COPLAND IN PURSUIT OF NEOCLASSICISM:  
A SPECULATIVE DISCOURSE ON HIS "LEFTIST" POLITICS,  
HIS INTERPRETATION OF MAHLER, AND THEIR  
CONFRONTATION AT THE THIRD SYMPHONY

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Abstract

Aaron Copland’s Symphony No. 3 (1946) is widely agreed to be not only one of the composer’s finest accomplishments, but also one of the greatest American achievements in the genre. From his roots as a modernist composer to his experiments with proletarian work songs, film scores, and eventually neoclassicism, Copland composed through the lens of his changing political worldview, which has been described by some as communist. This project seeks to interrogate the Third Symphony as a social object in order to uncover how it reflected—or failed to reflect—his political and aesthetic goals. Through a pointed focus on his writings on Mahler, whose work he believed pointed towards neoclassicism, as well as a philosophical-aesthetic discussion of the symphony from the standpoint of Adorno, Benjamin, and twentieth-century Marxism, I have sought to provide an original critique of this work. Ultimately, while the Third Symphony lost sight of the formal innovations of Mahler, as well as the expressionism of the modernists who followed, it can be read as pointing toward the freedom that Copland desired for society but was necessarily unable to manifest formally through the composition’s internal phenomena.