

**Three American Musical Masterpieces:  
*Rhapsody in Blue, Appalachian Spring, and Adagio for Strings***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The target audience for this curriculum is high school juniors and seniors with varying degrees of musical knowledge and experience who are preparing for the aural perception examination administered by the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) in preparation for International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) candidacy. The IBDP is a content-driven program, international in scope and context, which provides a standardized way of measuring student achievement and knowledge in subject areas. The humanities and sciences receive equal weight, although the sixth component of the subject hexagram, which is visual or performing art, can be replaced by additional testing in other areas. The aural perception exam was altered in 2002 to reflect a broader-based study of music than the timeband approach of previous years. The challenge has become to develop a curriculum that selects and explores major works and provides students a historical context, a grasp of musical elements, a music vocabulary, and the skill to combine this knowledge in a discussion of works which are probably unknown to the student. This study involves traditional Western art music and music of world cultures. The Listening Paper section of their assessment consists of a timed test (2 ½ hours). Students are given a CD with usually unfamiliar selections from Western art music and world music examples. They provide written responses which are assessed by an independent IB examiner on the basis of aural perception (the ability to discern, describe, and notate the musical elements: melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, tone color), technical language (use musical terminology related to the music heard), structural analysis (factors relating to how the piece is constructed), and context (place the work in context of other music known to the candidate) (IBO 23-26).

## **PREPARING FOR THE LISTENING EXPERIENCE**

In preparing the student's aural experiences, it is helpful to examine ways of listening. Aaron Copland suggests three planes of listening to music. First is the sensuous plane of listening for sheer pleasure without particular knowledge. The second plane involves expression. This is a controversial concept with highly individualized responses to the question of what a composition might mean. The third plane involves the music alone and requires specific musical knowledge of the inner workings of the musical act and the elements of musical composition and performance (Copland, *New Music* 20-23).

Another American composer, Roger Sessions, discusses the four stages of the listener's development. The first stage is simply hearing with whatever knowledge one possesses. The second stage is enjoyment. The third stage involves musical

understanding, which involves knowledge of musical concepts, elements, and historical and artistic context. The fourth stage involves discrimination or the cultivation of a sense of values (88-98).

Both of these composers regard the role of the listener as important and both have devoted time and effort to writing about the role of the listener as a part of the artistic process. Sessions considers the roles of the performer, composer, and listener as a triangular equation of shared dependency and respect. This view elevates the role of the listener to full participant in the artistic experience and demands his/her educated attention. Copland emphasizes the role of the listener as requiring a “more active kind of listening...not someone who is just listening, but someone who is listening for something” (23).

Robert Jourdain calls expert “listening a skill-a performance skill” (264). He emphasizes the need for repeated exposure to create powers of anticipation and a musical map which frees the mind to probe deeper relationships. He emphasizes that “listening is always effortful” (266).

With the assumption that music listening requires attention and effort comes the responsibility to provide and guide listening experiences. David Elliott says, “Educating competent, proficient, and expert listeners for the future depends on the progressive education of competent, proficient, and artistic music makers in the present” (99). Elliott further states that “expert listening involves learning why, how and where one should focus one’s thinking while listening for the several dimensions of different musical works” (100).

Elliott traces four themes in the process of educating the music listener and elaborates on each. Summarized, these four closely related themes include first, the involvement of various cognitive processes in which the listeners “covertly construct, chain, compare, order, abstract, transform, recall, and imagine auditory patterns;” second, the observation that “musical works are manifestations of generic human listening processes and the practice-specific ways that different cultures...develop these processes;” third, that “music listening is music minding,” which relates our musical experiences to a junction where the human consciousness and humanly made sounds converge; and fourth, the identification of musical sounds as “artistically and culturally determined information requiring artistically and culturally determined knowing” (Elliott 86-87).

Within this context of the “why” and “how” of the listening experience, we now move to the choice of “what” we choose to provide as guided listening experience. The repertoire studied will need to provide specific listening experience which will give students the tools needed to explore unfamiliar music and respond in writing in a coherent way which can then be evaluated within specific guidelines.

## REPERTORIE FOR LISTENING EXPEREINCE

This particular unit will span five class periods of 1 ½ hours each (block schedule), but will not necessarily be consecutive classes. The three works chosen for study are *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) by George Gershwin, *Appalachian Spring* (1944) by Aaron Copland, and *Adagio for Strings* (1936) by Samuel Barber. These works were chosen because they represent major works in the repertoire of each of the American composers studied in this HTI seminar. Many arrangements of these works exist, one or another of which is probably known in some fashion to the students. This concept of moving from the study of something known to unknown is part of the IB teaching/learning philosophy and pedagogy. Each of these works is tonal and can be studied in the context of Western art music for melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, tone color, and form. These works will serve as representatives of American music in the first half of the twentieth century. They follow the presentation of major works from each of the historical time periods and precede presentations on the work of Cage, Reich, and Pärt.

Each work will be presented by two or more recordings and with score excerpts provided. The study of each will follow the whole-part-whole process. The music will be presented aurally in a whole performance. Musical elements will be abstracted from the composition which will be explored in the music itself and then transferred (in later classes) to unknown musical works. The conclusion of each of these small studies will return to the work presented whole. There is the obvious flaw here of turning this into the “blind man and elephant” study where only one facet of the work is studied. There is an ongoing challenge in this new way of exploring aural perception to connect fragments from past sequentially prepared listening studies to new listening experiences. It is an open-ended way of study which can continue throughout the student’s life rather than a set of information which is learned for an examination and then possibly discarded. Music now becomes a way of knowing rather than a conglomeration of facts and themes which may seem irrelevant to the student.

This unit of study represents a major work-in-progress with a huge learning curve for the teacher and the students. It also represents a life-long study for the teacher-learners and the student-learners. Its implementation is challenging and the ongoing internal assessment is yet to be determined, but must be developed to prepared students for the IB Listening paper external assessment.

### ***Rhapsody in Blue***

George Gershwin (1898-1937), the son of Russian immigrant parents, grew up in New York City. An indifferent student from non-musical parents, he began to play piano in 1910 and began studies with Charles Hambitzer in 1912. He dropped out of high school in 1914 to become a “song plugger” for Jerome H. Remick & Co., a music publishing firm in Tin Pan Alley. Growing up in Manhattan provided Gershwin with a rich vein of musical influences and sounds from which to draw. He attended concerts and knew some

of the major masterworks in the European Classical tradition. He absorbed the music of the Jewish traditions and the African-American artists of his time, as well as the music of the theatre and vaudeville entertainers and the varied sounds of New York's ethnic communities. Steeped in the popular music of his day, a gifted pianist, and already a composer of songs in the Tin Pan Alley tradition, Gershwin left Remick in 1917 to pursue a music theatre career as a composer. His first full Broadway show was *La La Lucille* (1919) and his first major hit song was "Swanee" (recorded in 1920 by Al Jolson). He continued to write hit songs and shows, and by 1924, he had become a well-known song writer.

*Rhapsody in Blue* was written in 1924 for a performance called "Experiment in Modern Music," a concert by Paul Whiteman's band. Whiteman (1890-1967) was born in Denver, Colorado, the son of a music educator, and became a successful band leader in the 1920s. His principal arranger, Ferde Grofé (1892-1972), a gifted orchestrator who knew the Whiteman musician strengths and their doubling abilities, helped develop a sound which became famous. The purpose of the concert, according to the pre-concert lecture, was to show "the tremendous strides which have been made in popular music from the day of discordant Jazz...to the really melodious music of today....The greatest single factor in the improvement...has been the art of scoring...Eventually they may evolve an American school which will...make it very simple for the masses to understand and therefore enjoy symphony and opera" (Ewen 78).

This ambitious concert mixed "jazz" scored for orchestra; novelty piano pieces by Zez Confrey; a commissioned work by Victor Herbert, the great operetta composer; and a new work by the young George Gershwin. In writing about the genesis of *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin said:

There had been so much talk about the limitations of jazz . . . Jazz, they said, had to be in strict time. It had to cling to dance rhythms. I resolved, if possible, to kill the misconception with one sturdy blow...I had no set plan, no structure to which my music must conform. The *Rhapsody*, you see, began as a purpose, not a plan . . . It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattley-bag that is often so stimulating to a composer (I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise), that I suddenly heard—even saw on paper—the complete construction of the *Rhapsody*, from beginning to end...I heard it as sort of a musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our incomparable national pep, our blues, our metropolitan madness. (Schiff 12)

The runaway hit of the lengthy concert program was *Rhapsody in Blue*. It was a success with the eclectic audience and with most of the critics. *Rhapsody in Blue* subsequently was arranged for and performed by everything from harmonica bands to saxophone ensembles to symphony orchestras. The recordings used for this study include the 1993 recording by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra with James Levine as pianist and conductor and the 1924 recording of the Paul Whiteman orchestra with

George Gershwin as pianist. We will use score excerpts abstracted from the 1942 orchestral score published by Warner Brothers Publications. The class will also see the *Rhapsody in Blue* segment of *Fantasia 2000*.

As stated earlier, the exploration of each of these American masterworks involves choosing some musical element and/or characteristic which will be part of a sequential study of music that can help students develop a musical vocabulary to describe aural experiences with unfamiliar music. Musical elements don't exist in separate compartments and isolating them may weaken their impact; but every effort will be made to return them to their proper context in a whole performance listening experience.

In a famous imaginary conversation about “nice Gershwin tunes,” Leonard Bernstein proclaimed *Rhapsody in Blue* “a string of separate paragraphs stuck together... composing is a very different thing from writing tunes... you can't just put four tunes together, God given thought they may be, and call them a composition” (57). He added, “Those tunes. Those beautiful tunes. But they still don't add up to a piece” (58). Richard Crawford writing in the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music* says, “The melodies of Gershwin's concert works are surely the chief reason the works hold their place in the repertory” (Hitchcock 203). Larry Starr argues convincingly that Gershwin's concert “tunes” differ significantly from his “show tunes” (Starr 97) and observes that *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris* are “‘tuneful’ in the general sense, and Gershwin's characteristic melodic style is clearly audible in them. Yet a work that has tuneful qualities is significantly different from one that is literally composed of *tunes*” (97). Taking these ideas as a secondary backdrop to explore formal relationships between the melodies, we will examine the primary themes of *Rhapsody in Blue* and see how Gershwin creates melodies and uses them throughout the composition.

In the Cambridge Music Handbook on *Rhapsody in Blue*, David Schiff discusses five tunes and a tag which are closely related (14). They are all based on the blues scale and have major/minor thirds and flatted sevenths. They all contain the “Man I Love” cell (recognized by the students as “and many more,” the tag for “Happy a Birthday”). Three of the tunes contain a ragtime rhythmic motif (four pairs of eighth-notes with the middle two tied). All five themes imply a 16- or 32-bar form, but none ends with a clear cadence. Schiff believes that “the lack of cadences and modulating harmonies suggest that even before he began to weave the themes together Gershwin had transformed them from ordinary pop-tune structures” (15).

After hearing a complete performance of *Rhapsody in Blue*, the class will isolate each of the five main themes and explore some common elements of each. The students will have constructed their own composition based on a blues scale (in 12-bar form). Looking at each melody separately will prepare us to listen to the composition in sections and identify the melodies and look for motivic unity. This is concentrated and active listening without a score. The themes which will receive the most attention will be the first theme that Schiff refers to as the “ritornello” theme which reappears throughout in

various guises (Schwartz 328-331). In introducing this theme and its blues characteristics, we will see the opening of the pencil drawing of a line into a skyline in the *Fantasia 2000* production inspired by Gershwin and illustrator, Al Hirschfeld. The theme, like the pencil line, snakes out of the clarinet glissando to become one of the most identifiable melodies in American music just as the New York skyline is easily recognizable. The “stride” theme [12-13] has links to the B section of the opening melody [1]. Gershwin subtly reharmonizes the ritornello theme each time it reappears. Gershwin uses this introductory musical statement to establish the chromatic voice-leading, avoidance of root-position chords and frequent use of ninth chords which characterize the work as a whole.

The story of the famous opening clarinet glissando is an interesting sidelight of the composition:

It was not until rehearsals of the *Rhapsody* began that the glissando accidentally came into being. According to Grofé, who of course was present at the rehearsals, the opening clarinet passage at first was played ‘straight’ as written by Ross Gorman, Whiteman’s virtuoso solo clarinet and an incredible performer on other wind instruments as well. Then, stated Grofé, as a joke on Gershwin and to enliven the often-fatiguing rehearsals, Gorman played the opening measure with a noticeable glissando, stretching the notes out and adding what he considered a jazzy, humorous touch to the passage. Reacting favorably to Gorman’s whimsy, Gershwin asked him to perform the opening measure that way at the forthcoming concert and to add as much of a ‘wail’ as possible to the upper notes of the clarinet run. Gorman even experimented before the concert with various reeds until he found the one that gave him the most ‘wailing’ sound... (Schwartz 81-83)

The “shuffle” theme which marks the second section of the *Rhapsody in Blue* contains the most obvious use of the “Man I Love” tag which students will recognize from the tag to “Happy Birthday.” According to Schiff, this tag was a blues cliché and “it appears in overt and covert forms throughout the score” (23). Schiff identifies it in four-bar melodies found in the piano part and as a three-note cell hidden in the tunes or serving as a counter-melody. He illustrates this and the variants of the tag in piano reduction (24). Schiff continues, “Once the listener becomes tag-conscious, virtually every bit of ‘filler’ in the score turns out to be thematic” (23).

The second major melodic theme to be explored is the theme marked “andantino moderato” [28]. This famous theme which became Paul Whiteman’s theme song is 22 measures long and is in two sections. The A section can be divided into 8+6 bar phrases with an 8 measure B answer. The consequent phrase is nearly parallel. Students can notate the first two measures of this beautiful diatonic melody and look at the pitches in the context of a major scale and then examine the chromatic inner voice counterpoint. Having the students write this melody as a melodic/rhythmic dictation exercise and then

compare it with the written score illustrates another unusual performance practice characteristic. The first two measures are written and performed in common time, but the next six measures, while written in common time, are typically performed in cut-time. Students will be encouraged to compare and contrast performance practices of this section from various recordings. It is interesting that “the most famous melody in twentieth-century concert music is never played as written” (Schiff 22).

The piano plays each of the themes somewhere in the piece (except for the “Train” theme) and we will prepare a thematic index of these passages for further study. David Schiff isolates and names these themes as follows (13):

Ritornello theme: bars 39-54  
Train theme: bars 91-106  
Stride theme: bars 181-195  
Shuffle theme: bars 260-296  
Love theme: bars 357-382

After looking at these themes, the students will listen to the 1924 recording. The goal is for them to hear the isolated melodies within the context of the whole and to be able to accurately follow the form to see the cohesion of the whole piece. While not being able to articulate the motivic unity of *Rhapsody in Blue* through Schenkerian analysis (Gilbert 57-71), they will see those wonderful Gershwin tunes at work and tied together to create a work that no matter in what version it appears is still Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*.

### ***Appalachian Spring***

Aaron Copland (1900-1990) was born in Brooklyn, later commenting that he was “filled with mild wonder each time I realize that a musician was born on that street” (Copland, *What to Listen for* 151). Copland didn’t attend college, but rather studied privately in New York and went to France to study composition, where he became a student of Nadia Boulanger’s. Boulanger stressed craftsmanship over personal expression. At the same time, she encouraged her students to draw from their heritage and develop their own style within the framework of classical restraint.

Copland’s early works include pieces which incorporate jazz elements (*Music for Theatre* and *Piano Concerto*), but his work also reflects French values in its compositional craftsmanship and musical understatement. Some of his work from the early thirties is harshly dissonant and presents listening challenges for the audience. One of Copland’s most famous observations involves a turning point of sorts:

During the mid-‘30s I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer...It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum. I felt that it was

worth the effort to see if I couldn't say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms (Copland, *What to Listen for* 160).

The results of this populist thinking included *El Salón México*, *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*.

*Appalachian Spring* was commissioned in 1942 for Martha Graham and her dancers. Having pioneered a new dance vocabulary, Martha Graham and her troupe were well-respected in the dance world. The work was commissioned by the influential patron, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. The path to the final result was not a smooth one. Copland worked from a script sent to him by Graham and they only met a few times during its creation. The working title of the ballet was *Ballet for Martha* and by the time of its premiere in 1944, it had gone through numerous alterations of script. Copland said that he thought while he was writing it, "How foolhardy it is to be spending all this time writing a thirty-five-minute score for a modern dance company, knowing how short-lived most ballets *and* their scores are" (Kostalentez xxix). Upon seeing the dance for the first time, he was surprised to find that "music composed for one kind of action had been used to accompany something else" (Pollack 393). This counterpoint of dance and music would be an interesting lens through which to view the work.

The original script eventually was divided into eight parts:

- Prologue
- Eden Valley
- Wedding Day
- Interlude
- Fear in the Night
- Day of Wrath
- Moment of Crisis
- The Lord's Day

Copland eliminated the "Fear in the Night," "Day of Wrath," and "Moment of Crisis" episodes from the orchestral suite. Although the music has a folk-like quality, only one quotation of a folk song is used, namely "'Tis The Gift to Be Simple;" an old Shaker hymn, its use in the closing and its theme and variations setting will provide students with an excellent opportunity to explore instrumental tone color and orchestration.

The ballet, about thirty minutes in length, is in two parts and was originally scored for thirteen instruments (double string quartet, double bass, flute, clarinet, bassoon and piano). An indication of Copland's open-mindedness is that he preferred not to know the choreography in advance and felt that he knew Graham's technique and personality well enough to compose the ballet. In *Copland Since 1943*, he says, "I knew certain crucial things—that it had to do with the pioneer American spirit, with youth and spring, with optimism and hope" (32). He viewed Martha Graham as "unquestionably American" and said that her "dance style is seemingly, but only seemingly, simple and extremely direct.



Martha carries a certain theatrical atmosphere around with her always, and she communicates that to her dancers” (32).

Martha Graham’s synopsis for the ballet is very general and brief:

Part and parcel of our lives is that moment of Pennsylvania spring when was a “garden eastward in Eden.”

Spring was celebrated by a man and woman building a house with joy and love and prayer; by a revivalist and his followers in their shouts of exaltation; by a pioneering woman with her dreams of the Promised Land. (Pollack 401)

Howard Pollack emphasizes that although Graham’s scenario can be taken at face value, the “full scripts and the choreography itself suggest the use of these characters as symbolic archetypes, including the Pioneer Woman as the noble American dream, and the Revivalist and his Followers as an ascetic, resolute Puritanism” (402).

Pollack also shares an amusing story about the ballet’s title which Copland enjoyed telling:

The first thing I said to her when I came down to the rehearsal here in Washington was, “Martha, whatdya call the ballet?” She said, “Appalachian Spring.” “Oh,” I said, “What a nice name. Where’d’ya get it?” She said, “It’s the title of a poem by Hart Crane.” “Oh,” I said, “Does the poem have anything to do with the ballet?” She said, “No, I just liked the title and I took it.” And over and over again, nowadays people come up to me after seeing the ballet on stage and say, “Mr. Copland, when I see that ballet and when I hear your music I can just *see* the Appalachians and just *feel* spring.” I’ve begun to see the Appalachians myself a little bit. (402)

*Appalachian Spring* premiered in 1944 with Martha Graham, Erick Hawkins, and Merce Cunningham in the lead roles. Sets were by Isamu Noguchi. It was an unqualified success and remains so today. In 1945, *Appalachian Spring* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and Copland and Graham’s fame with a broader public was secure.

In preparing to explore this work as a suite, an orchestra piece, and a ballet, we will begin with biographical information. We will divide the work in small group presentations with biographies of Aaron Copland and Martha Graham. We will explore the genesis of the ballet, its script and how Copland’s music serves that purpose. In keeping with our larger goal of using major works to study specific compositional techniques and musical devices which serve the whole, we will be considering the role of space created through textural and tone color choices. This musical element serves the whole fabric on many levels. Pearl Lang, who danced the role of one of the Followers in the original production, said, “The idea of space is like fuel to a dancer. Aaron has given sound to this space” (Copland and Perlis 43). From the opening triadic outline to the

treatment of “Simple Gifts,” Copland opens up the world tonally and texturally to create a vision of a vast land with limitless opportunity. It is a work of optimism and joy.

One of the great pleasures of this course has been the rediscovery of Aaron Copland’s books about music. In addition to being a great composer, Copland has a gift for putting his ideas about music into words. Even though he did not choose to spend his life in academia, he has influenced musicians and laymen with his perceptions about the art of music. I’ve decided to make *What to Listen for in Music* required reading for my students next year. There are many music appreciation textbooks for use with the general public, but Copland’s insights “cut to the chase” and are presented in a logical, clear-cut fashion which inspires active listening and the joy that brings. This lesson on *Appalachian Spring* will make use of his music and his writing about music.

In keeping with the use of selected American masterworks to study various musical elements, I’ve selected an exploration of texture through *Appalachian Spring*. Obviously, students need to learn a great deal more than about one isolated musical element, but using a musical element such as texture provides a reference point for musical discovery.

In chapter eight of *What to Listen for in Music*, Copland identifies musical textures as monophonic, homophonic, and polyphonic (81-90). His descriptions and examples are concise and understandable. Copland emphasizes the difficulty of listening to polyphonic texture since it requires the mind to listen to several different lines of music simultaneously. He gently but firmly states that repeated hearings are necessary and conscious practice is required to become skilled at this most intellectually demanding listening. He suggests specific examples for practice and all of his observations are couched in the best “encouragement” manner of a good teacher.

Copland also identifies contemporary contrapuntal writing as linear or “dissonant” counterpoint, paving the way for a comparison of the polyphony of Palestrina, Bach, Beethoven and Hindemith. Copland emphasizes that it is easier to hear contemporary counterpoint because “there is no mellifluous harmonic web...the voices ‘stick’ out...for it is their separateness rather than their togetherness which is stressed” (87). Copland also stresses the interest created for the listener by the composer’s use of various textures within a single piece.

The following lesson design is created to cover three class periods. Because it is sectionalized, it may be spread out over more time. This unit of study would occur in the spring after students have completed about two-thirds of the year. Their study of music would have involved musical masterworks studied within a historical timeline. The premise of the course is to cover a great deal of material at the possible expense of superficial listening experiences. The students will have some knowledge of monophonic chant, single line melody with accompaniment, madrigals and motets of the Renaissance, fugal counterpoint and homophonic writing through Bach fugues and chorales. They will

have waded through Romantic composers from Schubert to Wagner, and hopefully, they will be eager psychologically and musically to meet the music of Aaron Copland.

Following the whole-part-whole approach, we will hear a recording of *Appalachian Spring* with Copland conducting the 1945 symphonic suite version. Passing observations will include their recognition of “Simple Gifts” and its presentation as a theme and variations, the solo instruments recognized by their tone color, and the identification of specific melodic intervals in solo passages. We will use certain solo lines for melodic dictation (triadic harmonies and examples of fourths and fifths).

We will isolate the “Presto” [37] of the full symphonic score (1945) and listen with attention to each line individually. The first line to be isolated will be the melody in the flute and first violin. In addition to exploring this diatonic melody, we will look at the harmony that Copland sets against it. This opens our ears to the clash of the seconds as another element of the texture. Another texture is created with the oboes and trumpets at [38] with harmonies of open fourths and fifths. Listening for these three sounds in repeated hearings to [37-39] prepares us to continue at [39] and observe which of these elements are continued and if others are added. The violins continue with the melody they introduced with alterations four measures before [40]. The melodic alteration here is also in the trumpet part and echoed in the oboe. An ascending scale is introduced in the contrabass and cello against the descending section of the violin melody. The repeated eighth-note pattern continues in the viola and cello and at [40] reappears as seconds. I will refer to this as the “chopsticks” motive. At [40], our textural elements are viewed through the rhythmic shift to triple which displaces the duple feel. A different texture is introduced via angular chords through disjunct intervals against the repeated eighth-note motive now presented in the accented triple groupings.

We will isolate this first section [37-41] and then listen to the complete “Presto” section [37-51] with full symphony. We will listen without score and see if we can isolate textures within the fullness of sound. We will then turn our attention to the original instrumentation for thirteen instruments using a recording from the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. We will listen to this section of *Appalachian Spring* with scores. After trying to isolate lines in the full score, I hope this more transparent scoring will seem easier to master. Confidence built, we will see a video produced by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra which deals with space in music. Each of these textures is isolated visually and aurally and then placed in context and explored in the context of space between notes (rests) and space between pitches (intervallic space). This is further placed in the context of Copland’s use of space to celebrate American frontier life. The performance is exciting and the narrator reviews elements of music which bring us back to our overarching goal of considering the musical elements as we listen to a piece actively.

We have now listened to the complete symphonic suite version of *Appalachian Spring* and isolated a small section in order to consider texture. We have isolated

melodic motives for dictation and we have examined the composer's choice of instrumentation to create mood. We have examined the original scoring through two performances. Our final step is to place the piece back in context through a performance. We will watch a performance of *Appalachian Spring* by the Martha Graham dancers filmed in 1958 to conclude this unit.

This is such a small attempt to explore the music of Aaron Copland in this way, but his work, musical and literary, is so significant that I hope these students will seek out his work and use his observations as they continue a lifelong pursuit of musical knowledge.

### *Adagio for Strings*

Samuel Barber (1910-1981) completed his String Quartet, op. 11 in 1936 while in Rome. The second movement was transcribed for string orchestra in 1938 and premiered by Arturo Toscanini and the Orchestra of the National Broadcasting Company on November 5, 1938. In 1967, Barber wrote a third version for mixed chorus with optional accompaniment.

Barber was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his opera *Vanessa* in 1958 and for his Piano Concerto in 1962. His work was appreciated by audiences and critics during his lifetime and is widely performed today. Barber was conservatory trained (Curtis Institute) and received several grants to study in Europe. He was profoundly influenced by his aunt and uncle, Louise and Sidney Homer. Louise Homer was a Metropolitan Opera contralto and Sidney Homer was a composer whose letters to Barber were lovingly saved and could today serve as exemplary guidance for young musicians.

Richard Jackson, writing in *Groves Dictionary of American Music*, compares Barber to Brahms. Both wrote works of deep personal emotion which were lyrical and dramatic but illustrated a mastery of traditional classical forms. Neither composer was an innovator but both produced works of substance and beauty with a distinctive personal stamp (Hitchcock 145).

Barber completed the now famous second movement of his String Quartet, op. 11 on September 19, 1936, and wrote to a friend, "I have just finished the slow movement of quartet today—it is a knockout!" (Heyman 153). Following one of the first performances of the string quartet, Howard Taubman wrote that the second movement was "deeply felt and written with economy, resourcefulness and distinction" (157).

Barber had met the legendary Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini in 1933, and as they established a friendship, Toscanini told Barber that he would like to perform one of his works. The historic event happened five years later when the broadcast of Toscanini and the NBC orchestra on November 5, 1938, included *Essay for Orchestra* and the string orchestra version of the second movement of his String Quartet, op. 11, now titled *Adagio for Strings*. The piece was immediately recognized for its stunning beauty. Olin

Downe's review of the concert remarked that Barber "writes with a definite purpose, a clear objective and a sense of structure... This is the product of a musically creative nature... who leaves nothing undone to achieve something as perfect in mass and detail as his craftsmanship permits" (Heyman 168).

*Adagio for Strings* was an immediate success and has remained popular with audiences ever since. It has been called our "national funeral music" (Heyman 173). It was played at the funerals of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, and Princess Grace of Monaco, and it has been broadcast upon the deaths of various dignitaries, including John F. Kennedy. It served as background music to the graphic war scenes of the 1986 film, *Platoon*, though Gian Carlo Menotti believes Barber would not have approved of this usage (Heyman 174).

After providing the students some biographical background on Samuel Barber's life and work, we will read a series of letters from Sidney Homer giving advice to Barber about his role as a musician and composer. These will serve to illustrate the inspiration provided by a respected mentor to a young composer.

On December 19, 1922, Homer writes "There is no doubt you have the making of a composer in you . . . you must aim for . . . the development of a taste that should, in time, amount to a passion, for the best in music in all forms . . . Taste is formed by coming into close and intimate contact with the great works of the masters . . . Sooner or later you will have to do hard work, and you will make more rapid progress now than when you are older." A letter of July 9, 1926 stressed spontaneity and sincerity, stating:

The beautiful thing about art is that quality never fades out. If it is there, it is there to stay, and that is what makes the effort, the patience, persistence, infinite care and scrupulous conscientiousness worth while . . . The intense desire to tell the truth . . . and to create something which would be an inspiration and an incentive to others, is what has led to the heart-breaking, almost appalling labor on the part of those who honestly felt that they had something to say . . . Everyone who joins the society in this place pledges himself to just one thing, sincerity. He tries to put into form his real feelings, not feelings he wishes he had. Pretense has no place here. (Heyman 64)

At a point in 1930 when Barber was discouraged with his composition studies, Homer admonished him, "I do not know a single man who hasn't had rocks in his life . . . Poise, equanimity, philosophy, sense of proportion, gratitude for what we have, a 'calm center,' fixed determination and an inflexible purpose are all to the good" (Heyman 75). Sidney Homer realized the significance of writing a piece for Toscanini to perform, and in 1934 he told Barber, ". . . the maestro loves sincere straight-forward stuff, with genuine feeling in it and no artificial pretense and padding" (164).

The study of *Adagio for Strings* offers students an opportunity to explore an American masterwork of reasonable length and enough complexity to be challenging, but not so much as to be overwhelming. We will begin by asking the same question that was asked of a group of distinguished musicians in a 1982 BBC retrospective broadcast about Barber. What makes this such a “perfect piece of music?” (Heyman 174). We will listen first to the orchestral version without scores and describe the mood which is created. In 1943, Robert Horan wrote about the “sensitive and penetrating design of melancholy” in Barber’s music (165). If this is true, can we look for the musical qualities which create this universal phenomenon? This is an open-ended question with no concrete, definitive answer expected.

We will explore the long singing solo melodic lines with their perfect arch and the slow tonal harmonies. We will trace the melodic line through the score, concentrating on its stepwise motion and its opening statement of a three-note ascending sequence. We will follow the sustained harmonies with elementary harmonic analysis (of limited portions of the music) which emphasizes Barber’s modal harmonic vocabulary. We will follow the shifting time signatures with their constant half note pulse. We will chart the dynamic contrast and compare it to the harmonic and melodic climax, trying to determine how tension and resolution are constructed. We will explore the texture and string tone color, including a comparison of the three versions (string quartet, string orchestra, and choral). We will follow this song-like piece from its quiet melancholy opening to its agonizing and poignant climax before [5] and its return of quiet resignation at the end. In this study, we will have used analytical skills to attempt to explain the greatness of this beautiful work. It is an appropriate work to include in some of our final time together.

The ten-minute piece can be heard several times in class and as individual listening assignments. The original question of “what makes this a perfect piece”—or, at least, a very good piece—will have as many answers as there are students. Each answer is valid and will be respected. As we arrive at our individual answers, we will consider the opinions of famous musicians. During the 1982 broadcast, Aaron Copland remarked on the “sense of continuity, the steadiness of the flow, the satisfaction of the arch that it creates from beginning to end...and it makes you believe in the sincerity which he obviously put into it” (Heyman 174). William Schuman commented in the same broadcast, “The emotional climate is never left in doubt. It begins, it reaches its climax, it makes its point, and it goes away . . . when I hear it played I’m always moved by it” (Heyman 175). Virgil Thomson called it “a detailed love scene...not a dramatic one, but a very satisfactory one” (Heyman 75).

We will give Samuel Barber the last word by including some remarks made in 1971. “[When] I’m writing music for words, then I immerse myself in those words, and I let the music flow out of them. When I write an abstract piano sonata or a concerto, I write what I feel. I’m not a self-conscious composer . . . it is said that I have no style at all but that doesn’t matter. I just go on doing, as they say, my thing. I believe this takes a certain courage” (Hitchcock *Grove Dictionary* 145).

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to develop more refined listening skills for International Baccalaureate students in preparation for the aural skills portion of their IB Listening Paper through the study of three American masterworks. Each of the compositions presented is performed frequently and continues to be part of the major concert literature. We have listened to each in whole performance and then looked at some detail of the work in more depth with the goal of transferring that knowledge to other musical works. We have examined melody and motivic unity in *Rhapsody in Blue*; texture and tone color in *Appalachian Spring*; and harmonic tension and release in *Adagio for Strings*.

In addition to the presentation of each of these pieces through the lesson designs discussed, the students will keep journals. These journals will include biographical information about composers and performers, notes about specific works studied individually and in class, a working vocabulary of musical terms, and observations about the role of specific music in the larger context of genre and timeline. The students are encouraged to include reflections which are personal observations about the music studied and its place in their life at this point in time. Each of these three American masterworks reflects American music in the first half of the twentieth century. It is part of the overarching IB philosophy to encourage students to study and know their own culture in order to respect and appreciate other cultures. These three masterworks by George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, and Samuel Barber represent some of the finest examples of American music and provide a basis for the student's knowledge of themselves as Americans within the larger world culture.

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