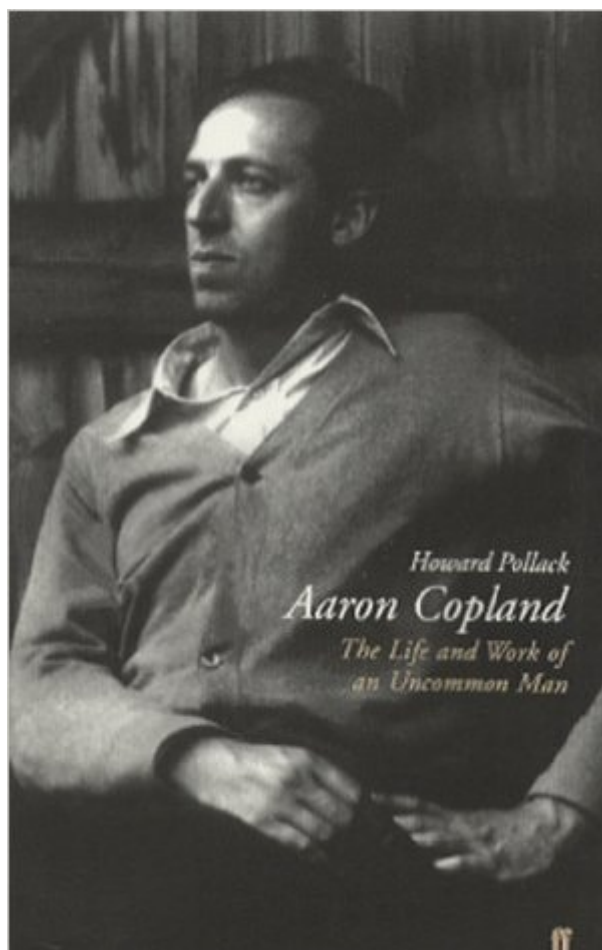


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Aaron Copland: The Life And Work Of An Uncommon Man



Synopsis

The American composer Aaron Copland was also a critic whose writings have influenced critical thought and contemporary taste in the USA. This biography traces his life and work: his childhood in Brooklyn as a son of Russian immigrants, his early coming to terms with his homosexuality, Paris and the "lost generation" of the early-1920s, his major relationships, the full Congressional investigation arising from suspicions that he was a communist, his work in Hollywood, his struggle with dementia, and his posthumous legacy in music.

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Customer Reviews

As one who adores Copland's music, I found this comprehensive biography to be an incredibly difficult yet satisfying work. To fully appreciate it, one needs to be a serious musician. I am not and therefore found some of the passages needed rereading to at least glean something of what the author intended to convey. If you delve into this book, be prepared to reread and re-reread a number of passages and chapters if you want to learn as much as it has to offer. Many have commented on the disjointed order of the book. I agree, at first it was disconcerting. Many of the chapters are stand-alone essays that, especially in the first half of the book, require a certain knowledge of Copland and his works. But, as stated above, if one is patient and willing to reread the passages after the discussions of individual works that come later, it is understandable why the author chose this approach. For young students of 20th century American music, this is a treasure trove of information about the many composers who are more than obscure to casual listeners of

this era of music. I found myself looking up many of the artists and expect it will keep me busy for years to learn more. Readers will get an incredible understanding of what Copland meant to his colleagues. His promotion and encouragement of their work shows a selfless side of Copland that only endears him more to those who love his music and influence. As a trivial side note, I was particularly pleased that the author noted Keith Emerson's "respectfully arranged" interpretation of Fanfare for the Common Man. It was as a young high school student listening to Emerson, Lake & Palmer's version that introduced me to Copland in the first place (and Mussorgsky as well).

Howard Pollack has written a large, immensely-detailed, and very moving biography of a marvelous composer. Copland (1900-1990) was Jewish (Copland later wrote that his parents were "more traditional than religious, but observant"), and Pollack notes that "if Copland was discreet about his Jewish background, he never hid it either.... (T)hroughout his life, Copland spoke warmly of the Jewish traditions he had grown up with." Copland was not traditionally religious, however: "He occasionally referred to God ... but he apparently rejected the idea of a personal deity who intervened in human affairs." His funeral was, at his request, nonreligious. "Copland never joined a political party." He was nevertheless later compelled to testify at the McCarthy hearings "as a friendly but not particularly cooperative witness," who stated categorically, "I have not been a Communist in the past and I am not now a Communist." Pollack covers all of the necessary biographical details fully, such as Copland's studying advanced composition with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Furthermore, "Boulanger's efforts on behalf of his career also earned his gratitude." Pollack's book is filled with insights into Copland and his music. "Copland composed primarily at the piano ... he felt somewhat defensive about this practice until he learned that Stravinsky did likewise." Copland was also influenced by jazz (he later wrote, "I was born in Brooklyn, and that in Brooklyn we used to hear jazz around all the time"), but after writing his Piano Concerto (1926), he "felt I had done all I could with the idiom." He notes that "to the end of his life, Copland named (Stravinsky) as his favorite twentieth century composer"; yet "Copland and Stravinsky maintained a rather cool friendship.

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