Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, Eb clarinet, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, strings.

Duration: 11 minutes.

THE COMPOSER – AARON COPLAND (1900-1990) – Copland’s most productive decade, both in terms of compositional output and reputation enhancement, was the 1940s. But Fanfare for the Common Man (1942), Lincoln Portrait (also 1942), Appalachian Spring (1944) and his other soon-to-be legendary Americana might not have been so sure a bet without the 1937 success he had in Mexico City. It seemed that Copland’s ability to capture another nation’s culture predicted considerable good fortune in his own.

THE MUSIC – Copland visited Mexico for the first time in 1932 and returned home with ideas for the piece that would become El salón México already forming in his mind. According to Copland’s written record of the piece and its genesis, Mexico got its hooks into the composer in a way no other foreign destination ever had. “It wasn’t as if I had never been away from home before” he stated and then added, “I had done my share of wandering…without bringing back any musical souvenirs. But there must have been something different about Mexico.” There were likely many differences, most of them unknowable, but one thing stood out to Copland from the start. The Salón México of the title was a dance club in Mexico City that the composer visited with his colleague Carlos Chávez. Copland was immediately dazzled by the quirky and colorful personality of the establishment. Apparently, there were three halls: one for the finely dressed, another for people in overalls and shoes and a final room for the barefoot. Copland’s account also speaks of a common practice among the revelers, who would curl themselves up on chairs after closing time for “a quick two-hour snooze before getting to a seven-o-clock job in the morning.” In the end, Copland was surprised by the warm response at the premiere of his fantastical Mexican tribute and flattered that the audience in Mexico City did not see his effort as mere “tourist” music. It was the best possible compliment.

THE WORLD – Construction on the Hoover Dam was completed in 1936. Also that year, Jesse Owens won four gold medals at the Berlin Summer Olympics, Syria signed a treaty of independence with France and Federico García Lorca was murdered by Spanish Fascists.