



**Picture source**

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## Essential Questions

- What was distinctive about Cole Porter's music?
- How did Cole Porter's music both reflect and add to the culture of the 1920s?
- What is meant by "nationalist music"?
- What values did Aaron Copland express through his music?
- What is uniquely American about these two composers?

# Cole Porter

- Born in Peru, Indiana in 1891
- Attended Yale University
- Wrote approximately 300 songs while there
- Left Harvard Law School to study music
- Moved to New York to begin his career in music
- 1916—First musical, *See America First*, opened on Broadway; closed after two weeks
- Moved to Paris in 1917, served in the French Foreign Legion in during World War I



Cole Porter was one of the most prolific and creative American composers of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Many of his melodies were considered unconventional for the time, and his lyrics contained clever rhymes and innuendoes that got his song *Love for Sale* censored from the radio, but they were just what many people wanted during the high-living days of the Roaring Twenties. His music also helped pull people away from the dreariness of life during the Great Depression.

Porter was born in Peru, Indiana and studied piano as a boy. He started writing songs at a young age. At Yale, he was well known as a writer of fight songs for the sports teams and for his work with the Yale Dramatic Association. He wrote musicals for clubs and alumni associations, where he met people who would help him later when he began his Broadway career. Porter's first Broadway effort was a flop, but he was already showing a dexterity with both music and lyrics.

## Porter in Paris in the 1920s



- 1918—World War I ended; Porter took an apartment in Paris
- 1919—Married Linda Lee Thomas; studied at Schola Cantorum with Vincent D'Indy
- 1919–1920—Contributed several songs to revue *Hitchy-Koo* and the musical *A Night Out*



Porter was part of an elegant crowd of musicians, artists, and expatriate writers in Paris. His lavish apartment contained a huge music room where he held soirees for his friends. He studied orchestration and counterpoint at the Schola Cantorum, a conservatory founded as an alternative to the Paris Conservatoire, which emphasized operatic music. Although Porter was homosexual, in 1919 he married Linda Lee Thomas, a wealthy woman from Kentucky who had divorced her abusive husband. She was aware of his homosexuality, but the marriage worked for them both. Linda benefited from Porter's social position and supported his musical career, while the marriage offered Porter a heterosexual façade he could present to the public in an age when homosexuality was not openly acknowledged or accepted.

## Broadway and Film Success

- *Kiss Me Kate*
- *Can-Can*
- *The Gay Divorcee*
- *Anything Goes*
- *Wake Up and Dream*
- *Red, Hot, and Blue*
- *Silk Stockings*
- *High Society*



Ed Sullivan and Porter on the TV show Toast of the Town

Porter is best known for his sophisticated melodies and lyrical agility. He didn't play down to his audiences but didn't use a popular vocabulary, instead making up clever, audacious rhymes. For example, in "Let's Do It," one verse goes: "In shallow shoals English soles do it/Goldfish in the privacy of bowls do it/Let's do it/Let's fall in love." In "You're the Top," he wrote: "You're the top! You're the Coliseum. You're the top! You're the Louvre Museum. You're the melody from a symphony by Strauss. You're a Bendel bonnet, a Shakespeare sonnet, you're Mickey Mouse." His lyrics often were humorous and referenced contemporary popular culture. Melodically, he often changed keys, going from major to minor as in "Night and Day" and from minor to major in "Begin the Beguine." In 1932, Porter's show, *The Gay Divorcee*, starred Fred Astaire in his last stage performance. In 1934, *Anything Goes*, starring Ethel Merman, opened and ran for over a year.

In 1937, while horseback riding in New York with friends, Porter's horse fell and rolled over onto him, crushing his legs. Doctors wanted to amputate his right leg, but Porter refused, even though it meant living in constant pain. His injury did not slow him down, however. During the 1940s, Porter had several hit shows on Broadway, including *Panama Hattie*, *Let's Face It*, and *Mexican Hayride*. He also wrote music for the movies. In 1948, his most successful show, *Kiss Me Kate*, based on the Shakespearean play *The Taming of the Shrew*, ran for almost three years on Broadway and was made into a successful movie. Some of his best known songs come from this show. In the 1950s, he had two more hit shows, *Can-Can* and *Silk Stockings*, both of which were also made into hit movies. In addition, he scored the film *High Society*, which starred Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Grace Kelly, three of the biggest stars of the era.

In the late 1950s, Porter's right leg was finally amputated. He lived the rest of his life in seclusion in New York City, traveling to California in the summers. He died of kidney failure in 1964 in Santa Monica, California.

Porter won an Academy Award for Best Song in 1934 ("The Continental" from *The Gay Divorcee*). He won the Tony for Best Musical and Best Score in 1949 for *Kiss Me Kate*. His shows are still revived on Broadway and by theater companies around the world, and his songs have been recorded by many well-known singers, from Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald to Sheryl Crow and Alanis Morissette.

# Aaron Copland



Copland as a teenager

- 1900—Born Brooklyn, NY
- 1917–1921—Studied with some of the best music teachers in New York
- 1921–1924—Studied in Paris
- 1927—Began teaching at the New School for Social Research in New York

Aaron Copland was a versatile composer whose influence on American music went far beyond his own compositions. He is best known for his symphonic works, but also wrote music for ballet and films. In the 1920s, Copland lived in New York and met many of the leading artists of the era, including photographer Alfred Stieglitz and his circle, which included Stieglitz's wife, the painter Georgia O'Keefe. Stieglitz thought that American artists should "reflect the ideas of American Democracy," a concept that influenced Copland as well as O'Keefe, Ansel Adams (a leading nature photographer), and Walker Evans, whose photographs documented the effects of the Great Depression on the American rural heartland.

During the Great Depression, Copland became politically active in Progressive causes. He worked with the Group Theater, which focused on plays that dealt with contemporary issues. He also joined the Popular Front against Fascism to protest the aid that Hitler was giving to General Franco's forces in the Spanish Civil War. His leftist political activities would cause him to be called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1953.

In 1939, Copland wrote the scores for *Of Mice and Men*, based on John Steinbeck's book about two farmhands, and *Our Town*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Thornton Wilder, which described life in an emblematic turn-of-the-century New England town. In 1950, he won the Academy Award for his score for William Wilder's film *The Heiress*, which starred Olivia de Havilland and Montgomery Clift.

Copland was classically trained and listed Igor Stravinsky as his model and favorite modern composer. He was also influenced by Ravel, Bartók, Satie, and Prokofiev. He admired jazz and employed some of its elements in his work, yet he developed a distinctly American sound in symphonic music. This included weaving American folk songs into his compositions, such as the use of the Shaker melody in *Simple Gifts* in *Appalachian Spring*.

- 1932—Founded Festival of Contemporary Music at Yaddo, NY
- 1937—Co-founds the American Composers Alliance
- Wrote *Billy the Kid*, his first ballet
- 1942—Composed score for *Rodeo*
- 1942—*Lincoln Portrait*
- *Fanfare for the Common Man*



The 1940s were one of Copland's most productive decades. During these years, he produced many of his most important and well-known compositions.

In 1942, he composed the ballet score for *Rodeo*, which was choreographed by one of America's most famous choreographers of the era, Agnes De Mille (who also created the ballet sequence for Rogers and Hammerstein's Broadway musical *Oklahoma*). The music from one of its sequences, "Hoe Down," has become one of his best known compositions through its use in television, movies, and commercials.

Copland also produced music that aroused patriotism during World War II. His *Lincoln Portrait*, commissioned in 1942, combined music with a text he created from Lincoln's speeches and letters. It was performed often during the war with prominent actors such as Henry Fonda acting as narrator.

In December 1941, the United States entered World War II after being attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. With America suffering many defeats in the Pacific during the first months of the war (including in the Philippines, Guam, and at Wake Island) Copland was commissioned to compose a work that would lift American morale. The result was *Fanfare for the Common Man*, which many saw as a tribute to the millions of Americans serving in the Armed Forces, as well as those working for the war effort at home.

## Later Years



Michael Tilson-Thomas

Throughout his career, Copland interwove his own work as a composer and conductor with teaching at the New School of Social Research, Harvard University, and Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. He wrote several books on music and loved working with young musicians. One of his best known students in composition and conducting was Leonard Bernstein, who recorded many of Copland's works and is considered by many to be the best interpreter of his mentor's compositions. Copland also taught conducting to Michael Tilson-Thomas, who headed the London Symphony and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. Tilson-Thomas also recorded much of Copland's music.

Copland kept his personal life discreet, but lived and traveled openly with his male lovers, many of whom were also talented in areas of the arts.

Copland received many honors in his lifetime. In addition to four Academy Awards nominations for his film work (and one win for *The Heiress*), Copland received the New York Music Critics' Circle Award for *Appalachian Spring*. He also won the Pulitzer Prize for that composition. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In the 1980s, he received the National Medal of Arts and the Congressional Gold Medal. In recognition of his decades of work as a teacher, the Music School at Queens College in New York is named after him. He died in New York in 1990, but his work lives on in recordings, performances, and in the generations of musicians, composers, and conductors whom he influenced.

### Picture source

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