

Symphony No. 2
Aaron Copland
Analysis by David Mitchell

Symphony No. 2 is a transitional piece in the career of Aaron Copland. It contains many of the characteristic elements of his later pieces such as diatonicism, doubling, and exploitation of orchestral timbres. On the other hand, it is rhythmically and harmonically more experimental than his later pieces for orchestra, including *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*. A comparison of *Symphony No. 2* with pieces that came before and after it will illustrate its place in his development as a composer.

The first three pages of *Symphony No. 2* are tonally ambiguous. For example, page 1 contains notes F#, D, F, C, G and A. This particular note collection fits into some type of diatonic collection because it cannot fit into either a whole or octatonic collection. It could either be the key of C major/minor or G major/minor. F# indicates that these notes belong to the key of G, while F natural indicates that they belong to C. Additionally, Copland has left out the third (E or Eb) and the seventh (B or Bb) in the key of C. He has also left out the third (B or Bb) and the sixth (E or Eb) in the key of G. These particular notes Bb, B, Eb, and E are the most important notes to determine the key at this point in the piece.

On page 2, Copland introduces more tonal ambiguity. The first note that we hear outside of the collection on page 1 is Bb. This indicates that the piece is in the key of G minor. Immediately after that, there is an Eb in the oboe part, measure 2 on page 2. Then there is an F natural in the oboe, flute, and strings. With the addition of notes Bb, Eb, and F natural, there are three possible keys that this piece could be in, the key of G minor, Eb major, or C minor. Up to this point, none of these keys have been confirmed with any kind of cadence or leading tone resolution. One of the reasons for this is the fact that the linear motion is primarily disjunct. This means that there is very little half-step motion between the leading and tonic or the third and fourth to help the listener determine the key.

On page 3, Copland continues to string us along. All of the accidentals are gone and the note collection is C, D, F, G, A, and B. All of these notes indicate that the piece is now in the key of C major except the all important third (E) is missing. Additionally, there is no half step motion between notes B and C that is indicative of a leading tone to tonic resolution. This technique of avoiding clear linear indications of key seems to be a pattern throughout *Symphony No. 2*.

Symphony No. 3 and *Symphony No. 2* share a similar harmonic language. They are both diatonic pieces that avoid clear dominant to tonic cadences. They both have linear profiles that are primarily disjunct. In comparison to *Symphony No. 2*, *Symphony No. 3* contains more conjunct motion between notes. And there is some leading tone note resolution that indicates a tonal center. This beginning said, they basic language in these two symphonies is similar. They both contain diatonic collections that are tonally ambiguous. With this in mind, *Symphony No. 2* is an early example of Copland working out his diatonic language, a language that he used later in *Symphony No. 3* as well as *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*.

Symphony No. 1, the Organ Symphony, is harmonically more experimental than *Symphony No. 2*. Not having the score on hand, the recording of *Symphony No. 1* indicates that there are a more consecutive half steps and non-diatonic leaps in the melodic line. It is definitely not diatonic. With this in mind, *Symphony No. 2* is a radical change in harmonic language compared to *Symphony No. 1* which is more experimental, and *Symphony No. 3* represents a refinement of Copland's diatonic language that began in *Symphony No. 2*.

One thing that *Symphony No. 2* has in common with *Symphony No. 1* is that they are rhythmically more complex than *Symphony No. 3*. The first movement of *Symphony No. 3* sounds like it is almost entirely in common time. This is definitely not the case with *Symphony No. 2* or *No. 1*. The meter is constantly changing in *Symphony No. 2*, and *No. 1* is rhythmically similar. When listening to both pieces, it is difficult to get a sense of what the meter is. This makes these particular pieces difficult

for an orchestra to play. This is likely the reason why *Symphony No. 3* is in common time. Perhaps, Copland learned something from the difficulties that he encountered getting *Symphony No. 2* performed. He dialed back the difficulty level after he had a better idea of what a symphony can and cannot do well.

One thing that seems to be consistent in all three symphonies is his use of doubling. There seems to be very little counterpoint and very few thick chordal structures. Copland uses the orchestra like a monophonic instrument much of the time. He has the parts double each other to create complex timbral combinations. For example, he often has the xylophone and marimba double the winds and strings. This is an interesting effect because it creates a timbre that has a lot of bite on the front end with a complex sustained tone. "Hoedown" from *Rodeo* is a good example of this technique.

Taking into consideration Copland's use of diatonicism, rhythmic complexity, and doubling, *Symphony No. 2* is a transitional piece between Copland's experimental early pieces and his more popular later pieces. It is an example of a composer learning to walk a fine line between experimentation and playability. In the end, he found his own sound that is original yet popular and easy to play. Hopefully, we can all do the same.