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Like Stravinsky with his “Dumbarton Oaks” Concerto, Aaron Copland had a musical tie-in to the Washington area—his music for the 1939 documentary “The City.” The film’s scriptwriter, urban historian Lewis Mumford, envisioned a future of planned communities such as Greenbelt—an optimism that Copland’s music rather wanly reflected.

Copland also had a less happy association with Washington: He was grilled by Sen. Joseph McCarthy in 1953 about communist influence on the arts.

At Georgetown University on Saturday night, both connections were on display in “Copland and the Cold War”—part piano recital, part film screening, part reenactment and part academic analysis. Portions of “The City,” an American indulgence in socialist realism that is just out on DVD with the score recorded by the Post-Classical Ensemble under Angel Gil-Ordóñez, showed Copland’s populist outreach. The composer’s communist sympathies in the 1930s came through in an audience singalong of “Into the Streets May First,” an embarrassing call to destroy the bourgeoisie and raise the hammer and sickle. (Copland later disowned it.) Members of Georgetown’s theater and performance studies program led the singing and reenacted some of Copland’s awkward, squirming congressional testimony. Joseph McCartin, an associate professor of history, put Copland’s politics in the historical context of the Great Depression.

Through it all, pianist Benjamin Pasternack vibrantly traced the composer’s musical development, from “The Cat and the Mouse” (1920) through the dramatic Piano Variations (1930) to, finally, the expansive Piano Fantasy (1957). The latter piece employs an esoteric use of Schoenbergian principles, showing Copland in full post-McCarthy retreat from any attempt to appeal to the populace at large.