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Steinway Artist Jacquelyn Helin Explores the Music of the Composers Who Put America into American Music

Mark Tiarks
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Jacquelyn Helin's professional relationship with Aaron Copland will inform the pianist's Renesan lecture and recital, as her program will feature personal anecdotes about the composer in addition to her musical selections by him.

Clay Ellis

Savvy Santa Fe classical music lovers know that one of the most intriguing events of the spring is a lecture-recital by Steinway Artist Jacquelyn Helin. They take place under the auspices of the lifelong learning group Renesan and are a blend of rewarding pianism and insightful commentary.

In recent years, her subjects have included Claude Debussy, George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, and Franz Schubert. This year, however, she's mixing it up a bit with a thematic program, on Thursday, May 14, titled Face to Face with the 30s and 40s: American Music Comes of Age.

The featured composers are Aaron Copland (1900-1990), Virgil Thomson (1896-1989), Roy Harris (1898-1979), Roger Sessions (1896-1985), and Samuel Barber (1910-1981). Helin had warm professional relationships with Copland and Thomson, and has made several acclaimed recordings of the latter's piano music, so her program will feature personal anecdotes about them in addition to her musical selections and commentary.

"They had all studied in Paris at some point, but as they returned here during the 1930s, they started creating music that wasn't just composed in America, but had an identifiably American sound," Helin tells *Pasatiempo*.

"We live in a very different musical environment now, largely due to the internet, when everything is accessible at all times," she continues. "They worked collectively as well as individually, by organizing concerts and other events to put American music on the map."

Their work was aided by the federal government's Works Progress Administration, which funded an extraordinary range of theatrical, musical, film, and dance projects across the country.

Copland became known as "The Dean of American Music," thanks to the quality of his music and the extent of his activities in supporting it. He also went through the largest stylistic transformation of the five composers in achieving his goals.

Jacquelyn Helin's (left) professional relationship with Aaron Copland (right), "The Dean of American Music," will inform the pianist's Renesan lecture and recital, as her program will feature personal anecdotes about the composer in addition to her musical selections by him.

details

Face to Face with the 30s and 40s: American Music Comes of Age

1 p.m. Thursday, May 14

St. John's United Methodist Church

1200 Old Pecos Trail

$30

505-982-1338; ccasantafe.org

After studying in the early 1920s with famed teacher Nadia Boulanger in Paris, much of his work had a spiky, neo-classical quality. "During these years, I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer," he later wrote. "It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum."

He was also intrigued by opportunities provided by radio, recordings, and film. "It made no sense to ignore them and to continue writing as if they did not exist," he continued. "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."

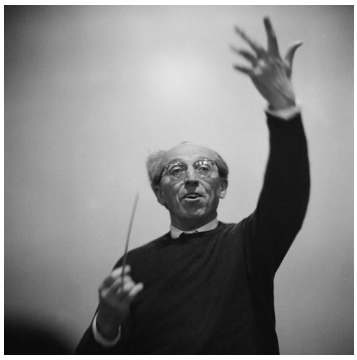
So Copland began to explore the possibilities and practices of including aspects of American folk music in his work, as well as developing a type of openness in their scoring, which sounded particularly American. His interests also extended south of the border. In 1932, Copland visited Mexico for the first time. His friend Carlos Chávez, the country's preeminent classical composer and conductor, took him to an iconic nightclub called El Salón México, and the American was entranced by what he saw and heard.

He started work almost immediately on a symphonic piece based on folk tunes that were played there, returning to Mexico City several times while composing it. Chávez conducted the world premiere of *El Salón México*, subtitled "A Popular Type Dance Hall in Mexico City," in 1937; the American premiere took place a year later, during a radio broadcast by the NBC Symphony.

Copland later said of the piece, "All I could hope to do was to reflect the Mexico of the tourists, because in [El Salón México] one felt, in a very natural and unaffected way, a close contact with the Mexican people. [It was] the spirit I felt there which attracted me and what I hope I have put into my music."

Shortly after its American premiere, Leonard Bernstein created an arrangement of it for solo piano, which Helin will perform in its entirety on her Renesan program. Her program also includes Copland's *Four Piano Blues*, which were composed at different times between 1926 and 1948.

Their titles are drawn from the composer's interpretive markings: "Freely Poetic," "Soft and Languid," "Muted and Sensuous," and "With Bounce." None of them is in a strict blues style and each of them was dedicated to a fellow pianist who was instrumental in Copland's musical development. One of the dedicatees, Leo Smith, gave the world premiere in 1950. To hear a performance by the composer himself, go to sfnm.co/Copland.



Jacquelyn Helin's professional relationship with Aaron Copland (above), "The Dean of American Music," will inform the pianist's Renesan lecture and recital, as her program will feature personal anecdotes about the composer in addition to her musical selections by him.

While Copland is best known today for his iconic ballet music, Virgil Thomson's fame derives primarily from his two brilliant operas set to Gertrude Stein's nonlinear texts — *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Mother of Us All* — and his multiple film scores (see "Pitch Perfect" for a story about another of Thomson's talents).

The former opera had a legendary 1934 premiere, thanks in part to the piece, which was set in Spain, had just two acts, and included more than 20 saints. The production boasted an all-Black cast, direction by John Houseman, choreography by Frederick Ashton, and scenery designed by visual artist Florine Stettheimer, which was made primarily from that newfangled kitchen creation, cellophane.

A FLINTY MISSOURIAN, Thomson grew up surrounded by vernacular music from the turn of the 20th century, hymns, parlor ballads and popular songs sung around the family's piano, and brass band concerts.

As a Harvard University undergraduate, he was introduced to the music of Erik Satie by a young tutor, and the French composer's textural clarity, directness of expression, and sly wit became hallmarks of Thomson's mature style.

Helin's presentation includes the complete score to Thomson's first film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, from 1936. It's a 25-minute documentary that was funded by the WPA, and it placed blame for the Dust Bowl squarely on the over-exploitation of natural resources by the region's farmers, an environmental point of view that was highly controversial at the time.

To hear Helin perform "Blues" from its score, which Copland praised as "fresher, more simple, and more personal" than Hollywood's typical fare, go to sfnm.co/Blues. You can check out the entire film at sfnm.co/Plow.

Samuel Barber (from left), Roy Harris, and Virgil Thomson are the featured composers on Jacquelyn Helin's upcoming Renesan lecture and recital, Face to Face with the 30s and 40s: American Music Comes of Age.

Thomson's Pulitzer Prize-winning score for *Louisiana Story*, a 1948 quasi-documentary funded by the Standard Oil Company to show the benign and beneficial effects of its oil-well drilling in Cajun country, is represented by its first movement, "Bayou." Helin's recorded performance of it can be sampled at sfnm.co/Bayou.

Like Thomson, Roy Harris was a Midwesterner, born in Oklahoma, who moved to California's then-rural San Gabriel Valley as a child. He was largely self-taught until his early 20s, when he studied with Arthur Bliss, a British composer then living in Santa Barbara, and Arthur Farwell, the country's leading scholar of Indigenous music.

He spent the late 1920s in Paris, perfecting his technique under Boulanger's tutelage and becoming a zealous student of Renaissance music due to her influence as well. Harris is best known today for his Symphony No. 3, which was premiered by Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1939 and remains one of the most frequently performed American works in that form.

Much of Harris' work made overt use of well-known folk tunes, albeit transformed in highly virtuosic ways. Helin's presentation includes several selections from his sets of *American Ballads*. "They're not just, here's the tune, I'm going to harmonize it," Helin says. "It's taking the folk tune as a jumping-off point. I think the pianism of Roy Harris is very beautiful."

To hear "The Streets of Laredo" from his first set of *American Ballads*, performed by his concert pianist-wife Johana Harris, go to sfnm.co/Laredo.

The work of Roger Sessions — the first section from his tetralogy of short works titled *From My Diary* — provides the biggest contrast on the program. "I've always loved this piece. I can remember after the first time I heard it I spent a whole afternoon practicing it and discovering it," Helin says. "It's a kind of late-Romantic expressionism, and it's gorgeous."

Sessions was a precocious musical student who began studying at Harvard University at age 14, received an undergraduate degree at 18, and then immediately enrolled at Yale as a graduate student.

Unlike most of his peers, he had no interest in American vernacular music genres and worked primarily in historical forms such as the symphony, the concerto, and the sonata. Sessions' musical language fell into three relatively well-defined periods, starting with neoclassicism up to about 1930, then a period of tonally based but more harmonically complex works (into which *From My Diary* falls), and finally, from 1946 forward, works based on atonalism and other serial techniques.

"Samuel Barber just writes exquisitely for the piano," says Helin. "I'll play the first two movements from *Excursions*, which are snapshots of various American folk traditions. And they're beautiful piano pieces, because everything that Barber wrote for piano is incredibly well crafted."

Excursions, which was Barber's first published work for solo piano, was commissioned by Russian-American pianist Vladimir Horowitz, who premiered it in 1945.

The first movement is marked "Un poco allegro," which means a little bit fast (but not too fast). The structure is highly classical — a five-part rondo — but the style suggests boogie-woogie, thanks to the bass line with its driving rhythm and the frequent blue notes in the right hand.

The second movement is marked "In slow blues tempo." It's a skillful evocation of Southern syncopated blues and requires a sense of conversational rhythmic freedom to be most successful.

To hear Horowitz in a live performance of *Excursions*' first movement at Carnegie Hall, go to sfnm.co/Barber.

And then see (or rather, hear) them in person — face to face — to get the full picture of this slice of American music.

PITCH PERFECT

While Hector Berlioz was the most influential and stylish writer of all the 19th-century composers, that distinction for the 20th century belongs to Virgil Thomson, thanks to the perspicacity of his observations and the straightforward, down-to-earth style in which they were conveyed.

To wit, he was the music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* for many years and published a number of books, including an autobiography, original works, and collections of his newspaper and magazine reviews and commentaries.

Thomson's description of the plot for Verdi's opera *The Force of Destiny* (*La Forza del Destino*), from a review of Metropolitan Opera production, is a three-sentence gem and an excellent example of his written work:

"It suffers from a libretto that is little more than a stringing together of all the 19th-century theater hokum that its author, Piave, had ever heard of, and that means practically all there was.

"There are murders and maledictions and tavern gaieties and transvestitism and mistaken identity and a battle and a storm and an eating scene and a comic monk and a paternal abbot and a male chorus dressed as Franciscans and several duels and at the end a general carnage of all the principal persons.

"Underneath all this there is no real conflict of character and no general theme beyond that suggested by the title, which might well be translated 'Tough Luck.'" — M.T.

Mark Tiarks