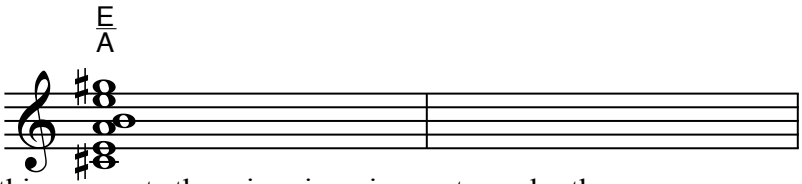
Some ideas about the harmony in the first movement of Appalachian Spring.

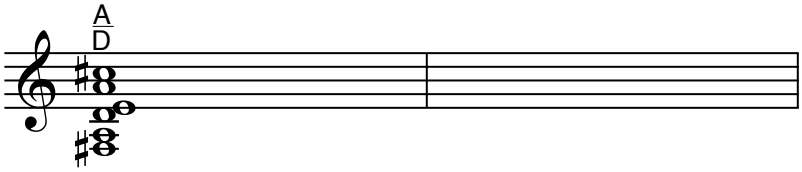


The harmony seems to be based on an E major triad in 2nd inversion stacked on top of an A major triad in 1st inversion. Stacking the triads this way puts them in mirror image to each other.

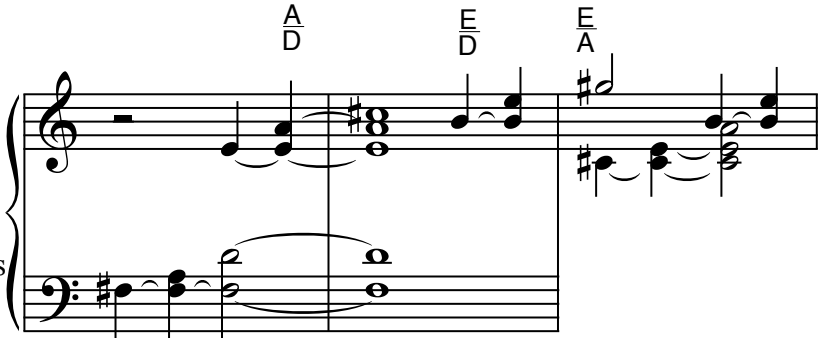
The interval of an ascending 3rd in the A triad (C# to E) is "reflected" in the E triad by the descending 3rd (G# to E). Likewise the interval of an ascending 4th in the A triad (E to A) is "reflected" in the E triad by the descending 4th (E to B).

The triads A and E are two of the three primary triads (I and V) in the key of A major. The third primary triad, D major (IV), comes in a little later. So Aaron Copeland uses only the I, IV and V chords in the key of A in this movement..... well almost..... there are a couple of substitutes for IV close to the end.

All of the melodic and harmonic material in the first 10 bars is derived from the E/A chord.

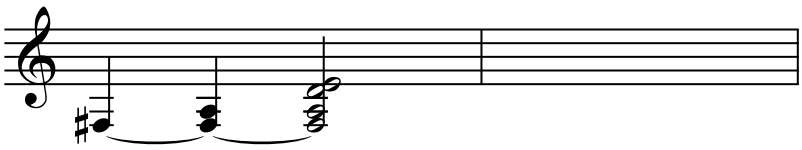


In bars 11 - 12 the strings and bassoon introduce A/D from the bottom up while the piano plays a pedal A, making it clear that we have not changed key.

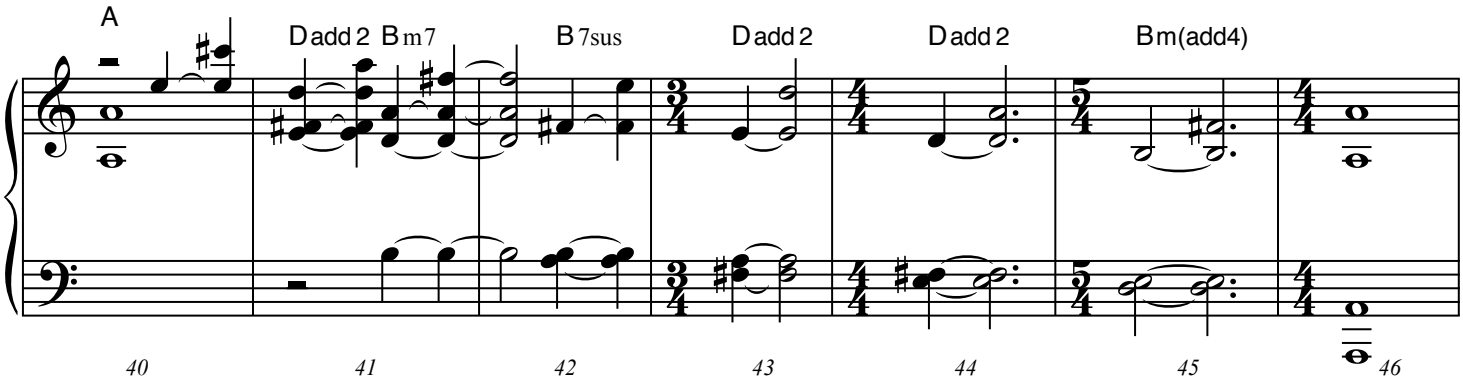


Beginning in bar 13, we hear a series of stacked chords gently rocking back and forth between I and IV on the bottom of the stack and I and V on the top. The triads on the bottom are always in 1st inversion while the ones on top are always in 2nd. At various points we hear A/D, E/A and briefly E/D. The melodic motive which is first stated by the flute and strings in bars 3-5 is used for every change of harmony in this section. It continues on this way through to rehearsal #5 (bar 40).

Each of these "polychords" contains a major second where the two triads join e.g. the notes D and E in the A/D chord above. Starting in bar 41 Copeland pares down the polychord to a triad with an added note, mostly a D triad with E as the added note.



Bars 40 to 46 present a prolonged plagal cadence, I (bar 40) to IV with added notes (bars 41 to 45) resolving to I in bar 46. The Bmin and Bsus chords are "like-function substitues" for IV.



Such beautiful music! Thank you Aaron Copeland!