

PISTON'S VIOLIN SONATA*

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TWO major works by Walter Piston have been recorded within the past year: the *First String Quartet* and an orchestral suite made from the ballet, *The Incredible Flutist*. The fact is of the greatest importance, not only because it reflects the rising prestige of the American composer, but because it makes it possible for the public to understand Piston's mature style. The *String Quartet* is a charming and a typical piece. Beautifully and cleanly scored for the instruments, it is free from pretentious and redundant writing. This is not a work of deep emotional interest but of wit and fine proportion. *The Incredible Flutist* is as popular a work as one can imagine a composer like Piston writing. Little complicated dissonance disturbs the conservative listeners and it has melody that would delight a child.

These two works are now being followed by a third, a *Violin Sonata*, and again the public may take stock of the composer's direction. A new work by Piston rarely offers a critical point of departure. Rather, it confirms with greater clarity and conviction those qualities which have always been characteristic of his music. His style, like that of Darius Milhaud, shows little change from work to work. I see this consistency of idiom as no weakness, but as the basis of a fine talent; nor do his compositions lack in vitality and meaning because of it.

I do not find it possible to question that his style is American, but it is certainly not consciously or blatantly so. His great concern has always been with the elegance and conciseness of his melodic materials and the fine balance of tonal forms. For all of Piston's absorption with the abstract qualities of music, his composition has a wit, an edge, an energy that an audience rarely fails to feel. One never is too conscious of details nor too overwhelmed by monumental proportions. A great virtue of this writing is that devices and organization simplify rather than complicate the work for the listener.

*This is the third of MODERN MUSIC's articles on American works that have been recorded. Louis Krasner, violinist, and Mr. Piston have made records of the *Sonata* for Columbia which will probably release them later in the year.

Clarity and wit represent only one side of Piston's temperament. The other is more difficult to define, but whatever it is, it stands in almost exact opposition to the acid quality of the counterpoint so common to all of his works. It is, in effect, a sudden blurring or fogging of contrapuntal lines which results in a kind of impressionism that is never obvious and serves as relief from the drive of the rest of the composition. This duality of style is essential to his expression and represents no undigested eclecticism. In the earliest composition of Piston's that I know, the *Three Pieces for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon* (which has been recorded by the New Music Quarterly Recordings) this contrast is felt largely between the slow and the fast pieces. In the first string quartet however, the contrast is felt within the movements as well as between them. In this way a greater feeling of dimension is gained and the work makes a rounder statement.

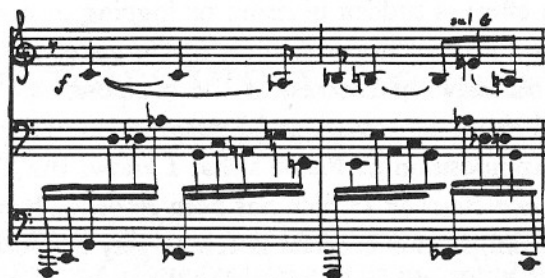
The new *Sonata for Violin and Piano* shows that the contrast of these two basic elements becomes more and more important in Piston's development. In this work there is a conscious emphasis of harmony to balance the fundamental contrapuntal texture of the music. The result is far more than an impressionistic feeling; the dimensions are so heightened that a strong dramatic effect is obtained. And because of this dramatic effect, resulting from the harmonic materials of the work, I find the violin sonata not only the culmination of the idiom one has come to associate with Piston but the beginning of a new phase in his expressive powers. For this work is stirring in a way that Piston's compositions have not been in the past. It lacks none of the dynamic qualities that we have come to know; it retains much characteristic wit and elegance, and it is, of course, perfectly modeled in its tonal proportion; but it moves us with a new drama and somberness.

An illustration of this difference is found, I believe, in the way the first theme is introduced:

Moderato (♩ = 69)

This is rhetorical and dramatic and depends for its effect not upon counterpoint but upon harmonic feeling. The first two measures alone present

an idea of such force that it can dominate the entire movement. The dual character of his style is made clear by the way the theme is set on the second page of the sonata.



It is with such a treatment that the sonata might have begun had it been written several years ago; this contrapuntal accompanying figure and melody remind one of the beginning of both the *Sonata for Flute and Piano* and the *Piano Trio*. The display of dissonant counterpoint, in other words, has been given a place secondary to the more harmonic conception. In fact, at the close of the movement the first theme is set in a harmonic manner that more completely than before presents the quality of the melody.



The slow movement is made up of long melodic lines, and counterpoint is used which makes no attempt to avoid the richness of thirds. There is a quality in the melody—a use of sequence over an irregular and chromatic harmony—that reminds one of the late works of Fauré.



The last movement is more in the style that we have come to associate

with Piston. It is witty and precise, filled with contrapuntal tricks and devices. With little ado it leads to a brilliant and satisfactory ending.

One has the impression that Piston is increasingly interested in the appeal of his music to a large audience. Without in any degree abandoning the fine intellectual qualities of his works, he is incorporating more varied elements into his musical vocabulary. It is encouraging when a composer of the highest standards writes a popular work of charm such as *The Incredible Flutist*, and it is of real importance when a new work such as the *Violin Sonata* shows an increased intensity of expression. For these achievements, more than all others, will make the American composer valued by the environment of which he is a part.