

SAN ANTONIO SYMPHONY

SEBASTIAN LANG-LESSING
TOBIN ENDOWMENT MUSIC DIRECTOR CHAIR

2014-2015 Young People's Concert Series

Presents

YPC 3 - BILLY THE KID  **PAINT TO MUSIC**

TEACHER'S GUIDE



MAY 5, 6  7, 2015, 9:45 AM  11:10 AM

H-E-B Performance Hall at the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts

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YPC 3 - BILLY THE KID COPLAND'S *BILLY THE KID*

In 1938, a wealthy New York **impresario** named Lincoln Kirstein invited composer Aaron Copland to write music for a new ballet. Kirstein and his **choreographer** Eugene Loring had already developed the idea for it to be a “cowboy ballet.” Copland’s thoughts had already been

From “Notes on a Cowboy Ballet”

“When Lincoln Kirstein, director of the Ballet Caravan, asks you to write a ballet for him, it is a foregone conclusion that you are going to tackle an American subject. Still, when he suggested Billy the Kid as a proper hero for a native ballet, I had certain misgivings. Not about Billy the Kid, of course—for where could on find a better protagonist for an American work,—but about my own capabilities as a ‘cowboy composer.’ ... It wasn’t long before I was convinced that fate had chosen me and none other to compose this folk-ballet about a young desperado of the Wild West.” —Aaron Copland

turned to American folk music and to composing music about American subjects, but he wasn’t sure at first that that he would make a good “cowboy composer” (see sidebar). He later wrote, “Lincoln tempted me with several books of western tunes, and Loring wrote a scenario about the notorious bandit of the Southwest.” Soon after was born the great American ballet classic, *Billy the Kid*.

The ballet’s storyline of course is based on the legend of the great outlaw and gunslinger of the Old West, William Bonney, whom the people called Billy the Kid (see Who was Billy the Kid? on page 21). Its first performances were so successful that Copland later said, “I cannot remember another work of mine that was so unanimously received.” A year later, the composer arranged the music into a ballet suite so that it could be performed by orchestras in the concert hall, too. Copland divided the suite into eight short sections, or movements. Let’s explore each movement of the suite below.

INTRODUCTION: THE OPEN PRAIRIE



Both the first and last movements of the suite are called “The Open Prairie.” In his article “Notes on a Cowboy Ballet,” Copland writes “The action begins and closes on the open prairie.” Here Copland paints the scene for the story of Billy the Kid. The prairie of the Old West is a vast and seemingly endless grassland. There are still very



What is a prairie?

A prairie is a large, mostly flat area of land in North America that has few trees and is covered in grasses.

"Prairie." Merriam-Webster.com.
Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 8
Dec. 2014.

few roads or fences to speak of; the land is yet untamed. Trees and people are scarce, but birds and wild animals can be found in the empty places: deer, prairie dogs, even wild horses. The sky is a big bright blue, and summer days are long and sunny. On a clear day, one can see for miles and miles off into the distance. Sometimes you can spot a train of covered wagons struggling across the prairie, or a grazing herd of buffalo. To the west, the jagged outline of the Rocky Mountains stands out on the horizon.

In the music to this introductory movement, Copland captures the loneliness of the great empty stretches of land that make up the prairie. He balances this feeling however with a sense of wonder and awe at the majestic beauty of these stark American landscapes.



The Prairie of New Mexico

The movement opens with just three instruments playing: an oboe and two clarinets. Copland creates an unusual sound color by having the oboe play low notes while the clarinets play higher notes. The **intervals** played by the two clarinets are open fifths, and the wide space between the oboe's sound and that of the clarinets lends a sense of emptiness to the sound [YPC 3 playlist, track 1].



Oboe

Clarinet (in C)

A plodding, offbeat bass line played by the piano, timpani and double bass [0:35] might suggest the slow and difficult pace of the pioneers as they moved westward across the plains. This would almost be a slow march but becomes trudging and lopsided in the movement's $\frac{3}{4}$ meter.



A lone flute plays the opening melody now [0:51] followed by what might be far-away bird calls in the clarinets and oboe [1:11]. More instruments eventually

join in on the bass line as the melody passes to the oboe, piccolo and violins [1:30]. The music continues to build steadily in solemn fashion as other instruments jump in and begin to mimic each other. In a loud moment of climax [2:21], Copland creates a repeated chord by stacking three intervals of an open fifth on top of each other:



The effect is a powerful sound, one where some notes clash against each other and yet still come together to create an “open” sound.

STREET IN A FRONTIER TOWN



[YPC 3 playlist, track 2]

In his “Notes on a Cowboy Ballad,” Copland writes, “The first scene is a street in a frontier town. Familiar figures amble by. Cowboys saunter into town, some on horseback, others with their lassos.” Billy the Kid is known to have grown up in Silver City, New Mexico, so probably this is the frontier town that Copland had in mind. The suite movement begins with the melody of a traditional cowboy song called “Great Grandad,” although Copland has changed the melody somewhat from the original. In the ballet version, Copland actually asks for a tin whistle to play the part, although in the suite it is played by the piccolo. One might imagine a child at sunrise piping in the street on a shiny tin whistle.

Piccolo



Tin Whistle

Copland follows with a jaunty melody based on another real cowboy song “Whoopie ti yi yo, Git Along, Little Dogies,” to which he adds a number of “wrong” notes [0:29], possibly to hint at the mischiefness of young men joking and playing in the streets. The “right” notes are first played by the angular sounds of muted horn and viola, while the “wrong” notes appear in the bassoon and cello.

There is the sense that the town is waking up as more instruments join in. Copland begins to play around with this jaunty melody by having the trumpet, trombone and violins cut

it up into snippets [0:59]. The music dies into silence, only to be interrupted by a sort of **fanfare** [1:43], probably announcing the arrival of the sheriff or some important person to the town. A spirited rendition of another cowboy song, “The Old Chisholm Trail” [1:54] leaves little doubt that there are now men on horseback racing up and down the street. Two trombones enter with a short interlude that might be reminiscent of the traditional cowboy song “Streets of Laredo,” also known as “Cowboy’s Lament” [2:11]. Copland brings back the jaunty melody based on “Git Along, Little Dogies” with its wrong notes, this time played by the oboe and trumpet [2:27]. This in turn transitions into “Great Grandad,” with the piccolo solo now accompanied by sleigh bells and leaping sounds in the piano and strings [2:44]. Energy continues to build until the end of the movement, which flows without a break into the next section: “Mexican Dance and Finale.”



A Quiet Day in Utica by Charles M. Russell

MEXICAN DANCE AND FINALE

The scene is still the street of a frontier town, but now a few Mexican women begin to dance a *jarabe* [ha – RAH – bae]. Traditional *jarabe* dance music usually has several **meter changes**, as does Copland’s. But Copland’s *jarabe* in this section is unusual in that it is mostly written in 5/8 meter, meaning there are 5 beats in each measure as opposed to the traditional 2, 3 or 6. Typical of Mexican dance music, the trumpet leads the way [YPC 3 playlist, track 3]. Accompaniment includes woodblock and muted horn.

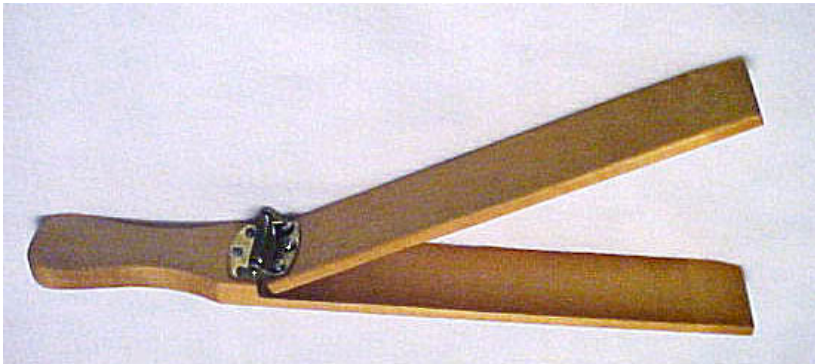
♩ = 200

Trumpet (in C)

 Musical score for Trumpet (in C). The score is written on two staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a 5/8 time signature. The tempo marking is ♩ = 200. The dynamic marking is *mf*. The melody consists of a series of eighth and quarter notes. The second staff continues the melody, also in 5/8 time.

Eventually the violins take over, followed by the oboe, with the melody from a cowboy song called “Goodbye, Old Paint” [0:44]. In the ballet, Billy is seen here for the first time as a boy of twelve with his mother. The “Old Paint” melody gathers steam and its harmony part becomes

increasing dissonant as a fight breaks out “between two drunks... The brawl turns ugly, guns are drawn,...” and suddenly the music stops with a loud gunshot [2:22]. To help make this effect in



Slapstick

the music, Copland uses a percussion instrument called a slapstick. A slapstick or clapper is a simple instrument made of two flat wooden boards connected by a hinge. The player slaps the two boards together quickly to make a loud whip noise. Two more gunshots follow. In this tragic moment of

the ballet, Billy’s mother has accidentally been shot. In his “Notes on a Cowboy Ballad,” Copland writes, “...in some unaccountable way, Billy’s mother is killed. Without an instant’s hesitation, in cold fury, Billy draws a knife from a cowhand’s sheath and stabs his mother’s slayers. His short but famous career had begun.” Billy runs away and the movement ends mournfully with the tune from the open prairie, played by a lonely solo oboe [2:44].

PRAIRIE NIGHT: CARD GAME AT NIGHT

The story fast-forwards now to this scene of Billy as a teenager playing cards around a campfire with his outlaw friends. The prairie is quiet with stars shining brightly in the night sky, and the music is peaceful. The movement is written in 12/8 time, and offbeat accompaniment in the flute and clarinet give the sense of a gentle rocking back and forth, perhaps from a light breeze on the prairie [YPC 3 playlist, track 4].



The melody, played by muted violins and violas [0:13], is based loosely on the cowboy song “Bury Me Not on the Lonesome Prairie,” also known as “The Dying Cowboy.” Later, a lone trumpet takes over with three short solo entrances that sound almost like **improvisation** [2:02]. The peaceful mood of the card game is broken by the sudden realization that they are being watched by a posse – a group of men who have been looking to bring Billy in – led by Sheriff Pat Garrett! [3:14].

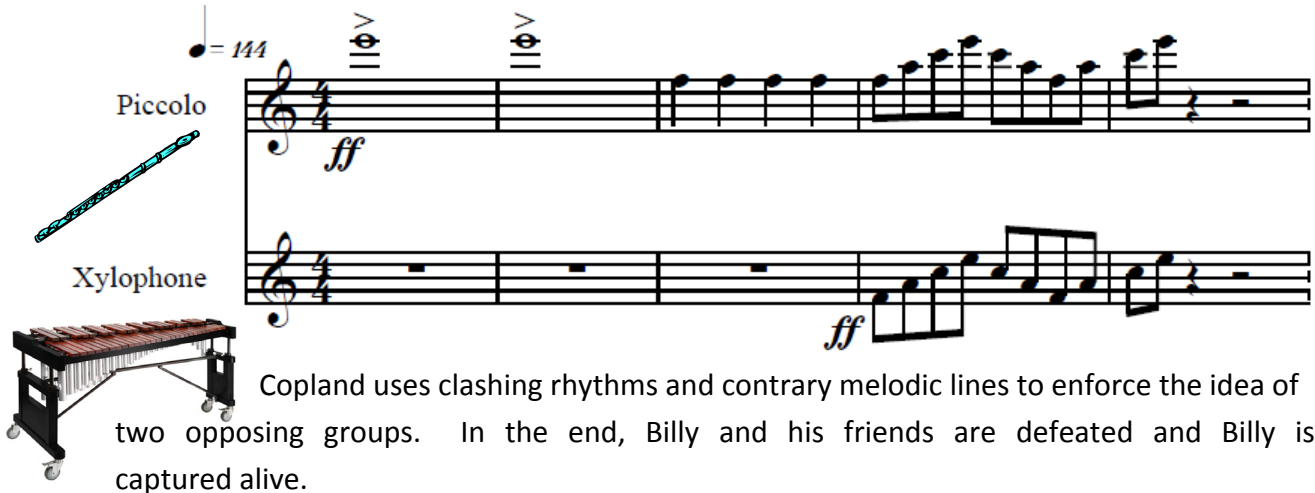
GUN BATTLE

Billy and his friends quickly grab their guns as the Sheriff’s men start shooting. This time the guns are



**Colt Model 1873 Revolver,
of the kind used by Billy the Kid**

played by two groups of instruments in the orchestra. The first group includes the timpani, bass drum, harp, piano and lower strings playing **pizzicato** (plucked). The rat-tat-tat sound of another set of guns is played by muted trumpet and snare drum [YPC 3 playlist, track 5]. Between gunshots, the woodwinds, trumpet, xylophone, piano and upper strings contribute frantic and angular sounds that might suggest men yelling and scrambling for cover [0:27].



Copland uses clashing rhythms and contrary melodic lines to enforce the idea of two opposing groups. In the end, Billy and his friends are defeated and Billy is captured alive.

CELEBRATION: AFTER BILLY'S CAPTURE



The town begins to celebrate and dance in the streets at the news of the outlaw's capture. While the people are excited to be free now from their fear of Billy the Kid, there is something uneasy about their celebration. Although Billy had been seen by many as a cold-blooded murderer, others thought of him as a misunderstood hero and only a reluctant killer. Copland hints at this from the beginning of the movement. While the melody introduced by the piccolo and oboe might seem cheerful enough, the harmony part is wrong: it's in a different key! [YPC 3 playlist, track 6].



Ob.

D.B.

When a composer writes music in two different keys at the same time, it's called **bitonality**. Author Beth Ellen Levy describes Copland's hinting at the uneasiness or disagreement over Billy's capture with the use of "stilted rhythms, shrieking piccolos, and wrenching bitonality." Later Copland recreates the tinny sound of honky-tonk saloon piano. Here the "wrenching bitonality" is even more apparent. As in the beginning, the bass notes are a **half step** higher than they should be. The resulting sound might give the listener the sense that not everything is as it should be with this "celebration" [0:30]. Then the raucous melody of the beginning comes back in a new key, this marked "crudely" in the musicians' parts [1:10]. Now come the "shrieking piccolos" – that is, two piccolos playing the same melody at the same time – but a step apart from each other in the scale. The result is a hideously **dissonant** sound [1:23].

A musical score for two piccolos. The score is written on two staves, both in treble clef and key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 90. The music consists of a series of rapid, repetitive notes, creating a dissonant and frenetic sound. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed together. The two staves are played in parallel, with a half-step difference between them, as indicated by the text above.

This wild and crazy dance becomes even louder and more frenetic as we approach the end of the movement, which terminates in a series of uncertain chords.

BILLY'S DEATH

As the story goes, Billy is put into a makeshift jail at the courthouse, but soon makes a legendary escape. He hides out with his sweetheart in a stone house in the desert. Soon, however, Sheriff Pat Garrett tracks him down and surprises him. In an instant, he kills Billy with a single shot. So ends the short life of Billy the Kid at the age of only 21. While this part of the story is not included in the orchestral suite, Copland does insert a short movement titled "Billy's Death." Miss Jacobson sums this movement up nicely on her webpage blogspot about "Billy the Kid":

Billy's death is represented by a quietly mournful passage for the outlaw's death; a gentle statement of rich descending chords in the strings with occasional accompaniment by upper winds that conveys nostalgia for the slain outlaw.

The rich harmonies of the chords seem almost reminiscent of Prokofiev's music to his *Romeo and Juliet* ballet. Perhaps Billy's sweetheart is Juliet in this movement, whose hushed sobs for her lost love can be heard in a part for solo violin marked "quasi tremolando" ("almost trembling") [YPC 3 playlist, track 7].

A musical score for solo violin. The score is written on a single staff in treble clef and key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 60. The music is marked "solo" and "quasi tremolando". The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed together. The dynamic is marked "pp" (pianissimo). The music is a quiet, mournful passage, consisting of a series of descending chords and notes.

THE OPEN PRAIRIE AGAIN

To finish out the story, Copland brings back the music from the opening movement: “The Open Prairie.” As in the beginning of the ballet, dancers representing pioneers move slowly from right to left across the stage, led by the Sheriff. About these two movements, Copland writes, that the events that take place on the open prairie are, “merely typical of many such episodes on the long trek to the Pacific.” Author Wilfrid Mellers writes:

At the very end, the World comes into its own again;
the final march returns to the dignity of the opening,
though we cannot hear it with the same ears,
now that we know what is at stake.

This time it's the horns that start the prairie theme, which gradually builds to an ending that expresses both triumph and heartbreak [YPC 3 playlist, track 8].