

*THE QUINTET OF ROY HARRIS

ARTHUR MENDEL

IT often happens that when we first hear new works by a composer whose music has pleased us in the past, we feel that the juice is thinning out. The composer is over-intellectualizing, we say; or his mannerisms are getting the best of him; or his invention is drying up. It is easier after the first performance of a new work to remark about the falling off of the composer's powers (we have all done it) than to confess that perhaps we have not yet grasped the change in his viewpoint or the increased concentration of his idiom. So Beethoven's hearers no doubt spoke, with the *Appassionata* in mind, after a first hearing of Opus 78. (It is easier still, of course, to pretend that we don't notice any change, and that everything is crystal clear to us, as it always has been; but I am talking about what one at least at the time honestly believes.)

Ever since Harris's early *Concerto* for clarinet, piano and strings, there have been those who greeted each new work with regrets that Harris was petering out. And even among his sincerest admirers, every work has not been welcomed with a uniform enthusiasm. I remember the conversation of a few of them with Harris after the first performance of the *Variations for String Quartet*, when there was general agreement (in which I joined) that the work, while admirably logical and "well made," was less juicy than the chamber music that had preceded it. It took considerably greater familiarity to show that that judgment, while sincere enough, was superficial.

Now the *Quintet*, on the other hand, wins its hearers decisively the first time. I cannot remember any Harris work since the *Concerto* that has been greeted so enthusiastically at its premiere. And it is its appeal to the new listener that becomes enigmatic as one deepens one's acquaintance with the work. For it is as concentrated as anything Harris has written and it is consistently polyphonic to an extent that might be expected to rule out easy triumphs. It is full of elaborate canonic device and subtle thematic development, and as one becomes more and more absorbed in these intricacies one forgets more and more the factors that give it direct appeal to the casual listener. What are these factors?

*This is the first of a series of articles which MODERN MUSIC will devote to notable American works that have been or are being recorded. Early in January Victor will bring out a release of the Harris *Quintet*, played by Johanna Harris and the Coolidge Quartet.

First of all, exceptional melodic beauty. Melody is always Harris's starting point, and the richness of his melodic invention is one of his greatest natural gifts. But even among Harris's themes, the melody upon which the first two movements of this work are based is a rarity – and this partly in ways which can be easily pointed out:

THEME OF PASSACAGLIA AND CADENZA



Harris's melodies are usually notable for their free, asymmetrical, "autogenetic" growth. Without sacrificing any of this asymmetrical, growing quality in detail, this theme has a symmetry in its larger outlines that offers advantages in development which Harris has usually denied himself. This, incidentally, is his first melody that can really be called ternary.

The theme is so eminently singable, so strongly diatonic and tonal in feeling, that one is surprised to realize that it contains every note of the twelve-tone scale. In this characteristic, which it shares with the other three themes of the work, it represents no radical departure from earlier Harris themes. (Compare the slow movement of the *Concerto*, for example, or the theme of the string-quartet *Variations*.) But in the present work the use of all twelve tones in each theme does represent Harris's conscious affirmation that one may employ the full resources of the twelve-tone system without falling into either chromaticism or atonality.

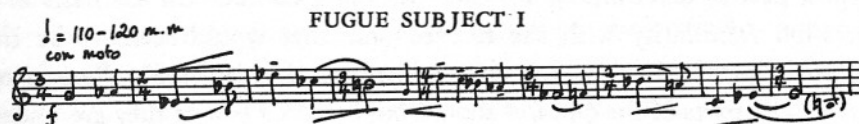
In addition to its beauty of thematic material, the *Quintet* makes its first appeal particularly through great variety of texture and color. A common complaint about Harris's music is that it is all on one plane of intensity, that it never relaxes. There is a certain truth in that observation (whether or not it is ground for complaint), and this uniformity of emotional pitch only makes variety of texture the more welcome. There is

no room in such music, obviously, for color effects for their own sake. The use of each of the different instruments *solo* in this work adds greatly to its textural interest. But the changes in the texture are not simply coloristic: they are the basis for the form of the second movement – a multiple Cadenza. Harris has here greatly developed his piano idiom, as well as made fine use of all its old devices – melodic passages in unadorned octaves, sharply percussive writing, poignant polyharmonies, etc. That idiom contrasts on the whole admirably with string tone. And here, as already in the *Concerto*, Harris shows his masterful feeling for withdrawing instruments from the texture for a time and restoring them just when an increase or a change in sonority is most telling. (That is, when it is most clearly a formal necessity. Of course I am not claiming for Harris any monopoly on the obvious truth that form and color are two approaches to the same end; I am simply pointing out that in this work he has made particularly effective use of color as an ingredient of form.)

These are some of the factors that have made the *Quintet* Harris's most popular chamber-music work. (Despite the fact that the music is not published and no records have been available until now, the work has had some twenty performances in the less than two years since it was written.) They commend it to any listener. But there is much more that does not meet the casual ear.

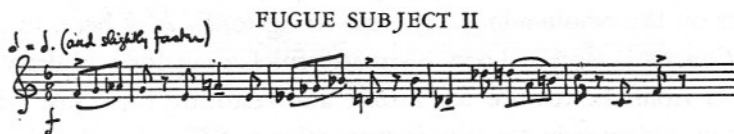
The first movement (*Passacaglia*), a series of some six variations on the theme given above, derives all of its continuously growing material from that theme. The derivation of all the material in the first two movements is a process that is often not obvious – occasionally even obscure – and that will repay careful study. The second movement is a Cadenza in which the violin, viola, cello, and piano, each *solo*, take turns at treating the same theme rhapsodically. Harris has written no more beautiful pages than the piano's part in this Cadenza – a texture of wonderful richness and beauty, in which, I think, there is more than a superficial kinship to some of the last Beethoven sonatas.

The last movement is a triple fugue on three subjects. The first of these, in its first form, has only eleven of the twelve notes.

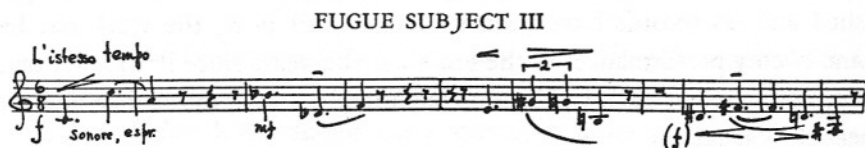


When in the third part of the Fugue, the twelfth note is added (C# between

the G and the D) it represents a real amplification of the theme – not because one has counted notes and found one missing, but because the breadth of this portion of the theme is greatly enhanced by measuring off the leap with this additional note. (Both the other subjects have all twelve notes.) After three sets of statements of the first subject, in varying harmonic textures, and three stretto episodes, the second enters against a 6/8 version of the first.



This theme reveals, more obviously than either of those that have preceded it, its twelve-tone construction; it gradually expands, like the "wedge" subject of Bach. It is more chromatic in character than the other themes, but still strongly tonal. Upon this subject there are two sets of entries and two episodes. Then against a re-duplicated version of this second subject, the third subject is introduced in the viola.



There is but a single answer; then extended stretto developments, continually increasing in animation, lead to a restatement of the first subject, which remains in command from here to the end. And it is on a grandiose proclamation of material from that subject, in augmentation, that the work ends.

The Fugue makes purposeful use of many devices of polyphonic style which there is no room to list, let alone analyze, here; but it should be mentioned that full appreciation of this movement – in fact, any real judgment of it – is not to be had without a detailed understanding of their place in its development.

But the ear is often faster than the mind, and beyond all the details of a work's composition there is its indefinable quality that plays the biggest part in determining whether we like it or not. On the basis of a thorough familiarity with the themes (for that would seem to be the minimum prerequisite to any real enjoyment of this work) there is no reason why parts of the *Quintet* should not be loved before they are understood. Indeed, I think that is the proper order.