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# Program Notes

By Paul Horsley

Suite from *Appalachian Spring* (1945)

**Aaron Copland** (1900-90)

The inspiration for one of the musical masterpieces of the 20th century was a woman—a visionary who is now recognized as one of the most influential artists of dance history. “When I wrote *Appalachian Spring*, I was thinking primarily about Martha and her unique choreographic style, which I knew well,” wrote Copland about Martha Graham, the pioneer who planted what was essentially a foreign art form—classical ballet, with its roots in Russia and feudal Europe—firmly onto American soil. “Nobody else seems quite like Martha: She’s so proud, so very much herself. And she’s unquestionably very American: There’s something prim and restrained, simple yet strong, about her which one tends to think of as American.”

Composers often inspire choreographers, but in periods of great cultural shift the opposite occurs as well. Just as modernists attached to Serge Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* spurred Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and others to forge fresh musical idioms, the pioneers of modern dance in America—a large number of whom were women—propelled composers to create sounds that were as adventurous as the dances they were making. Throughout the 1930s Copland and Graham had yearned to collaborate, but

## A HYMN REVIVED

“The Gift to be Simple,” a 19th-century Shaker hymn largely unknown until Copland included it in his score, has since been re-interpreted by popular artists from Judy Collins to Allison Krauss, from R.E.M. to the Icelandic singer Jónsi.

it was not until Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge attended a Graham program in early 1942 that funding materialized for such a project. The benefactress’s Foundation commissioned Graham to create three ballets for its 1943 Fall Festival in Washington, D.C.: One was to be *Appalachian Spring*. But because Graham’s path-forging scenario took more time to craft than expected, the ballet didn’t reach the stage until October 1944, when it was performed in Washington to Copland’s original chamber version of the score (for 13 players).

*The Ballet for Martha*, as Copland called it, depicts “a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the last century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, that their new partnership invites.” Graham’s approach meshed with Copland’s new concern to write music that could “say what I had to say in the simplest terms.” In 1945, the composer created a suite for full orchestra, which is cast in eight sections played without pause. ✕

## “THAT VIOLET WEDGE”

Choreographer Martha Graham gave this ballet its title, drawn from a Hart Crane poem about the Adirondacks of New York State (rather than Pennsylvania farmland, where Graham set her ballet): “O *Appalachian Spring*! I gained the ledge; / Steep, inaccessible smile that eastward bends / And northward reaches in that violet wedge / Of Adirondacks!”

25 minutes ■ 1 movement