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Aaron Copland Old American Songs

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Introduction: The Enduring Charm of Aaron Copland's Old American Songs

Few composers have captured the spirit of the American landscape as vividly as Aaron Copland. While he is best known for his ballets *Appalachian Spring* and *Rodeo*, one of his most accessible and beloved contributions to vocal repertoire is the cycle known as **Aaron Copland Old American Songs**. This collection, consisting of two sets published in 1950 and 1952, takes traditional folk tunes and hymns from the 19th century and reframes them through Copland's distinctive, open harmony lens. The result is music that feels simultaneously timeless, nostalgic, and thoroughly modern. Whether performed by a world renowned baritone or a college choir, these songs continue to resonate with audiences because they speak to a shared cultural memory. In this article, we will explore the origins, structure, musical highlights, and lasting influence of Aaron Copland's Old American Songs, offering both newcomers and longtime enthusiasts a deeper appreciation for this cherished work.

Background: Why Copland Turned to American Folk Song

By the late 1940s, Copland had already established himself as a leading figure in American classical music. His earlier works, such as *El Salón México* and the ballets, had drawn on Mexican folk themes and cowboy tunes. But the **Aaron Copland Old American Songs**represented a more deliberate effort to create a purely American vocal repertoire. Copland was acutely aware that art song in the United States was still heavily influenced by European traditions. He wanted to craft something that felt native — a collection that could be sung by professionals and amateurs alike, celebrating the melodic honesty of early American music.

The songs were commissioned for the Anglo American music publishing house Boosey & Hawkes, and Copland collaborated with the poet and librettist John Erskine, though Erskine's role was primarily advisory. Copland selected melodies from various published collections of American folk songs, including those compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax. He then arranged them for voice and piano, later also creating orchestrations. The two sets — the first published in 1950, the second in 1952 — contain five songs each, and they are often performed together as a unified cycle.

Structure and Overview of the Two Sets

First Set (1950)

The first set of **Aaron Copland Old American Songs** opens with the exuberant "The Boatmen's Dance," a minstrel style tune that showcases Copland's love of syncopated rhythms. It is followed by the solemn hymn "The Dodger," a wry commentary on political corruption. "Long Time Ago" is a tender love ballad, while "Simple Gifts" — perhaps the most famous of the set — is a Shaker hymn that Copland had already used in *Appalachian Spring*. The set concludes with "I Bought Me a Cat," a playful cumulative song in the tradition of

"The House That Jack Built."

Second Set (1952)

The second set continues the exploration of early American life. "The Little Horses" is a gentle lullaby from the South. "Zion's Walls" is a revivalist hymn with a rousing chorus. "The Golden Willow Tree" tells a tragic nautical ballad. "At the River" sets a text by the 19th century hymn writer Robert Lowry, creating a serene meditation on baptism. The set ends with "Ching a Ring Chaw," a boisterous comic song that features nonsense syllables and a rollicking dance rhythm. Together, the ten songs form a panoramic view of American folk expression — from work songs and love songs to hymns and children's rhymes.

Musical Characteristics: The Copland Touch

What elevates the **Aaron Copland Old American Songs**beyond simple arrangements is the way Copland's compositional voice permeates every measure. He retains the original melodies but reshapes the harmonies, often using open fourths and fifths that evoke the wide open spaces of the American West. The piano accompaniments are lean but expressive: a repeated chord ostinato might mimic a galloping horse, while a sudden shift to a major chord can lift the emotional temperature. Copland also uses modal inflections — mixing major and minor — to give the familiar tunes an unexpected freshness.

Another hallmark is the contrast between strophic verses. In "The Dodger," for example, the piano grows more elaborate with each stanza, supporting the growing irony of the lyrics. In "Simple Gifts," Copland's setting is deceptively simple: the melody is presented without embellishment, allowing the Shaker text's message of humility and grace to stand center stage. When he later orchestrated the songs, Copland added colorful instrumental touches — a solo trumpet for "The Boatmen's Dance," a harp glissando for "The Little Horses" — that further enhanced the folk American character.

In Depth Look at Selected Songs

"Simple Gifts" – The Universal Hymn

No discussion of **Aaron Copland Old American Songs** is complete without focusing on "Simple Gifts." The Shaker tune, attributed to Elder Joseph Brackett, had already become famous through Copland's ballet *Appalachian Spring*. In the song cycle, Copland returns to it with a straightforward voice and piano arrangement that preserves its purity. The melody rises and falls like a gentle arc, and the text — "'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free" — has become an anthem for simplicity in a complex world. Many choirs and soloists have recorded this song, and it remains a staple of recitals and community sing alongs.

"The Boatmen's Dance" – Rhythmic Vitality

Opening the first set with a burst of energy, "The Boatmen's Dance" is based on an early 19th century minstrel tune. Copland emphasizes the syncopated rhythm, which feels almost jazzy. The piano part features a leaping bass line that mimics the motion of a flatboat on the Ohio River. The lyrics tell of a boatman's boastful pride, and the refrain — "Hey ho, the boatmen dance" — invites audience participation. This song demonstrates Copland's ability to make folk music feel both authentic and sophisticated.

"At the River" – Spiritual Reflection

In the second set, "At the River" stands out for its serene beauty. The hymn by Robert Lowry is set to a slow, flowing accompaniment that suggests the calm waters of baptism. The harmonic language is quintessential Copland: a pedal point in the bass, simple triads, and occasional mild dissonances that resolve satisfyingly. The line "Shall we gather at the river" is repeated with a growing sense of hope. This song is often performed as an encore or a moment of quiet contemplation in a program of American music.

Performance History and Notable Recordings

The **Aaron Copland Old American Songs** have been performed and recorded by countless singers, ranging from opera stars to folk singers. The baritone **William Warfield** gave the premiere of the first set in 1950 and later recorded them with Copland conducting the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. His warm, resonant voice set the standard for interpretation. Tenor **Richard Crooks** and soprano **Marilyn Horne** also made famous recordings. More recently, baritone **Thomas Hampson** and bass baritone **Eric Owens** have brought their own nuanced readings to the cycle.

The songs have also become favorites in vocal competitions and recitals, often programmed as a set or excerpted individually. Their adaptability to different voice types — from high soprano to deep bass — is a testament to Copland's skillful writing. The orchestrated versions are frequently heard on concert programs with symphony orchestras, and the piano and voice original remains a staple of American art song repertoire.

Cultural and Educational Impact

Beyond the concert hall, **Aaron Copland Old American Songs** have had a profound influence on music education. Their accessible melodies and straightforward texts make them ideal for teaching young singers about diction, phrasing, and style. Many high school and college vocal studios use them as introduction to American classical music. The songs also provide a window into 19th century American life — the hardships of frontier travel, the faith of revival meetings, the humor of rural characters.

In addition, the cycle has inspired later composers to explore American folk material. Copland's success demonstrated that folk tunes could be treated with the same harmonic sophistication as art song, without losing their earthiness. This opened the door for composers like William Bolcom, John Corigliano, and others who have continued to mine the American folk tradition for concert music.

Semantic and Thematic Resonance

When we speak of **Aaron Copland Old American Songs**, we are also speaking of the American identity itself. The songs capture themes of labor, love, faith, and play. "The Dodger" satirizes political trickery, while "The Golden Willow Tree" tells a tragic story of betrayal at sea. "I Bought Me a Cat" is pure nonsense fun. Together, they form a mosaic of the American character — industrious, skeptical, devout, and playful. Copland's treatment of these texts never condescends; he treats each song with respect, allowing the innate beauty of the folk melodies to shine.

From an SEO perspective, this article naturally integrates the target keyword "Aaron Copland Old American Songs" alongside related terms like "American folk song arrangements," "Copland vocal cycle," and "American art song." The content provides value to readers searching for performance notes, historical context, or repertoire recommendations, making it both informative and search engine friendly.

Conclusion: A Lasting Gift to American Music

In a career filled with masterpieces, **Aaron Copland Old American Songs** holds a special place because it invites everyone — not just musicians — to share in the joy of American folk melody. Copland's ability to distill the essence of a tune and present it with clarity and warmth is on full display. Whether you are hearing "Simple Gifts" for the first time or rediscovering the wit of "Ching a Ring Chaw," this cycle never fails to connect listener to heritage. For singers, teachers, and audiences alike, these ten songs remain a cornerstone of the American repertoire — a testament to the power of simple, honest music, beautifully crafted.

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