

## THE TENDER LAND SUITE (1952-54)

Copland, Aaron



### THE OPERA:

Copland's own synopsis for his opera, *The Tender Land*, revealingly articulates the purposes of this elusive stage work:

The opera takes place in the Thirties, spring harvest time. It's about a farm family - a mother (Ma Moss), a daughter (Laurie) about to graduate from High School, her sister (Beth), and a grandfather (Grandpa Moss). Two drifters (Martin and Top) come along asking for odd jobs. The grandfather is reluctant to give them any, and the mother is alarmed because she's heard reports of two men molesting young girls of the neighborhood. Nevertheless, they sleep in the shed for the night.

The graduation party begins the second act. The heroine has naturally fallen in love with one of the drifters. And they prove it by singing a twelve-minute love duet. But there is something of a complication. You see, she associates him with freedom, and he associates her with settling down. Martin asks Laurie to run away with him but in the middle of the night he decides that this kind of roving life is not for Laurie, so he silently steals off with Top. When Laurie discovers she's been jilted, she decides to leave home anyway, and at the conclusion the mother sings a song of acceptance that is the key to the whole opera. In it she looks to her younger daughter as the continuation of the family cycle that is the whole reason for their existence.

But there is a missing ingredient to this synopsis. A fellow traveller on the left during the thirties, Copland was a victim of the Red Scare. His interrogation

by Senator Joseph McCarthy's Subcommittee on Special Investigations – a chilling vignette of real-life theatre – was a traumatic experience for America's most famous and prominent classical composer, who found himself dissimulating under oath when asked about past dealings with members of the Communist Party.

This trauma is revisited in *The Tender Land*. Not only is Grandpa Moss oddly paranoid about outsiders ("You can't trust strangers. Bums! Dogs!"); even after his suspicions that Martin and Top have molested a neighbor prove unfounded, he sings (amazingly): "You're guilty all the same." Ma Moss, too, has "a funny feeling" about Martin and Top, but adds; "Have I the right to make an accusation just on feeling? I hope I'm wrong." (Erik Johns later confirmed that he and Copland "were thinking about all the false McCarthy accusations and the effect they had on innocent people.")

### **THE SUITE:**

The suite Copland extracted from *The Tender Land* is in three movements, with the second and third linked without pause. As it happens, the Opera's three acts are sampled in reverse order. Movement one comprises the *Introduction* to Act 3 and the music of the love duet for Martin and Laurie. Movement two is taken from the Act 2 party scene – the Opera's one big number. Movement three adapts the quintet, "*The Promise of Living*", that ends Act 1. This hymn-like finale, arguably the opera's most memorable music, is an elongated moment musically italicized by the composer. The text, in effect, promises a world without McCarthy when Grandpa, Ma, Laurie, Martin, and Top sing:

*The promise of ending  
In right understanding  
Is peace in our own hearts  
And peace with our neighbor.*

In other words: the suite ends with a ringing moral affirmation - versus the tenuous ending of the opera itself. In fact, for this writer *The Tender Land Suite* seems a considerably more successful composition than *The Tender Land*. Shorn of the opera's dark patches, of its ambivalence of message and means, the suite celebrates throughout the plain and uplifting musical signature Copland indelibly inscribed as 'American'.

The opera was commissioned by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II for the American League of Composers' 30th anniversary. Originally envisioned for television presentation, the work was rejected by NBC's producers and went on to be premiered instead at the New York City Center of Music and Drama on April 1st, 1954. The opera was poorly received at the time, with critics finding the characters weak, the plotline wanting, and the orchestra too large for the small vocal ensemble. Copland and his librettist, Erik Johns (writing under the pen name Horace Everett) therefore made extensive revisions to the opera, most notably restructuring from two acts to three.

The orchestral suite was compiled by the composer in 1958. Remarkably, it remains far less performed on the concert platform than the composer's more famous 1944 ballet, *Appalachian Spring*, considering the later work's deeper artistic maturity and, arguably, better-composed music.

### **DERIVATION AND INFLUENCES:**

One catalyst for *The Tender Land* was Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, James Agee's famous portrait of the American South during the Depression, unforgettably illustrated by Walker Evans' photographs of hard, rural, lives.

Originally started in 1936, Agee originally planned to create a photo-essay for Fortune magazine about tenant farmers in the Deep South. Agee and Walker spent three weeks in a small Alabama town, interviewing and photographing three impoverished families. After Fortune turned down Agee's first draft, he expanded it into a sprawling book, published with Evans' photographs in 1941. Both men, critics now agree, brought a moving humanity to the subject of poverty in the rural South.

The now iconic Evans images from the book provided Copland with models for several of the characters in his musical realisations for the opera, including the two drifters, Martin and Top. Most importantly however, the leading characters of Ma and Laurie were born from Evans's haunting portraits of an emaciated mother and her half-hopeful, half-dazed daughter, who stare blankly at the camera out of some unnameable depths of despair.

For all intent and purposes the opera records an episode among such lives.

Notably, Johns turned class relationships upside-down in the operatic treatment. He upgraded Ma and Laurie economically; the score describes them as lower middle-class. As a sign of their economic security, Laurie is the first in her family to graduate from high school -- a rite of passage that loomed large in American theatre and literature (*Our Town*, *Carousel*, *Peyton Place*) at a time when college was for the few.

Having moved the Moss family up the social scale, Johns subsequently downgraded the drifters from educated outside agitators to hobos, who, at their first appearance, remind the audience inappropriately of Lennie and George in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. But the real influence on the opera derived from Steinbeck's writing, including locale, is captured from his 1939 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The generic locale also bears more than a passing resemblance to the never-never land of the musical *Oklahoma!* which, in effect, funded the opera. But in the Copland/Johns' realisation – as well as Agee and Evans, or Steinbeck's portrayal of the fictional Joad family – there is no "...bright golden haze on the meadow"; the land is not green, the harvest has failed, and the dust bowl that is Oklahoma in the 1930s is a frightening reality.

*"The land just blew away; we had to go somewhere."*  
— Kansas preacher, June, 1936

Copland gravitated toward the book; still an obscure and controversial publication in 1952, not only because he liked it but because he thought that in this way he might be able to use some of the music from his abandoned musical after Erskine Caldwell's 'Tragic Ground'; both concerned poor southerners. Johns never read the Agee book but rather adapted its basic premise of "two men from an outside world 'invading' the inside world of a provincial family."

Although Johns gleaned some motifs and themes from Copland's popular films and ballets, his libretto differed most dramatically from those earlier works in the fact that Laurie leaves home at the Opera's conclusion.

The irrational fears of Grandpa and Ma Moss – a mixture of xenophobia and sexual anxiety – also strike a new note. Copland and Johns in part derived these ideas from personal experiences, including Johns' departure from home at an early age and Copland's ordeals with Congress. But such features more generally reflect the changing times.

American drama of the 1950s dealt with messy issues by turning them into dirty secrets.

More disturbing, perhaps, in this U.S. Presidential election year, are similar parallels to suggestions from some quarters to demonize immigrants and Muslims. In 1978, Copland himself made it clear that in *The Tender Land*, the plight of the outsiders, Martin and Top, was especially important to him epitomising his beliefs in the notion of strangers being both absorbed and accepted into American life.

### **Derivation of the Music in the Suite from the Opera:**

#### Movement I (Introduction and Love Music)

Act III – Introduction  
Act II – "Laurie...You Know, Laurie" (Martin)  
Act II – "In Love? In Love?" (Laurie)  
Act II – The Tender Land

#### Movement II (Party Scene)

Act II – The Graduation Eve Supper  
Act II – The Supper Ends  
Act II – "Stomp Your Foot Upon the Floor" (Top)

#### Movement III (Finale: "The Promise of Living")

Act I – "The Promise of Living" (Grandpa, Ma, Laurie, Martin, Top)

## **History of The Great Drought and Dust Bowl Exodus**

The Dust Bowl exodus was the largest migration in American history. By 1940, 2.5 million people had moved out of the Plains states; of those, 200,000 moved to California.

When the drought and dust storms showed no signs of letting up, many people abandoned their land. Others would have stayed but were forced out when they lost their land in bank foreclosures. In all, one-quarter of the population left, packing everything they owned into their cars and trucks, and headed west toward California.

When they reached the Californian border, they did not receive a warm welcome as described in this 1935 excerpt from Collier's magazine. "Very erect and primly severe, [a man] addressed the slumped driver of a rolling wreck that screamed from every hinge, bearing and coupling. "California's relief rolls are overcrowded now. No use to come farther," he cried. The half-collapsed driver ignored him – merely turned his head to be sure his numerous family was still with him. They were so tightly wedged in, that escape was impossible. "There really is nothing for you here," the neat trooperish young man went on. "Nothing, really nothing." And the forlorn man on the moaning car looked at him, dull, emotionless, incredibly weary, and said: "So? Well, you ought to see what they got where I come from."

The Los Angeles police chief went so far as to send 125 policemen to act as bouncers at the state border, turning away "undesirables". Called "the bum brigade" by the press and the object of a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union, the LAPD posse was recalled only when the use of city funds for this work was questioned.

Arriving in California, the migrants were faced with a life almost as difficult as the one they had left. Many California farms were corporate-owned. They were larger and more modernized than those of the southern plains, and the crops were unfamiliar. The rolling fields of wheat were replaced by crops of fruit, nuts, and vegetables.

Like the fictional Joad family in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath", some 40% of migrant farmers wound up in the San Joaquin Valley, picking grapes and cotton. They took up the work of Mexican migrant workers, 120,000 of whom had been repatriated during the 1930s. Life for migrant workers was hard. They were paid by the quantity of fruit and cotton picked with earnings ranging from seventy-five cents to \$1.25 a day. Out of that, they had to pay twenty-five cents a day to rent a tar-paper shack with no floor or plumbing. In larger ranches, they often had to buy their groceries from a high-priced company store.

The sheer number of migrants camped out, desperate for work, led to scenes such as that described by John Steinbeck in his novel.

“Maybe he needs two hunderd men, so he talks to five hunderd, an’ they tell other folks, an’ when you get to the place, they’s a thousan’ men. This here fella says, “I’m payin’ twenty cents an hour.” An’ maybe half a the men walk off. But they’s still five hunderd that’s so goddamn hungry they’ll work for nothin’ but biscuits. Well, this here fella’s got a contract to pick them peaches or — chop that cotton. You see now? The more fella’s he can get, less he’s gonna pay. An’ he’ll get a fella with kids if he can.”

As roadside camps of poverty-stricken migrants proliferated, growers pressured sheriffs to break them up. Groups of vigilantes beat up migrants, accusing them of being Communists and burned their shacks to the ground. To help the migrants, Roosevelt’s Farm Security Administration built 13 camps, each temporarily housing 300 families in tents built on wooden platforms. The camps were self-governing communities, and families had to work for their room and board.

When migrants reached California and found that most of the farmland was tied up in large corporate farms, many gave up farming. They set up residence near larger cities in shacktowns called Little Oklahomas or Okieville on open lots local landowners divided into tiny subplots and sold cheaply for \$5 down and \$3 in monthly instalments. They built their houses from scavenged scraps, and they lived without plumbing and electricity. Polluted water and a lack of trash and waste facilities led to outbreaks of typhoid, malaria, smallpox and tuberculosis.

Over the years, they replaced their shacks with real houses, sending their children to local schools and becoming part of the communities; but they continued to face discrimination when looking for work, and they were called “Okies” and “Arkies” by the locals regardless of where they had come from.

### **The Importance of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* to Copland’s Opera**



Thomas Hart Benton ((1889-1975)

*The Departure of the Joads*, 1940

Advertising illustration commissioned by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox for poster for the movie, *The Grapes of Wrath*  
Egg tempera and oil paint on a support

Painting in the collection of the Ralph Forster Museum, College of the Ozarks

First published in 1939, Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning epic of the Great Depression chronicles the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s and tells the story of one Oklahoma farm family, the Joads, driven from their homestead and forced to travel west to the promised land of California. Out of their trials and their repeated collisions against the hard realities of an America divided into haves and have-nots evolves a drama that is intensely human yet majestic in its scale and moral vision, elemental yet plainspoken, tragic but ultimately stirring in its human dignity.

A portrait of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, of one man's fierce reaction to injustice, and of one woman's stoical strength, the novel captures the horrors of the Great Depression and probes the very nature of equality and justice in America.

Sensitive to fascist and communist criticism, Steinbeck insisted "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" be printed in its entirety in the first edition of the book – which takes its title from the first verse: "He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored."

Steinbeck's real achievement in the novel is that he gathered the country's recent shames and devastations – the Hoovervilles, the desperate, dirty children, the dissolution of kin, the oppressive labour conditions.

The Pulitzer Prize was due, at least in part, because alongside the poverty and dispossession, Steinbeck chronicled the Joads' refusal, even inability, to let go of their faltering but unmistakable hold on human dignity. Witnessing their degeneration from Oklahoma farmers to a diminished band of migrant workers is nothing short of crushing. The Joads lose family members to death and cowardice as they go, and are challenged by everything from weather to the authorities to the California locals themselves. As Tom Joad puts it,

"They're a-workin' away at our spirits. They're a tryin' to make us cringe an' crawl like a whipped bitch. They tryin' to break us. Why, Jesus Christ, Ma, they comes a time when the on'y way a fella can keep his decency is by takin' a sock at a cop. They're workin' on our decency."

The point, though, is that decency remains intact, if somewhat battle-scarred, and this, as much as the depression and the plight of the "Okies," is a part of American history.

## MADE IN HEAVEN (2009 rev. 2013)

Broadstock, Brenton



### Composer's Note:

*Made In Heaven* is a musical tribute to the iconic jazz recording *Kind of Blue* made in 1959. The instrumentalists on that recording were some of jazz's greatest artists: Miles Davis, trumpet; Cannonball Adderley, alto saxophone; John Coltrane, tenor saxophone; Wynton Kelly, piano; Bill Evans, piano; Paul Chambers, bass and Jimmy Cobb, drums.

*Made In Heaven* is not an arrangement, nor transcription, nor does it quote any 'melodies', nor does it attempt to recapture the jazzy, 'coolness' and individuality of the original recording. As a 'serious classical composer', the opportunity to write a work inspired by an iconic jazz album that had been a part of my early musical development was liberating, exciting and a little daunting! *Kind of Blue* has been the starting point for a symphonic metamorphosis, my mix of jazz, rock and classical music.

The structure the concerto is in four movements and coincides with, or reflects, four of the five tracks on the recording, but in my own order:

1. Is quizzical in mood. (*So What*)
2. Is in three parts and is 'Spanish' in flavour. An exuberant 'Spanish' dance is enclosed by two pensive sections (*Flamenco Sketches*)
3. Is moody and introverted and based on a 10 bar harmonic progression. It is dedicated to my friend Graham Lloyd and to his son, Greg, who tragically lost his life in the 'Black Saturday' fires at Steels Creek, Australia in February 2009. (*Blue In Green*)
4. Is a 12 bar blues but is very fast in tempo and takes on a quasi 'rock and roll feel'. (*All Blues*)

The title *Made In Heaven* comes from a quote by drummer Jimmy Cobb found on the original LP recording cover notes – *it must have been made in heaven*.

*Made In Heaven* was commissioned by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and written while I was Composer In Residence in 2009.

I revised *Made In Heaven* in 2013, reduced the original five movements to four, and changed their order. The concerto now features all members and sections of the orchestra.

### **Biography:**

Brenton Broadstock was born in Melbourne, Australia in December 1952. He studied History, Politics and Music at Monash University, and later composition and theory with Donald Freund at the University of Memphis in the USA and with Peter Sculthorpe at the University of Sydney. The University of Melbourne awarded him the Doctor of Music degree in 1987. From 1982-2007 he was employed in the Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne where he was Professor of Music and Head of Composition.

In 1999 Brenton received the prestigious Don Banks Award from the Australia Council for his contribution to Australian music and in 2014 he received an AM, Member of the Order of Australia, in the Australia Day Honours for “significant service to music as a composer, educator and mentor”.

Brenton has won numerous prizes for composition, including the Paul Lowin Song Cycle Prize, 2 APRA Awards and 2 Maggs Awards; his music has been performed at many national and international festivals, including the BBC Proms; by all of the major orchestras in Australia, by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Bavarian Radio Orchestra, the Krasnoyarsk Orchestra in Russia, the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra in Finland and at the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games.

Brenton has written 6 symphonies, concertos for tuba, piano, euphonium and saxophone, several orchestral works, a chamber opera, 3 string quartets and much chamber, choral and solo music. His compositions are available on 50 commercial CDs worldwide.

In 2009 Brenton was Composer In Residence with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra composing a concerto for jazz trumpeter James Morrison and a choral symphony. In 2013 Brenton’s string orchestra work, *Never Truly Lost*, commissioned by Rob and Nancy Pallin, was toured around Australia by the Australian Chamber Orchestra with Satu Vänskä as solo violinist. In May 2014 *Never Truly Lost* was the ABCs entry to the International Rostrum of Composers held in Finland and was selected as a ‘recommended’ work (from 50 entries from 27 national radio networks).

In 2016 Brenton’s string quartet, *Safe Haven*, will be premiered by the Enso Quartet on their Australian tour sponsored by Musica Viva.

Brenton is currently a freelance composer. For further information: [brentonbroadstock.com](http://brentonbroadstock.com)