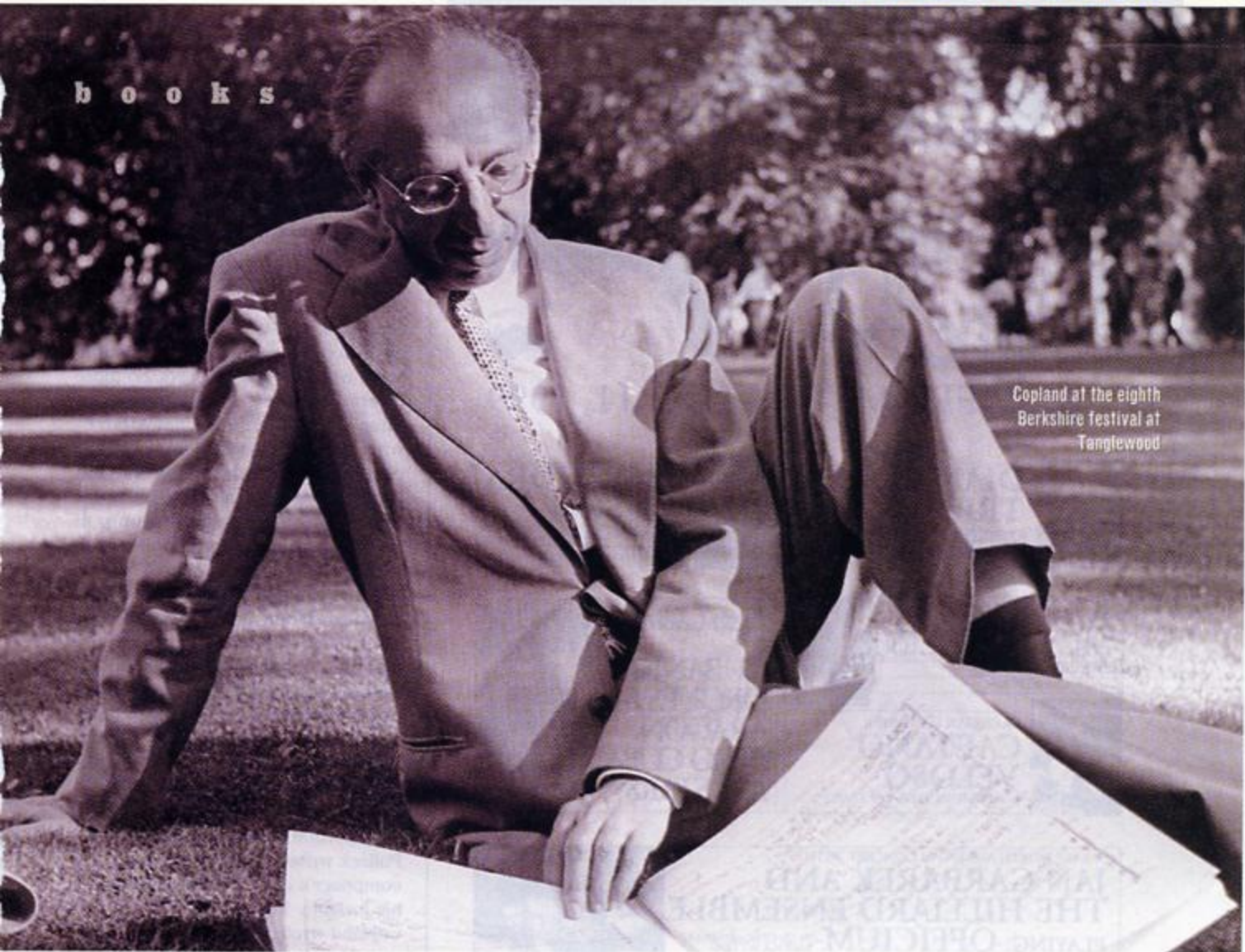


books



Copland at the eighth Berkshire festival at Tanglewood

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Copland's big score

Underappreciated in his lifetime, Aaron Copland gets respect in a new biography **By Michael J. Giltz**



**Aaron Copland:
The Life and Work of
an Uncommon Man**

■ Howard Pollack
■ Henry Holt ■ \$37.50

If the gay poet Walt Whitman gave America its boisterous, forceful words, surely the gay composer Aaron Copland gave America its music. Copland's most popular pieces—such as *Fanfare for the Common Man* and *Appalachian Spring*—are imbued with a frontier spirit, unabashed vastness, and infectious optimism. Because of those works, Copland's image today is that of a musical Norman Rockwell: iconic and popular but not artistically significant.

So it's a shock to find in Howard Pollack's respectable (and respectful) biogra-

phy that for much of his career Copland was considered avant-garde. Further, the man whose music would be played at numerous presidential inaugurations was himself a supporter of communism who championed the cause for many years. In Copland's case the "common man" might very well have been a Red.

As his career slowed down in the '70s, Copland was divorced on all sides—intellectuals disdained him for being popular, while mainstream fans didn't know what to make of less accessible pieces like *Inscape*. But after he died in 1990 (following years ▶

of increasing dementia), Copland's hits remained vital, and his main body of work—which ranged from operas to symphonies and chamber pieces—gained stature with each passing year.

Pollack chooses not to tell Copland's story chronologically. If he discusses Copland's finances, for instance, Pollack quickly charts his income from the early days to the end of his career. Each chapter can be read as a freestanding essay about a given topic—say, Copland's relationships with his musical peers. So those interested in his romantic life can jump directly to "Personal Affairs," where we learn Copland was perfectly comfortable about being gay. We also learn that as Copland grew older, his lovers often remained young. It wouldn't have occurred to Copland to discuss such things, which means there is precious little drama we're privy to. When Pollack details one lover named John Kennedy (no, not that one) brandishing a knife at Copland in bed, it's shocking precisely because so little else here takes place outside the concert hall.

Pollack's on firmer ground in the hall, however, and detailed descriptions of Copland's music comprise a hefty portion of the book. To his credit, Pollack writes accessibly about the the composer's craft without sacrificing his insights. For virtually every piece Copland wrote, Pollack provides background on how it was commissioned, a close analysis of the work's innovations, and information on its critical response. Most biographers either love or hate their subjects, and Pollack certainly falls into the camp of Copland admirers. Still, Copland seems to have been an eminently decent and discreet man, so why criticize a biography for reflecting that?

Pollack's admirably annotated, straightforward depiction of this artist's professional life is probably what Copland would have preferred. Still, it's too dry and scholarly to strike the populist chord that Copland himself struck. And, of course, that rare gift is exactly why he's remembered today. ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post and Entertainment Weekly.