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**Walter Piston's Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra:
Thematic and Motivic Transformation, Style, and Violinistic
Issues**

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by

Rachelle Marie Davis, B.S., M.M.

Treatise

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
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Dedication

To Kent and to Ethan

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With many significant endeavors in a person's life there are individuals who leave their mark in passing. This has certainly been the case here. First of all, I would like to thank my academic co-chair, James Buhler, for his words of wisdom and assistance when it came to crunch time preparing this document and my performance co-chair, Eugene Gratovich, for his support while at the University of Texas. I would also like to acknowledge the reference librarians at Dartmouth College; the West Lebanon, New Hampshire Public Library; the music division of the Library of Congress; and the special collections librarians at Boston Public Library for their assistance in finding documents for me. I am also grateful to Boosey and Hawkes, Incorporated publishing house which very generously loaned me a study score of the concerto free of charge.

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Publication No. _____

Rachelle Marie Davis, D.M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2004

Supervisors: Eugene Gratovich, James Buhler

Walter Piston's Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra is shown to be a musically accessible and technically idiomatic work that is pedagogically beneficial as a preparation for later study of the Sibelius, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky concerti. Motivic and thematic transformations are examined, as well as a correlation drawn between Piston's definition of counterpoint and his use of counterpoint in this work. Stylistic influences examined include those of Bach and Stravinsky, and though Piston was not a nationalist in his music style, elements of the "American" sound of the 1930s and 40s found in this concerto are discussed.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Biography of Walter Piston

INTRODUCTION

The 1920s saw a steady stream of American students make their way across the Atlantic to study composition with Nadia Boulanger and other French composers. These included composers such as Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Roy Harris. Among the students who went to study composition in France at this time was the Harvard graduate Walter Hamor Piston (1894-1976) who studied at the Ecole Normal de Musique with Boulanger, Paul Dukas, and Georges Enescu from 1924-26. Upon his return to the United States in 1926, Piston joined the music faculty of Harvard University where he remained until his retirement in 1960.

As a composer, Piston's work has not maintained its hold on the public's imagination as the works of some of his contemporaries have. During his lifetime, however, he received popular and critical acclaim for several of his symphonies as well as for his suite from the ballet *The Incredible Flutist* (1938). In addition, he received two Pulitzer Prizes¹ and was three times presented with the New York Music Critic's Award² as well as earning numerous other honors. His work is primarily instrumental and most easily classified as neoclassical for its clarity of line and form found in much of his work.

1939 marked a significant expansion in the violin concerto repertory. Besides Piston's First Concerto, three other major concerti were composed that year by William

¹ Piston won the Pulitzer Prize for his Third Symphony in 1948 and his Seventh Symphony in 1961.

² Piston won the New York Music Critic's Award for his Second Symphony in 1944, his Viola Concerto in 1959, and his String Quartet no. 5 in 1964.

Walton, Paul Hindemith and Samuel Barber. The Piston concerto is as musically accessible as the better known Barber Concerto, though technically more difficult.

This thesis examines Piston's Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra from a variety of perspectives, including discussions of formal and compositional issues, interpretive concerns, and issues related to technique and pedagogy of the violin. Aside from a few paragraphs in Howard Pollack's book on the composer,³ extremely little has been written and published about the First Concerto. A quick examination of the score demonstrates that the work fits under the fingers well and, though a challenge, is very idiomatic to the instrument. A recent recording of the Piston Concerto by James Buswell⁴ shows the work to be an exciting, vibrant piece of music that merits deeper study and, most certainly, exposure to larger audiences.

RECEPTION AND EARLY REVIEWS OF THE CONCERTO NO. 1 FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA

Piston's Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra was written during the summer of 1939 for violinist Ruth Posselt of Boston (b. 1914) to whom the work was also dedicated. The work was first performed on March 18, 1940 in Carnegie Hall by Posselt with the National Orchestra of Washington conducted by Leon Barzin. Critic Howard Taubman, in a positive review of the premier the next day, commented:

If one does not expect every new composition to be a masterpiece, Mr. Piston's concerto may be pronounced, even after one hearing, as a work worthy of respect and admiration...Mr. Piston writes with zest and momentum; the last movement

³ Howard Pollack, *Walter Piston* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1981).

⁴ *Walter Piston: Violin Concerto No. 1 (1939), Violin Concerto No. 2 (1960), Fantasia for violin and orchestra (1970)*, James Buswell, with Theodore Kuchar and National Symphony Orchestra of the Ukraine. Recorded May 27-31, 1998, Kiev. CD: Naxos American Classics 8.559003.

is a rondo that has living warmth. This movement, by the way, was played twice.

Mr. Barzin explained that “we were not satisfied with the first playing.”⁵

Taubman’s comments on Posselt’s performance of the work were also positive:

Miss Posselt played the Piston concerto with a flash and temperament that must have been a delight to the composer, who sat in a box. She has evidently immersed herself in the music. Its technical hazards held no terrors for her. She concentrated on the interpretation, which was full of breadth, feeling and conviction. Mr. Piston wrote the concerto for Miss Posselt, which was a good thing for music and interpreter.⁶

Also performed on the same concert by Posselt was the New York premier of the *Concertstueck for Violin and Orchestra* by Henriette Bosmans and the Dvorak *Violin Concerto in A minor*.

Elliott Carter’s brief review of the concerto in his 1946 article on Piston is a good synopsis of the essential character of the Concerto:

The Concerto for Violin and Orchestra marks an abrupt change [from the previous Violin Sonata of the same year (1939)]. This is as diatonic as the *Carnival Song* for men’s voices and brass (1938) but far more tuneful. Its Mendelssohnian charm and facility and its amplitude of form leaves one with a sense of completeness not always present in Piston’s music. The earlier dissonant sharpness is avoided and

⁵ Howard Taubman, “World Premiere for Violin Work,” *The New York Times*, 19 March 1940.

⁶ Ibid.

the work moves in an atmosphere of warmth and brilliance that makes it an immediate success, although, for some strange reason, it is rarely heard. It ought to appeal to violinists because the orchestra never suffocates the solo part, as it does in most modern concertos. Most of the materials suggest in a very discreet way various kinds of popular music. The first theme has a simple freshness entirely new to Piston and the whole movement flows along in this engaging fashion from beginning to end. A second movement of quiet, peaceful character contrasts a soft background of brass with the fragile voice of the solo instrument in a development that is unusually bland and reflective for this writer of poignant slow music. The finale jokes along gaily, stating its rondo theme against a comically broken-down bassoon figure changing, later, to more lyric moods.⁷

Elliott Carter's synopsis of this concerto indicates that even in 1946, a mere six years after the premier, this concerto received little attention. Today the first Piston violin concerto is performed infrequently, if at all, and certainly has not received much critical scrutiny or popular acclaim. This may be due in part to the fact that the work is now out of print. In addition, the work has not attracted a major international performer to champion it with audiences. Perhaps if a noted performer were to take up the work, it might be resurrected much as the Barber Concerto was in the 1980s and 1990s. Though the work may never become part of the mainstream canon of violin concerti, it certainly deserves more exposure than it has received so far.

⁷ Elliott Carter, "Walter Piston," *The Musical Quarterly* 32 (1946): 369.

COMPOSER BIOGRAPHY

Walter Hamor Piston, Jr. worked briefly as a draftsman and later trained as an artist before he decided to go into music full time at the relatively late age of 24. He has gone down in history as a wonderful pedagogue who could make dry counterpoint come alive, a theorist who pioneered the way theory was taught in the second half of the twentieth century, and a skilled composer who won numerous awards for his compositions including Pulitzer prizes for his Third and Seventh Symphonies.

Born on January 20, 1894, Piston was the second of four sons in a second generation English/Italian immigrant family in Rockland, Maine. Little is known about the musical circumstances of his childhood, but his family moved to Boston in 1905 and did not own a piano until 1906 when Walter was twelve.⁸ His father brought home a violin when Walter was in high school, and he was soon playing in the high school orchestra and practicing so much that his mother is said to have complained, “Must you practice all day?”⁹ Piston went on to study violin with Florence Jones, a violinist at the MacDowell Club, with Felix Winternitz, a concert violinist, and with Jules Theodorowicz and Placido Fiumara, both with the Boston Symphony.¹⁰ He was proficient enough on the violin and piano by his late teens to be earning money playing in dance bands and theater orchestras.¹¹

He attended the Mechanical Arts High School in Boston where he focused on engineering and became proficient as a draftsman, which may explain why he was very

⁸ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 16. From a personal letter to Howard Pollock from Edward Piston, 15 October 1977.

⁹ Ibid. Citing a phone conversation Pollack had with Ruth Naugler, 22 July 1979.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kaufman LP liner notes.

meticulous throughout his life with the visual clarity of his scores.¹² He majored in art and drawing at the Massachusetts School of Art from which he graduated in 1916. It was here that he met his future wife, Kathryn Nason, whom he married in 1920. As to why he chose to go to school in art rather than music, he later commented:

My family was far from wealthy, and while I had some talent in music, I was also interested in art. The New England Conservatory cost money, but the Massachusetts School of Art was free. Hence I went to art school, and earned money on the side playing the violin and piano. I kept getting more and more interested in music, and by the end of the senior year I was entirely devoted to it; but by then I was so near to graduation I decided to finish up school and I got my diploma as a painter.¹³

During this time and later while at Harvard, Piston played violin and piano in dance bands, at times even directing these orchestras at local cafés, dance halls, hotels, restaurants, and at social events.¹⁴ According to Piston, the type of music he played on these occasions was “the familiar, routine popular music, endlessly repeating the platitudes in fashion at the time, occasionally relieved a bit by excerpts from musical shows or even selections from operas.”¹⁵ Howard Pollack comments that “long after he quit this profession, Piston continued to play such music to entertain his friends at private

¹² John Warthen Struble, “Piston,” in *The History of American Classical Music: MacDowell Through Minimalism*, by John Warthen Struble (New York, NY: Facts On File, Inc., 1995), 163.

¹³ Peter Westergaard, “Conversation with Walter Piston,” *Perspectives of New Music* 7 (1968): 3-17, Reprinted in *Perspectives on American Composers*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward Cone (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 157; Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 18.

¹⁵ Westergaard, “Conversation with Walter Piston,” 157.

parties.”¹⁶ Though he would later strive for a more international, neoclassical sound to his music, he would occasionally let his previous dance hall background slip into a composition.

With the advent of World War I, Piston joined a Navy Band stationed at MIT for two years. Though he did not play a band instrument at the time, he listed the saxophone as his primary instrument since he had heard it was easy to learn. Piston comments:

When the war came, the First World War, that is, and it became obvious that everybody had to go into the service, I wanted to go in as a musician. I couldn't play any band instrument, but I knew instruments and I knew that the saxophone was very easy. So I went down to Oliver Ditson's and bought a saxophone, and stopped by at a public library to get an instruction book. I learned enough to play by ear. In a very short time I was called and I tried out for the band. I didn't pretend to read the part but just played notes that went with the harmony, and I was accepted. That turned out to be a rather valuable experience for me, because we had all kinds of spare time; with instruments always available in the band room I picked up a moderate ability to play something on each of them. I was proficient enough to play the English horn solo in the *William Tell* Overture on the little soprano saxophone in Symphony Hall.¹⁷

In 1917, while in the Navy, Piston joined MacDowell Club as first violinist and came under the influence of the director Georges Longy, a distinguished French musician who was hired as the principal oboist of the Boston Symphony in 1898. Under his

¹⁶ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 18.

direction, the Club's performances emphasized baroque and romantic French music. When Longy founded the short-lived Boston Musical Association in 1919 with the purpose of promoting new American music, Piston played principal second violin in all of the Association's orchestra concerts until the Association's demise in 1921.¹⁸

In 1919 Piston joined Archibald Davison's counterpoint class at Harvard as a "special student" and, according to Piston, by the end of the term "Doc was all fired up about getting me to come to Harvard. I think he more or less arranged the whole thing."¹⁹ As a result of Davison's encouragement, Piston entered Harvard as a regular, full-time student in the fall of 1920 at the age of twenty-six and went on to graduate *summa cum laude* in 1924. While studying there he worked as Dr. Davison's assistant in addition to working as an assistant at one time or another to most of the other music faculty as well.²⁰ In addition to being exposed to both old and new music performed on campus as well as attending lectures by such distinguished composers as Vincent d'Indy, Arthur Bliss, and Darius Milhaud, Piston also gained valuable experience directing the Harvard school orchestra, the Pierian Sodality, from 1921 to 1924, often with very favorable reviews.²¹

Among the awards Piston received his senior year was the John Knowles Paine Traveling Fellowship, which awarded its recipients \$1500 a year for two or three years of study abroad. Using this fellowship, Piston and his wife Kathryn traveled to Paris where they stayed from 1924 to 1926. While in Paris, he attended the École Normale de Musique where he studied composition and counterpoint with Nadia Boulanger,

¹⁷ Westergaard, "Conversation with Walter Piston," 156.

¹⁸ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 17.

¹⁹ Westergaard, "Conversation with Walter Piston," 157.

²⁰ Ibid., and Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 20.

²¹ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 23.

composition with Paul Dukas and Georges Enescu, and played viola in the orchestra.²² Among his American contemporaries studying with Boulanger at the time were Virgil Thomson, Roy Harris, and Aaron Copland. Though many of his American compatriots in Boulanger's class would return to Europe repeatedly for various lengths of time, Piston only returned one more time, for a sabbatical in 1936, though he would keep in contact with Boulanger throughout his life through the occasional note or postcard.²³

Upon completing his course of study at the École Normale in 1926, Piston returned to Harvard to assume a position on the theory and composition faculty where he taught until his retirement as professor emeritus in 1960; he served for a time as the chairman of the department and held the Walter W. Naumberg Professorship of Music.²⁴ During his tenure at Harvard, Piston revised the way theory was taught, developed the concept of "harmonic rhythm,"²⁵ and taught many of the twentieth century's leading American composers. A partial list of his pupils reads like a who's who of American composers: Leonard Bernstein, Elliott Carter, LeRoy Anderson, Arthur Berger, Irving Fine, Harold Shapiro, Daniel Pinkham, Samuel Adler, and John Harbison, to name just a few.²⁶

As a teacher, Piston was an engaging lecturer who was able to effectively communicate with his students. Leonard Bernstein recalled his positive experience in Piston's class in a Young People's Concert entitled "A Tribute to Teachers":

²² Ibid., 25.

²³ There are several notes from Boulanger in the Piston collection at the Boston Library including a couple of birthday cards. Nadia Boulanger was only 7 years Piston's senior.

²⁴ Bruce Archibald, "Piston, Walter," *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Ed. by H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie (London: MacMillan, 1986), 572.

²⁵ John Warthen Struble, "Piston," 164.

²⁶ Ibid., 165. Also, Howard Pollack, "Piston, Walter," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd Edition, ed. S. Sadie, and J. Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), 20:792.

[Piston] made the study of so dry a subject as fugue come alive for me week after week, hour after hour. Anyone who has ever had the good fortune to study with Piston can never forget the deep understanding of music he was able to communicate, or the deep belly-laughter that went with all our classes; he is certainly one of the wittiest minds and tongues I have ever known.²⁷

According to Pollack, “Although he [Piston] encouraged them to find their own way, many of these composers show his stylistic influence, especially in matters of contrapuntal finesse and textural clarity.”²⁸ Upon his retirement, Piston was able to direct his energy to composing at his home in Belmont, Massachusetts and at his farm in Woodstock, Vermont. He continued to compose until his death in Belmont, Massachusetts on November 12, 1976.

PISTON THE COMPOSER

Piston is primarily known today for his contributions to music theory pedagogy in the form of four theory textbooks: *Principles of Harmonic Analysis* (Boston, 1933), *Harmony* (New York, 1941), *Counterpoint* (New York, 1947), and *Orchestration* (New York, 1955). The latter three were widely used and later translated into numerous languages. *Harmony* was particularly important in bringing about a new era in theory pedagogy in which, as noted by David Thompson, students were taught theoretical principles through the “observation of musical practice.”²⁹ Though Piston is better

²⁷ Leonard Bernstein, “A Tribute to Teachers,” Young People’s Concert, Nov. 2, 1963. Typescript from the Bernstein Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
<http://memory.loc.gov/music/lbcoll/lbypc/0272/017.jpg>

²⁸ Howard Pollack, “Piston, Walter,” 792.

²⁹ Ibid.

known today as a theory pedagogue, during his life he was a successful composer who was unique among his contemporaries for concentrating on purely instrumental music; the only exceptions in his oeuvre are two choral works, *Carnival Song* (1938, 1940), and *Song and Prayer of David* (1958).

Piston's compositional style is neoclassical in texture and form. His choice of the European influenced neo-classicism of Paul Hindemith and Igor Stravinsky as the basis of his musical style and his general avoidance of the overt "Americanisms" popular with his contemporaries gave his music a European flavor distinct from that of his nationalist contemporaries Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, and Virgil Thomson.³⁰ But while he typically avoided quotations of American folk song in his music, his compositions still have an essential "American" sound to them through their reference to traditional dance rhythms, his use of quartal and quintal harmonies, as well as jazz and blues harmonies. While Piston's style reaches back to traditional forms and textures found in the sonata, string quartet, and symphony, his harmonic and rhythmic language are definitely those of the twentieth century. He frequently uses twentieth century dance rhythms, jazz and blues harmonies, frequent avoidance of triadic harmonies, and a consistent use of perfect fourths and fifths as fundamental building blocks for his vertical harmonies rather than the traditional triads.

Piston's compositions include over twenty-six chamber works including five string quartets, a *Sonata* for violin and piano (1939), and a *Sonatina* for violin and harpsichord (1945). While he wrote relatively few pieces for keyboard, Piston's writing for orchestra is as prodigious as that for chamber ensembles, including eight symphonies, multiple concertos and similar works for solo instruments and orchestra—including two

³⁰ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 64-65.

violin concertos (1939, 1960); a viola concerto (1957); *Variations* for Cello and Orchestra (1966); and a *Fantasia* for Violin and Orchestra (1970), as well as various other works for orchestra.

Early in Piston's career as a composer, Edward Burlingame Hill introduced his work to Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1924-1949), who encouraged him to write for symphony orchestra. This began a collaboration with the Boston Symphony Orchestra that led to the BSO premiering eleven of Piston's works between 1927 and 1971. In addition to his close connection with the BSO, Piston fulfilled commissions for the major orchestras of New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Dallas, Louisville, Minneapolis and Cincinnati among others.³¹ While Piston's symphonic works received significant critical notice, his most famous and frequently performed work continues to be the orchestral suite arrangement of his ballet *The Incredible Flutist* (1938; orchestral suite arrangement, 1940). This fame is somewhat ironic, however, inasmuch as its programmatic basis is anomalous in Piston's oeuvre.

While Piston experimented with the 12-tone method as early as the Flute Sonata in 1930 and composed a strict 12-tone work as early as the *Chromatic Study on the Name of Bach* for organ (1940), the work of his early and middle periods was tonal with a linear or modal harmony emphasizing perfect fourths and fifths (this is certainly the case with the first movement of the first violin concerto).³² Not until the 1950s and especially the 1960s, when he turns to a more extensive use of the 12-tone method, does his work exhibit the dense chromaticism characteristic of the modern music of the time. Piston also moved away from his use of traditional three- and four-movement forms at this time,

³¹ Pollack, "Piston, Walter," 792.

³² Bruce Archibald, "Piston, Walter," 572.

often composing more complex one-movement works such as his *Fantasia* for Violin and Orchestra (1970) and his *Variations* for Cello and Orchestra (1966).³³

Piston received many awards during his lifetime. Among them were Pulitzer prizes for the Third Symphony (1948) and the Seventh Symphony (1961), New York Critic's Circle Awards for his Second Symphony (1944), the Viola Concerto (1959), and the Fifth String Quartet (1964), as well as the Naumburg Award for the Fourth Symphony (1953). He was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1938, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1940, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1955. He also received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Coolidge Medal (1935) and numerous honorary doctorates. In 1969, the French government bestowed on him the decoration Officier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and he was honored by the Vermont government in 1971 with an award "for Excellence in the Arts."

The Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra (1939) was composed at the beginning of Piston's middle period of composition (which lasted until the early 1950s), before most of these honors were bestowed on him. Yet in this work, one can hear the compositional craftsmanship and contrapuntal skill that became trademarks of his musical language. One can also hear influences from his days as a musician in a dance band as well as the more traditional influences of the European neoclassical school. These and other aspects of this composition will be discussed later in this document.

³³ Howard Pollack, "Piston, Walter," 792.

CHAPTER 2

Concerto Form and Motivic Analysis

Walter Piston's Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra is a remarkable work that highlights Piston's skills as a composer, orchestrator, and contrapuntalist. While a deeper theoretical knowledge of the work is not necessary to an enjoyable performance of the work, a study of the fascinating thematic and motivic transformations found in this composition underscores Piston's compositional craftsmanship and sheds light on some of his compositional choices that may not be clear when first heard.

The following are Piston's program notes for the Concerto No. 1 that outline the form and tonality of the work, giving a brief overview of the work as a whole:

- I. *Allegro energico* 3-4, in sonata form, tonality D major. The first theme is played by the solo violin after a few introductory chords, and it presents two elements, one broad and lyric, the other rhythmic. The second theme is quiet and simple, accompanied by muted strings.
- II. *Andantino molto tranquillo* 4-4, in F minor. A melody played by the flute is followed by three variations, with a return of the melody in the solo violin, muted.
- III. *Allegro con spirito* 2-4, a rondo with three themes, tonality D major. Theme I appears in the solo violin after a short introduction. Theme II is a rhythmic transformation of the second theme of the first movement. Theme III is presented as a canon by the horn and solo violin. There is a cadenza combining themes II and III, and a coda. The form is then, ABACABA, cadenza, coda.³⁴

As seen above, the Concerto No. 1 is conventional in its form, following the traditional three movement format and utilizing standard forms for all three movements. Piston does, however, delay the traditional virtuosic cadenza until the end of the third movement which allows him to utilize thematically transformed material from all three movements. It is Piston's use of thematic and motivic transformation throughout the concerto that will be discussed in further detail in this chapter.

FIRST MOVEMENT

While Piston was essentially a traditionalist in form and compositional technique during the period in which this concerto was written, he still utilized the neoclassical language of the twentieth century with his use of syncopation and his avoidance of a triadic foundation for his harmonies in favor of quartal and quintal harmonies (which tend to lend the work and "American" sound).³⁵ This concerto evidences these compositional traits through Piston's consistent use of quartal and quintal harmonies and in his use of traditional forms and tonality for each of the movements.

³⁴ Walter Piston. Handwritten program notes found in his archives at Boston Public Library. These match program notes found on the record cover of the recording of the Piston Violin Concerto No. 1 made by Hugo Kolberg, violin/Otto Matzerath, conductor, 1970.

³⁵ Clifford Taylor, "Walter Piston: For His Seventieth Birthday," *Perspectives of New Music* 2 (1964): 102-14. Reprinted in *Perspectives on American Composer*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward Cone (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 183.

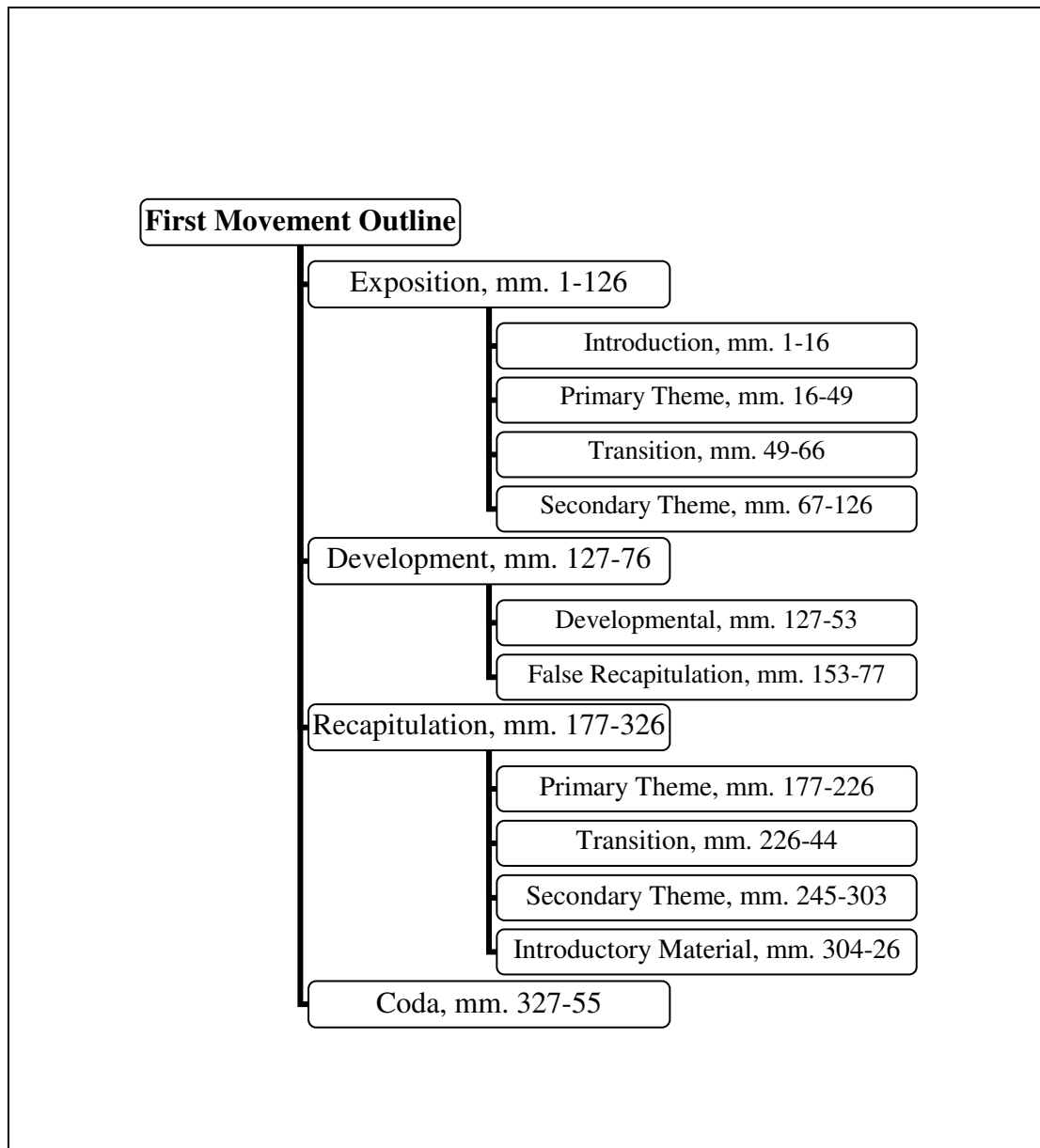


Figure 1 Formal outline of first movement.

The first movement, *Allegro energico*, is written in the customary first movement sonata form and in D major. The exposition of the first movement is relatively straightforward, with the introductory chords leading into the primary theme where Piston’s “rhythmic element” —a syncopation—is first heard in the accompaniment. The syncopated rhythmic element supports the broad, lyrical theme in the solo violin before

this lyrical line yields to the syncopation and joins the orchestra playing the rhythmic element for the last portion of the theme (see Figure 2). The primary theme contains the germinal motive in m. 25 that is a pair of slurred minor seconds, the first one ascending followed by a descending second beginning a minor third above the end of the first second, shown in Figure 3. The germinal motive then becomes the foundation of the transition (mm. 49-67), as illustrated in Figure 4. The germinal motive also appears in the second and third movements in various transformations.

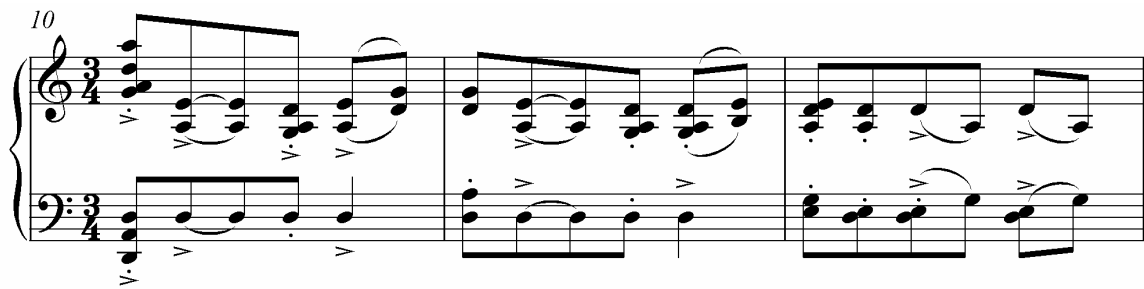


Figure 2 First movement: Rhythmic element, mm. 10-12.



Figure 3 First movement: Germinal motive, m. 25.



Figure 4 First movement: Transition section examples of m. 25 germinal motive, m. 54, m. 62.

68



76 Hn.

Vla. 'Cello, Timp.

18

The development (mm. 126-177) focuses on material from the introductory chords and the primary theme and is split into two parts. The first half of the development consists of sequences utilizing the rhythmic material in the orchestra punctuated by introductory chordal material in the solo violin which then leads into the second half of the development, which is a false recapitulation in F-sharp major with the solo violin playing an ornamented version of the primary theme (m. 153).

The real recapitulation (mm. 177-326) returns in the orchestra in D major with the solo violin entering as the primary theme moves to the rhythmic element, now expanded and treated sequentially. The sequence gives way to material from the broad opening of the primary theme, which is used to build energy for several measures before the impassioned climax of the movement where the solo violin returns with the primary theme two octaves above the original entrance of the theme (mm. 217-20). The rest of the recapitulation follows with expected changes except that the first entrance of the lyrical portion of the second theme is inverted in both the accompaniment and solo lines. The second theme returns to its original arrangement however for the subsequent repetition. The rhythmic element from the primary theme (see Figure 2) reappears at the end of the second theme and is treated sequentially and developed until the solo violin bursts in with a recapitulation of the introductory chords after which follows a coda.

At first, the *Piu mosso* coda might seem tacked onto the end of the movement with little relevance to the rest of the movement—aside from a return of the rhythmic element in the accompaniment: the solo line consists of a rapid passage of eighth-note triplets ending in a flourishing upward scale and a final D major chord. Closer inspection however, reveals that though there are some minor intervallic differences, the solo line is a thematic transformation of the primary theme with the melodic line of the theme

rewritten up a compound minor sixth, the rhythm reduced to simple triplets, and mm. 16-24 and mm. 25-30 repeated to extend the passage as shown in Figure 8 (compare the second part with Figure 9). Hence, rather than just rounding out the recapitulation, the return of the introductory chords at the end of the recapitulation also serves the function of introducing the return of the primary theme in the coda.

The figure displays a musical score for the first movement, illustrating a thematic transformation. The score is organized into four systems, each featuring two staves for Violins (Vln.).

- System 1:** The top staff is labeled "Coda Violin" and the bottom staff is labeled "mm. 16-30 Violin". The Coda Violin staff begins at measure 327 and includes a triplet of eighth notes, a bracketed section labeled "Like mm. 16-24", and an "Octave shift" indicated by a downward arrow. The mm. 16-30 Violin staff also features triplets and a bracketed section labeled "mm. 16-24".
- System 2:** Both staves are labeled "Vln.". The top staff includes a bracketed section labeled "Like mm. 16-24" and an "Octave shift" indicated by a downward arrow. The bottom staff includes a triplet of eighth notes.
- System 3:** Both staves are labeled "Vln.". The top staff includes a bracketed section labeled "Like mm. 16-24" and an "Octave shift" indicated by a downward arrow. The bottom staff includes a triplet of eighth notes.
- System 4:** Both staves are labeled "Vln.". The top staff includes a bracketed section labeled "Like mm. 25-30". The bottom staff includes a triplet of eighth notes.

Measure numbers 327, 329, 332, and 335 are marked at the beginning of the first, second, third, and fourth systems, respectively. The score uses treble clefs and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Figure 8 First movement: Coda thematic transformation—comparison of coda solo line mm. 327-38 with primary theme mm. 16-30 solo line written in triplets.



Figure 9 First movement: Primary theme, solo violin line, lyrical section only, mm. 16-31.

SECOND MOVEMENT

The slow movement of this concerto, *Andantino molto tranquillo*, is a theme and variations that is soulful and almost haunting with its F-minor tonality expressed in expansive, lyrical melodic lines over slowly undulating accompaniment figures in quartal harmonies. The theme of the movement has several motives from the first movement as well as motives that appear later in the movement and can be divided into two parts of five and ten measures respectively.

The movement opens with an introductory descending cello line that culminates with the germinal melodic motive from m. 25 of the first movement. Figure 10 and Figure 11 offers a comparison. This germinal motive appears in part or in full four more times in the movement: At the beginning of the first variation (m. 19), before the second variation (mm. 38-39), at the beginning of the third variation (mm. 65-66), and at the end of the movement (mm. 93-94). The introductory cello line is followed by an undulating accompaniment figure played by the clarinets in fourths. This accompaniment is built from the second of the two melodic motives of the secondary theme set to a rhythmic

ostinato as illustrated in Figure 12 and Figure 13.³⁶ In the second phrase of the accompaniment shown in Figure 14, an inverted form of the clarinet motive (as in the first movement, m. 68—see Figure 15) is used while the rhythmic motive is retained. The second phrase in the solo flute references the opening cello motive found in Figure 10 in a motivic transformation of the first four notes of that motive as seen in Figure 16.



Figure 10 Second movement: Opening cello motive, mm. 1-2.

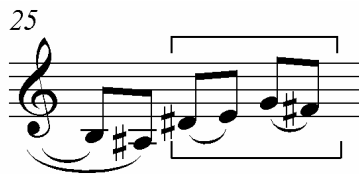


Figure 11 First movement: Primary theme germinal motive, m. 25.

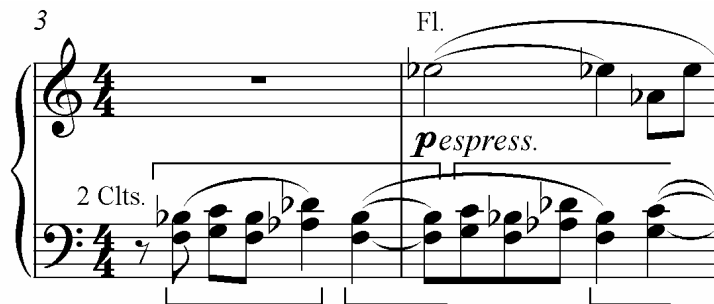


Figure 12 Second movement: Clarinet ostinato motive, mm. 3-4.

³⁶ It is interesting to note that the accompaniment figure is constructed of a four note melodic ostinato played to a four beat rhythmic ostinato using five notes so that the original version of the figure does not reappear until four measures later, signaling the end of the accompaniment phrase, after which an inverted form of the melodic figure is used with the same rhythmic ostinato.

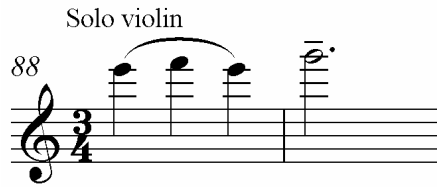


Figure 13 First movement: Secondary theme inverted motive, mm. 88-89.

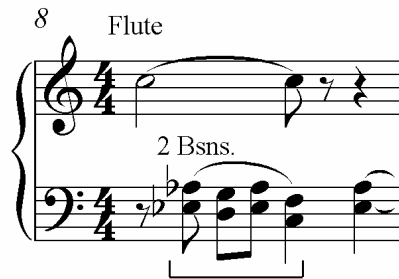


Figure 14 Second movement: Inversion of clarinet ostinato motive, m. 8.

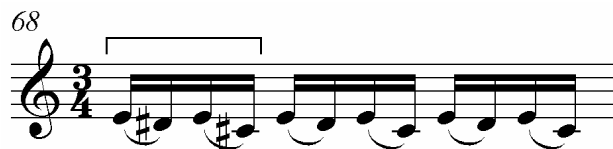


Figure 15 First movement: Secondary theme, first motive, m. 68.



Figure 16 Second movement: Motivic transformation of the Figure 10 cello motive, mm. 9-10.

The solo violin enters on the first variation (m. 19) with a melodic line that is reminiscent of an inverted form of the theme played by the flute. When the second part of the variation begins (m. 26) the melodic line returns to that of the theme but is

rhythmically altered by a single eighth note in the next measure and later moves up a half-step for several measures (m. 29) before moving on to new material (m. 32).

The central second variation is marked by a change in tempo (*Un poco animato*) and a focus on material from m. 11, m.13, and m.14 of the theme. The first eight bars of the variation treat this material sequentially with the melody first occurring in the solo violin, then moving to the clarinet, and finally returning to the solo violin. The soloist then builds the momentum to the climax of the movement at m. 52-53 where the solo violin returns to the melodic motive from the flute line of m. 14 as illustrated in Figure 17 and Figure 18. A descending line decrescendos away from the climax and the variation ends with a motivic transformation of the flute motive in a sequence of ascending inversions of the arpeggio as shown in Figure 19.

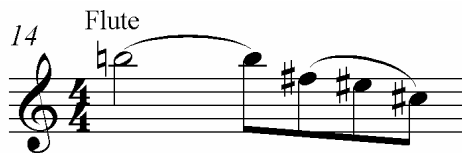


Figure 17 Second movement, theme: Descending flute motive, m. 14.

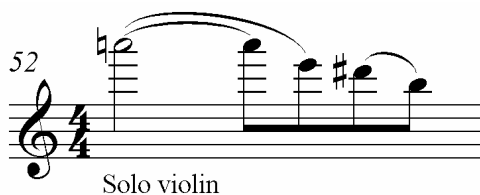


Figure 18 Second movement, second theme: Descending flute motive in solo violin, m. 52.

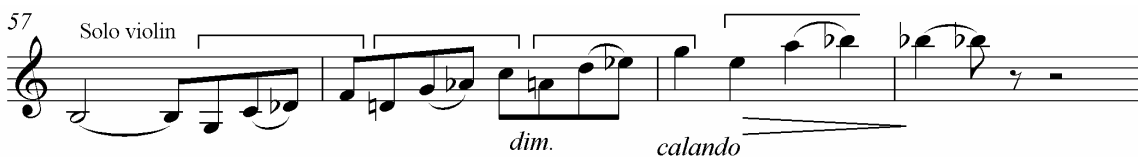


Figure 19 Second movement, second variation: Motivic transformation of Figure 17 flute motive, inversion of descending flute arpeggio, mm. 57-60.

Coda: mm. 386-431

In the last variation (m. 60), the melodic material from the theme opens in B-flat major in the brass for the first half before the solo violin enters with an obbligate-type melodic line in triplets for the second half over an occasional reference to the undulating accompaniment figures of the theme in the orchestra.

When the theme returns again at m. 78, it appears down a whole step in the solo violin and does not return to the original key until m. 86, where the melodic line leaps a tritone instead of a major third as in the opening version of the theme. The movement then closes as it began with the soulful descending cello figure ending in a full F-minor chord at pianissimo.

THIRD MOVEMENT

The finale, *Allegro con spirito*, is the most “American” sounding of the three movements. Its refrain is reminiscent of a barn-dance; there is a hint of jazz, and Piston consistently uses open sounding quartal and quintal harmonies generally associated with “American” music of this time period. The movement returns to D major and is in a standard seven-part rondo with three themes as shown in Figure 20. In spirit, the movement has the energy and rhythm of a dance, much in keeping with the exuberant quality of many of the rondo finales of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, which likewise use various dance rhythms to bring the movement to a boisterous ending.

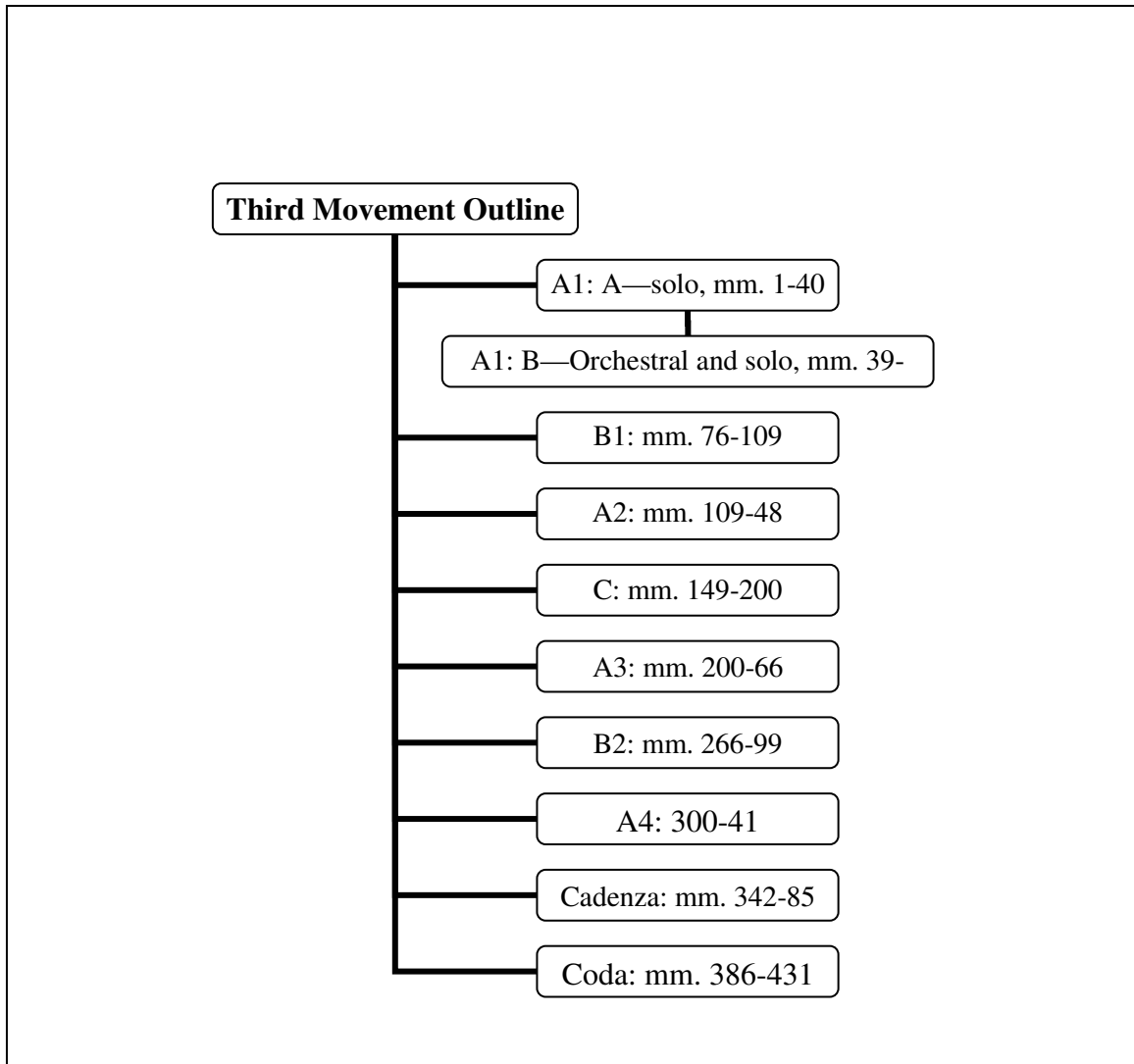


Figure 20 Third movement: Outline of the form.

The movement opens with a fanfare-like introduction in the brass that is punctuated by syncopated staccato winds that take over shortly thereafter and settle down to a syncopated vamp in the bassoon. Piston then uses this vamp, which is a repeated melodic motive with rhythmic displacement, to accompany the first part of the refrain as illustrated in Figure 21.



Figure 21 Third movement: Opening bassoon vamp, mm. 10-13.

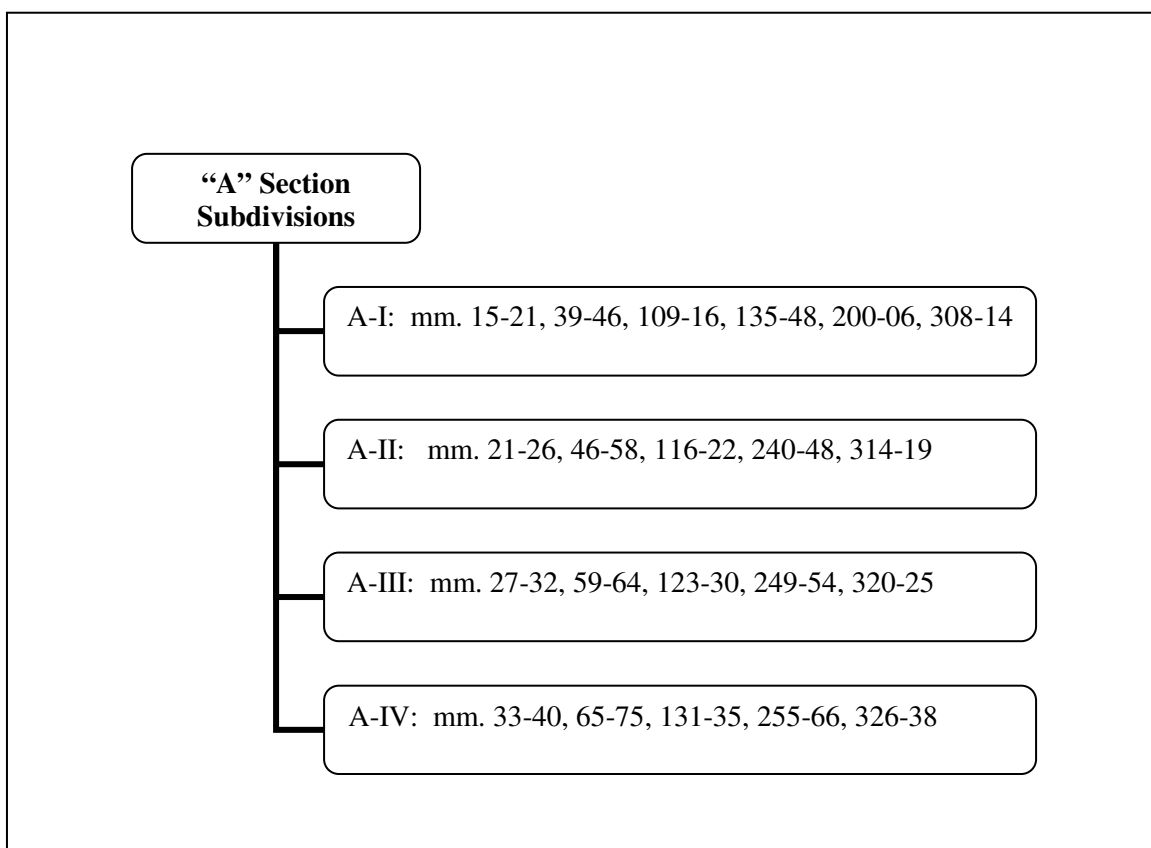


Figure 22 Third movement: Outline of the A section subdivisions.

The refrain of this movement is reminiscent of a rollicking barn-dance tune due to Piston's use of syncopation, double-stops, and open intervals in the solo and accompaniment lines. It is first stated by the solo violin accompanied by rather sparse strings and woodwinds and can be divided into four sections that are varied and

developed in later versions of the refrain (see Figure 22). As Figure 21 shows, the first section of the refrain (A-I=mm. 15-21) revolves around the intervals of a perfect fourth and the indecisiveness of a major/minor third. Rhythmically, the A-I solo line is built around a 3+2+2 syncopation with a few added eighth-notes to sustain a sense of unpredictability. It is the most characteristic of the four sections of the refrain with its syncopation and repetitiveness.



Figure 23 Third movement: A-I, mm. 15-21.

Figure 24 shows the second section of the refrain (A-II), which contains a couple of motives in the solo line related to the germinal four-note motive from m. 25 in the first movement. These return with each refrain. The germinal motive, as seen in Figure 25, was developed extensively in the transition section of the first movement. The opening cello line of the second movement, which reappeared several times before the end of the movement, also makes reference to this motive. The first transformation of the germinal

motive heard in the third movement is shown in Figure 26. Here the motive is inverted, the rhythm is diminished to sixteenth-notes, and the first two intervals are each expanded by a half note so that the outside interval is now a tritone instead of a diminished fourth.³⁷ This transformation of the motive appears again at the end of the refrain in mm.34-35 (solo line) as well as in each recurring refrain. The second transformation of the germinal motive, illustrated in Figure 27, is related to the first and is a retrograde inversion of the motive seen in Figure 26. This section of the refrain also contains a third motive, shown in Figure 28, which becomes important later in the movement. It consists of a descending set of minor sixths that are significantly expanded in the immediate variation of the refrain (mm. 48-55) and further developed in the cadenza.

Figure 24 First movement: A-II, mm. 21-26.

³⁷ The tritone is the interval found between the first and third notes rather than a diminished fourth for the same notes in the germinal motive.



Figure 25 First movement: Germinal motive, m. 25.



Figure 26 Third movement: Tritone inverted transformation of germinal motive from first movement, m. 21.



Figure 27 Third movement: Tritone retrograde transformation of the germinal motive, m. 26.



Figure 28 Third movement: Minor sixths motive, m. 24.

The final two sections of the refrain, A-III (mm. 27-32) and A-IV (mm. 33-40), are of less interest to this discussion with the exception of a descending sequence of the inverted tritone motive first seen in Figure 26 and illustrated here in Figure 29.



Figure 29 Third movement: Descending sequence of the Figure 26 motive from m. 21, mm. 34-35.

One of the interesting formal features of this movement is Piston's immediate repetition of the refrain with variation (mm. 39-76). Here Piston alters the A-I melody and expands the A-II section (mm. 46-58) by seven measures with a development of the descending minor-sixth motive from m. 24 in the solo line and replaces the second transformation of the germinal motive (m. 26) with a nine sixteenth-note motive, shown in Figure 30, that is cycled three times so that on the final cycle it begins on the downbeat (mm. 56-59). Figure 31 illustrates how the developmental third refrain makes reference to this material in inverted-retrograde and retrograde forms (only a four-note motivic fragment is used however), while Figure 32 shows the reappearance of the motive at the end of the movement where it opens the coda and is sequenced and developed for twelve measures (mm. 386-97).



Figure 30 Third movement: Nine-note motive, mm. 56-59.

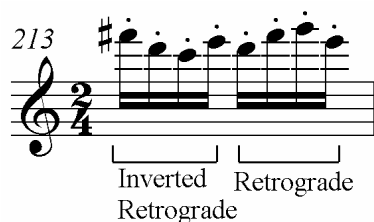


Figure 31 Third movement: Altered versions of m. 56 motive, m. 213.

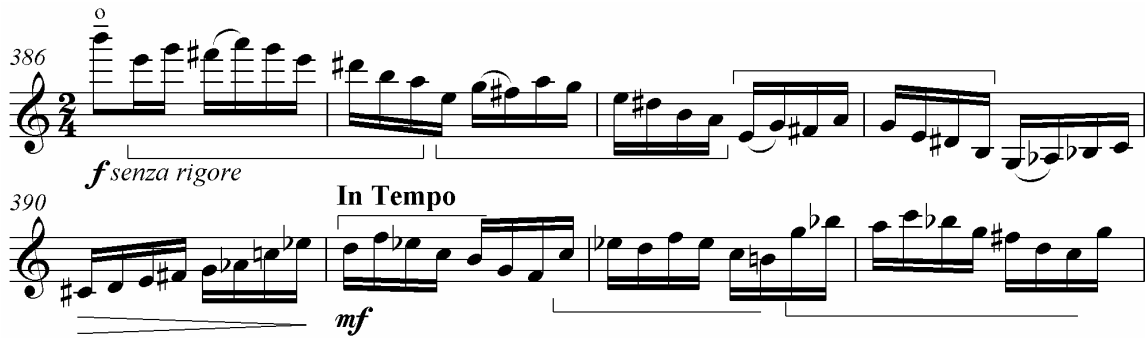


Figure 32 Third movement: Sequencing and alteration of nine-note motive (mm. 56-59), mm. 386-93.

A-III (mm. 59-64) is only slightly altered from the first version. A-IV (mm. 65-75) however, is expanded by four measures that sound as if the soloist is repeatedly attempting to play the passage of the inverted tritone motive as in mm. 34-35 but is only successful after several tries. When the passage from m. 34-35 is finally played however, the intervals between each repetition of the motive are shortened to a minor third so that the A1b-IV section ends up a major third in F-sharp minor for the first episode.

Piston returns to thematic transformation in the F-sharp minor B theme (B1 = mm. 76-109) illustrated in Figure 33. The B theme is a rhythmic transformation of the secondary theme of the first movement, shown in Figure 34, with a tango rhythm used to give a restless, sultry mood to the episode (see Figure 35).



Figure 33 Third movement: B theme, solo line, mm. 81-86.

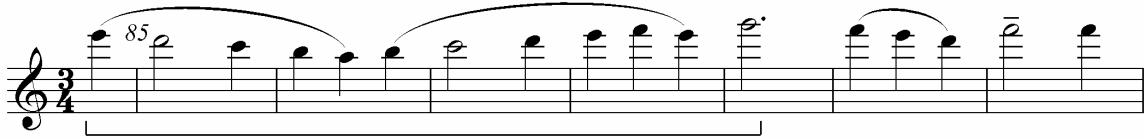


Figure 34 First movement: Secondary theme, solo line, mm. 84-91.



Figure 35 Third movement: B theme tango rhythm

The second appearance of the refrain (A2 = mm. 109-48) arrives on the heels of B1 in G major (in new key, up a perfect-fourth from A1) with a pianissimo entrance in the violin and a staccato bass line in the cello. This bassline illustrated in Figure 36 is reminiscent of a jazz walking bass accompanied by an offbeat staccato ascending scale in fourths in the violins. The dynamic level gradually increases with the addition of winds until it reaches fortissimo at m. 135 with the full orchestra playing the A theme. This time however, the theme stalls after four measures (m. 139) and a motive from mm. 137-38 of the theme is repeated down through the orchestra in a transitional section, changing in register, key, and dynamic level to the beginning of the next episode at m. 149.



Figure 36 Third movement: Walking bass, mm. 110-13.

With the beginning of the C episode in E minor at m. 149 (C = mm. 149-200) the dynamic level returns to *piano*. The energy levels however, are much less lively than those of the A2 opening, with long solo lines accompanied by a murmuring staccato ostinato. The C episode consists of a repeated two-phrase canon at the octave with the first statement played by the solo violin and French horn accompanied by staccato bassoons. In the repetition, the solo canonic lines are played by the strings in octaves and accompanied by the winds. Once again, as in the B episode, the thematic material of the first phrase (mm. 149-59), as illustrated in Figure 38, is borrowed from a previous movement. This time however, it is a minor mode rhythmic transformation of the second movement theme's first phrase (see Figure 37). The second phrase of the C section is elided with that of the first, such that the final note of the horn phrase becomes the first note of the second phrase with the horn leading the canon and the solo violin responding. Rather than using new material in the second phrase (mm. 159-72), Piston simply inverts the first phrase with only one interval change at m. 164 (beginning now on G, rather than on B) and uses the same rhythmic pattern as that of the first phrase as shown in Figure 38.



Figure 37 Second movement: First phrase of theme, mm. 4-8.



Figure 38 Third movement: C episode theme, solo violin only, mm. 149-72. For full version see Figure 46 in chapter 3.

The third refrain (A3 = mm. 200-65) is the most substantial refrain outside of the opening double refrain and is the most developmental of the A sections. The refrain opens with the first six bars of the A1a-I theme played by the first clarinet at the bottom end of its register and is immediately joined by the solo violin playing sixteenth-note spiccato passagework that is primarily scalar and chromatic in nature, often blurring the boundaries of tonality. In m. 206 the refrain is dropped and the section turns developmental, building in energy until it explodes in a short percussion solo (mm. 234-39) after which the orchestra returns to the A1b version of the refrain with in m. 240.

The second B section (B2=mm. 266-99) returns in D major (rather than the original minor mode), while the final A refrain of the rondo (Intro=mm. 300-08, A4=mm. 308-41) opens with a reprise of the introduction in the opening key of D major, shortened however so that the solo violin comes in six bars early. The refrain ends with a pedal A in the brass acting as a cadential I 6/4 before the cadenza.

In the cadenza, Piston ties the movement and the entire concerto together, expanding on motivic material from the A section first, then simultaneously quoting the B and C section themes—as illustrated in Figure 39, Figure 40, and Figure 41, which are thematic transformations of themes from the first and second movements respectively, thus incorporating elements from each of the movements in the cadenza. The five-part

cadenza opens with a four measure double-stop fanfare reminiscent of the opening trumpet fanfare but more directly related to m. 28 of the A-I section. It then explores the opening refrain theme in the key of A (as in the key of A3). The third motive to be developed is that of the descending sixths first seen in m. 24 and further developed in mm. 50-55. The cadenza then proceeds to simultaneously quote the tango B theme and the lyrical C theme, first in E minor and then in G major for the upper B theme and D.

The movement is wrapped up with a brilliant coda that begins with a development of the nine-note motive from A-II (mm. 55-56), returns to a short variation of the opening A theme at the *Più allegro* and concludes with a flourishing ascending arpeggio ending on a D major chord that is reiterated twice, each time reduced by a note so that final note is simply D.



Figure 39 Third movement: First phrase of B theme, mm. 80-86.



Figure 40 Third movement: First phrase of C theme, mm. 149-58.



Figure 41 Third movement cadenza: B and C themes combined, mm. 363-70.

While a knowledge of the thematic and motivic transformations within this work is not essential to an enjoyment of the work, an understanding of the interrelationships of the different themes and motives in this concerto makes it that much more intriguing to study as Piston's skill as a compositional craftsman is apparent in these passages. Piston's ability to transform a motive or theme is evident with each new manipulation of the germinal theme or inventiveness of thematic transformation. In addition, knowledge of the thematic transformations within this work may also allow the performer to make sense of some of Piston's compositional choices, as with the relationship between the first movement and its coda. This, along with an understanding of Piston's use of counterpoint, adds to the pleasure found in a study of this work.

CHAPTER 3

Compositional Issues: Counterpoint, Orchestration, Stylistic Influences, and the “American” Sound of the First Violin Concerto

Counterpoint and orchestration were two topics that greatly interested Piston as a pedagogue; he wrote well-respected texts on each subject. As a composer, his music reflected his expertise garnered through his studies in counterpoint with Boulanger and his extensive hands-on experience with various band instruments during his stint as a musician in a Navy band during World War I, as well as his years of experience as a semi-professional violinist, violist, and pianist. In the area of musical style, Piston’s influences were primarily European. There is, however, an undeniable “American” sound to his music, particularly in the First Concerto. This chapter will explore Piston’s ideas on these issues and how they relate to the First Violin Concerto.

COUNTERPOINT

Piston’s idea of counterpoint is outlined in the introduction to his textbook: “the art of counterpoint is the art of combining melodic lines.”³⁸ It is an interplay of agreement and disagreement, of dependence and independence. Piston believed, however, that agreement or dependence “detract from the contrapuntal nature of the texture”³⁹ and points out that agreement or dependence is found when harmonic and melodic rhythms are unified in a common goal, when rhythmic stresses and rhythmic patterns coincide, or when multiple melodic lines are in similar motion and reach their climax at the same time.

³⁸Walter Piston, *Counterpoint* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1947), 9.

³⁹ Ibid.

Means of contributing to the contrapuntal style, on the other hand, are those that result in independence and disagreement, such as the use of dissonances, non-harmonic tones, avoiding the “coincidence of rhythmic stress and rhythmic patterns,” and “making use of oblique and contrary motion” in the melodic lines.⁴⁰ Piston’s belief was that though there is no “common practice” in counterpoint from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as there is in harmony, the differences of contrapuntal usage among composers “are not in the elements and principles but in the degree of their application.”⁴¹

Given the previous definition of counterpoint, one finds that this concerto is often contrapuntal with “independence” and “disagreement” in the harmony and rhythm frequently used to provide momentum while “agreement” and “dependence” in these areas are used at points of emphasis in the work or to bring a sense of closure to a section. For example, in the primary theme of the first movement, the rhythmic stress of the melodic line never truly lines up with that of the accompaniment until the very end of the statement, thus avoiding any true resting point and providing a sense of movement through the end of the soloist’s version of the primary theme. Counterpoint appears again in the second theme where Piston used independence in phrasing between orchestra and soloist in the secondary theme. Here one finds phrases in the solo part and accompaniment that are off by a full measure until the end of the first repetition of second theme, again allowing the sense of continuous motion as shown in Figure 42. When the same portion of the second theme appears in the recapitulation, Piston inverts both the orchestral and solo lines in the first statement, as illustrated in Figure 43; they only reappear in their “proper” form for the second statement of the second theme in the recapitulation.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

80

Vlms. sord.

p *sotto voce* Clt.

p dolce

86

Bass

2 Oboes

Ob.

2 Hns.

C.A.

3 Hns.

2nd Vln.

92

pp

Figure 42 First movement: Secondary theme, mm. 79-97.

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

257

Solo vn.

2 Flts.

p

dolce

2 Hns.

262

dolce

Oboes

Flts.

2 Oboes

Flt.

Clt.

C.A.

Figure 43 First movement: Recapitulation secondary theme—inversion of theme, mm. 257-68.

In the second movement, counterpoint is found in the opening clarinet ostinato that moves through five statements of the melodic line and four statements of the rhythmic line as illustrated in Figure 44; the clarinets restate the opening version of the ostinato to complete the accompaniment phrase before moving down by sequence a whole step to begin the next phrase and continue in a similar fashion. Even then, the phrasing and rhythm of the accompaniment does not coincide with that of the solo flute until the end of the theme where rhythmic agreement between the soloist and accompaniment serves to highlight the end of the theme. Such use of counterpoint is an effective way of keeping momentum since the long, lyrical phrases can easily lose energy and a forward sense of direction.



Figure 44 Second movement: First phrase of theme, mm. 3-8.

Piston seems to have reserved his most interesting (or perhaps most overt) counterpoint for the third movement of the piece. In the B episode Piston borrows the second theme from the first movement, alters the mode to minor, and gives it a tango rhythm (in the return of the B episode the theme returns to major). Then, when the woodwinds take over the theme in m. 95 (a measure before the solo violin completes the first statement of the theme), the cellos and basses respond a bar later in canon with an inverted statement of the theme as shown in Figure 45 (though the canon only appears when the tango theme is present in the melodic line). Any concurrence of rhythm is thus avoided until the last four bars of the episode (mm. 106-09). In addition to utilizing canonic inversion, Piston also eschews agreement of rhythm and linear motion until the end of the episode, again utilizing counterpoint to promote a sense of forward motion; agreement and dependence to signal the boundary of the episode and providing a prime

example of his definition of counterpoint.

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs).
 System 1 (measures 95-100): The upper staff contains a canon for Flts. and Clts. (flutes and clarinets), marked *p* (piano). The lower staff contains a canon for Bsn. (bassoon), 'Cello (cello), and Bass (bass), marked *cresc.* (crescendo).
 System 2 (measures 101-104): The upper staff continues the canon for Flts. and Clts., marked *mf* (mezzo-forte). The lower staff continues the canon for Bsn., 'Cello, and Bass, marked *mf*.
 System 3 (measures 105-109): The upper staff continues the canon for Flts. and Clts., marked *p*. The lower staff continues the canon for Bsn., 'Cello, and Bass, marked *p*.
 The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (*p*, *mf*, *cresc.*), articulation (accents, slurs), and phrasing (brackets).

Figure 45 Third movement: B episode canon between upper and lower voices, mm. 95-109.

The central C episode of the third movement is another example of interesting counterpoint. Here Piston borrows the theme from the second movement and places it in canon between the solo violin and French horn, using an inversion of the first phrase of the C episode as the second phrase and reversing the order of the canon with an elision at the end of the first phrase so that the horn leads the canon. In addition, Piston uses an eleven-note, eighth-note ostinato in the bassoons to delineate his phrases by aligning the beginning of a phrase with the return of the ostinato figure to its original position

beginning with ‘E’ on the downbeat as Figure 46 illustrates. In the second phrase (m. 160), the ostinato figure extends the ending of the phrase two measures by spacing the ostinato notes with eighth-note rests.

Piston’s final significant use of counterpoint occurs in the middle of the cadenza where the solo violin plays the tango B theme simultaneously with the lyrical C theme, not only incorporating the two episodes of the third movement, but also referencing the first movement and second movements of the concerto through the B and C themes respectively in a clever package—see Figure 47.

149 Solo violin
p dolce
 Fr. hn.
 2 Bsn.

157

165

Figure 46 Third movement: C theme, mm. 149-72.



Figure 47 Third movement: Counterpoint of themes B and C in cadenza, mm. 363-77.

ORCHESTRATION

Piston's orchestration in this concerto is very light with very few moments of full orchestration. Often only one or two choirs of instruments play at any given time, even during orchestral tuttis. When all three choirs do play, it is frequently with a call and response pattern between the choirs or as punctuation,⁴² with only three moments in the first movement and one in the last movement presenting the large, well-rounded sound of the full orchestra.⁴³

Closer inspection of Piston's use of the various choirs in the First Concerto shows he makes little use of the brass choir except as punctuation in the first movement and as short, jazzy fanfares in the last movement. The horns do play a significant melodic and supporting role in the concerto (particularly in the C episode of the last movement). The string choir is treated in typical fashion, supporting the solo line or taking the melodic lead as necessary, though Piston does take pains to ensure that the string section never conceals the soloist. The woodwind choir is where Piston truly features the colors of the

⁴² First movement: mm.167-73, 200-09, 237-39; third movement: mm.1-6, 70-72, 128-29, 255-59, 266-68, 303, 305, and 337.

⁴³ First movement: mm. 182-92, 215-21, 313-17-Recapitulation; third movement: mm. 135-39.

individual instruments. His use of English horn, flute, bassoon, and clarinet in the slow movement are idiomatic and effective in creating a melancholy canvas for the solo violin. In the last movement, Piston's use of Stravinskian bassoon ostinati in the refrain provides an entertaining counterpart to the solo violin's barn dance melody.

While the orchestral *tutti*s do utilize the full resources of the orchestra, Piston has balanced the solo and orchestral accompaniment in such a way that the soloist is never pitted against the entire orchestra without support from the winds or strings. The orchestration during solo violin passages is typically light and supportive, allowing the soloist to be clearly heard above the orchestra. When the orchestration is full during solo passages it characteristically appears in three types of situations, all of which still allow the soloist to be heard:

- 1) The most frequently occurring situation where the entire orchestra plays during a solo line is when the orchestral eighth-note chords punctuate the solo line on the down-beat, often at the end of a tie in the solo line so that little is covered up. (First movement: mm. 1, 9-10, 146, 174, 317-23, 346-47, 355; third movement: mm. 266, 428-29.)
- 2) Piston also uses full orchestration where the orchestra is in the lower register and the solo violin is soaring above the orchestra or where the orchestration is very different in character from the solo line so that the solo line sticks out (still often with the soloist at a high register). (First movement: mm. 207-17; second movement: mm. 52-53—orchestra is in lower register and piano.)
- 3) Finally, Piston uses full orchestra when there are other lines supporting the solo violin line as in a *tutti* from a Baroque concerto. (First movement: mm. 217-22; third movement: mm. 135-39, 406-09, and 428-29.)

STYLISTIC INFLUENCES

A brief study of Piston's musical influences is interesting when studying the First Concerto as it provides the performer with an understanding of the stylistic predispositions with which the composer approached composition and therefore elements that might be important to note in the work. Piston was reticent to acknowledge specific stylistic influences in his later music, but a closer look at his early influences gives one perspective on elements of style that were later incorporated into his musical language. This is particularly true in the study of the First Violin Concerto since this work was composed at the beginning of his second period of composition when elements of these early influences can still be traced in his compositional style.

In an interview with Peter Westergaard, Piston discussed some of the influences on his early music, acknowledging that the music of J.S. Bach, and to some extent Paul Hindemith, influenced his use of counterpoint in his early works. "Certainly Hindemith had something to do with it..., but no, it may sound corny, but I think Bach had a great deal more to do with it. More than that I would say it was in the air."⁴⁴ A brief examination of Piston's later works indicates that his love of counterpoint which developed while studying these composers was assimilated into his musical vocabulary. During the same interview, Piston acknowledged that "I was pretty close to Stravinsky, musically speaking."⁴⁵ In discussing Piston's early stylistic influences, Bruce Archibald makes an additional observation however:

His early works were influenced in part by Stravinsky but more deeply by the French neoclassicism of the later works of Fauré and Roussel. Gallic qualities of

⁴⁴ Westergaard, "Conversation with Walter Piston," 160.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

clarity and proportion are found throughout his work; the neobaroque element which developed in the 1920s can be found in much of it.⁴⁶

With respect to stylistic influences found in the Piston First Concerto, the French neoclassical influence outlined by Archibald can certainly be seen in the Piston's traditional use of form in each of the movements and in the spare lines of the orchestration. One can also see the contrapuntal influence of Bach in the various movements (see discussion on counterpoint earlier in this chapter). The shadow of Stravinsky's influence can be found in the asymmetrical accenting in the first and last movements (though it could also be argued that these influences are primarily from jazz and ragtime), and Howard Pollack comments that the first movement's introductory "violin double-stopping and the finale's bassoon ostinati [A1-I refrain and C episode] are quite Stravinskian."⁴⁷ Pollack also asserts that this concerto is closely modeled after the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto*. Commenting on the similarities in both concerti, Pollack states:

From the standpoint of nationalism, their first movements are their most personal, their slow movements are subtly tinged by popular song, and their finales are clearly evocative of national dance. The nationalism of the Piston *Concerto*,

46 Bruce Archibald, "Piston, Walter." Writing in the same vein, Otto Karolyi also commented: "In his work, the influence of Stravinsky, and above all the French school of modern composers from Fauré to Poulenc, can be detected. The tone which he strikes is international rather than American in the narrow sense of the word. His masterly neoclassical style with a romantic leaning could be defined as being to America what Benjamin Britten and Sergei Prokofiev are to their respective countries, but with one major difference, as Piston was an almost entirely instrumental composer." Otto Karolyi, *Modern American Music: From Charles Ives to the Minimalists* (London: Cygnus Arts, Madison and Teaneck Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 35.

⁴⁷ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 70.

however, does not preclude a contrapuntal sophistication typical of its composer...It is as if Bach wrote the Tchaikovsky *Concerto*—in America.⁴⁸

Typically, contrapuntal neo-classicism and nationalism are at odds with each other. Pollack's final comment about Bach writing the Tchaikovsky Concerto in America however indicates that perhaps Piston was able to find a common ground between the two movements. The nationalism of Tchaikovsky shines through in Piston's choice of a more personal first movement, a slow movement flavored with national song (the blues), and a final movement clearly imbued with national dance (country dance). The counterpoint of Bach is not lost however, as Piston is somehow able to couch the nationalistic elements of this concerto within his neoclassical contrapuntal language in such a way that the blending of the two styles not only makes sense, but is enjoyable as well.

This tension between neo-classicism and nationalism is one of the more interesting dichotomies of Piston's style. Piston tended to avoid nationalism in his music and embraced a neoclassical aesthetic and yet his music, and particularly the First Violin Concerto, sounds undeniably "American." It is the "American" sound that is the most dominant stylistic element found in this concerto and a significant factor in its distinctive sound.

THE "AMERICAN" SOUND AND THE FIRST VIOLIN CONCERTO

Piston's Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra (1939) is a delightfully accessible twentieth century American work that uses the musical language of the twentieth century couched in traditional forms with references to popular culture,

⁴⁸ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 69-70.

expansive themes, and the use of quartal and quintal harmony to give it an “American” sound. The concerto was written at the beginning of Piston’s middle period of composition and, according to Elliott Carter, is the first of his works to exhibit an “American” sound⁴⁹ while Howard Pollack also asserts that “of all Piston’s works, the *Violin Concerto* is perhaps most pointed in its Americanisms.”⁵⁰ While Piston does not directly quote American themes or styles as his compatriots Copland and Harris did during this period, he does allow the essence of “Americana” to infuse this concerto much more fully than in previous works.

In general, Piston did not consciously strive to write “American” sounding music. Unlike his friend and contemporary, Aaron Copland, who used folk music in his compositions of the late 1930s and 40s, Piston sought to avoid using such direct references to American musical heritage. This is not to say that his music does not sound “American,” but rather, that he chose not to be overt in his Americanisms. Commenting on this subject in 1940 Piston states:

The self-conscious striving for nationalism gets in the way of the establishment of a strong school of composition and even of significant individual expression. If the composers will increasingly strive to perfect themselves in the art of music and will follow only those paths of expression which seem to take them the true way, the matter of a national school will take care of itself...But the composer cannot afford the wild-goose chase of trying to be more American than he is.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Elliot Carter, “Walter Piston,” *Musical Quarterly* 32 (1946).

⁵⁰ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 67.

⁵¹ Quoted by George Smith, “Walter Piston: American Composer,” *Magazine of Art* 33 (1940), 128.

Late in his life Piston stated his thoughts on writing “American” music much more succinctly:

Copland and I had a friendly war about American music. Aaron and I were very thick. We practically grew up together. He had hopes of producing an American music that was just as recognizable as French and German music. I told him that America had so many different nationalities that it would be nearly impossible. I felt the only definition of American music was that written by an American. He had to agree, but he felt there ought to be a vernacular.⁵²

Though Piston did not choose to incorporate folk music in his work like many of his contemporaries, his music does have an undeniably “American” sound to it with some compositions sounding more overtly “American” than others. In 1955 Gilbert Chase commented:

It should be observed that Piston’s allusions to jazz and other popular idioms of American music became a fundamental feature of his style and were not merely the result of a passing fashion. The popular idioms have become more closely integrated into his musical texture and are used not decoratively but organically... He has never been a self-proclaimed Americanist or a cultivator of musical nationalism, but his compositions, perhaps more than those of any other composer, demonstrate the extent to which popular idioms can infuse and color

⁵² Quoted by Ellen Pfeifer in “Walter Piston Musician of the Month,” *High Fidelity/Musical America* 24 (August 1974), 4-5.

even the most classical manifestations of contemporary art music in the United States.⁵³

Piston himself commented on the pervasive influence of jazz in his music in a 1967 interview stating, “I have spent my life trying to get away from it, but there still is, in most of my music, the influences of jazz.”⁵⁴ The influence and integration of elements of American popular music, including jazz, in Piston’s compositions is hardly surprising when one remembers that he spent most of his young adult years earning a living as a violinist and pianist playing popular music in dance bands at hotels, cafés, and dance halls. According to Howard Pollack, “long after he quit this profession, Piston continued to play such music to entertain his friends at private parties.”⁵⁵ Pollack later points out however, that for Piston “the use of American material is made not on principle [as in Copland’s case] but rather when it appears appropriate to a certain work, movement, or even theme.”⁵⁶

Though much of Piston’s music has elements of an American sound (regardless of how complex and dissonant the work), Piston’s period of composition from 1939 through the next decade was marked by a more direct incorporation of “Americanisms” than at any other time.⁵⁷ During this period we see a movement away from the objective, spare, dissonant lines of his earlier work toward a warmer lyricism with a more conscious use of

⁵³ Gilbert Chase, *America’s Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1955), 566.

⁵⁴ John Burns, “Piston’s Composing Bridges Established and Modern Music,” *Dartmouth Summer News*, 8 August 1967, 6.

⁵⁵ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 18.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁷ The symphonies no. 2 (1943) and particularly no. 4 (1950) written during this same time period also sound very “American” as well as the Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra.

popular musical elements such as ragtime, jazz, and country dance.⁵⁸ It is not surprising to note that Piston's more overt use of nationalism during this period comes at a time when there was a renewed sense of nationalism in the music written by his American contemporaries. Much of the music written by American composers during the 1930s and 40s makes reference to various elements of American culture including the use of hymn style phrasing and hymn quotations (from the Southern Baptist and New England Congregational traditions), imitation of the wide open spaces of the West in the harmony and melody (through the use of wider intervals, quotations of cowboy music, and the use of soaring, expansive themes), imitation and quotation of popular melodies and rhythms (such as ragtime and tango), and jazz elements (rhythms, harmonies, instrumentation, and the blues form).⁵⁹

Many of these elements of the "American" sound can be found in the First Concerto (1939). Though the last movement most obviously exhibits an "American" sound, the rhythmic element from the primary theme of the first movement exhibits the influences of ragtime and Tin Pan Alley⁶⁰ in the syncopations shown in Figure 48, while the irregularly-spaced stress accents of the transition (mm. 58-67) reflect the influence of

⁵⁸ Nicholas Tawa, *Serenading the Reluctant Eagle: American Musical Life, 1925-1945* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), 168.

⁵⁹ An interesting note on the "American sound" from the book by Virgil Thomson: *American Music Since 1910*, with an introduction by Nicolas Nabokov (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 18. The basis of the American musical accent according to Virgil Thomson is "the habit of a steady beat" and the ability to sustain a steady beat in performance. Thomson believes that the source of this habit is found in the "constant presence of dancing (both square and round dancing), the metrical discipline of ragtime piano playing, [and] the tendencies in our folk singing and our hymn singing toward a compulsive rhythm." Thomson further goes on to comment that "from the steady beat comes the appetite, if only to relieve monotony, for irregularly-spaced stress accents. The tension of free stress-patterns heard against a steady meter creates an energy that has been rare in music since Beethoven's death. And although this dynamism reaches its highest point in jazz, I find it also present in most of the American art music composed since 1920, no matter what may be the other sources of that music."

⁶⁰ Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 67.

jazz rhythms.⁶¹ Throughout the concerto, Piston's use of quartal and quintal harmonies, spare orchestration, wide interval range, and long lyrical lines, (the latter two examples are particularly found in the second movement) also gives one a sense of the expansiveness of the American continent (much like the Violin Concerto, op. 14 by Samuel Barber written the same year). The slow movement also utilizes a blues element in the ostinato motive of mm. 3-7 and similar passages—see Figure 44 from earlier in chapter 3,⁶² while last movement hints at the blues third in the A-I section with its alternation between major- and bluesy minor-thirds as illustrated in Figure 23 from chapter 2.

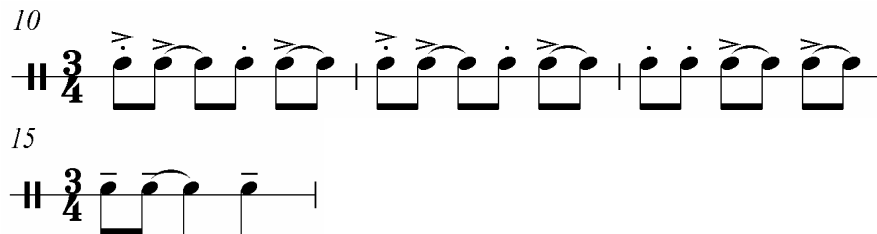


Figure 48 First movement: Example of the influence of ragtime and Tin Pan Alley syncopations on the first movement rhythmic element, mm. 10-12, m.15.

Though the whole work has an “American” feel, the last movement of this concerto is by far the most “American” sounding of the three movements. This can be heard in the barn dance syncopation of the ritornello A sections, the tango rhythms of the B episodes, and the jazz-like walking bass of the second A section and the coda (mm. 110-13, 406-09) illustrated in Figure 36 and Figure 49. Upon closer examination, the nine-note motive from the A section shown in Figure 30 exhibits the melodic shifting and rhythmic characteristics of a secondary rag. The rhythm and melodic shifting in this

⁶¹ The outside movements of this concerto clearly exemplify Virgil Thomson's ideal of syncopation against a steady beat. (See footnote 59) While the last movement is very obviously influenced by popular dance and ragtime, the first movement still exhibits the energy Thomson speaks of through the use of syncopation and “irregularly-spaced stress accents.”

motive also show similarity to the triple shuffle of fiddle music, but the connection is not as strong as with that of secondary rag. Also included in the third movement is a jazz-style percussion section solo—see Figure 50. In commenting on Piston’s choice of irregularly-spaced accents, Howard Pollack points out that if Piston had written the opening solo passage of the third movement in mixed meter instead of in a straight 2/4 as illustrated in Figure 51 and Figure 52, the passage would have “sounded more Stravinskian but less jazzy.”⁶³ Instead, Piston’s choice of meter and use of accents energizes the movement and gives it a distinctly “American” sound. To a certain extent, it is this energy and “American” sound in addition to the idiomatic writing for the solo violin that makes this an enjoyable work to study and perform.

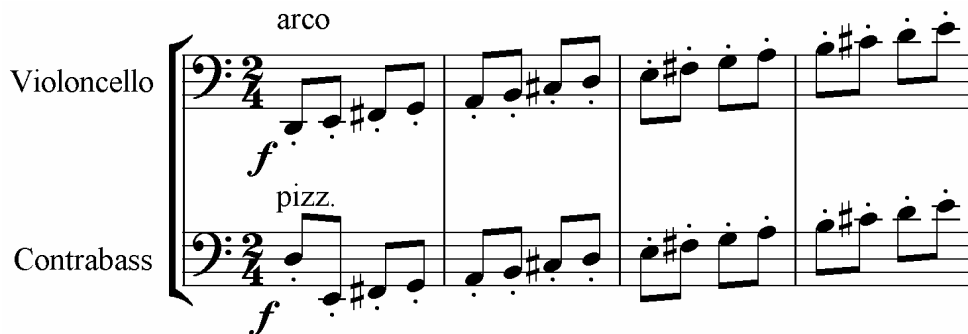


Figure 49 Third movement: Walking bass in coda, mm. 406-09

⁶² Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 68.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

234 Timpani *f*

Tambourine *f*

S.D. snare off
Cymb. with S.D. stick

B.D. with B.D. stick

237

trm

f

on rim.

Figure 50 Third movement: Jazz style percussion cadenza, mm. 234-40.

15

2/4

Figure 51 Third movement: Refrain rhythm as printed, mm. 15-21.

2/4

3/8

2/8

5/8

3/8

2/8

5/8

Figure 52 Third movement: Refrain rhythm if rewritten Stravinsky style, mm. 15-21.

CHAPTER 4

Violinistic Issues: Musical, Technical, and Pedagogical

The Piston First Concerto is a very rewarding piece for a violinist to study as it is highly idiomatic. Various passages of the piece feature many of the characteristic qualities of the instrument including long, lyrical lines that highlight the vocal quality of the instrument (suggesting the instrument's Italian vocal heritage), as well as more percussive, accented passages (reflecting the instrument's French dancing heritage). In addition, Piston presents numerous opportunities for the left hand to display virtuosic technique with double-, triple-, and quadruple-stops, rapid passage-work, as well as fingered and natural harmonics. From a pedagogical standpoint, the work is an excellent precursor to the longer standard concerti such as the Tchaikovsky, Sibelius, and Brahms as it features similar technical challenges while providing the teacher with another excellent, very musically accessible work that utilizes the musical language of the twentieth century.

MUSICAL ISSUES

Perhaps the most significant musical issue to consider when preparing this work for performance is that of rhythm and in particular Piston's use of accent. Throughout the work Piston is very particular in his placement of accents, and it is the syncopation created by these accents that gives the work its energy and vitality. In later years, Piston commented on his concept of rhythm: "I do believe that rhythm to be rhythm has to be felt. I do not believe that the measuring off of time-values necessarily creates rhythm."⁶⁴ This implies that the performer needs to take an active role in interpreting the rhythms of

⁶⁴ Westergaard, "Conversation with Walter Piston," 167.

the piece and attempt to capture the musical style they suggest. In another interview, however, Piston commented on rhythm: “This is not to say that that the composer should give the performer complete liberty with the composition, but he should avoid making performing similar to ‘the old-fashioned player piano.’ ‘If I saw the notation “very measured” on the score, I would be very sure to play that section in a very measured way,’ Piston said. But he laughed and added, ‘Still I’m sure my idea of very measured would not be the same as the next man’s.’”⁶⁵ So while Piston expects the performer to “feel” the rhythms of the work, he is not giving the performer carte blanche.

Given these comments on rhythm, Piston has certainly provided the performer with a significant amount to “feel” in this concerto. In the first movement, the solo line of the primary theme could be felt in a lyrical 6/8 for much of the time while the accompaniment is in a strong 3/4 time. Accented off-beats provide the solo line with a syncopation that ruffles the lyricism and gives the primary theme an edginess that prevents it from getting too slurpy and romantic (until m. 32 where the solo line takes over the rhythm and meter of the accompaniment and the accents become important to enhancing the sense of syncopation). The transition sections of the first movement are also peppered with syncopations in the accompaniment that the soloist responds to and plays over.

While the first movement is interesting in its syncopated first theme, it is the last movement that truly brings out the syncopated dance element with its rollicking barn dance type syncopations in the refrain (A sections) and a more sensual sense of dance with the tango rhythms of the B episodes. It is in this movement that Piston is really relying on the performer to “feel” the dance rhythms implied in each section and to

⁶⁵ John Burns, “Piston’s Composing Bridges Established and Modern Music.”

transmit the energy and vitality of these dance implications to the listener. Here it is important that the soloist (and accompaniment) respect the printed accents as they highlight the sense of dance in the movement. It is also important that the accompaniment plays along with the accents and off-beats that reflect the character of dance and that it picks up on the additional inferences to popular music elements in the accompaniment such as the jazz inspired walking-bass-line in the second A section and the coda (mm. 110-13 and mm. 407-09)—see Figure 36 from chapter 2.

The second important musical issue is that of spinning a long, lyrical phrase in the theme and variations of the second movement and in the exposition and recapitulation of the first movement. One of the difficulties in playing the slow movement is managing the long phrases, which are often extended by eliding the ending of one phrase with the beginning of the next in such a way that the line is continuous (mm. 11, 22). In general, the theme and variations consists of two long phrases, the first phrase of five to seven measures in length, and the second phrase nine to fourteen measures. The challenge to phrasing in the first movement is less about the length of the line (typically 7-9 measures in the primary theme and 6-7 measures in the secondary theme) and more about the thwarted anticipation of phrasing in the primary and secondary themes. This prevents the performer and listener from settling down by utilizing unexpected chord changes and incomplete resolutions that extend the line further than anticipated (mm.21-23, mm. 29-30, 90-91, and like passages).

Finally, it is important to be aware of the counterpoint occurring between the soloist and the various lines in the orchestra (see the previous chapter for examples of counterpoint). The soloist should not over-emphasize his or her line in the contrapuntal exchanges. The soloist's awareness however, of where counterpoint is occurring and the

conversations involved between the soloist and the accompaniment will enable the listener to pick up on the counterpoint.

Finally, Piston's ideas on composing for the performer were very much in favor of the performer's input and interpretation of the work: "I must say I've always composed music from the point of view of the performers. I love instruments, and I value the cooperation of the performers. I believe in the contribution of the player to the music as written. I am very old-fashioned that way."⁶⁶ This being said, it seems it would be helpful for the performer to examine other performances if possible, to get an idea of the range of performance practice.

Performance Practice and Review of the Three Extant Recordings

Related to the musical issues a performer confronts when studying the First Concerto is the question of performance practice. There are times when it is helpful to hear various interpretations of the work, in addition to carefully studying the composition, so that one can have a better understanding of performance practice issues for the piece in question. The three available recordings of the First Concerto provide both a cultural perspective as well as insight into the performance practice of the time in which the recording was made. The first recording was made in 1956 by the Americans Louis Kaufman and Bernard Herrmann with the London Symphony Orchestra; the second by German Hugo Kolberg in 1970 with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra and Otto Mazerath; and the most recent recording was recorded in 1998 by the American James Buswell and American trained Theodore Kuchar with the National Symphony Orchestra of the Ukraine.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 163.

Piston, Walter. *Walter Piston: Violin Concerto No. 1 (1939), Violin Concerto No. 2 (1960), Fantasia for violin and orchestra (1970)*. James Buswell, violinist, with Theodore Kuchar and the National Symphony Orchestra of the Ukraine. Naxos American Classics 8.559003, recorded May 27-31, 1998, Kiev. Compact Disc.

When compared to the other two recordings, Buswell's recording is technically the cleanest and the interpretation that best captures the energy and vitality of the dance in the last movement. This may be due in part to Theodore Kuchar's excellent work with the National Symphony Orchestra of the Ukraine and their ability to support the soloist idiomatically. The other movements are also played convincingly by soloist and orchestra. This recording received the Gramophone Critic's Choice award in 1999.

Piston, Walter. *Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra*. Hugo Kolberg, violinist, with Otto Mazerath, Berlin Symphony Orchestra. Mace LP MXX 9089, 1970. LP record. Other publications of this recording: (England/USA) EMI Odeon 0 80610, (Germany) Electrola 0 80610, (Spain) OLAX 1027.

Hugo Kolberg takes the first movement in a much slower tempo than does Buswell, and in m. 80 and following (as well as similar passages), the orchestra plays the eighth-notes a more pronounced staccato than the Buswell recording, though the score does not indicate staccato at this point. Kolberg also takes much more liberty in the second theme, almost as if it were marked rubato while at other times the performance seems too measured. Kolberg's interpretation of the second movement is likewise much slower and more lyrical than Buswell's, which may be a good thing since the movement should not feel hurried, though at times it seems like choice of tempo causes the melodic line to lose forward momentum and stall at times. Kolberg's choice of tempo in the last movement seems too fast for the metronome markings indicated so that the characteristic dance element is lost and the movement becomes an exercise in virtuosity—interesting, but less appealing.

Piston, Walter. *Violin Concerto, No. 1 (Walter Piston)* with Violin Concerto in D major by Aram Kachaturian. Louis Kaufman, violin, with Bernard Herrmann, London

Symphony Orchestra. Recorded April 14, 1956. Discopaedia MB 1050, 197?. LP Record. Bay Cities BCD-1019, 1990. Compact Disc.

Kaufman takes the opening chordal introduction much more rapidly than in the other two recordings with very short chords somehow making the introduction sound much more like an introduction, but he plays the lyrical primary theme at a much slower tempo. When the theme is played in octaves by the soloist in m. 209 however, it sounds a bit rushed as if the tempo is too fast here instead of sounding grand and majestic, heralding the climax of the recapitulation. It is possible that he might have been focusing instead on the rhythmic syncopation of the accompaniment here, which may be better served by not broadening the tempo slightly.

In the second movement the flute comes in a bar too early but everything somehow rights itself by the soloist's entrance in the first variation. Kaufman uses significant rubato in the opening phrases, a very sweet sound, with extensive use of glissandi into notes (most likely reflecting the preferences of the time period—1956), to produce a sentimental sound. Kaufman pushes the movement forward much more than does Kolberg, though the rhythm is not always clear due to the soloist's frequent use of rubato.

In the third movement, the orchestra does not follow the accents well and so the movement loses some energy, though the soloist is consistent in his adherence to the score's articulation markings. Though an improvement on the Kolberg recording, Kaufman's performance of the last movement still doesn't dance like that of Buswell and is missing some of the clarity and sparkle heard in Buswell's recording of the last movement.⁶⁷ In the cadenza, Kaufman takes the whole cadenza rather fast with not much

⁶⁷ From a technical standpoint it is interesting to note that in the A-I part of the A section, Kaufman sounds like he is using left hand pizzicato in addition to using the bow on the A notes.

time taken to allow a sense of space and freedom that is typical of a cadenza—though his technical skills are evident in his very legato double stops.

TECHNICAL ISSUES

This concerto is a challenging piece with technical requirements similar to those of major violin concerti such as the Tchaikovsky and the Sibelius. As such, if the violinist is prepared to study any of those works, he is ready for this concerto. Piston's study of the violin is evident in the writing of this piece, as the work is very idiomatic and, though challenging, fits under the fingers well. What follows is an outline of some of the technical issues presented in each movement and a suggested way of preparing the student to handle them.

First Movement

The first technically demanding section in this movement is the opening quadruple-stop passage illustrated in Figure 53 that returns in the development and again just before the coda.⁶⁸ While the chords fit under the fingers without too much trouble, the passages are somewhat awkward due to quick changes required. This presents a particular intonational problem for the left hand since the chords abound in perfect fourths and fifths which are difficult to play in tune, particularly at this pace. In the bow hand, the performer is faced with playing smooth string-crossings (correctly wiping the strings) in such a way that the chords end up clean, clear, and beautiful. An excellent etude to prepare the performer for both the left and right hand technical issues found in these passages would be the first etude in the Twenty-four Etudes and Caprices for Solo Violin, op. 35 by Jakob Dont which is entirely triple and quadruple-stops.

⁶⁸ Mm. 1-10, 131-32, 135-41, 317-26.

Allegro energico ♩ = 126

Figure 53 shows the first movement of a piece, measures 1-10. The tempo is marked **Allegro energico** with a quarter note equal to 126 beats per minute. The music is in 3/4 time. The right hand plays a series of double, triple, and quadruple stops, while the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The score is divided into two systems, with measures 1-5 in the first system and measures 6-10 in the second system. The second system includes a *poco rit.* (poco ritardando) marking and a *a tempo* marking.

Figure 53 First movement: Double, triple, and quadruple stops, mm. 1-10.

Moving on through the movement, the next passage to present technical difficulties is the double stop passage in mm. 36-38 and the corresponding passage in the recapitulation (mm. 195-205). The demanding left-hand techniques found in these passages are two-fold: the biggest issue is that the finger-pattern changes very quickly on the eighth-note at allegro (quarter-note=126). Secondly, the pattern often changes intervals from a seventh to a series of fourths to a second and back with an occasional third and several shifts added to the mix. If the student is comfortable with rapid double-stop changes of this nature there should be little difficulty in mastering these passages.

The sixteenth-note passages in the transition section fit well under the fingers though the finger pattern used in them is the more unusual closed finger pattern of half-step, whole-step, half-step (H-W-H). There are few awkward shifts however, and Piston

uses the same finger pattern consistently (perhaps reflecting his extensive performance experience as a violinist and violist).

In addition to the triple/quadruple-stop passage mentioned previously, the development also challenges the violinist technically with a passage of fourths at wide intervals interspersed with fingered harmonics followed by fourths and sixths at wide intervals involving several awkward leaps before moving to three measures of fingered harmonics illustrated in Figure 54. This passage is probably the most difficult one for both hands in the first movement. The problem for the bow hand lies in the quick switch in technique between the heavy bow needed for forte double-stops and the fast, lighter bow need to play fingered harmonics cleanly in the first three measures of the passage.

146

150

mf *w.w.*

dm. *p*

poco rit.

C.A. 2 Bsns.

Figure 54 First movement: Fingered harmonics, mm. 146-53.

Aside from the use of octaves from mm. 207-16 and the passage of sevenths, sixths, fourths, and seconds similar to the development double-stop passage in mm. 199-206, the last portion of the movement that is somewhat technically demanding is the *Più mosso* which is in triplets. Here the challenge is more to keep track of finger patterns and location quickly enough so that the section can fly, but this is easily mastered with practice.

The difficulty of this movement from the musical perspective is to give direction to the long lines found in the Primary and Secondary sections of the movement and to attempt to make the final coda sound like it belongs to the rest of the movement as it sounds totally different in character.

Second Movement

The slow movement is the most soulful and romantic of the three movements and one which exploits the lyrical qualities of the violin. As such, the primary technical complexities are related to the musical ones of how to make the long lines speak to the audience and to impart a sense of phrasing and direction to the line.

Third Movement

The third movement is the most violinistically demanding of the three movements, both within the movement itself and in the cadenza. The primary difficulties in the A1, A2, and A4 refrains are controlling the wide shifts and rapid finger-pattern changes and using the bow effectively to make the refrain dance. Though there are some double-stops in the refrain, they fit under the left hand well and are unlikely to cause too much trouble. Unlike the finger-patterns found in the first movement that tended to span the finger width of a diminished fourth (which is the average violinist's most comfortable hand position), the finger patterns found here are expanded to a tritone (diminished fifth).

Exercises for the left hand found in Ruggiero Ricci's etude book *Left-Hand Violin Technique*⁶⁹ are helpful in opening the hand up to comfortably play reaches of a tritone and perfect fifth. The A3 refrain presents additional challenges to the violinist as the first twenty measures are spiccato sixteenth-notes that are a conglomeration of finger-patterns in chromatic and diatonic scales and arpeggios. In addition, the second half of the A3 refrain also contains two passages of sixths with a quadruple-stop at the beginning that require some consideration.⁷⁰

While the B1 episode is not particularly difficult aside from some wide string crossings and shifts, B2 replaces the section of wide string crossings and shifts with natural and fingered harmonics which present different technical issues to the left and right hands. The C episode is lyrical and provides the violinist with a respite from the pyrotechnics of the A refrains.

As might be expected, the cadenza is the most technically complex and demanding passage in the entire concerto with passages of double and triple-stops shown in Figure 55 and Figure 56, arpeggiated ricochet, illustrated in Figure 57, and a passage where the lyrical C theme is played simultaneously in double-stops with the tango-like B theme—see Figure 58. The coda following the cadenza is in sixteenth-note passagework that is not too challenging. There are a few large shifts however, that do present the difficulty of shifting smoothly and quickly.

⁶⁹ Ruggiero Ricci, *Left-Hand Violin Technique* (Milwaukee, WI: G. Schirmer, 1988).

⁷⁰ Mm. 250-51, 253-54.

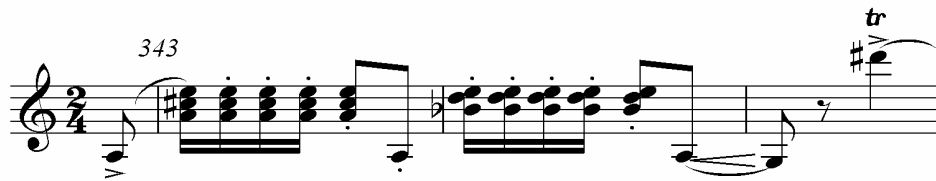


Figure 55 Cadenza: Triple stops, mm. 343-44.

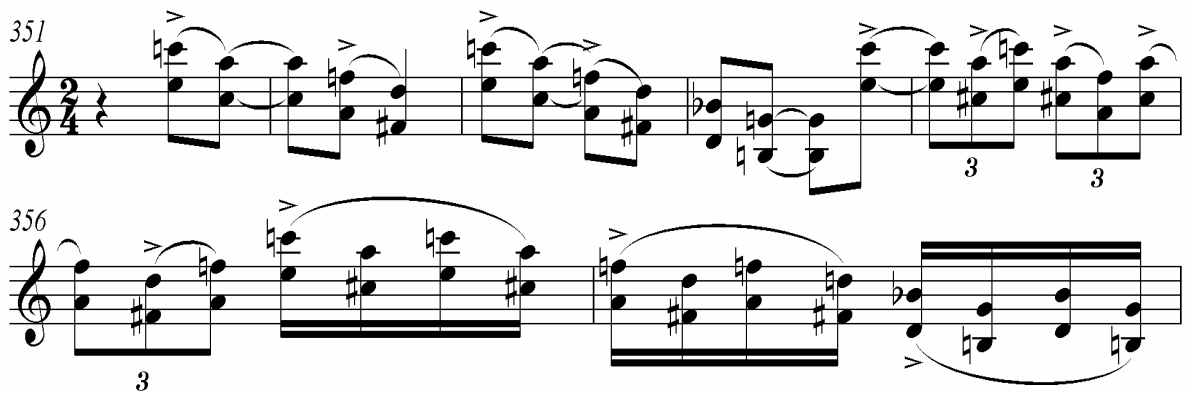


Figure 56 Cadenza: Double stops, mm. 351-57.

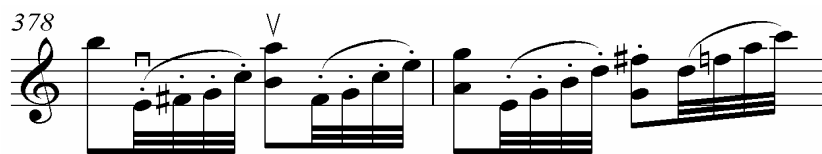


Figure 57 Cadenza: Arpeggiated ricochet, mm. 378-79.



Figure 58 Cadenza: Double-stops with B tango theme and C lyrical theme, mm. 363-77.

PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

From a pedagogical standpoint, this concerto would most likely be best studied after the Barber, Bruch G minor, and Mendelssohn E minor concerti because the Piston First Concerto utilizes the long lyrical lines of the Barber (second movement of the Piston), the spiccato of the last movement of the Mendelssohn (A3 refrain of the third movement of the Piston), and the double-stop facility of the Bruch. Though the Piston First Concerto utilizes more fourths, fifths, and sixths, and far fewer thirds than the Bruch, the facility with double-stops is still similar, though the Bruch is perhaps easier (the Dvorak Concerto requires a similar double-stop facility as well). While the Piston First Concerto utilizes technique found in the Tchaikovsky, Brahms, and Sibelius concerti, such as similar double- and triple-stopping technique and the use of counterpoint with different articulation in each line in sustained double-stop passages (Sibelius), the Piston First Concerto is not as long and hence not as taxing and therefore might be a better concerto to study prior to these concerti (only about twenty minutes rather than thirty-five to forty-five minutes). Aside from the reward of studying the First Piston Concerto for its own sake, the pedagogical advantages of studying this work would be that it is a very musically accessible twentieth century work that develops the student's facility with double-stops of fourths and fifths while at the same time providing a good preparation for later study of the traditional pedagogical canon of Sibelius, Tchaikovsky, and Brahms since it contains much of the same technique but is much shorter in length.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Walter Piston's Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra (1939) has been examined from a variety of angles in this thesis. While the concerto is traditional in its three movement form and the use of sonata form, theme and variations, and rondo for its

internal forms, it draws on the twentieth century compositional resources of quartal and quintal harmonies and extensive syncopation. An examination of themes and motives in the concerto has shown that the work contains several thematic and multiple motivic transformations. In the first movement, the primary theme is transformed into the melodic basis for the coda of the same movement, while the secondary theme melody is transformed into the tango B episode of the third movement. In addition, the first phrase of the second movement theme becomes the melodic basis of the C episode in the third movement. On the motivic level there has been shown to be a germinal motive in the first movement that is found in various transformations in the second and third movements.

Because Piston wrote a textbook on counterpoint and was known to be a contrapuntalist, this element was also examined in the First Concerto in light of his definition as independence and disagreement. It was shown that there are numerous examples of this type of counterpoint throughout the composition and that Piston utilized various aspects of counterpoint, including rhythmic disagreement, to maintain forward momentum in his phrases. Also examined was Piston's use of orchestration, which was shown to be very supportive of the solo violin, with the orchestra rarely having the opportunity to overwhelm the soloist.

Piston's stylistic influences were examined and it was shown that his early influences of Bach and Stravinsky are found in this concerto; Bach's influence in Piston's use of counterpoint and Stravinsky's in some of the instrumentation and Piston's use of rhythm. Perhaps an even greater influence found in this work was the American musical culture within which Piston was working at the time of this composition. Elements of ragtime, jazz, barn dance, and tango are found in the work as well as less concrete aspects of "American" music such as the use of a wide range in pitch and broad, lyrical themes

reminiscent of music associated with the American West, and the use of quartal and quintal harmonies which is consistent with “American” music written at the time.

Finally, the First Concerto was examined from the perspective of the violinist, including musical, technical, and pedagogical issues. It was shown that the work is idiomatic, and, though technically challenging, it fits well under the fingers and provides challenges in multiple areas for both right- and left-hand technique. Pedagogically, this concerto was shown to be suitable as preparation for the longer Tchaikovsky, Brahms, and Sibelius concerti as it contains many of the same technical challenges but is much shorter. It also develops the performer’s ability to play double-stops in fourths and fifths cleanly and consistently in tune as these intervals are used far more frequently than the traditional thirds and sixths. Performance practice was also examined with a review of the three extant recordings providing examples of how performance of the work has changed with time since the first recording was produced in 1956 and the most recent recording was produced in 1999. More study into performance practice of music in the 1930s and 40s is needed as the use of glissandi and rubato is much more extensive in the 1956 recording than in the 1999 recording, and it may be that Piston would have preferred the former style of playing.

At the time of this writing, the First Concerto is not widely performed or studied, which is unfortunate since the work certainly deserves a wider audience and is an excellent pedagogical work. The concerto is such a musically accessible and entertaining work that it is somewhat surprising that the work does not have a larger following. There is hope that the work may eventually garner a larger following however. James Buswell’s 1999 recording of this concerto has received excellent reviews,⁷¹ and was

⁷¹ Leslie Gerber, web review for Amazon.com of James Buswell’s 1999 recording of the Piston Violin Concertos, accessed February 13, 2004.

awarded the *Gramophone* magazine's Critic's Choice in 1999 as well as a five-star rating from the *BBC Music Magazine* in September, 1999,⁷² prompting some renewed interest in the work. What the First Concerto needs is a couple of prominent soloists and artistic directors who will champion the work as was done for the Barber Concerto op. 14 in the 1980s. Though this may not happen during the lifetime of the current generation, perhaps a future generation will discover and enjoy the merits of the Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra (1939) by Walter Piston.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00000DHT6/categoricalgeome/ref%3Dnosim/102-7094861-6704149>

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72 From promotional material for Buswell's recording at the Castle Classics web site, accessed February 13, 2004; available at

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Piston, Walter. Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. Score. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. A manuscript of the score is housed in the Library of Congress. It contains dynamic markings in colored pencil and barely visible markings in a couple of small places where Piston erased notation and rewrote a part.

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Rachelle Marie Davis was born in Loma Linda, California on June 17, 1972, the daughter of Bobetta Jeanne Shearer Berthelsen and Stephen Otto Berthelsen. After pre-college studies in home school, she attended Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, Massachusetts for two years before transferring to Pacific Union College, Angwin, California where she graduated *summa cum laude* with a B.S. in music in May 1994. She then entered the Graduate School at Indiana University where she completed her Masters in Music in May 1998. While there she was on the faculty of the Indiana University String Academy. Upon moving to College Station, Texas she assumed the position of Orchestra Director at Stephen F. Austin Middle School in Bryan, Texas for the school year 1998-99 before returning to full time studio teaching. She entered the Graduate School of the University of Texas at Austin in the fall of 2000. Upon completion of her coursework in 2001, she accepted the position of Assistant Professor of Music and Assistant Director of the New England Symphonic Ensemble at Columbia Union College in Takoma Park, Maryland. She is currently on the faculty of the Paulin Center for the Creative Arts on the campus of Pacific Union College, Angwin, California.

In addition to her teaching career, Rachelle has performed around the world as soloist, concertmaster, and member of the New England Youth Ensemble, performing in major concert venues in Europe, the Middle-East, South Africa, China, Mexico, the Caribbean, Canada, and the United States. She has also performed regularly in Carnegie Hall as concertmaster of the New England Symphonic Ensemble. She currently resides in Angwin, California with her husband Kent and son Ethan.

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