Belonging to the Ages:
The Enduring Relevance of
Aaron Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait*

KAYLYN SAWYER

On Saturday, April 29, 1865, five days after Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train stopped in the city, the New York Philharmonic opened the last concert of its twenty-third season with the funeral march from Ludwig Van Beethoven’s Third Symphony. The performance program explained this inclusion—a piece “expressly composed for the occasion of the death of a great hero”—as “a fitting tribute to our departed Head.” Indeed, the act of memorializing Lincoln in music began shortly after his tragic assassination plunged the nation into a period of collective shock and deep mourning. Thomas Kernan identifies over one hundred vernacular music pieces composed in the eight-month period following Lincoln’s death, but it was not until the twentieth century that serious concert works were composed to memorialize the fallen sixteenth president. Many of these compositions, which can be described as “musical memorials” or monuments “constructed not of stone, but rather in sound,” laud Lincoln’s accomplishments and attributes while challenging the public to attend to Lincoln’s unfinished work.¹ With countless performances over the past seventy-five years and a secure place in the canon, Aaron Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait* is one of the most recognizable and performed of the Lincoln musical memorials. As such, its use reflects changes in historical memory and in the artistic appropriation of Lincoln. Through the interactive processes of performances and listening, *Lincoln Portrait*, a patriotic work tinged with the progressive ideology of its composer, has invited generations of audiences to subjective and personal reflection on Lincoln’s

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identity while prompting social and political discourse on the essence and morality of the nation he sought to preserve.

To interpret the metaphorical meaning of *Lincoln Portrait* and appreciate its enduring appeal, it is necessary to explore the circumstances of its commissioning, the character and motivations of the composer himself, and how the Lincoln tradition was claimed in the early part of the twentieth century. Composer Aaron Copland was born in Brooklyn in 1900 to Jewish immigrants from Russia. He studied music first in Brooklyn before going to Paris to work with Nadia Boulanger. He returned to the United States with a desire to create music “that would immediately be recognized as American in character.” After experimenting with jazz, he moved toward a simpler style of music he termed “imposed simplicity” that would appeal to the general public. His incorporation of folk traditions coincided with the Great Depression, which created a demand for functional music appealing to general audiences. Copland shared his belief in accessibility with conductor Serge Koussevitzky, who wrote in the *New York Times*, “The concert world, formerly the guarded sanctum of the elite, has now become a familiar world to millions of men and women.”

Copland’s turn toward accessible music was further influenced by his changing political sensibilities. Moved by the desperate suffering of people through the Great Depression, he aligned himself with Progressivism and the Popular Front. Indeed, Copland engaged with communism in both cultural and political activities. He wrote an article for *New Masses*, a proletarian publication, about the benefits of a good “mass song” in creating solidarity for action and as a weapon in the class struggle. In a September 1934 letter to friend and fellow composer Israel Citkowitz, Copland expressed his communist sympathies, noting that he spoke at a meeting of the Communist Party in Minnesota. These political leanings are evident in his work. Compositions such as *El Salón México* (1932), *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Appalachian Spring* (1944), and *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1943) employ “cherished American myths” to promote the progressive values of radical populism, multiethnic sensitivity, and concern for the oppressed. Yet

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despite these subtle political tints, his music reached the broad audience he intended and contributed to the definition of an American sound, earning him appellations such as “Dean of American composers” and “the Moses of the modern music movement.”

With Germany’s invasion of Poland in 1939, the world was on a path toward global conflict. This total war would be mobilized on the battlefront and the home front, employing everything from mechanized weapons to popular music. Just as Copland had referred to music as a weapon in the class struggle, so now “music no less than machine guns has a part to play, and can be a weapon in the battle for a free world.” As the mass song rallied workers in solidarity, the “musical diplomacy” of World War II aimed to rally the hearts and minds of Americans to the fight for democracy. Serious music, a reminder of civilized society, was needed to impress, to inspire, and to reinforce democratic principles. Historian Annegret Fauser contends that no event in history used music “so totally, so consciously, and so unequivocally” in promotion of a national cause as did World War II.

Composers and musicians participated in this musical mobilization. Earl Robinson, composer of the Lincoln tribute The Lonseome Train: A Musical Legend, observed, “Songs can be bullets,” and conductor Serge Koussevitzky noted, “We, as musicians, are soldiers, too.” Conductor Andre Kostelanetz was also part of this musical mobilization, as he explained in a Time Magazine interview, “I want people to get the message of what democracy is, what we are fighting for.” After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he considered how music might be used “to mirror the magnificent spirit of our country.” Thus he proposed in a letter to commission three American composers to write “three new works . . . to represent a musical portrait gallery


of great Americans.” Copland proposed Walt Whitman, “the patron poet of all American composers,” as inspiration for his composition. But with composer Jerome Kern having already selected Mark Twain, Kostelanetz suggested selecting a statesman instead of another literary figure. Copland then turned to Abraham Lincoln. As Copland explained, “Lincoln was a favorite during the war years. Furthermore, I recalled that my old teacher, Rubin Goldmark, had composed an orchestral threnody in 1918, ‘Requiem Suggested by Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.’” In reflecting on the commission, Copland would write, “From that moment on, the choice of Lincoln as my subject seemed inevitable.”

The choice by politically progressive Copland to memorialize a nineteenth-century Republican president might seem peculiar. In the early part of the twentieth century, however, Lincoln’s image had taken on new importance with the Lincoln centennial, and the fiftieth anniversary of his death and the Civil War’s end. It was in these early years of the century that Lincoln emerged as a national idol. Politically, the Republicans’ firm hold on Lincoln’s legacy as the party’s founder weakened, as political parties on the left began to advocate economic and social equality for the marginalized and oppressed as being within the Lincoln tradition. While Theodore Roosevelt claimed that Lincoln and his political supporters were progressives in their time, Woodrow Wilson applied Lincoln’s ideas of freedom and opportunity to contemporary issues during the 1912 election. By the mid-1930s, Democrats led by Franklin D. Roosevelt were invoking Lincoln frequently. When visiting Lincoln’s birthplace in June 1936, Roosevelt stated, “Here we can renew our pledge of fidelity to the faith which Lincoln held in the common man.” Roosevelt again incorporated Lincoln in his July 1938 monument dedication speech at Gettysburg advocating “opportunity and security for citizens” and imploring that America “live by the wisdom and the humanity of the


Democrats utilized Lincoln’s ideas of social and economic equality to connect him with their contemporary political views.

Lincoln and the Civil War were also themes used by the Popular Front during the 1930s to promote civil rights and equality. While Roosevelt was laying claim to Lincoln’s legacy, Earl Browder, secretary of the Communist Party in America and Communist Party candidate for president in 1936 and 1940, also claimed the Lincoln tradition. The communist platform for the 1936 election used the Civil War and Lincoln to situate the party clearly in the line of revolutionary events in U.S. history. Appealing to the search for Americanism in this era, the platform concludes, “Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism,” and plainly states that the “Communist Party continues the traditions of 1776, of the birth of our country, of the revolutionary Lincoln, who led the historic struggle that preserved our nation.” Thus there is a clear line from George Washington to Lincoln to communism. The document contends that Republican policies and the Democratic New Deal are insufficient to address the “greatest crisis since the Civil War,” which comprised widespread unemployment, oppression of minorities, and exploitation of the working class. Echoing Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg, the party implored working people to organize and establish a “people’s government—a government of, for, and by the people.” Lincoln’s legacy was again invoked in the 1940 campaign by Browder, who claimed that the “masses” in the United States “cry out for a new party, for a modern Abraham Lincoln” to offer a solution to the present crises. He offered himself as the man to fill that legacy and to carry on that work. No doubt, given Copland’s political leanings at the time, he would have heard this rhetoric associating Lincoln with the Popular Front ideology and egalitarian views he espoused.


and could likely imagine writing a memorial to him through the lens of 1940s leftist thinking.

Finally, Copland was part of a World War II generation for whom history’s great heroes had daily relevance. More than simply a political asset, Lincoln was revered as a “moral symbol inspiring and guiding American life,” and his image was used to frame the national crises of these early decades. As collective memory shapes present reality, the World War II experience, like the World War I experience two decades prior, was interpreted through association with Lincoln, the Civil War, and the nation’s struggle for freedom and morality. Indeed, as Franklin D. Roosevelt would explain in the summer of 1938, “The fullness of the stature of Lincoln’s nature and the fundamental conflict which events forced upon his Presidency invite us ever to turn to him for help.” To this end, narratives and images of Lincoln were used to fulfill historical discourses, that is, as described by sociologist Barry Schwartz, “to clarify the purpose of WWII, legitimate the preparations for it, and then to orient, inspire, and console the people who fought it.”

Despite some detractors, Lincoln’s prestige continued to rise during the first decades of the twentieth century, peaking in 1945. The name of Abraham Lincoln was visible not only in politics but on the cultural landscape, in communities, on bookshelves, and on theater stages. He was also found in the concert hall. The idea of setting Lincoln in concert music was not new when Kostelanetz proposed his commission. There were seventeen large ensemble Lincoln compositions written between the years 1919 and 1944. With Lincoln as inspiration, they sought to “capture the essence of America in symphonic form.” In addition to Goldmark’s 1918 composition, Copland would have been familiar with the Lincoln memorials written by other Jewish American composers, including Ernest Bloch (America: An Epic Rhapsody), Jaromir Weinberger (Lincoln Symphony), and Jacob Weinberg, who conceived a “musical memorial to Abraham Lincoln” and set


11. Peterson, Lincoln in American Memory, 312; Schwartz, Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era, xii; Barr, Loathing Lincoln, 9, 105, 151, 167. Lincoln critics were primarily “irreconcilable Confederates,” select groups of African Americans disappointed with the unfulfilled promise of emancipation, and antimodernist critics who denounced federal expansionist activities.
the *Gettysburg Address* in 1936. There were also works composed by Copland’s fellow left-leaning political activists, such as Elie Siegmeister (*Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight*) and Morton Gould (*Lincoln Legend*).12 Thus, it is likely that Copland had heard these and other Lincoln musical memorials as he began to compose his own musical tribute to Lincoln for Kostelanetz.

The commission, and *Lincoln Portrait*, continued the trend of commodifying Lincoln’s legacy. But instead of using Lincoln as a commercial enterprise for financial gain, Copland used the fallen president’s legacy to inspire Americans and console them during the dark days after Pearl Harbor. Indeed, composer Roy Harris observed, “Lincoln was the personification of a human ideal, an ideal for Freedom, which had to be fought, bled for and lived for. As such, Abe Lincoln has become one of our national symbols which we look to when our way of life is threatened.”13 For Copland, the choice of Lincoln was not accidental. His name and image had been before the American people for most of the century, and his legacy was adopted by leftist causes that resonated with Copland’s political sensibilities. Fellow composer Leonard Bernstein noted, “You know, Aaron always had some kind of identification in his mind between plainness and Abraham Lincoln.”

As Copland began writing in February 1942, the *New York Times* noted, “It is natural, that Lincoln’s Birthday in 1942 should make an American draw parallels between Lincoln’s great war and our own great war.” Copland was a musician who was politically engaged. Lincoln was a symbol of humanity and freedom widely known among the people, embraced by thinkers on the political left, and truly was an inevitable subject for Copland’s musical portrait.14

The genre of musical portraiture, originating in the eighteenth century, combines the musical elements of form, rhythm, harmony, and


Copland’s Lincoln Portrait

style to represent unique aspects of an individual’s identity. Selections of text and language fuse with the temporal aspects of music to allow a subject’s life to be presented as evolving through time. The musical composition and artistic performance then blend as an “interactive form of representation” to evoke uniquely formed and subjective images of the subject.\(^{15}\) Although Copland admits to having “no great love for musical portraiture,” he welcomed the opportunity to serve the war effort. He hoped to avoid being overly sentimental on one extreme or grandiose on the other by using narration with Lincoln’s own words, which Copland thought were “among the best this nation has ever heard to express patriotism and humanity.” He chose “a few excerpts that were particularly apposite to America’s situation in 1942.”\(^{16}\) The following is the text Copland wrote for the Speaker in *Lincoln Portrait*.

“Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history”

That is what he said,
That is what Abraham Lincoln said:

“Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We—even we here—hold the power and bear the responsibility”

He was born in Kentucky, raised in Indiana, and lived in Illinois.

And this is what he said:

This is what Abe Lincoln said:

He said:

“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

When standing erect he was six feet four inches tall.


\(^{16}\) Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 342–43; Copland to Harold Spivacke, September 1942, Crist and Shirley, *Selected Correspondence of Aaron Copland*, 145. Copland considered joining the Army Specialist Corps as a composer.
And this is what he said:

He said:

“It is the eternal struggle between two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. . . . It is the same spirit that says, ‘You toil and work and earn bread—and I’ll eat it.’ No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle!”

Lincoln was a quiet man.
Abraham Lincoln was a quiet and a melancholy man.

But when he spoke of democracy,

This is what he said:

He said:

“As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is not democracy.”

Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth President of these United States, is everlasting in the memory of his countrymen.

For on the battleground at Gettysburg, this is what he said:

He said:

“. . . that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion: that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Copland recalled using Lord Charnwood’s 1916 biography as a source for Lincoln’s words. Musicologist Elizabeth Crist questions this recollection, however, and suggests that Copland found his texts in Philip Van Doren Stern’s The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln. The Lincoln texts Copland uses in the narration are from the December 1862 Annual Message to Congress, from the seventh Lincoln-Douglas debate on October 15, 1858, and from the Gettysburg Address. Interestingly, the description of Lincoln’s height “when standing erect he was six feet four inches,” which Copland likely saw in Stern’s book, first appeared in William Herndon’s Life of Lincoln. The quote “as I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master” does not appear in either source, but had been oft repeated and attributed to Lincoln.

17. Aaron Copland, Lincoln Portrait (Boosey and Hawkes, 1943).
Franklin Roosevelt had even used this quote in 1936 in a speech given at Lincoln’s birthplace.  

Copland connected the Lincoln quotations with “narrative passages, simple enough to mirror the dignity of Lincoln’s words.” The simple narration added by Copland employs the redundancy of Hebrew syntax. Copland’s phrasing, “This is what Abe Lincoln said; He said,” echoes the repeated emphasis on speaking found in the Hebrew Bible: “And God spoke . . . saying.” Using simple ritualistic syntax to frame Lincoln’s words is further evidence of Copland’s imposed simplicity in Lincoln Portrait. This phrasing would be appreciated by a wide audience as a reflection of their common religious language. At the very least, this syntax suggests that Copland may have viewed Lincoln in Biblical or God-like ways. Through these words Copland hoped to inspire Americans to face the moral and political challenges of their time. Although these excerpts mostly referenced the slavery crisis, they applied to the twentieth century struggle for freedom, justice and democracy as well.

The composition for Lincoln Portrait can be divided into three sections. The music is mostly original, except for the quotation of two traditional American tunes, “Springfield Mountain” and “Camptown Races.” The slow and somber first section with the musical quotation of “Springfield Mountain” establishes Lincoln’s melancholy nature and places him in the rural and traditional America of the previous century. The second section, with its faster and more upbeat rhythms and quotation of “Camptown Races” moves him from his humble past to the politics of Washington, D.C., where he becomes a wartime president. This section ends with military-themed drums and brass, transitioning back to “Springfield Mountain” and the slower narrated third section. The music is largely in the background as the narration introduces Lincoln’s background and physical stature. The nineteenth-century Lincoln quotations are used to inspire twentieth-century

20. Exod. 20:1 and Gen. 8:15 (Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text); Crist, Music for the Common Man, 157, 160; Barr, Loathing Lincoln, 160–61; Schwartz, “Memory as a Cultural System,” 922. Barr refers to this trend as “Lincolnolatry.”
Americans to action in defense of freedom and democracy, keeping with Lincoln’s principles and the legacy of the Civil War. The final quotation from the Gettysburg Address moves the work from reflective to triumphant, supported by the rising fanfare in the orchestra.21

While the title of the composition implies patriotism and adulation of a great statesman, Copland’s accessible aesthetic and narrative selections were also a subtle endorsement of his Popular Front beliefs in radical populism, social equity, and economic justice. Copland’s simple narrative characterization of Lincoln’s humble origins places the great president among the common people. The familiar American folk tunes Copland used invoke a sense of unity similar to that of the worker’s “mass song,” which he advocated as a “cultural symbol” that gives “continuity to the day-to-day struggle of the proletariat.”22

The written text in Lincoln Portrait also reflects Copland’s populist sensibilities and cultural activism. Lincoln’s words extracted from a mid-nineteenth-century context serve as a contemporary call for social and economic reform, reinforcing many principles from the 1936 Communist Party platform. The “fiery trial” for which the people “bear the responsibility” referenced in the first Lincoln quote applies to the communist-proclaimed “greatest crisis since the Civil War,” for which the platform demands “common action . . . in the interests of our people and our country.” The second Lincoln quote about the inadequacy of past beliefs and need for new ideas is echoed in the platform’s criticism of past Republican policies, failing capitalism, and the unsatisfactory New Deal. Like Lincoln’s call to “think anew and act anew,” the progressives implore the people to “unite the forces of progress against the forces of reaction.” The quotations on tyranny and slavery support the racial equality and socioeconomic justice principles addressed in the communist platform, which denounces the exploitation of all oppressed classes, including women and minorities. Through these quotations, Copland paints Lincoln as the “modern Abraham Lincoln” Browder called for in his 1940 campaign: a revolutionary leader who would “defend and promote the unity of the working people” while addressing the immediate fascist threat to democracy. Finally, the Gettysburg Address quotation, which encourages people to continue Lincoln’s work, is directly echoed in the communist call to establish


“a government of, for, and by the people.” So while Copland is quoting Lincoln in his composition, he is also advocating the social and economic reforms supported by the Popular Front with a nuanced interpretation of “the people” as the common working classes. Lincoln’s Civil War is cast as the first battle in an ongoing struggle for freedom.23 Although passively consuming this leftist ideology, general audiences primarily received Lincoln Portrait as a patriotic offering, and the Lincoln it portrays as the beloved statesman of their shared history who personifies the American story and could lead in the present fight for equality at home and against fascism abroad.

Lincoln Portrait was completed in April 1942. The premiere of three new American compositions, a series of “musical portraits,” was announced in both the New York Times and the Chicago Daily Tribune. Lincoln Portrait premiered on May 14, 1942, in Cincinnati with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and radio actor William Adams as narrator. Interpreted within the context of contemporary events, Andre Kostelanetz noted that the premiere occurred following the Allied victory in the battle of the Coral Sea. With loud applause from the audience, Kostelanetz later concluded, “Lincoln’s warning fell on victory-deadened ears.” Initial reviews were quite positive, as an Associated Press story reported that all musical sketches were “received heartily by the audience.” Kostelanetz conducted Lincoln Portrait in several locations throughout the country in 1942. In July he performed the work in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., with poet and Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg narrating. The performance ended in silence. Kostelanetz again interpreted this in context, noting that the country had come to realize that the war’s road would be “bloody and dark.” He concluded that Lincoln’s words spoken that July resounded not triumphantly as in Cincinnati but “with a terrible new clarity.” Ray Brown of the Washington Post misinterpreted the silence, characterizing Lincoln Portrait as “a disappointing work . . . too discordant and too modern in idiom to depict the simplicity and strength of Lincoln.”24

Kostelanetz continued to premiere the work. Its first West Coast performance was in August 1942 with the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra and Edward Robinson narrating. Lincoln Portrait premiered later that month on the Coca-Cola–sponsored radio program The Pause That Refreshes on the Air. Copland himself seemed enthusiastic about the radio premiere, writing to William Schuman, “If you have nothing better to do, listen in on the afternoon of the 16th at 4:30 when Kostelanetz is broadcasting my Lincoln piece, for the greater glory of Coca-Cola. They have mesmerized Carl Sandburg into delivering the Speaker’s part.” Sandburg’s selection as narrator, as explained in the news, was “because his own poetry . . . expresses a philosophy akin to that of Abe Lincoln.” Sandburg had advocated economic equality and had been a great supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and he characterized the New Deal as a second emancipation.25 His presence as narrator reinforced the progressive tones in the work, and Sandburg would become a favorite to narrate Lincoln Portrait. In his message prior to the radio premiere, Sandburg noted “how closely Lincoln’s words sometimes fit our own needs today” and that “the ideas of Lincoln fight the ideas of Hitler.” On hearing the radio premiere, Copland’s former instructor Nadia Boulanger praised, “You have succeeded in something indefinable and of great significance.”26

With Lincoln Portrait put before the American public by radio, Kostelanetz released it for performance by Serge Koussevitsky, who premiered the work in Boston with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in March 1943, with left-wing activist and actor Will Geer narrating. It premiered in New York the following month and was performed by the New York Philharmonic in July, again narrated by Sandburg. As before, the reviews were mostly positive, with affirmations for Copland such as “one of his most interesting and compelling works” and “an outstanding contribution to the contemporary musical scene.”27


26. Schwartz, “Memory as a Cultural System,” 916; Fauser, Sounds of War, 250. Fascism was associated with slaveholding, and Hitler’s demand for national expansion was likened to demands for the extension of slavery in the United States.

The selection of Geer, as with Sandburg, reinforced the Popular Front ideology subtly present in the work. Geer would later be blacklisted for lack of cooperation with a House Committee on Un-American Activities investigation. His narration performance, however, was not what Copland envisioned. In an April 1943 letter to Kostelanetz, Copland remarked, “From what I can gather Will Geer must have been rather on the hammy side.” A note for the speaker was added to the score cautioning against “undue emphasis in the delivery of Lincoln’s words” and instead relying on “sincerity of manner.” This caution was apparently disregarded in the first recording of *Lincoln Portrait* by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, directed by Serge Koussevitzky, with the narration by Melvyn Douglas described by critics as “perhaps too passionate.” The Overseas Branch of the Office of War Information, apparently unconcerned with any communist ideology in the piece, arranged for a recording to be sent to servicemen abroad, noting the work epitomized “the spirit of America.”

Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait* had been heard across the country and was now to be heard around the world.

With audiences seeing the actors and events of history through contemporary lenses, public remembrance “reflects and frames the American experience.” Just as our understanding of Lincoln is shaped by “contemporary understandings of freedom, equality, and federal power,” *Lincoln Portrait* performances evoke images of Lincoln in contemporary debates. While the musical elements and text remain unchanged, varying performers and performance venues can deepen the metaphorical meaning of *Lincoln Portrait*, allowing for personal and unique interpretations of the piece. *Lincoln Portrait* was composed and received primarily as a patriotic work, yet Copland’s choice of musical and text quotations and the personalities selected to narrate some performances reinforce its leftist principles. At the intersection of collective memory and commemorative symbolism, the meaning of *Lincoln Portrait* becomes fully developed through the interaction of composer, artists, and recipients in the context of performance.

How this interaction between musical composer and performance could influence public perception became unfortunately evident in


the postwar years. Victory in World War II secured the defeat of Hitler and fascism, and the spread of communism came to be perceived as the greatest threat to democracy. For Copland and other politically engaged artists, navigating the cultural and political climate of the Cold War was challenging. A 1949 *Life* article identified Copland and forty-nine other prominent individuals as “innocent dupes” who had associated with “Communist-front organizations.” This accusation did not go unnoticed, and in January 1953, Illinois Republican Fred Busbey protested the scheduled performance of *Lincoln Portrait* at the upcoming Eisenhower inauguration festivities. Unlike the withdrawal of Vincent Persichetti’s composition, *A Lincoln Address*, from Richard Nixon’s second inaugural concert for content considered inconsistent with Nixon’s policies, Busbey’s objection was based solely on the political activities of the composer. Rooted in concern over a perceived endorsement of Copland’s communist leanings, the performance was scratched from the program. Harsh criticism from within the musical community and from the press followed. Copland characterized the controversy as “an attack by an elected official on the patriotism of a private citizen” and observed that “intellectuals are becoming the targets of a powerful pressure movement led by small minds.” Paul Hume of the *Washington Post* called it a “new threat to the rights and liberties of American citizens,” and journalist and historian Bruce Catton wryly observed that the removal “at least saved the assembled Republicans from being compelled to listen to Lincoln’s brooding words.” In defense of the work, Paul Taubman of the *New York Times* wrote that it “is a work instinct with patriotic feeling” and correctly predicted “Aaron Copland’s creative stature will not be diminished by this episode.”

Unfortunately, Copland’s brush with Cold War anticommunism would not end with this episode. Four months later, he was summoned to appear before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy. He was questioned persistently about his political activities, with McCarthy at one point stating, “You have what appears to be one of the longest Communist-front records of any one we have had here.” Copland emphatically

stated, “I have not been a Communist in the past and I am not now a Communist.” This claim was technically true, as there is no evidence that he ever joined the Communist Party. There was no mention or questioning about the content of his musical composition, *Lincoln Portrait*, reflecting how it continued to be appreciated as an inspiring patriotic work. Copland characterized the “current tiff with the Senate authorities” as “an experience I never expected to have.” He later reflected on his Popular Front activities with, “It seemed the thing to do at the time.” The digital archives of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic show no performances of *Lincoln Portrait* by either orchestra between the years 1949 and 1955. As Cold War anticommunist hysteria faded and the investigation into Copland’s communist ties concluded in 1955 without prosecution, *Lincoln Portrait* returned to concert halls. As for Copland, he emerged from this difficult period with his reputation and career generally intact, and he went on to participate in state events for both Republican and Democratic administrations, eventually receiving the Congressional Gold Medal in 1986.³¹

Although public perception of Lincoln and other great men diminished over the last half of the century, *Lincoln Portrait* continued to be played in concerts across the nation whenever the country needed to tap into the Lincoln legacy.³² It has been performed numerous times and has been narrated by various people chosen for their fame, oratory skills, or the unique depth of meaning their presence would bring to the performance. *Lincoln Portrait* as an orchestra piece has been used to celebrate, console, exhort, inspire, and encourage. In ironic contradiction to Busbey’s fears that Copland’s political activism would subvert American democratic values, the reverse happened as his populist-tinged *Lincoln Portrait* emerged as an emblematic patriotic song.³³ It is frequently played at Independence Day celebration concerts and


³³. Thanks to Allen C. Guelzo for providing his insights on these matters with me via email.
was included in the New York Philharmonic’s 1976 Tour in Celebration of the United States Bicentennial. Narration provided by General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, “hero of the Persian Gulf war,” for a 1991 performance cast *Lincoln Portrait* as a triumphal work. It has been narrated by other notable personalities from the unexpected to the sublime, such as Margaret Thatcher, Alec Baldwin, Henry Fonda, William Warfield, and James Earl Jones. Consistent with the purpose of its commissioning, it has also been included in concerts marking the anniversary of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, which were as surprising and devastating as the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.\(^{34}\) Celebratory and consolatory performances such as these invoke Lincoln’s tradition as Man of the People and Savior of the Union.

By the 1960s, Lincoln’s image was less multidimensional as his folk hero status and role in saving the Union lost relevance. Instead, Lincoln was seen more singularly as a personification of racial justice and reconciliation; the “great emancipator.” *Lincoln Portrait* was likewise used during the Civil Rights Movement to capture and capitalize on this aspect of Lincoln’s legacy to promote political and social equality. By the mid-1960s, the Lincoln Memorial had been established as a venue that added the moral authority of Lincoln to the struggle, due in large part to a pioneering concert given by Marian Anderson on April 9, 1939. Anderson, an African American vocalist, performed the outdoor concert on Easter Sunday, coincidentally occurring on the seventy-fourth anniversary of Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Court House, after being denied use of Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Walter White, NAACP secretary, thanked First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt for her assistance in securing the Lincoln Memorial location and dubbed the concert “the most thrilling experience of our time.” An editorial by Roy Wilkins of the NAACP called the successful outdoor concert the “ultimate rebuke to the D.A.R. and to bigotry.” The link between Lincoln’s unfinished business and the modern civil rights movement was solidified by 1963 with the March on Washington and Martin Luther King’s iconic “I Have A Dream” speech, symbolically given at the Lincoln Memorial. Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait* would be incorporated into this legacy in August 1966 at an outdoor concert performance by the New York

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Philharmonic in which Marian Anderson was selected to narrate Lincoln’s words.\footnote{35}

Democratic president Lyndon Johnson elevated the association of Lincoln with contemporary struggles for equality as he appropriated Lincoln tradition to advocate for his Great Society programs. In a Lincoln Birthday speech given at the Lincoln Memorial, he called for the nation to rededicate itself to Lincoln’s unfinished work, stating, “Lincoln’s words have become the common covenant of our public life.” Again, Lincoln’s words are framed in Biblical terms. If Lincoln’s words were the “common covenant,” then Lincoln Portrait might be considered its sacred hymn, one that would be used symbolically following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April of 1968. Although admiration for Lincoln as the “white Moses” had been transferred over the years to King as the “black Moses,” they were both martyred in strikingly similar scenarios. How appropriate, then, that performances of a composition written by the “Moses of the modern musical movement” would entwine the legacies of these modern prophets in American history. King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, provided moving narration to Lincoln Portrait with Aaron Copland himself conducting a February 12, 1969, concert with the National Symphony Orchestra at Constitution Hall. With her husband’s assassination casting “a new, and more revealing light” on the music and words, Paul Hume asked rhetorically, “When, if ever before, did it carry quite the same significance as from the lips of Mrs. King to hear those lines from Gettysburg.” Artist and social activist Yolanda King, eldest child of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, reinforced this connection by narrating Lincoln Portrait in a 1989 performance with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Six years later, Yolanda King and Coretta Scott King would join together in an “unusually impassioned” narration of Lincoln Portrait for a musical tribute concert to Martin Luther King Jr. in Chicago.\footnote{36} With intentionally selected narrators, these performances


of *Lincoln Portrait* challenged contemporary audiences to continue the work of the Great Emancipator.

While exhorting Americans to continue working for equality, *Lincoln Portrait* has also been performed to celebrate achievements of African Americans, particularly in the political arena. Former Virginia governor L. Douglas Wilder narrated *Lincoln Portrait* with the National Symphony Orchestra in 1991 during his tenure in office as the first African American governor elected in the United States. As the grandson of slaves, he had risen up from common-man roots to historic political leadership, echoing Lincoln’s legacy as a man of the people and a self-made man. This theme was repeated on a grander scale with the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first African American president. Obama adopted the Lincoln legacy early in his campaign, announcing his candidacy for president from the steps of the Old State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois, where Lincoln had delivered his “House Divided” speech. He spoke of hope, saying, “The life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible.” *Lincoln Portrait* was performed at the Lincoln Memorial as part of a preinauguration concert, which also included a video of Marian Anderson’s historic 1939 concert. The narration provided by actor and distant Lincoln relative Tom Hanks, who played a World War II army officer in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, connected the piece back to its commissioning as a wartime work, and its performance for this inauguration had a celebratory tone.\(^37\) The historic inauguration would bring new poignancy to *Lincoln Portrait* performances commemorating the Lincoln bicentennial later that same year.

With repeated use in performances celebrating the victories of American democracy, *Lincoln Portrait* risks being reduced to hollow boastful rhetoric without deeper purpose. Copland specialist Elizabeth Crist questions whether such use has shifted the “cultural significance” of *Lincoln Portrait* toward “authoritarian grandeur that hallows victory in order to forget the hallowed dead.” Indeed, one might question whether a twentieth-century musical portrait of a nineteenth-century president can be effective in inspiring meaningful reflection on twenty-first-century values. Contemporary performances

demonstrate that *Lincoln Portrait*, inspired by Abraham Lincoln, can most assuredly continue to provoke thought about ongoing struggles for freedom against oppression and can still pluck the social consciousness of Americans. Spike Lee chose to use *Lincoln Portrait* as part of the soundtrack for his 1998 film *He Got Game*, which tells the story of an urban high school basketball star’s struggle for self-determination against a community of others seeking to profit by exploiting him and his talent. In addressing the “tyrannical people,” the use of *Lincoln Portrait*, though seemingly absurd in an urban context, is quite effective. Lee has explained his choice by observing that Copland’s music, like basketball, is distinctly American. In July 2015 the Boston Symphony opened its season with an all-American concert that included *Lincoln Portrait*. But the hate-inspired mass shooting at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, less than a month prior deepened the implication of that night’s performance. Journalist Jeremy Eichler observed that the contemporary events “in Charleston and beyond made the text once more feel far from a dusty historical souvenir.” Audiences that evening were reminded through haunting words that Lincoln’s work toward equality remains unfinished.

With increased attention to multiculturalism and a broader understanding of oppressed minority groups throughout this nation’s history, *Lincoln Portrait* has continued to invite reflection on the nation’s values. Recent narration by actor, media sensation, and social activist George Takei further demonstrates how *Lincoln Portrait* still effectively prompts debate on contemporary issues in America as we consider not only national triumphs but shared failures. Although Takei has narrated the work three times, his most recent performance with the Oregon Symphony in 2017 brought particularly intense meaning to Lincoln’s words. Takei, who was held in an internment camp as a child in 1942 as *Lincoln Portrait* premiered, represents an ironic contradiction as Americans struggle to reconcile professed democratic ideals with historical missteps and current threats. For Takei, Lincoln’s words “resonate not only with the internment of Japanese Americans during the second World War, but also today, when we have the same kind of sweeping generalization of whole groups of people.” Finally, the National Symphony Orchestra included *Lincoln Portrait*, narrated by

actress Phylicia Rashad, in its all-American concert performed on the eve of Donald J. Trump’s presidential inauguration. The performance, although intended as a celebration of the American presidency, had a deeper effect. As journalist Anne Midgette writes, “The words of one president spoke with particularly aching poignancy as the country prepared to inaugurate another.” These recent performances show how *Lincoln Portrait* still has the ability to provoke thought about the struggle for freedom, the fragility of democracy, and the dangers of division in America.

Aaron Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait* remains one of the most recognized and enduring of the Lincoln musical memorials. The accessible style of composition, comfortably blending familiar tunes and spoken text with serious orchestral music, explains its lasting appeal to general audiences. By understanding Copland’s engagement with the political left and how the Lincoln legacy was claimed during the 1930s, Copland’s choice of Abraham Lincoln as the subject of his musical portrait becomes evident. Neither accidental nor coincidental—as Copland stated himself—it was inevitable. Lincoln was a symbol of humanity and freedom widely known to the people, and Copland evinced warm sympathies for the common man. The performances of *Lincoln Portrait* in the years since its composition have shaped and reflected historical memory. Varying venues, occasions, and narrators have influenced audience perceptions of the piece. It has been performed to celebrate victories of democracy, to console during times of collective strife, to inspire Americans toward greatness, and to exhort people to action when valued principles have been threatened. Far from being a work of hollow patriotism, *Lincoln Portrait* is an extraordinary and powerful musical memorial, received by audiences who liken Lincoln’s greatness to the story of an America struggling to live into his ideals of freedom and equality. By capturing a complex man in a masterful work of imposed simplicity, Copland has created in *Lincoln Portrait* a musical image of Abraham Lincoln that perhaps, like Lincoln himself, also belongs to the ages.