

When a composer has well-defined and expressed theories these form a convenient basis for discussion of his music, if only to recall how little it matters whether or not he practises what he preaches. It is doubtful whether Harris is aware of the exact nature of the most expressive and telling qualities in his music. The slightly uncouth awkwardness, the nervous restlessness, he would undoubtedly consider defects rather than qualities. If these characteristics are due, as some think, to a lack of technic, let us hope the man can in some way be prevented from acquiring a technic which would rob his musical language of some of its most valuable attributes.

Melodically, Harris has two pet aversions. They are the sequence and the regular rhythmic pulse, both elements of symmetry. He is more successful in avoiding the second than the first, it being a simple matter to add or subtract a beat here and there. Sequences, that is to say the repetition of patterns, have a way of making their presence felt in spite of extensive variations of the original pattern. Be that as it may, one cannot help thinking that it is a needless limitation of resources to exclude any particular element of expression, there being a place for everything, as the saying goes. The continual change in length of the rhythmic units making up a melodic line imparts a sense of wandering and seeking which may account in part for the attempts to describe Harris' music in terms of the great open spaces of the West, the American pioneer spirit, and even the distant outline of a mountain range. References to elements not considered characteristic of the "good old U.S.A." are carefully avoided in this connection, for Harris is, above all, the accepted one hundred per cent American composer.

The nervous shifting from duple to triple rhythm and vice versa is well suited to the driving, energetic type of music familiar in the works of Harris. The procedure is less successful when applied to calmer and more serene moments. What seems to the cynical observer to be anxiety or fear on the part of the composer that his music may not be interesting enough rhythmically has led Harris into a complexity of notation which

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ROY HARRIS
A Portrait by
WALTER PACH

nificance of the bar-line and the attempt to make meter and rhythm synonymous should perhaps be laid to the influence of Stravinsky and Bela Bartok. After the *Sacre* most of our young composers fell under a tyranny of the bar and measure quite as strict as that which held sway during the nineteenth century, forgetting that the bar-line in music is only a convenience for keeping time and that it indicates rhythmic stress only by accident and coincidence. The impracticability of this means of indicating rhythm is seen at once when more than one contrapuntal voice is employed. If the counterpoint is good, the independent and opposing rhythms involved obviously can not be shown by the same barring. In the Scherzo of the *Piano Sonata* Harris makes a desperate and amusing attempt to solve the problem by the use of accents and the connection of the stems in groups of eighth and sixteenth notes. The result is needlessly complex to the eye and not half as "contrapuntal" to the ear as many a bit of two-part writing in conventional notation by Bach.

EXAMPLE 1. PIANO SONATA. Scherzo.



In the Andante of the same piece are to be found the following time signatures in rapid succession: 5:4, 11:4, 4:2, 3:4, 10:4, 9:4, 11:4, 14:4, 16:4, 13:4, 5:4, 9:4, 11:4. An added difficulty in reading a measure like 16:4 is remembering the accidentals, especially if the composer sometimes repeats an accidental and sometimes does not.

On the whole, one ought not to refer to Harris as a contrapuntal composer. The combination of individual lines is not an outstanding feature of his idiom. Instances in which this happens are the exception rather than the rule (see the fugal

exposition in the last movement of the *Sextet*). This is surprising, because Harris has often declared himself as interested in contrapuntal writing and is constantly pointing out some ingenious contrapuntal bit in his own work. But the movement of parts in similar rhythm does not constitute counterpoint and this is the procedure that occurs most often in his music. Frequently what appears to be a combination of melodies turns out to be one or two lines divided among several voices. The fugal exposition in the finale of the *Concerto for Clarinet, Piano and Strings* seems to become alarmed at the prospect of a fourth entry of the subject and takes refuge in two harmonic sequences.

If it were important to determine origins of the harmonic element in Harris, we should perhaps conclude that the French school represents its nearest counterpart, realizing, however, that it has already become a mild sort of blasphemy to find influences in the music of this most original figure. In slow, impressive movements the chromatic alterations and cadences sometimes tend toward a Strauss-Mahler sentimentalism and even (as in the choral of the *Sextet for Strings*) get as far as what used to be called "barber-shop" harmonies.

EXAMPLE 2. SEXTET FOR STRINGS. Choral.

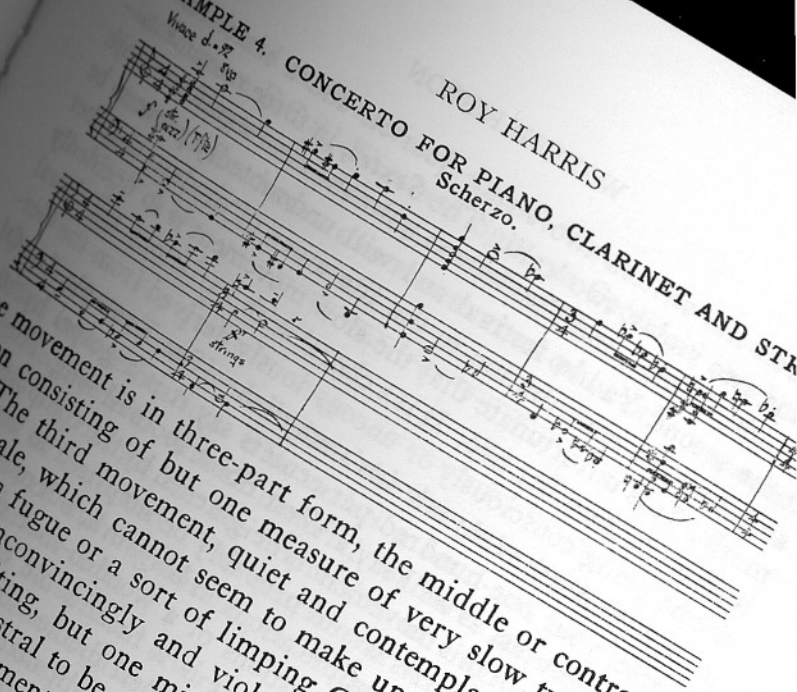


This is not to say that Harris does not employ these harmonies advantageously and convincingly. Some of Harris' best harmonic writing (see the beautiful Andante of the *Piano Sonata*) has been alluded to as having a polytonal basis, but while it is true that a combination of two different chords may have been used, it is equally true that it takes more than one chord to establish a tonality. In listening to this music one is practically

or not the composer
because of peculiar-
ment of the *Con-*
in A-minor, but

STRINGS.

EXAMPLE 4. CONCERTO FOR PIANO, CLARINET AND STRINGS.
ROY HARRIS
Scherzo.



The movement is in three-part form, the middle or contrasting section consisting of but one measure of very slow twelve-two time. The third movement, quiet and contemplative, is joined to the finale, which cannot seem to make up its mind whether to become a fugue or a sort of limping Czerny exercise and so ends a bit unconvincingly and violently. This work contains much fine writing, but one might reasonably suggest that the three movements of the *Piano Sonata* are even more lude, Andante Ostinato, and Scherzo. The first is an example of that spare, rugged side of H. The first is so personal and convincingly sporadic in the exploitation of the Andante, on an ostinato bass, employing some movement is

...ing *Quartet* (really the second quartet)
...the material for the entire three move-

...out as ... on the score:
...ated to the Prelude.
...ive of the Prelude
...in the first half) the
...e Prelude; the second
...istics of the Choral.
...the Fugal forms. (Unite-
...it would simplify the ar-
...the (related) material and
...the Finale.

3. First Theme of Finale.

Second Theme of First Movement

EXAMPLE 8(a). SECOND

...latest
...with the ac-
...horns, four tr-
...moderate percussion.
...fair to comment on the
...score. The writer is indebted
...quotations from the *Symphony*:
...EXAMPLE 8(a). SECOND
...Second Theme of First Movement (a.)

a sextet for two
three movements—
st significant work
bly prove to be
of modern chamber
ment is so decidedly
variations, the choral
derived from the Ger-
(See Example 2.) Of
y it is a gospel hymn—
t football song. The Teu-
ned by the composer's har-
be surprised to hear of any
his work, but more than one
a wooden-shoe dance toward
a formidable edifice of fugal
best themes. It is not quite as
from the markings on the score,
thematic is about as impor-
appears on the score:
to the Prelude
Prelude

ROY HARRIS
ments is based on the motive E-flat, C, which in Ger-
Es, C, hence E.C.S., Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, to whom
Quartet, as well as the *Sextet*, is dedicated.



The work is not as successful as the *Sextet* and seemed rather aimless on one hearing. The variation form and the demands upon the theme to furnish material for three movements are probably responsible for the impression of fragmentary form and a lack of continuity. The quartet was warmly received on the occasion of the magnificent performances by the Pro Arte Quartet in various cities.

Although he has written several works for symphony orchestra, Harris has been singularly unlucky in getting performances of these works by major orchestras. He has just completed a *Symphony*, which is scheduled for performance by Koussevitzky this season. One looks forward with interest to hearing his treatment of the orchestra. He is trying to secure an orchestral style "indigenous to the line and form" to use his own words. In this latest work he is using a large orchestra: woodwind by threes, with the addition of an E-flat clarinet and an extra bassoon; six trumpets, three trombones, tenor and bass tubas; euphone, and strings. It would be un-
from a fleeting glimpse of the
poser for the following





