) scoring practices. These observations are supported by writings dealing with Copland's work such as Stanley V. Kleppinger's article "On the Influence of Jazz Rhythm in the Music of Aaron Copland" (Kleppinger 2003, 77-111) and Arthur V. Berger's "The Music of Aaron Copland" (Berger 1945, 420-47) outlining the composer's three style periods (from a 1945 perspective) including: 1) the deliberate incorporation of jazz, 2) "leanness of textures and patterns," (422), and 3) melodic abstraction applied to folk tunes and themes associated with the American landscape.

American Themes

Above all, Copland strove for and achieved a uniquely American sound. Through his fascination with U.S. traditions, such as jazz, American folk song, and American hymn tunes, he transformed these influences into a uniquely personal and syntactically coherent language. Copland also absorbed European compositional technique, including serialism, into his broader stylistic milieu. American stories highlighting a staunch individualism caught Copland's imagination. *The Tender Land* (1954), *Rodeo, Billy the Kid* (1938), *Appalachian Spring* and *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942) variously relate to the American heritage. Within these pieces Copland frequently quotes traditional folk songs and hymns cloaked in his unique compositional style including colorful scoring and a predilection for harmonies emphasizing fourths and fifths. An example is his use of popular Civil War tunes and the folk ballad *Springfield Mountain* in *Lincoln Portrait* (1942). Copland's music often evokes the openness of the American West, the simplicity of rural America, or America's contemporary urban landscape.

In striving to achieve a uniquely American sound Copland turned to early American musical traditions such as the First New England School of Composers and psalmnodists[4] and shape-note singing and The Southern Harmony.[5] It is interesting to note that while Copland was Jewish and a first-generation citizen, he chose to represent American music from an earlier Protestant perspective (hymn tunes, shape-note melodies), rather than a Jewish-American or more contemporary multicultural aesthetic. He reached back to the nineteenth-century music of Appalachia, the pioneer cowboy songs of the American West, and the unique unschooled approach to harmony of the Colonial Era.

Being far removed from formal European compositional training, these early American musical traditions relied on an instinctive and unschooled approach to composition. The melodies of these early composers were often modal and pentatonic, and voice-independence was a goal of part-writing with a knowledge of consonant and dissonant intervals. The resultant sound had a strong impact on Copland's harmonic language.

> The style was technically archaic but vitally expressive […] It violated most rules for "correct" composition, such as those forbidding parallel fifths, octaves and unisons; parallel fourths between outer voices or upper voices without a third in the bass; unprepared and unresolved

4 The first American composers and tune compilers active between 1770 and 1810 led by William Billings (Nathan 1973).

5 A form of American choral music and style of notation developed in the early nineteenth century and still performed in sections of the southeastern United States.

> dissonance; and crossings of voices. […] There is a rigorous, spare, disciplined beauty in the choral writing that is all the more to be prized for having been conceived in the 'backwoods' for which many professional musicians have such scorn (Chase 1974, 179).

Jazz Elements

Perhaps the strongest stylistic influence that moulded Copland's American sound is jazz, especially rhythmic syncopation, metric shifts, and cross rhythms. Copland utilised two jazz styles: one fast and rhythmic, the other the Blues. He distilled them into his own style employing rhythmic development and variation, augmentation and diminution, and jazz quotation. During his studies in Paris with Nadia Boulanger at the Palace of Fontainebleau (1921-1924) she encouraged him to explore jazz in his search for an American sound and saw in his rhythmic experiments a unique and personal voice. He recalls his composer friend Roy Harris, who studied with Boulanger two years later, writing about rhythm:

> Our rhythmic sense is less symmetrical than the European rhythmic sense. European musicians are trained to think of rhythm in its largest common denominator, while we are born with a feeling for its smallest units…We do not employ unconventional rhythms as a sophistical gesture; we cannot avoid them… (Copland 1952, 83).

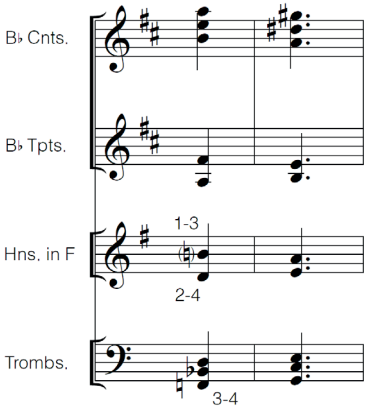
Copland saw jazz as a native vernacular music that was finding expression in the international compositional scene. He was fascinated by the combinations of duple and triple rhythms in the same line and their ensuing conflict. Kleppinger writes "Copland associated tied syncopations with jazz rhythm." (Kleppinger 2003, 77). A 1926 article by Dan Knowlton differentiates between primary and secondary rag. Primary rag refers to untied syncopation, and secondary rag (a term he inherited from an African-American guitar player) refers to tied syncopation, the "superimposition of one, two three upon the basic one, two three four" (Knowlton 1926, 581). Copland's use of tied syncopation can be heard throughout the B section of *Emblems*, such as in the reoccurring gesture: eighth/two sixteenth notes tied to two sixteenths/eighth first heard in the snare drum. Although his use of jazz quotation subsided after 1928 (the *Clarinet Concerto* commissioned in 1947 by Benny Goodman is a notable exception), its impact can be heard in works from much later including *Emblems*.

Harmonic Language

Copland's late harmonic language is often called bitonal, when it is in fact the extension of the harmonic series so common in jazz harmony.

> There was no planned basis for the polytonal implications. It must be a spontaneous reaction to the music you are hearing around you. In the twenties a new music was really quite new. It seemed fresh and different, rhythmically more exciting, more daring and more challenging to the performer, as well as the composer. So what influences a composer depends on what period he is living in, what development of music is in that time, and so forth. A lot of things come into play (Copland 1968, 89).

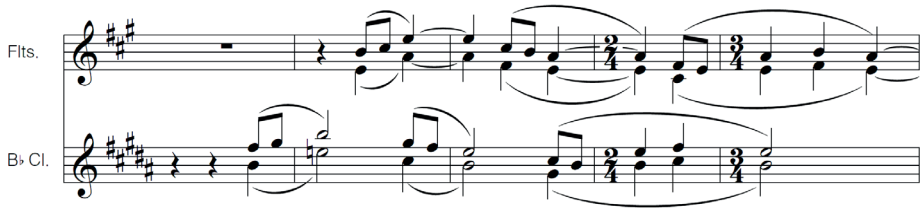
Manipulation of the harmonic series defines Copland's approach to pitch expansion in his large instrumental works: the reinforcement and embellishment of the lower intervals of the overtone series in wide chordal spacings with a heavy emphasis on fifths, fourths, and thirds reinforcing natural harmonics to create a sparse texture. Copland often omits chord tones such as the third, creating harmonic ambiguity. This is heightened by the use of chord extensions and the layering of chords that seem unrelated, such as in *Emblems* at m. 8 on the downbeat where D-major in cornet 1/trumpets/horns, C-major in the trombones/cornet 3, and a C-sharp in cornet 2 for added harmonic coloration, are juxtaposed (see Ex. 1).



Example 1. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 7-8

His later compositions such as *Inscape*, *Connotations*, and the *Piano Fantasy* (1955) show a prevalent use of clusters and the total chromatic spectrum, which was no doubt influenced by his foray into twelve-tone composition starting in 1950 with his *Piano Quartet*. Copland does not use traditional functional harmony, but more a tonal polarity between tonal centers. Pitches outside the diatonic scale provide harmonic richness and chromatic coloration. Quincy Hilliard discusses Copland's unique approach to harmony with the simultaneous use of chords whose roots are a second apart.

Copland's piquant harmonies are coupled with a linear melodic fabric that often contains extensive counterpoint at the octave, fifth, or unison (see Ex. 2).



Example 2. Copland, *Emblems,* mm. 92-96

Copland often also used melodic devices such as stretto, imitation, fugue, variation and melodic transformation. Most of his melodies are diatonic with little chromaticism and when a theme is repeated, alterations are usually reserved for rhythmic and intervallic content, within the original mode. He frequently used thirds, fourths, and fifths melodically as well as the gesture of a rising minor third from the sixth to the first scale degree at cadences common in folk music. Many of his melodies alternate between major and minor creating modal duplicity. He also composed melodies based on the Blues scale, such as in the trio of the second movement of his *First Symphony* (1926-28).

Melody

The use of declamatory melodic style in quasi-recitative passages harkens back to the Blues, as well as to the psalmodic chant of the synagogue. Examples of this can be heard in *Inscape* and *Quiet City*. Copland's approach to melody, even in his frequent angular melodic passages, retain a line of long-range voice leading. He states of his own music: "the melody is generally what the piece is about" (Crofton and Fraser 1985, 41).

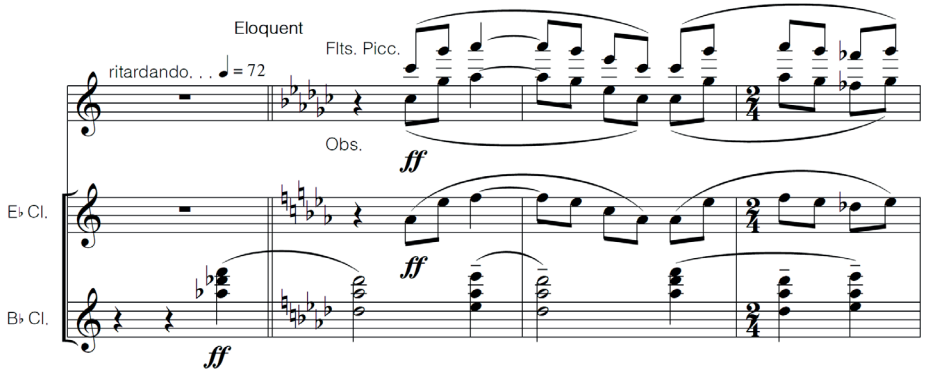
Form

The composer was fond of tripartite arch form consisting of statement, digression, and return. Within this formal framework, Copland shows a preference for a slow-fast-slow structure as seen in *Appalachian Spring*, *Emblems*, and *Inscape*. His works demonstrate a formal logic wherein themes are developed durationally using expansion or contraction, and texturally using a variety of tone colors. Nelly Case writes:

> He has mastered the construction of large, integrated forms through pithy statement, economy of means, and intense dramatic logic. In addition, Copland's feeling of responsibility to the listener

for explicit communication will become evident, his passion for elucidation resulting in the deliberate distillation of demotic elements into a successful, abstract utterance (Case 1984, 53).

Emblems is composed in rounded binary form, with sections distinguished by tempo, pitch, and textural content. The return of the A section is varied and truncated. For instance, the opening fanfare gesture is withheld until immediately before the coda. At figure forty-two a new soaring countermelody is introduced (see Ex. 3).



Example 3. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 295-300

Scoring

Another characteristic of Copland's music is sparse textures. Expressing the true essence of his musical statements in the simplest possible terms is keenly apparent. This can especially be heard in his late works such as *Duo for flute and piano* (1970-71), and *Threnody No. 1: In Memoriam Igor Stravinsky* (1971). Critic Paul Rosenfeld stated: "The earmark of Copland's music is leanness, slenderness of sound, sharpened by the fact that it is found in connection with a strain of grandiosity." (Case 1984, 40) Transparent textures and a precise tonal vocabulary wed craftsmanship with a depth of expression. In composing, Copland usually worked slowly and carefully. For instance, 1955-57 was dedicated solely to composing the *Piano Fantasy*, and 1967 to composing *Inscape*. This attention to detail could also be heard in his performances as a conductor and pianist.[6]

[6] "Copland Plays Copland Piano Concerto," YouTube video, 18:35, licensed to YouTube by SME (on behalf of Sony Classical); Concord Music Publishing, EMI Music Publishing, and 9 Music Rights Societies, June 16, 2016, https://youtu.be/vC3qQpyp4rI. "Copland Conducts El Salon Mexico," YouTube video, 12:59, Ibid., June 15, 2016, https://youtu.be/Qj-98yBfEI0.

Copland's scoring highlights his austere compositional aesthetic. The textural sparsity of his large ensemble works highlight his predilection for non-tonal pitch content and chromatic coloration. The use of solo wind and percussion writing, and widely spaced chord voicings with instruments in their extreme registers is common. This contributes to what has been called the sound of "wide open spaces" heard in much of his music. Copland makes some revealing comments on what he calls "the sonorous image" in his book *Music and Imagination*, which help us gain insight into his scoring practices. He discusses the ability of musicians to imagine sound and the timbral combination of different instruments, and the importance of that imagination to composers. "You cannot produce a beautiful sonority or combination of sonorities without first hearing the imagined sound in the inner ear" (Copland 1952, 22).

He conceived the orchestration framework of a composition once the notes were composed, rather than scoring and composing simultaneously. However, certain passages would arise that would immediately suggest to him a special orchestral timbre. He also discussed the fact that all instruments have innate technical limitations, but that these limits can focus creativity, and through stretching these limitations new ideas can arise. The most original orchestraters innovate, and Copland's creative scoring and his desire to push the limits of both orchestral instruments and the voice make him a trailblazer.

Copland's Style as Reflected in *Emblems*

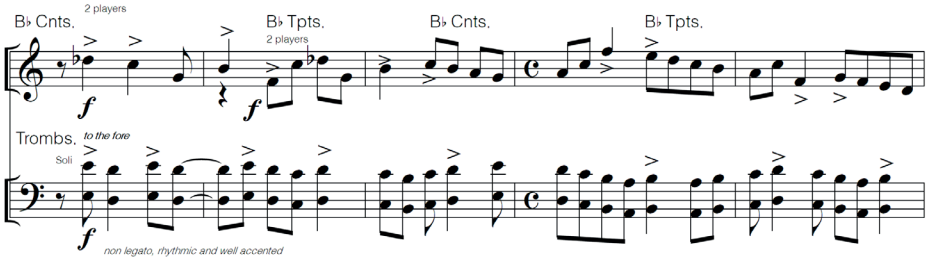
Emblems was not an anomalous work as originally thought. It bears all of the trademarks of Aaron Copland's "American" sound. It uses the traditional folk melody "Amazing Grace," which is embedded in the fabric of the piece. After appearing in several harmonic and melodic guises, the tune is presented in a straightforward manner as a main theme by a subset of flutes, clarinets, and oboes in unison at the end of the A section. This gradual transformation of melodic material and use of thematic variation are hallmarks of Copland's style.

> Embedded in the quiet, slow music the listener may hear a brief quotation of a well-known hymn tune, *Amazing Grace*, published by William Walker in the Southern Harmony in 1835. Curiously enough, the accompanying harmonies had been conceived first, without reference to any tune. It was only on a chance perusal of a recent anthology of an old Music in America that made me realize a connection existed between my harmonies and the old hymn tune (Copland 1964, 1).

The noble and austere fanfare of the opening is also characteristic of Copland's dramatic style and is similar to his *Fanfare for the Common Man* in its evocation of wide-open spaces through the use of sparse textures, slow-moving rhythmic content

and diatonic pitch material which favors harmonic series motion. Lyrical melodic lines with angular contours also abound in *Emblems*. The contrasting moods within the work include the noble opening, the dissonant dotted-note interruptions, the lyrical "Amazing Grace," the humorous and playful middle section, and the triumphant conclusion. Each section reflects an aspect of Copland's sound. It has a slow-fast-slow form with a transformed and condensed return.

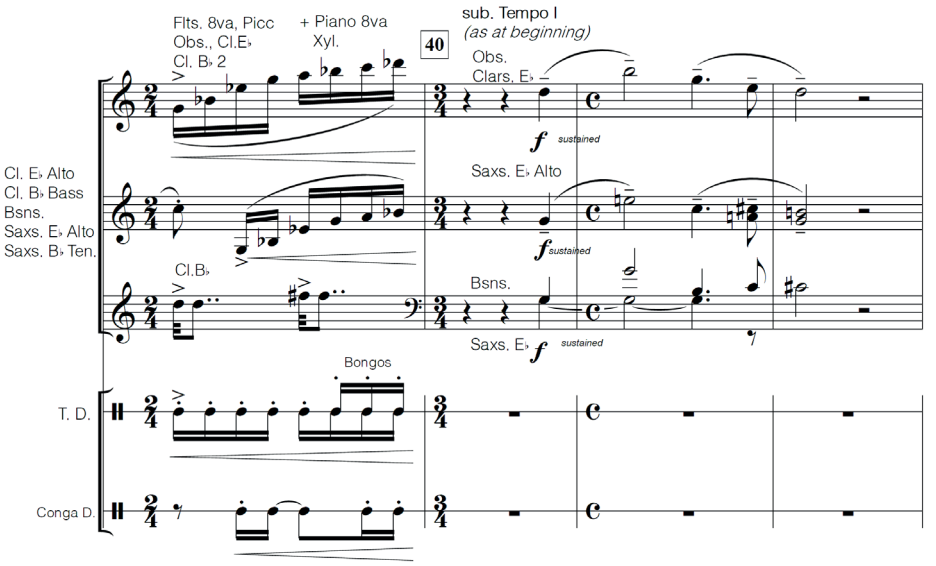
The middle section highlights another stylistic trait of Copland's: syncopated and jazz-inspired rhythms reminiscent of popular dance forms and ragtime. This entire section is comprised of rhythmic motives that are manipulated and developed. For instance, a rhythmic cell is introduced, first in non-pitched percussion, and gradually mutates into a ragtime theme in the piano part. Copland's imaginative use of instrumental color is keenly apparent in this section and is especially audible in the percussion writing. This includes the clever, unexpected use of piano, woodblock, bongos, congas, suspended cymbal, and snare drum played on the rim, interspersed with silence. Lively humor is captured here with the interplay between solo instruments and larger instrumental families in a constantly shifting rhythmic web. The prominent use of jazz piano figures is reminiscent of his works from the late 1920s, which incorporate such elements in a more direct way. Copland sets a rhythmic "groove" over which constantly shifting ideas are presented, such as the new trombone melody at figure thirty-four (see Ex. 4).



Example 4. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 234-238

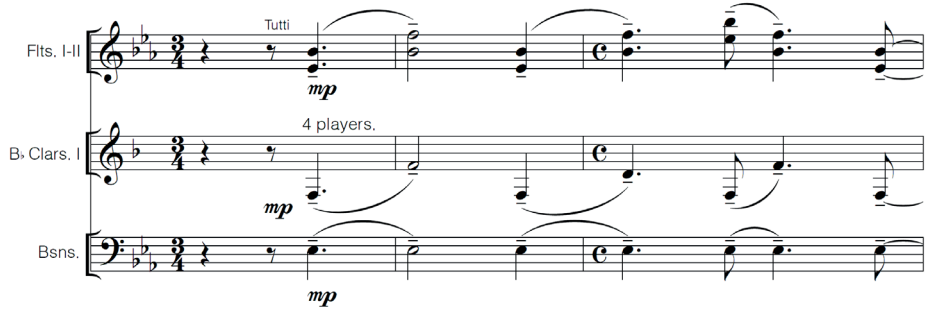
Rhythmic complexity is achieved through implied and actual metric shifts. The mid-point of the internal section suggests improvisation through the free rhythmic development of the motive.

The use of jazz harmony is also prevalent throughout *Emblems*, as is the use of major and minor thirds in a chord, and the use of chord extensions. There are also arresting moments of silence at significant arrival points found in much of Copland's music. The most dramatic in this piece is the silence immediately before the return of the A section at figure forty. The return is itself a surprise in that it begins with the second theme area (see Ex. 5).



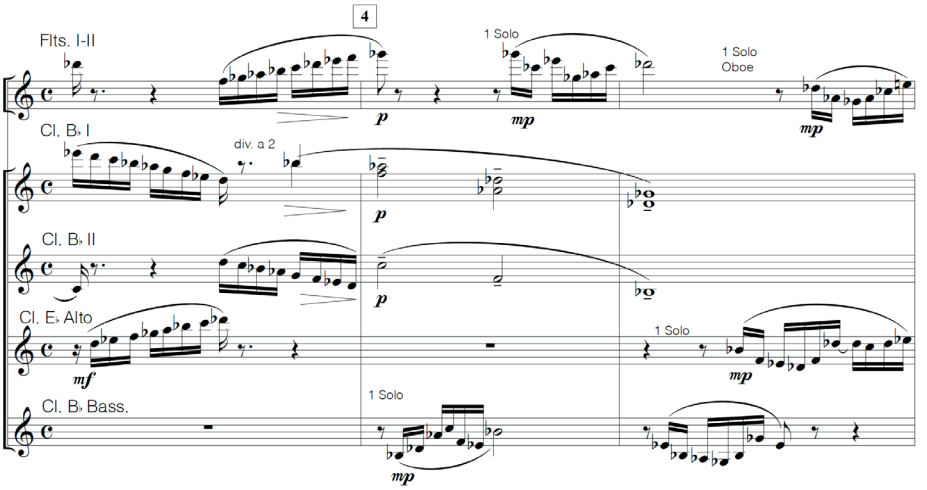
Example 5. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 279-282

Copland reserves the return to the opening idea for a striking moment in soft, low woodwind tessituras in contrast with the initial presentation in strident high register woodwinds (see Ex. 6).



Example 6. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 295-300

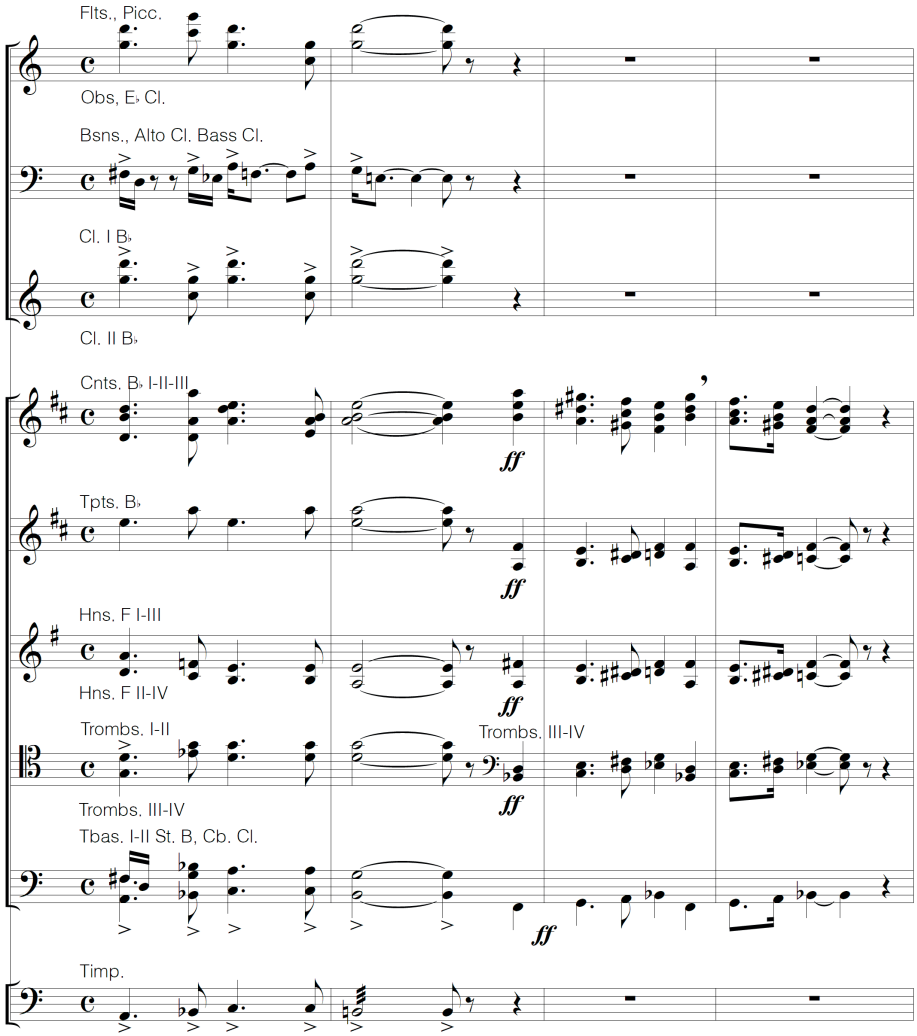
Copland often scores the brass, woodwind, and percussion choirs independently and in counterpoint to one another, as well as in varying combinations and contrasting ranges. His expressive solo writing can be heard in passages for flute, oboe, trumpet, piccolo and bass clarinet (see Ex. 7).



Example 7. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 23-25

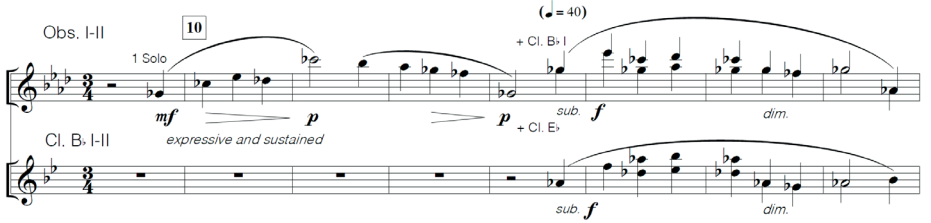
Copland's use of tonal harmony and chromatic coloration, in combination with sparse scoring and chord voicings based upon harmonic series intervals, is the most obvious connection to his general stylistic language. *Emblems*' opening fanfare reflects a fondness for openly spaced sonorities with an emphasis on fourths and fifths in the high tessitura of the ensemble, reinforced in the following phrase in all registers. Harmonic conflict is soon introduced through the juxtaposition of unrelated major triads contrasting relatively consonant diatonic structures (mm. 1-8) with dissonant chromaticism at m. 8 (see Ex. 8).

By combining triads whose roots are a whole step, a fifth, or a fourth apart, he introduces the interval of the minor second. This technique provides opportunities for chromaticism, dissonance, and further harmonic development. The sparse and austere sound throughout is typical of Copland and the Puritan ethic of the early colonists of the United States. There is a strong basic tonal structure in *Emblems* clearly rooted in C-major. However, Copland enlivens his diatonic tonal language with chromaticism. This can be heard in the chromatic bassoon accompaniment to *Amazing Grace*.



Example 8. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 6-9

The melodies in *Emblems* are typical of Copland. Lines with diatonic and chromatic stepwise motion are contrasted with those employing angular leaps (see Ex. 9).



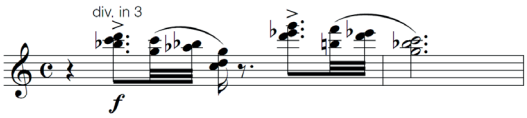
Example 9. Copland, *Emblems,* mm. 55-63

The prominent use of thirds, fourths and fifths can be heard throughout. The initial melodic statement outlines fourths and fifths melodically, while the contrasting material that follows is more stepwise. The contour of "Amazing Grace" highlights the intervals of the fourth and third. The piece's powerful coda, one of the most dramatic endings in the repertoire, consists of bold and disjunct melodic gestures characterized by leaps of a fifth, sixth, seventh, and an octave.

Formally, *Emblems* is cyclical and developmental. The large formal tripartite structure is mirrored in increasingly smaller levels, including small-scale embedded tripartite structures evident within both the A and B sections. The overall organization is both tightly crafted and seemingly free and improvisatory. The form is rounded binary with a truncated and varied return.

Copland's creative and individual use of tone color brings his melodies to life. The band idiom was not well known to Copland, and he was able to create a fresh pallet of color combinations free of pre-conceived notions. Many mid-twentieth-century works in this genre rely upon thicker textures, copious doubling, and blended sounds that avoid pure colors. *Emblems* often treats the wind band as choirs of woodwind, brass, and percussion. In addition, individual instruments are given solo passages throughout to provide textural balance and a variety of color. He generally reserves full ensemble in rhythmic unison for points of powerful structural impact, such as the beginning, leading into the B section, and the end. The judicious use of percussion instruments highlights the winds, such as the use of suspended cymbal with a hard stick in the opening matching the upper woodwinds; the marcato entrance of the bass drum in m. 4 punctuating the tuba entrance; the triangle underscoring the delicate "Amazing Grace" melody, and the sole statement by the tam tam in the last page of the score.

The use of extreme registers is found throughout *Emblems*. Examples include the three-voice clusters in the first clarinet high-register divisi at figure three (see Ex. 10); the fourth register high D-flat in the flute immediately preceding figure forty, and the high concert C in the first cornet immediately prior to the coda.



Example 10. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 55-63

Copland's keen sense of timbre is all the more remarkable considering that it was conceived primarily after the pitches and rhythms were notated. Although a new medium to Copland, the band idiom provided ample creative scoring opportunities for him to compose an effective work. The solo woodwind writing calls to mind the quiet passage of *Inscape*, as well as those in his opera *The Tender Land*. *Emblems* has a colorful timbral palette unique amongst the wind band repertoire.

Emblems: A Guide to Understanding and Performing a Neglected Masterwork

Copland's note in the score reads:

> An Emblem stands for something, it is a symbol. I call this work *Emblems* because it seemed to me to suggest musical states of being: noble or aspirational feelings, playful or spirited feelings. The exact nature of the emblematic sounds must be determined himself for each listener (Copland 1964, 1)

Here we find the first clue to rendering an effective performance. Contrast in spirit is a hallmark of *Emblems*, and therefore drawing out these different characters is important. The composer provides unique verbal clues to the style of each section with words such as "noble," "grace," "eloquent," "broad," "bold," and "big" that appear in the score. These directions were reinforced in rehearsals with the composer. Following the premiere Aaron Copland attended a rehearsal of the Baldwin Wallace University Band. He spoke to the musicians:

> You must always play absolutely in tune when you play dissonance. We composers take a chance when we write it, because if it is not played absolutely in tune, it sounds like a mistake… Everybody knows a band can play loud. The question here is, how soft can you play? (Copland and Perlis 1989, 344)

In line with the composer's suggestions, it is important in rehearsal to work on beat-free tuning of the intervals and chords using just intonation, especially at the start, the end of the A section, and the coda. Tune the lower perfect intervals first. Remind players of the need to explore the quiet end of the dynamic spectrum in line with Copland's

vision for *Emblems*. Loud passages should be performed with resonance and clarity, not forced. Copland provided ample opportunity for both pianissimo and fortissimo playing.

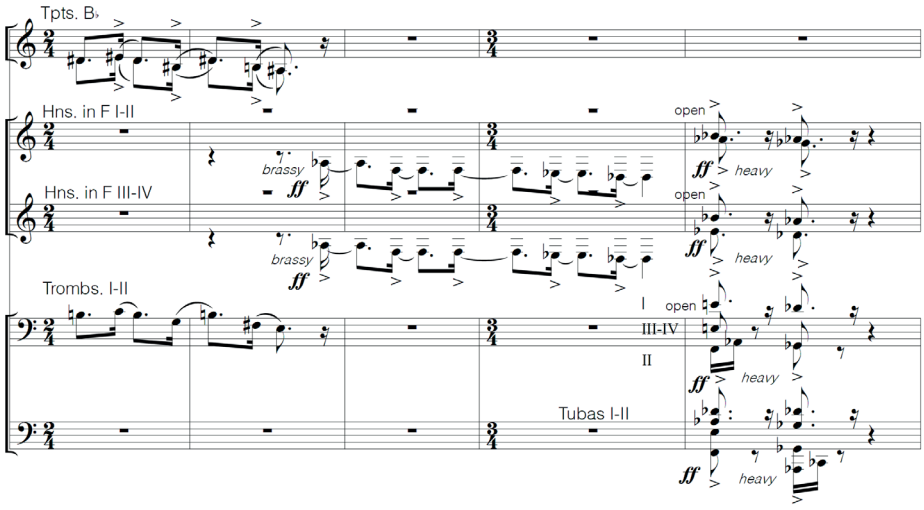
In early performances of the work, including the premiere, the opening and ending sections of *Emblems* presented the figures more detached, in keeping with a common stylistic approach in wind performance. However, executing the chords more sonorously and sostenuto renders them more powerful and effective, highlighting Copland's desire to depict noble and aspirational feelings. Copland's performance directions suggest character virtues of nobility, eloquence and grace. These very physical traits are evident in gestures of slow, stately, considered motion, and suggest a gravitas that Copland desired for his work. To truly embody such musical "virtues" in a performance of this piece, suggested musical approaches include the use of mellifluous and singing-style tone for angular melodic content, to soften the hard edges of disjunct melodic motion. Cluster chord harmony can be balanced by dynamic envelopes, to favor the fourth and fifth content of the lower registers. Textures should be thoroughly rehearsed by adding chord voices one by one, and rehearsing contrasting lines independently then gradually layering them for maximum textural clarity. The delicate, lyrical style called for in the "Amazing Grace" sections, can be achieved by adding dynamic shaping to all phrases, and with all solos within the piece, striving for a singing style with some rhythmic flexibility. In these ways, a performance remains true to the composer's stated intent of a piece both noble and aspirational.

Emblems can be perceived as formally disjointed. The musical interpreter must provide formal coherence between sections to make the transitions between the sharply contrasting material sound smooth and logical. For instance, relaxing the tempo into m. 43 (marked heavy) makes for a smoother transition (see Ex. 11).

Because of the stylistic disparities mentioned earlier, and which were quite intentional by Copland, sectional transitions can seem disjunct in performance. This can be mitigated by taking a bit more time at structural points which helps to define each transition, such as broadening the tempo before the arrival into the B section, taking more time during the silence at the end of the B section at figure forty, as well as before and after the return of the opening material four measures before figure forty-eight. These interpretive decisions can be heard on the *Emblems* live performance by the Sydney Conservatorium of Music Wind Symphony.[7]

The B section should be performed in a light-hearted, spirited, playful manner as recommended by Copland, yet with utmost rhythmic precision. Ragtime is alluded to here in the piano solo providing clues to the stylistic rendering of the figures. Some have described this section as also having a Latin American flavor in its syncopation, further

[7] Sydney Conservatorium of Music Wind Symplony, "Emblems", June 8, 2017, YouTube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDbeLCVlAtU



Example 11. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 39-43

highlighted by the solo use of bongos and congas in the percussion soli at the start of the B section. Copland had a fascination with the musical traditions of Mexico and South America, and he travelled frequently to Mexico to guest conduct and to collaborate with his friend and musical counterpart, Carlos Chávez.

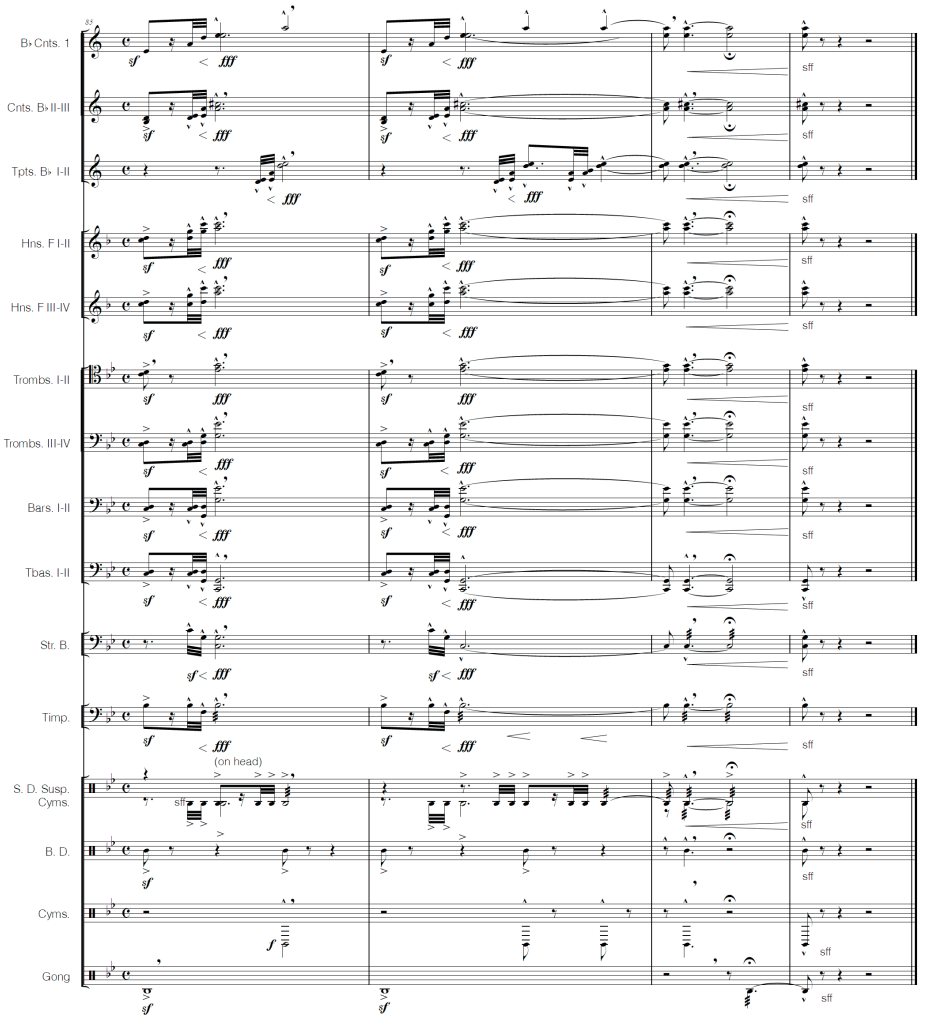
> The close camaraderie between Copland and Chávez remained constant from the time of their first meeting in 1927 until Chávez's death in 1978. Their musical language was different, although they shared many of the same musical influences…they both sought and found a national identity in their music…

Some musical cross-pollination did occur: "Perhaps it is worth citing the Mexican *canción* "El mosque," which Copland quoted in *El Salón México*, and which Chávez used a few years later in his choral drama *La paloma azul*."

Some of the most challenging sections of *Emblems* follow the opening passages of the B section. Starting with the piano solo at figure nineteen, the sparse scoring and unpredictable nature of the music lends itself to error. This section has been the undoing of a number of otherwise excellent performances. Each rehearsal should run the first half of the B section three times straight through, striving for no mental errors.

The coda must have a sense of finality and awe. It should be performed with a sound that is relaxed and open, and very full and resonant, utilizing the acoustics of the space. It should not sound harsh or forced or overblown. Conductors should leave space for the chords to reverberate, especially on the last page of the score. Cue each of the

elements in the final measures noting the unique intensification added with brass flutter tongue and tam tam roll. Ensure the final note has some length for maximum impact, and that it is carefully tuned and balanced. On the final release dampen all ringing percussion sounds in line with the winds, allowing the accumulated acoustic energy to reverberate in the space (see Ex. 12).



Example 12. Copland, *Emblems*, mm. 353-356

In contrapuntal passages, such as those at the octave in figure fifteen at the end of “Amazing Grace”, the ensemble should match the energy and inflection of each line between concurrent voices. All countermelodies should be clearly audible and played *espressivo*. The grace notes in the celesta should sound relaxed and free to draw attention to this detail. In the build up at the end of the B section the conductor should balance the dynamics so that all statements can be heard. Percussion parts should emphasize the accented figures here but play lighter on the other notes so as not to overbalance the textures. Intonation is paramount for the final note before the return, as it lingers during the rest.

Conclusion

Copland was able to combine indigenous elements of jazz, folk song, and hymnody with a highly individual sense of melody and counterpoint, harmony, rhythm, form, and timbre to formulate what has hitherto been referred to as his “American” sound. Copland’s interest in reaching back to earlier musical traditions, such as the early psalmodists and shape-note singing and their unschooled approach to voice-leading, influenced his harmonic language and his approach to creating a uniquely “American” sound. His fascination, especially early in his career, with jazz impacted his rhythmic gestures and the incorporation of the Blues. These disparate elements, including allusions to vernacular styles and folk song quotation, and an overall leanness of texture and clarity of form, provide stylistic coherence in what became a unique and readily identifiable voice.

An examination of the singular work *Emblems* demonstrates these characteristics in strong relief, including his inclusion of the popular hymn tune *Amazing Grace*, the ragtime rhythmic figures in the B section, and the numerous passages with sparse, transparent textures. In *Emblems* Copland reserves bold, full ensemble statements for important structural points such as the introduction, leading up to and concluding the central section, and the final four pages of the score. Prioritizing these important structural moments, and reserving the most dramatic arrival for the tension and resolution leading into the last page of the score, will help shape the overall trajectory of the work. Conductors and instrumentalists wishing to perform *Emblems* should note Copland’s expressive markings, especially those describing the character of each passage, as well as his statement at the front of the score describing the intention of the work. Conductors should take time at structural points, creating links in the outer sections with subtle tempo and dynamic adjustments between rapidly alternating theme areas, in order to provide coherence to passages that might otherwise sound disjointed. Performers should strive for beauty of sound to balance the dissonant chords and angular melodies.

In *Emblems* Copland created a masterwork for the wind band, even though it was not seen as such at the time. While viewed as an anomaly and a departure from his earlier populist works, *Emblems* is similar in compositional style to other large ensemble

compositions he wrote in the 1960s. It is reflective of his best work, and bears the compositional trademarks seen throughout his output: American themes, incorporation of jazz rhythms, and his unique approach to melody and harmony. *Emblems*, Copland's only original band work, is unique in the repertoire, and bears the undeniable stamp of one of the most revered historic composers from the United States. An emblem stands for something: an icon who has shared with us the vision of the American musical heritage.

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* Musical examples prepared by Andrew McWade.