

## 2025 Festival Orchestra Notes by Fran Rosenthal

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### Rachmaninoff & Copland | Sunday, March 30, 2025

#### Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1873-1943, Piano Concerto No. 3, op. 30



In 1909, when internationally acclaimed pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) sat down to play the premiere of his Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, his legendary gigantic hands easily handled the expansive, virtuosic concerto. Described by Stravinsky as a “six-and-a-half-foot scowl,” the stern, introverted musician astounded the New York audience with the thematic intrigue and brilliant rhythmic passages of his new work.

This period, from 1907 to 1917, was the most successful for Rachmaninoff as a composer. His serious mental crisis, caused by dismal reviews for his Symphony No. 1, was behind him, and his Piano Concerto No. 2 had become an instant audience favorite. That said, he only accepted the commission for the third concerto because he wanted to buy a new car! Due to a tight schedule, the celebrated pianist did not have time to practice his solo part at home in Russia, where he had composed the work. Instead, he was forced to use a silent keyboard while on board a ship to the United States, an experience he loathed.

The First Movement (*Allegro ma non tanto*, fast, but not too much) sets out the themes in rapid order. The piano begins with a simply stated, rather serious passage. Many critics have identified the melody as an old hymn from Kiev, although the composer denied this, declaring, “It simply wrote itself.” The piano and orchestra converse in a staccato dialogue that yields a second idea. Suddenly, the mood changes, and we are surrounded by the romantic, passionate sound that is Rachmaninoff’s musical signature. The first theme (“hymn”) returns to be developed with rhythmic detail. The tempo picks up, and the orchestra delivers a huge fortissimo chord, then yields to the soloist.

Because Rachmaninoff wrote two cadenzas for the Third, it is always a topic of speculation among audiences who know the piece. Both are spectacular. Note that, within the cadenza—typically a showcase for the soloist’s technical skills—the woodwinds are heard, bringing back the first theme, and the piano restates the melodic second theme. Thus, the cadenza section actually serves as the recapitulation in a rather inventive use of sonata

form by the composer. The ending or coda is of particular interest, as it not only repeats the “hymn” theme but also recalls the staccato rendition of the melodic second theme.

The Second Movement (Intermezzo; Adagio, a slow, leisurely tempo) opens with an expressive melodic section. The woodwinds present introspective themes, which the strings then elaborate upon. The piano enters explosively, and the atmosphere suddenly intensifies. Chromatic harmony creates a sensuous mood. As the soloist plays several virtuosic measures, the clarinet and bassoon recall the theme from the First Movement. See if you can spot this: the music is ingeniously hidden in waltz-like measures. The movement ends as it began, with the haunting melody.

The Third Movement has often been called the “ne plus ultra” of concerto movements, and with good reason! Driving and aggressive, it is technically outrageously challenging, and to top it off, the score is filled with countless pronouncements and witty variations of the First Movement themes. Structurally, the movement (Finale alla breve; in effect, fast and march-like) is in A-B-A form. The first section is rhythmically driven and comprised of several themes, including a lyrical melody that is simply magical. In terms of sheer compositional interest, the “B” section is the most fascinating part of the entire concerto. Essentially, it is all music from the First Movement. Divided into three passages, it begins with a sparkling tour de force marked *scherzando* (a lighthearted movement, a little joke). The slow inner section that follows is expressive and heartfelt: Rachmaninoff’s distinctive Romantic musical idiom is once again in command. Variations on the lovely second theme and the “hymn” melody from the First Movement dominate. The first part, A, returns and unfolds. With the key change to major tonality, the concerto ends literally on a “happy” note as the thrilling, over-the-top coda brings the work to a brilliant close.

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### Aaron Copland, 1900-1990, American; Symphony No. 3



I believe that most of the audience for this final concert of AZMF's Orchestra Week will recognize Aaron Copland's name. Is it because you have heard his music composed for the ballets *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo*, and *Appalachian Spring*? Or perhaps you have heard *Fanfare for the Common Man*? (AZMF performed the work a few years ago.) No matter where you were first introduced to Copland's music, you most likely have heard many musical idioms that you identify as American. Copland accomplished this using songs, hymns, and instrumental styles native to our country in many of his works. Here in *Symphony No. 3*, written between 1944 and 1946, the Americana sound is not quoted directly from any

existing materials except his own *Fanfare*.

If you know the brief, very famous concert opener, you may be aware that in 1942, in the midst of WWII, Eugene Goossens, Maestro of the Cincinnati Symphony, commissioned eighteen composers to write a *Fanfare* to honor the Allied Forces. Goossens loved Copland's contribution but was puzzled by the title, as it did not refer to the war or freedom. I have not found Copland's words that explicitly refer to his title. He did make many statements about his mission in life, which was to make his music understandable and available to all audiences—not only in concert halls but also through the growing mediums of radio and recordings. It clearly makes sense that he would compose a piece for the "Common Man."

A fun aside is that the two musicians decided to perform the work on March 12, 1943, just before income taxes were due. Taxes had risen significantly because so much government spending went to wartime expenditures. This caused severe hardships for taxpayers, particularly since employers were first required to initiate a withholding tax.

I have not included Copland's vast biographical materials, as they are readily available on the web, except to point out a few salient facts that speak to his musical language. For the compelling detailed background that helped form Copland's music, I refer you to Google.

Quickly then... As a child, Copland began his long musical journey playing the piano. He also took lessons in composition. Upon graduating from high school, he opted to forgo college. In 1920, he decided to go to Paris to "feel the artistic vibe." By then, he had decided that composing would probably be his life's work. In the vibrant "city of lights," Copland's principal teacher was Nadia Boulanger, a skilled organist, composer, and mentor to many

young musicians. She was referred to as the "Mother of American Music" because so many budding composers from the States came to her to learn composition. It was from her that Copland learned the art of "dépouillement" (Fr. "stripping down"). Ned Rorem, fellow composer, writer, and friend, commented that this technique stemmed from Boulanger: "Remove, remove, remove what isn't needed. That stuck. The leanness!—particularly in his instrumentation, which he himself termed 'transparent.'"

Hence, what you have heard in the familiar pieces and will hear in the *Symphony* is open, spare orchestration and clear, often complex harmonic settings across the four movements. This is Copland's first symphony that has a key signature. You will readily hear dissonant, polytonal, and atonal passages. "Atonal," as you may surmise, means no one key is involved in a harmonic setting, rendering a music that has no home key or tonal center.

His *Americana* evokes reminiscent sounds of what he previously quoted directly. In this work, he brings his characteristic open sound to powerful orchestration for all sections of the orchestra to deliver what the LAFil Annotator, John Henken, calls "...an abstract evocation of time and place without recourse to folk material." Having quoted that sentence, there is no doubt in my mind that folk songs, jazz, hymns, city noise and quiet (listen to *Quiet City* on YouTube), Mexican rhythms (listen to *El Salón México* on YouTube), and certainly hints of what he heard in Western cowboy music are all woven into the score of this large composition, but not as specific references. Rather, they are part of Copland's personal musical ethos—his unique identity and his personal statement contained in his art.

The eminent conductor Serge Koussevitzky commissioned the *Symphony No. 3* to be dedicated to the memory of Koussevitzky's wife. The Maestro conducted the premiere and labeled the work "the greatest American symphony—it goes from the heart to the heart" (This is supposedly a paraphrase of a Beethoven quote).

The **First Movement** is marked *Molto moderato* (very moderate) and immediately opens with the first of three themes that form the section. I say three, but when the movement is parsed by interested musicians, many more motivic phrases are to be found in the mix. Quoting Copland: "The themes—three in number—are plainly stated: the first in strings at the very start without introduction; the second, in a related mood, in violas and oboes; the third, of a bolder nature, in trombones and horns." Maybe you will hear the first hint of his *Fanfare* in the emphatic *mélange* of the themes that brings the movement to a peaceful, magical coda (remember, "coda" is the Italian word for tail).

The **Second Movement** is a *Scherzo* (It. "joke"). It follows an ABA form and is marked *Allegro molto* (It. "very fast"). The opening is festive, really boisterous, featuring the brass. The middle section, called the *Trio* (a term used to describe the contrasting middle section of a scherzo or minuet), is more mellow. It is followed by the return of brass exuberance. I do hear musical recollections of *Rodeo* and Western idioms skillfully woven into the movement. Will you, I wonder?

Concerning the **Third Movement**, Copland wrote, "It is the freest (Copland's spelling, not my typo) of all in formal structure. Although it is built sectionally, the various sections are intended to emerge one from the other in continuous flow, somewhat in the manner of a closely knit series of variations." Do listen for the many mood changes in this movement! The tempo marking is *Andantino quasi allegretto*—a little faster than *andante* (walking pace), but not so quick as *allegretto* (slightly slower than *allegro*, fast, lively).

The **Fourth Movement** is marked *Molto deliberato*—*Allegro risoluto* (you can surely translate for yourselves!). A quiet, uninterrupted flow emerges out of the Third Movement, with the flutes and clarinets sounding the *Fanfare*. Surprised? Were you expecting the brass to introduce the amazing theme? Referring back to Copland's signature style of large intervals in phrases and lean, clear textures in orchestration, he chose to announce his use of the *Fanfare for the Common Man* with simple, cleanly articulated lighter orchestration using the higher-sounding woodwinds—an effect I think you will find brilliant. Enter majestic brass. The theme is developed and heard in a fugal treatment and a recapitulation of the theme. New material is also introduced. Copland gives us a final reprise of the *Fanfare* and the opening motif of the work. I just used the word "brilliant" as a definition of exceptionally skilled, but here, and more to the point, "brilliant" is a description of the full orchestral splendor that brings the symphony to a "light up the sky" close.

At best, this is an informative précis (can a précis be long?). I urge you to be aware of the timbre (remember? The particular sound quality of an instrument as distinguished from another instrument) of the various orchestra sections. Hear which instruments highlight the many themes, and then, as I often write, just relax and "go with the flow" of Copland's amazing musical perspective.

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## Arizona Musicfest

Arizona Musicfest would like to thank Fran Rosenthal for thorough, entertaining, and thoughtful notes that add depth and perspective to the great music you'll hear during our Festival Orchestra week.