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| Appalachian Spring |
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| Summary  *Appalachian Spring* was choreographer Martha Graham’s final piece of Americana in the cycle of her choreography that began with the solo *Frontier* in 1935 (music by Louis Horst) and continued on with *American Document* in 1938 (music by Ray Green). Aaron Coplandcomposed the original score for *Appalachian Spring*, Isamu Noguchi designed the set and properties, and Edythe Gilfond designed the costumes. The Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation sponsored Copland’s score and the premiere of *Appalachian Spring* on October 30, 1944 at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.[[1]](#endnote-1) The original cast included Graham as the Bride, Erick Hawkins as the Husbandman, Merce Cunningham as the Revivalist, and May O’Donnell as the Pioneer Woman. The title was taken from Hart Crane’s poem *The Bridge* (Shea-Murphy 158). *Appalachian Spring* was acclaimed in 1944, at the height of the Second World War, as a patriotic affirmation of traditional American values in opposition to Nazi fascism. The regional Americanism theme of the 1930s prevalent in visual art in the 1940s was, as Martin Graebner has pointed out, ‘easily transmuted into the theme of rural patriotism’ (Graebner 7). *Appalachian Spring* has survived in the repertoire of the Martha Graham Dance Company to the present day. Shorn of the Second World War context in which it premiered, *Appalachian Spring* is now considered a lyrical and psychological study.  [File: Graham.jpg]  Figure 1 Martha Graham in Appalachian Spring (photographer unknown), Library of Congress  <http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200153814> Exposition *Appalachian Spring* is set in what at first appears to be the Civil War period with recognizable character types and the suggestions of a plot. A program note reads: ‘Spring was celebrated by a man and a woman building a house with joy and love and prayer; by a revivalist and his followers in their shouts of exaltation; by a pioneering woman with her dreams of the promised land.’[[2]](#endnote-2) The two scenarios Graham wrote for Copland in 1943 tell us a great deal about the work’s genesis and influences, yet neither scenario represents the final version.[[3]](#endnote-3) Graham introduced three characters in the scenarios that never made it to the stage: the Indian Girl, the Fugitive (an escaped slave), and the John Brown figure, or abolitionist, called The Citizen. Each of these characters was controversial for a patriotic wartime ballet because they suggested a style of reference to US history and a social consciousness characteristic of the popular front between 1934 and 1941. In submerging the popular front characters Graham opted for a more politically centrist position as a choreographer. By sharing the stage with Hawkins and Cunningham in leading roles, Graham likewise curtailed the power of her own forceful feminine persona to play a less assertive and less independent woman than in her earlier work (Siegel 140-152). Her interpretation of the Bride did, however, allow her to convey her own personal misgivings about marriage (Kowal 65).  Graham called *Appalachian Spring* ‘a legend of American living.’[[4]](#endnote-4) She tempered the conventional theatricality of the plot and lyrical line of the score with contradiction, doubt, and uncertainty. The absent characters are still suggested, as if encrypted within those still present. The Indian Girl, a character originally conceived to be a ghostly presence for the other characters, was perceptible in the nostalgic and distant quality of the Pioneer Woman; the panic of the Fugitive was perceptible in the movements of the Revivalist’s sermon; and the fanaticism of The Citizen was suggested in Hawkins’s stern interpretation of the Husbandman. These hybrid identities resulted from Graham switching the order of musical sequence while adapting both music and choreography to different personae. Although Copland’s score quotes a Shaker hymn (‘Tis the Gift to Be Simple’), the music also creates ‘a delicate yet substantial dissonance’ (Crist 172). While Noguchi’s set outlines the skeletal structure of a house and fence, the design evokes the sparseness of Shaker furniture. And though Graham’s choreography occasionally suggests folk dance, the movement displays modernist tensions and angularities. Temporal and spatial coordinates in the choreography are ultimately allusive, and the mimetic gesture supporting narrative is inflected by abstraction and symbolism.  In addition to Graham, Pearl Lang, Ethel Winter, Yuriko Kimura, and Christine Dakin have performed the role of the Bride with distinction, demonstrating a range of interpretations. This performance history along with Copland’s score, which won a Pulitzer Prize, has made *Appalachian Spring* a uniquely sustainable classic in the repertory of North American modern dance. *Appalachian Spring* has been danced by the Joffrey Ballet, the Boston Ballet, and the Paris Opera, as well as by students in a number of college dance departments. |
| Further reading:  (Crist)  (Franko)  (Graebner)  (Graham, Martha Graham- an American Original in Performance)  (Graham, Martha Graham: Dance on Film)  (Kowal)  (Murphy)  (Robertson, A Gift to Be Simple: The Collaboration of Aaron Copland and Martha Graham in the Genesis of Appalachian Spring)  (Robertson, Musical and Choreographic Integration in Copland's and Graham's 'Appalachian Spring')  (Siegel)  (Thomas) |

1. On the genesis of the commission of the score see W. D. Shirley, *Ballet for Martha. The Commissioning of* Appalachian Spring *and Ballets for Martha. The Creation of* Appalachian Spring*,* Jeux de Printemps*, and* Hérodiade (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Program, June 23-24, 1945, Bennington College. Martha Graham archive, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Martha Graham, ‘House of Victory’ (May 16, 1943), and ‘NAME?’ (July 10, 1943). Both scenarios are held at the Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress. On Graham’s use of character compression, see M. Franko, ‘Politics under Erasure: Regionalism as Cryptology’, in *Martha Graham in Love and War: The Life in the Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 57-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Martha Graham, ‘NAME?’, second scenario for Aaron Copland, letter of Martha Graham to Aaron Copland, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)