[MUSIC PLAYING] Transcript of Aaron Copland: A Self-Portrait. http://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=100725&xtid=989

I was born in Brooklyn on November 14, 1900. I was the youngest of five children. And we live above a large department store, on the corner of Washington Avenue and Dean Street.

My earliest musical memories are concerned, I suppose, with my hanging around my older sister while she was practicing her scales. And she would, after awhile, look at me down there, and say, Aaron, why are you hanging around here? Why don't you go outside and play with the other kids?

I didn't know what was fascinating me. I couldn't have explained it. But something about the sound of music just drew my attention in such a way that I wasn't willing to give up. And gradually she realized I was particularly interested in music. She began giving me piano lessons.

When his sister had taught him all she knew, he asked his parents for lessons with a professional piano teacher.

There was a certain resistance there though, I remember, because my father said after all we've spent so much money on the older kids lessons in music, and look how little has come of it. I don't want to waste any more money on you. But I was persistent. And he gave in finally.

Gradually, I found myself not only practicing what I was supposed to practice at the piano, but making up of tunes of my own and having difficulty in knowing what sort of harmonies ought to go with the tunes. And finally I decided, I must have a teacher.

So he began traveling from Brooklyn when he was 17, to study with Rubin Goldmark who impressed Aaron, because he lived in Manhattan.

He really knew his stuff. And so, for the four years that I spent with him, I really learned the fundamentals of harmony and counterpoint, and the form and composition. I owe him a lot in that sense.

But Goldmark was a traditional musician, and Aaron was already showing signs of needing to break free of conventional musical ideas.

I had a little trouble with him, because I was beginning to write pieces that from where he sat, seemed rather avant-garde, and he couldn't apply any of his conventional harmonic ideas to them, because they didn't have any conventional ideas in that sense.

So after four years with Goldmark, Aaron headed for France.

The newer music seemed to be coming from Paris. Debussy and Ravel were the hottest things around in those days, and especially the fact that Igor Stravinsky was alive, and living, and working in Paris. That was a big draw.

The French decided to establish a music school for American students, a summer music school, in the palace of Fontainbleau. When I learned about that, of course, I jumped at the idea since it meant that I would spend my first two months in Europe with a bunch of fellow Americans.

At the end of the two month school, they decided they'd give a public concert in Paris. I believe I played two early piano pieces, one a ~~Pasicalia~~ Passacaglia, and the other was a piano piece called, "The Cat and the Mouse".

["THE CAT AND THE MOUSE," MUSIC PLAYING]

After the concert, in the green room, to my great surprise and pleasure, Monsieur Durand of the famous French publishers, Durand and Company came up to me and said, is that work of yours published? I said no. He said, well, come and see me in my office, and perhaps, we'd like to publish it.

So I went to see him in his office. And he said, yes, definitely we would like to publish it. Here's a check for so many francs. It was about the equivalent of $25 or, at most, $50. I can't remember exactly. Here's a check. And just sign here. So I would have given him the piece for nothing. I was so delighted to be published, especially by Debussy's and Ravel's publisher, so I signed a piece of paper, and, by golly, I sell the whole, complete rights forever, about the equivalent of $50.

My friend, Harold [UNINTELLIGIBLE], says it's the only business mistake I ever made.

Paris was the place to be in the '20s, so they were all there. Joyce, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, the writers, as well as the composers and painters, could be seen in the cafes and bookstores. Although too young and green to be part of the Paris in the '20s set, Copland and his cousin Harold Clurman, who would become the distinguished theater director, suddenly found themselves in this extraordinary center.

While at Fountainbleau, Aaron had met the young woman who would become his teacher.

Fellow students started to talk to me about a teacher of harmony called Nadia Boulanger, and urging me to visit her class. And I said, no. I'm not visiting any harmony classes. I've had three years of harmony. Don't want to hear anything more about harmony. They said, no, no. Just go and see the way she does it. So I was very taken with her.

And very gradually, I began to think I would like to study with Nadia Boulanger. But I hesitated. Because I couldn't think, in the whole history of music, of any well known famous composer would had ever studied with a woman teacher.

Nadia Boulanger would become the single most important composition teacher of the century. Her influence was enormous as generation after generation of young musicians flocked to her studio to study with this exceptional woman.

She was really a remarkable personality and an extraordinary musician. She knew everything about music you would want to know. The oldest music. The newest music. A studio was not just a place where we studied with her. It was a kind of a musical center of Paris. She had her Wednesday afternoon classes for her students. And after the class was over, all the musical great of Paris came for tea.

I met Stravinsky there. And I met Poulenc [? Pulak ?] and Milhaud [? Mio ?], all the younger composers. I even shook hands with Saint-Saëns [? Sansons ?] in that place. She really launched me on my way. I mean, when it was announced in the French papers that Serge Koussevitzky, a Russian conductor living in Paris, was named the new head of the Boston Symphony, she said, we must go and visit him.

And the end of our visit, he astonished me by saying you-- pointing to me-- will write a symphony for organ and orchestra, and she-- Mademoiselle Boulanger-- will come and play the organ part, as soloist, with the orchestra.

Well, when we left his apartment, I said to Nadia, do you really think I could do it? You know, I had never heard a note of my own orchestration. I had never written a piece that lasted half an hour without pause.

And she sort of shook her finger at me, and said, you can do it. When Nadia Boulanger said you can do it, that was the end of the discussion. You could do it.

The "Symphony for Organ and Orchestra" signaled Aaron's return to the United States.

I must say, I've never had the instincts of an ex-patriot. I was in Paris in order get what I wanted to get. And when I had three years of it, I decided that was enough. And the fact that in America, our popular composers had been able to develop a style of music that the whole world recognizes, specifically American, made me think, now why can't we do that in the field of serious concert music?

Copland was unknown when he returned to New York City in 1924. But the "Symphony for Organ and Orchestra" caused a sensation when it was premiered early in 1925. As it happened, the work was performed first in New York by Walter Damrosch before being conducted in Boston by Koussevitzky.

I was very anxious to be there when they ran through it for the very first time. On that very morning, it snowed rather badly and the subway train from Brooklyn was behind schedule. Finally, we got to the 42nd Street station. And, breathlessly, after a two block run, I arrived at the front door, grab the door, opened it, and I got a blast of my orchestration for the very first time. It sounded so much more glorious than I ever imagined it was going to sound. I'll never forget that moment.

[MUSIC PLAYING]