

# MODERN MUSIC

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MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

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## AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XII

Walter Piston — Classicist

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THE music of Walter Piston offers no facile approach to the written word. It is free of those narrow personal traits with which musical journalism identifies an individuality. A mannered inflection or a rigid oratorical one is easier to transcribe than the urbane flexibility of Piston's musical speech. Individuality, in a good deal of modern music, reduces itself to a particularization of effect, a narrowing of the syntactical scheme to those special procedures which, so to speak, copyright the musical personality. The completeness of Piston's style, its command over all the resources of his art, excludes so convenient a basis of definition. This music does not impose its essence by the uniqueness of its function and perspective. It seeks rather to fully gratify the musical expectancy and tension created by its thematic material. Piston does not speculate with that principle of surprise, veritable catalyst of modern technic, by which even the simple elements of musical discourse are wilfully transformed into the most unpredictable shapes. He admits with all the good grace in the world that two plus two make four, and elaborates his whole musical scheme in that same straightforward way. He may weave the various elements of a movement into a fairly intricate pattern, but above all he scrupulously respects the dialectical process in which the chain of musical events is rigorously determined from one link to the next.

His insistence on the purity and definitiveness of musical pattern links Piston to that current of contemporary thought which has attempted to re-absorb classic principles into the music of today. This latter-day classicism first took definite shape in what was known as the neo-classic school. The emergence of Piston's music seems to depend, in fact, upon the recognition of fundamental musical values which this school was instrumental in establishing. In the sheer anarchy of the last decade, in its Babel-like profusion of systems, experiments, and extreme individualism, his fastidious and thorough-going culture seems lost, and his actual musical output very fragmentary. Only when a community of values, and a syntax based on classic forms had solidified the musical terrain, as it were, could the full body of his music begin to emerge. The steady course and increasing power of his work since the beginning of the decade seem to bear this out. The criteria, then, that began to shape Piston's work, are to a great extent the criteria of neo-classicism. But these criteria themselves, for all their appeal to a universality of musical values, are strongly marked by the particular circumstances under which they arose. Valid as their direction may be, the stringency and impersonality of musical effect which they posited can only be understood as a kind of *ascetic reaction to an unbridled cult of individualism and expression*. It is by the light of this inherited predisposition towards an *abstract* conception of pure form that I shall try to make clear, later on, why Piston's work exhibits, along with its very highly sustained level of musical achievement, a curious disparity of effect.



The variety and elegance of his music requires a more detailed technical analysis than is possible here. I shall sum up, however, a few elements of his style. It displays, first of all, a singularly refined conception of the exact limits of a given medium. The facile adaptability of "well-written" music amounts, most often, to a mere exploitation of color. Piston, however, penetrates to the core of each musical proposition. The medium itself is *auskomponiert*; and the conjunction of flute and piano, violin cello and piano, or concertante group and orchestra, is as thor-



WALTER PISTON

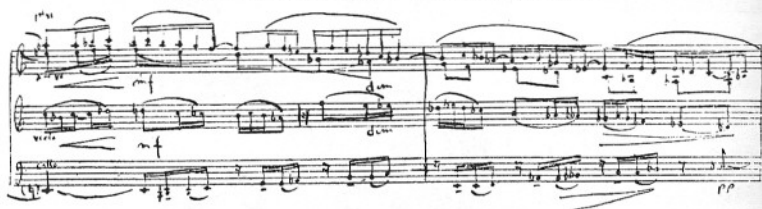
*A Portrait By*

KATHRYN NASON

oughly assimilated a factor in his form, as, say, the harmonic and melodic possibilities of his material.

The prevailing texture is contrapuntal, and highly organized in the distribution of voices. Each voice participates intensively in the motival development. This participation is over-conscientious at times. One finds instances where the contrapuntal design seems crowded, and where a simpler, more anonymous voice-leading would have given more transparent results. In a passage, for instance, from the *Adagio* of the first *Quartet*, the earnestness with which the cello pursues its motif obscures the character of the other parts.

ADAGIO from the FIRST STRING QUARTET



Such instances tend to disappear in Piston's more recent work. The voice-leading gains in concentration, and is so finely conceived and lapidary in effect, as to make it ideally suited for chamber music. I may add that each successive chamber-work makes Piston's achievement in this exacting field more outstanding.

His command over the resources of contrapuntal art is unquestioned. He can adapt even its most rigorous forms to musical purpose. The second movement from the *Concerto for Orchestra* is constructed to proceed by retrograde motion, and suffers no check, withal, to its giddy fantasy. Nor does Piston's penchant for canonic devices lead him into arid display. The canonic treatment of the following theme (from his second *Quartet*) enhances its expressiveness, and brings it into full relief.

FIRST MOVEMENT from the SECOND STRING QUARTET

The image shows a musical score for the First Movement from the Second String Quartet. It consists of three staves: Violin I (top), Violin II (middle), and Cello (bottom). The music is marked *All. 1/2* and features a canonic treatment of a theme. The notation is dense and rhythmic, with many overlapping lines and dynamic markings such as *ff* and *mf*. The score illustrates the expressiveness and relief mentioned in the text.

The harmonic texture is curiously compact of a double strain, diatonic and chromatic. The leading melodic voice may be diatonic, with a weaving, chromatic movement in the other parts; or the reverse. The conjunction is often a happy one. In the *Sonata for Flute and Piano*, for example, the figured accompaniment in the piano creates a shifting iridescent chromaticism, over which the flute develops the supple diatony of its melodic line.

## SONATA FOR FLUTE AND PIANO



Sometimes the intricacy of the chromatic element tends to congest the contrapuntal design, producing an effect of turgidity and strain quite out of keeping with the ease of manner so essentially a part of Piston's style. His music displays a fine sensibility for harmonic inflection, and so one cannot attribute this undue complicatedness of effect to an insensitive ear. Perhaps it is only in conjunction with other considerations of his music that one can guess at the sources of this complication. In any case, his recent work is marked by a more solidly integrated harmonic style. The diatonic basis of his harmonic language tends more and more to assert itself, is more sure of its effect, and of its ability to sustain one's interest without resort to a complication of texture. Reduced to even its simplest forms, as in the middle section from the *Scherzo* of the *Trio*, it is capable of drawing out individual and charming effects.

## SCHERZO from the TRIO FOR PIANO, VIOLIN AND CELLO

Alleg. mod.



The chromatic element no longer remains separate, but fuses into a diatonic context, inflecting and enriching its substance. The slow movements of the second *Quartet* and the *Trio* owe a good deal of their austere beauty and clarity of melodic utterance to this more finely-tempered harmonic language.



The real touchstone in the consideration of a musical individuality is the form. Far more than any other attributes, however personal they may seem, it leads us into the very structure and quality of the artist. That is why I have not till now attempted any estimate of Piston's individuality. His music is by no means void of personal mood and expression; but these elements, detached and considered by themselves, would have afforded only a superficial insight. I do not mean to imply by this that the personal qualities of Piston's music are negligible. On the contrary, the important role they play can only be understood in the light of the whole creative drama.

I might define this drama as the struggle between the abstract demands of pure architectonics, and the actual content of musical feeling and expression which the artistic sensibilities dispose. I have mentioned above that Piston's orientation to the problem of form was conditioned to some extent by neo-classic criteria. The sum of musical creation, according to these criteria, resolves itself into a sheer problem of architectonics. All considerations but those of pure design are excluded. While Piston does not subscribe in whole to these ideas he does tend to plan his form on this exclusive basis. As a result, the actual content will often lag behind the structural proportions. While the architectonic scheme is carried out with admirable skill, the divergence between form and content becomes a formidable problem. It may be stretching the point rather finely, but it does seem as if the congestion and strain of some of this music occurs in the attempt to fill these lacunae. Stravinsky's music, in its later aspects presents so smooth and impeccable a surface, just because the perfect neutrality of content permits him to spin out his design with all

the precision of an engineer. But Piston has two forces to reconcile and adjust: on the one hand, the impulses of emotion and expression which furnish the very marrow of musical content; on the other, the intellectual demands for design and cogency, for a demonstrable and well-ordered form.

We may evaluate his work by the degree of intensity with which these forces are reconciled. If the success of the process varies considerably, it is no indication of a lack of *justesse* in Piston's musical instincts and powers. It is a tribute rather to the essentially creative plane on which he is working. For an abstract inorganic matter like Stravinsky's offers none of the tough resistances and unforeseen complexities of a living matter. The perfect balance of his art is made possible by the perfect void out of which he operates. Stravinsky encounters, it is true, and brilliantly resolves resistances of a purely architectonic nature, but his success is all the more assured because his sphere is limited to the pressure of only one force. It is the combined pull of two forces, the polarity of expression and design, which makes the exact course the artist must describe between them so complex and incalculable—and alive. An art which attempts to eliminate one or the other is inorganic in the deepest sense. If we are compelled, then, to encounter this duality it is nevertheless within the specific powers of musical art to weld them so entirely, to fuse them to each other by so miraculous a process of interpenetration and absorption that their dual interests inhere in and completely saturate each other.

The perfect identification of expression and design is a governing principle of classic art. To profess this true classicism it would be necessary, first of all, to set a premium on those elements of the personality which really liberate the imagination. Only the fire and animation of an intensively felt idea are powerful enough to penetrate the entire musical form and crystallize every element of its style. If the application of this principle to Piston's music throws a sharp light on some of its insufficiencies, principally the disproportion between the extended form and the actual content, the creative aspect is made clearer too.

With each work Piston draws nearer to an ideal of perfect balance. In his very last works there is a marked advance in the

flexibility of adjustment between the form and animating idea. His architectonic powers are directed, particularly in the *Trio*, to intensive rather than extensive purposes. The transparency and modesty of proportion give freer play to expressive values. The slow movement of the *Trio* is extraordinarily successful in this respect. The sheer simple curve of its design is created with the most delicate apperception of the spacious twilit mood inherent in the melody. The *Scherzo* too, from the *Trio*, gains from this clarity of development. It is Piston in a very snappy, delightful humor. If his music is often at its best in the exuberant impulses of a careless gaiety, it is only another indication for us that the vitality of a light mood can be more intensive, creatively, than a tense dramatic mood which has struck no spark.

The development of Piston's style resolves itself into a revaluation of neo-classic criteria into truly classic ones. This process is by no means complete. The sloughing off of outworn methods and preconceived attitudes is arduous. Each element of composition demands to be reabsorbed into a fresh and living context. Design and expression must learn "to uncurl the same filaments of subtlety." Every inflection of the musical pattern must become transparent to the psychological intent. Piston's outstanding abilities, the seriousness and refinement of his musical ideals, the simplicity and sincerity of his moods should in the process of further development, carry him nearer and nearer to this living classicism.



## WORKS BY WALTER PISTON

DATE		PUBLISHER
1926	Piano Sonata	Manuscript
1927	Three Pieces for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon	New Music
1928	Symphonic Piece	Manuscript
1929	Suite for Orchestra	Cos Cob
1931	Sonata for Flute and Piano	Cos Cob
1932	Suite for Oboe and Piano	E. C. Schirmer
1933	String Quartet No. 1	Cos Cob
1933	Concerto for Orchestra	Cos Cob
1934	Prelude and Fugue for Orchestra	Manuscript
1935	String Quartet No. 2	Manuscript
1935	Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano	Manuscript
1935-36	Symphony	In preparation