During a visit with students at the University of Hartford in the summer of 1972, Aaron Copland was asked a provocative question: What did he think of the emerging field of electronic music?

If the student hoped to provoke a condemnation of the new and a defense of the traditional from the 71-year-old composer, he must have been disappointed. “I feel fine—when it's good,” Copland replied.

“The great drawback of electronic music is that if it is not produced live, it must be put on tape, and tape always sounds the same. It is diversity that keeps music alive,” he said. “My general attitude, however, is to keep an open mind and see what comes along.”

So it was with Copland, an American original whose life is being celebrated in “The Copland Century,” a 14-month series of events that represents one of the largest collaborative arts events in Greater Hartford’s history. Through concerts, lectures, dance performances, and films, The Hartt School, the President’s College, and 16 other collaborators are joining The Bushnell in inviting Greater Hartford to get to know a man universally acclaimed as the father of American music.

Many people may feel they are already well acquainted with Copland. His most popular works—Appalachian Spring, A Lincoln Portrait, Billy the Kid, Rodeo—have become icons of American culture, and Fanfare for the Common Man was nearly ubiquitous during this past summer of the Olympics. Today, 10 years after his death, his fame shows no signs of abating.

Yet Copland presents many paradoxes. A gentle and quiet man, he wrote music of enormous power. The gay son of a synagogue president from Brooklyn, he created a uniquely American sound. He spent three years studying the fundamentals of classical music in France before returning to draw inspiration from jazz, Shaker hymns, and cowboy tunes. A success in Hollywood, he never lost the respect of his peers, or forgot what it meant to be poor and unknown. He was, said his biographer, Vivian Perlis, “a simple, plain man in a most complicated way.”

By all accounts, he was that rare combination: an artistic genius with a heart of gold. “He was probably the sweetest man I ever knew in my entire life,” said James Sellars, an associate professor of composition at Hartt, who befriended Copland in 1965. “It was morally impossible for him to do anything that was not an altruistic act.”

In fact, Copland’s final act was to give everything of himself to his profession. He left Rock Hill, his home in Cortlandt, N.Y., to the Copland Heritage Foundation, which today maintains the property as a residence for visiting composers. His fortune he left to a foundation that today provides approximately $1 million a year for new music. “He was unusually generous,” said Robert Carl, chairman of the Composition Department at Hartt and one of the first to be invited to spend a month at the home.

“There’s no other composer’s house in the United States that is really so preserved and used for this purpose,” said Carl, who stayed at Rock Hill in October 1999. “You sleep in his bedroom and work in the studio where he wrote most of the music for the last 30 years of his life. It’s an enormous inspiration to be working at his table and playing the piano in the spot where he would be playing his piano. There’s a real sense of being immersed in the history of the place.”

Carl, who is also co-director of Extension Works, a new music ensemble in Boston, was writing a piano sonata while staying at the house and could feel Copland’s influence. “I never saw a ghost, or anything like that,” he said, “but now and then you couldn’t help but imagine him looking over your shoulder and saying, ‘That’s not the right note.’” It may have been that influence that led Carl to incorporate a piece of 18th-century folk music, “The World Turned Upside-Down,” in the second movement of his piano sonata, much as Copland had borrowed from cowboy songs and Shaker hymns.

A Generous Spirit

Visits with music students, such as those he made to Hartford in the early 1970s, were another measure of Copland’s generous spirit. Although he turned down nearly all of the many teaching positions offered to him (“I didn’t like people telling me what to do when I was younger, and I’m not going to start doing it myself,” he told The New York Times in 1960), Copland enjoyed being around music students, and on several occasions accepted invitations from his friend, the late Arnold Franchetti, then chairman of composition at Hartt, to lecture in Franchetti’s experimental Interactive Studies program. Copland had been awarded an honorary doctorate in 1959 by the University, one of the first half-dozen of the 40 institutions that would so honor him in the ensuing decades.

He said that he did not teach but merely “diagnosed.” Once, when asked what he had told an assembled group of students, he replied, “I taught them about minimalism. By definition, it can’t do too much harm.”

“He was very honest and open to young musicians,” said Perlis, a Yale faculty member and music historian, who helped Copland write his two-volume biography, Copland: 1900 through 1942 and Copland Since 1943. “I would say he was nostalgic for the college he never went to.”

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Copland, Perlis said, was also motivated by gratitude for his good fortune. At the end of a typical introduction listing his many achievements, “he would unwind his long legs, stand up, and say, ‘I’m a lucky guy,”’ Perlis said during a recent talk at Wilde Auditorium, sponsored by the President’s College. “He felt it was a privilege to work in something that he loved, to make a living in music. And he was so happy to be a part of the 20th century, where everything was new and exciting and different.”

In the truest sense, Copland was a man of the 20th century. He saw great significance in his November 14, 1900, birthdate, considering himself part of a fresh, new era. Being an innovator was his birthright. Perlis said. American music was ready to take off,” he added. “When he returned to the United States, he was on the spot when everything was new and exciting and different.”

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An Extraordinary Period of Growth

“If you think of the prime of Copland’s life and what was taking place in the arts, he was at the center of a huge development of an American form and the idea of establishing what is American in the arts,” said Malcolm Morrison, dean of Hartt. It was the excitement created by Copland, Martha Graham, Paul Taylor, Tennessee Williams, and other American artists that led Morrison to leave his native England for the United States in the mid-1970s. “It was an extraordinary period of growth that made this country hugely interesting to me,” he said.

The common view is that there were two sides to Copland’s music: the accessible, such as Rodeo, which could be enjoyed by a general audience, and the darker, more forbidding pieces that are less frequently played. These, which Copland referred to as “my orphans, my neglected children,” are no less brilliant. His Piano Sonata, for example, is “one of the greatest works of this century by anyone,” Sellars flatly states. The Copland Century celebration will feature some of these seldom-heard pieces, including a suite from the opera The Tender Land and the ballet Grohg, the first full performance of that work.

Carl, chairman of Hartt’s composition department, finds two aspects of Copland’s life particularly striking: he was one of the first American composers interested in the music of Latin America, putting him “way ahead of the game.” And, as the winner of an Academy Award in 1950 for his score for The Heiress and a Pulitzer Prize for music in 1945 for Appalachian Spring, he was one of a very few “crossover” artists able to achieve such great success in diverse musical fields.

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The Darkest Chapter

Perhaps the darkest chapter in Copland’s life was his investigation by the committee headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy, the ringleader of the red-baiting congressional circus of the early 1950s. A Lincoln Portrait [1942] was to have been performed at the inauguration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in January 1953, but the piece was replaced in the program after suspicions were raised over Copland’s political beliefs. It is a measure of his sunny outlook that the experience did not leave Copland bitter (“Agonizing is not my thing,” he told Perlis), and his place in American culture was secure enough to allow him to ride out the storm. Within the next decade, he would become one of the most...
honored cultural figures in the United States, receiving the Gold Medal of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and honorary doctorates from some 40 institutions, among them the University of Hartford.

Today, Copland serves as an inspiration, not only for composers who would seek artistic achievement at the very highest level but also for those who wish to make an honest living at what they love best. “He walked the line between popular acclaim and critical acclaim very well,” said Charles Michael Demuyck (’99), assistant professor at the University of Evansville in Indiana.

“Composers today are very aware of achieving success in their lifetimes. They don’t want to wait until 100 years after they’re dead to be a success,” Perlis said. “Certainly, Copland is a model for having it both ways, having the success and having the art pure.

“Copland’s place historically is secure, very secure,” said Perlis. “His music has continued to be performed and has escalated in popularity—usually only the same few pieces, but most composers would say that’s enough.”

Or, as James Sellars put it, “He has seeped into the culture so deeply that I don’t think we’ll ever be able to squeeze Copland out entirely.

“He was a great man.”

Copland Century: Hartford Celebrates the American Composer

The Copland Century represents a unique collaboration of arts groups in the greater Hartford area. As a celebration of Aaron Copland (1900–90), it offers a focus, both nationally and internationally, on the heritage of American music and art over the last 100 years, while reawakening the Copland spirit of cooperation and encouragement in the arts.

Boosey and Hawkes Music Publishers, which is promoting the worldwide Copland 2000 celebration, has declared Hartford’s celebration the most significant single collaboration on the international calendar. A wide array of concerts, lectures, and educational projects is being presented throughout a 14-month period that began in Hartford last March with the performance of Copland’s Appalachian Spring by the Martha Graham Dance Company and the Hartford Symphony at The Bushnell. The focus of the celebration centers on Copland’s own music, as well as the American composers he inspired.

DECEMBER 2000
Tuesday, December 5
Performance 20/20
Stravinsky: Octet
Strauss: Till Eulenspiegels Quintet
Copland: Duo
8 p.m. Lincoln Theater
Admission is free.

Wednesday, December 6
“Chick Austin: The Friends and Enemies of Modern Art”
Gene Gaddis, curator of the newly restored Austin House in Hartford (now a part of the Wadsworth Atheneum) gives a President’s College lecture on the eve of the publication of his new Chick Austin biography.
7:30 p.m. Wilde Auditorium, Harry Jack Gray Center
Admission: $15

Friday, December 8
Hartt Symphony Orchestra
Conducted by Christopher Zimmerman
Diamond: Symphony No. 4
Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 3, with Sae Hee Kim, pianist, winner of the student concerto competition
Beethoven: Symphony No. 4
8 p.m. Lincoln Theater
Admission: $15, $12, $10

FEBRUARY 2001
Friday to Sunday,
February 16 to 18
As a featured event of the Copland Symposium, a new version of Copland’s first full-scale orchestral piece, his ballet Grohg, will be fully staged for the first time.
Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m.
Sunday at 3 p.m. Lincoln Theater
Admission: $15, $12, $10

MARCH 2001
Wednesday, March 7
“Lennie! Portrait of a Legend”
President’s College lecture by Schuyler Chapin, author of Leonard Bernstein: Notes from a Friend, who will offer personal insight into the life and work of one of America’s greatest musical artists: Leonard Bernstein.
7:30 p.m. Wilde Auditorium, Harry Jack Gray Center
Admission: $15

Thursday, March 15
Hartt Symphony Orchestra
Christopher Zimmerman, conductor
Robert Carl: “Death” for orchestra
Khachaturian: Violin Concerto
Sibelius: Symphony No. 2
8 p.m. Millard Auditorium
Admission: $15, $12, $10

APRIL 2001
Wednesday, April 4
President’s College presentation by Chris Baker, literary director of the Hartford Stage
7:30 p.m. Wilde Auditorium, Harry Jack Gray Center
Admission: $15

Thursday, April 19
“Modern Music: An Interview with John Corigliano”
Robert Carl, chair of composition, The Hartt School, and recipient of the first Aaron Copland Award, will discuss with Corigliano his score for The Red Violin and his views on the direction of American music, in this President’s College event.
7:30 p.m. Wilde Auditorium, Harry Jack Gray Center
Admission: $15

MAY 2001
Wednesday, May 23
“Hartford in the 21st Century”
In this President’s College panel discussion on the future of Hartford arts, UofH President Walter Harrison hosts a select group of Hartford’s primary leaders in the arts to discuss issues of funding, education, programming, and public appreciation. Audience participation will be encouraged, as the direction of Hartford’s artistic development over the last decade and into this century comes under scrutiny.
7:30 p.m. Wilde Auditorium, Harry Jack Gray Center
Admission: $15