

Listening Guide

Copland: *Billy the Kid*, Scene 1, *Street in a Frontier Town*

DATE OF WORK: 1938 (ballet first performed); 1939 (orchestral suite)

GENRE: Orchestral suite from ballet

BASIS: Actual story of outlaw William Bonney (called Billy the Kid)

SECTIONS OF ORCHESTRAL SUITE:

<i>The Open Prairie</i>	<i>Gun Battle</i>
<i>Street in a Frontier Town</i>	<i>Celebration</i> (after Billy's capture)
<i>Prairie Night</i> (Card Game at Night)	<i>Billy's Death</i>

Copland's notes on the ballet: *The ballet begins and ends on the open prairie. The first scene is a street in a frontier town. Cowboys saunter into town, some on horseback, others on foot with their lassos; some Mexican women do a jarabe, which is interrupted by a fight between two drunks. Attracted by the gathering crowd, Billy is seen for the first time, a boy of twelve, with his mother. The brawl turns ugly, guns are drawn, and in some unaccountable way, Billy's mother is killed. Without an instant's hesitation, in cold fury, Billy draws a knife from a cowhand's sheath and stabs his mother's slayers. His short but famous career has begun. In swift succession we see episodes in Billy's later life—at night, under the stars, in a quiet card game with his outlaw friends, hunted by a posse led by his former friend Pat Garrett, in a gun battle. A drunken celebration takes place when he is captured. Billy makes one of his legendary escapes from prison. Tired and worn out in the desert, Billy rests with his girl. Finally the posse catches up with him.*

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

- Melodic paraphrases of a number of classic cowboy songs.
- Shifting meters, including a dance in 5/8, and much syncopation.
- Accented dissonance and polytonal harmonies.
- Extensive use of percussion.
- Dramatic and dissonant climax at end (death of Billy's mother).

Street in a Frontier Town; Moderato

Piccolo solo, with tune
Great Grand-Dad:



Other woodwinds join in dialogue.

New tune (paraphrased from *Git Along, Little Dogies*) in oboe and trumpet, almost in unison, with dissonance on strong beat (x):



Great Grand-Dad heard in piccolo, while strings enter with dissonant tune from above.

Alternation of 2 tunes—the first in woodwinds and strings, second in trombones.

Trumpet, with new, shifting-meter tune (4 + 3 + 4 + 3), and accompaniment in opposite meter (3 + 4 + 3 + 4):



Strings take up shifting-meter tune; brass and strings return to dissonant tune, which dies out.

Large chords played *fortissimo* in full orchestra, punctuated by bass drum;
disjunct tune based on *The Old Chisolm Trail*.

Quick dance tune in strings in 4/4
(loosely based on *The Old Chisolm Trail*), accompanied by syncopated
woodblock:



Trombones enter with tune from *The Streets of Laredo*:



Dance tune continues, with interjections of earlier dissonant tune in oboe and trumpet.

Opening tune heard in piccolo and clarinet, more animated, with grace notes and
harmonics in strings and sleigh bells, followed by slower, legato melody in low strings
and brass (based on *The Streets of Laredo*).

Mexican dance (jarabe) and finale:
trumpet, with melody in 5/8 meter
(based on *Git Along, Little Dogies*),
accompanied by wood-block and
gourd (accents shown with x's):



Violins enter with tune *Goodbye, Old Paint* in legato, 3/4 meter;
alternate with oboe playing verse
of same cowboy song:



Goodbye, Old Paint continues in fabric of complex polyphony; full orchestra plays tune,
alternating chorus and verse; trans-formed as it builds to climax.

3 loud chords, followed by 2 low notes (gun-shots), end section.