

## WALTER PISTON

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I was shocked to read in the sleeve notes of a CD of music by Walter Piston that commentators on his music have dismissed him as being academic as if this, and his intellectual prowess, were bad things. This is one of many prevailing injustices in music that poor composers are elevated to greatness whereas fine composers, like Piston, are savaged.

Bach was academic yet is admired and deservedly so. Beethoven was the marvellous exponent both of form and development and Max Reger was a fine academic.

I want to concentrate in the main on Piston's eight symphonies.

Piston's music has a wonderful sensitivity and his allegros are usually full of life and invigorating. His skills in counterpoint are second to none; his orchestration is magnificent and never extreme, and his book on the subject is highly commendable. His music is American as shown, for example in the finales of the second and third symphonies. There is often an infectious rhythm in his music.

Many fellow composers admired him and gave him the respect he deserved and still do.

He was born in Rockland, Maine on 20 January 1894 and is therefore a New Englander. In fact, he is a descendant of English and Italian ancestry. His father's father was Antonio Pistone from Geneva, who was a seaman.

When he was six years old, Walter moved with his family to Boston. He graduated from Mechanical Arts High School in 1912 and enrolled in Massachusetts Normal Art School until 1916. During the 1910s, he played the piano or violin in dance bands and the violin in various orchestras led by Georges Lengy. In 1916, he enlisted into the American Navy where he served his country for three years and where he learned to play the saxophone to enable him to be a band musician. He was educated at Harvard graduating in 1924 and joined the teaching staff after spending two years in Paris studying with Paul Dukas and Nadia Boulanger. These two teachers were as different as chalk and cheese. Dukas was an excellent teacher. He also studied the violin with Enescu.

In 1920 he married Kathryn Nason, a fellow student at the Normal Arts School, and they had 56 years together.

He stayed at his teaching post at Harvard University until he retired in 1960 and, among his pupils, were the splendid Irving Fine, the talented Elliot Carter, Harold Shapero, Leonard Bernstein and many others including Leroy Anderson.

Piston was not a snob and took an interest in modern developments in music such as serial music, elements of which can be found in his Symphony no 1 and his last symphony. He was not dismissive of this challenging system as was the late Michael Kennedy who revealed his ignorance and vitriol over this and other fascinating developments in music.

Piston's early works include a Symphonic Piece of 1927, a suite for orchestra of 1929 and the Concerto for orchestra of 1934. The first two string quartets date from 1933 and 1935 respectively and there is a Flute Sonata of 1930, a Suite for oboe and piano of 1931, the Piano Trio no 1 of 1935 and the Violin Sonata of 1939, all works of obvious merit.

The Symphony no 1 of 1937 is a fascinating work but it has not really caught on. These were the days when American music had to tow the line and be both nationalistic and traditional. The three

movements are Andantino leading to Allegro, Adagio and Allegro con fuoco and the music has a compelling rhythmic strength and in the slow music has a beauty that is typical of this fine composer. The soaring strings are ravishing beautiful at times.

The Violin Concerto no 1 followed soon after, as did his most popular work the ballet The Incredible Flutist of 1940 which is fun, but it is curious that a composers work that is most popular is not necessarily his best work.

The splendid Symphony no 2 has a distinct American feel and dates from 1943. It is not a war symphony. The opening Moderato is full of contrasting material beautifully bound together and not episodic. The Adagio is sadly nostalgic but not maudlin. After two movements of about 10 minutes each the final Allegro is just under 5 minutes and seems to be a Rondo. The music is full of spirit as if to indicate that the tide in the war was changing. Here is one of the rare composers who can write allegros.

In 1944 he composed some orchestral variations on a theme of Eugene Goossens.

The next symphony is the Symphony no 3 which dates from 1947. I do not regard it as a successful work. The opening Andantino is sometimes dreary; the following allegro has both exuberance and life; the adagio has some beautiful moments whereas the finale stops and starts.

In 1950, the University of Minnesota commissioned a work from Piston which became his Symphony no 4. Antal Dorati conducted the premiere with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra on 30 March 1951. It is in four movements namely *piacevole*, *ballando*, *contemplative* and *energico*.

The first movement is rustic and flows along gracefully, the second speaks of an urban waltz and country fiddling, the third is an impressive adagio, the final *energico* is in sonata form. It is very attractive music.

As for the Symphony no 5, it has been described as neo classical and dates from 1954 and was premiered by the Juilliard School in 1956. The movements are in sonata form, variations and rondo respectively. The introduction to the first movement is an impressive *lento*. The slow movement has a note row and the finale has an urgent rhythmic drive

The Symphony no 6 was completed in 1955 and written in celebration of the 75th season of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and first performed by them under Charles Munch and it was dedicated to the Koussevitskys. It has everything a symphony must have with long melodic lines and glorious orchestral painting ( no one does this better than Piston ). The scherzo is very percussive and often like a whirlwind. The following Adagio is ravishingly beautiful. The finale is very bright and owes much to A major and ends in a blaze of positive energy. Why should fine works like this be ignored? Why do British orchestras not play them? The works are not banal or trite and would find many, many friends if performed.

The Viola Concerto of 1957 is a masterpiece and there is probably no Viola Concerto more beautiful than this one. The movements are *Con moto e flessibile*, *Adagio con fantasia* and *Allegro vivo*. the main themes are infectiously immediate and the lyricism is simply stunning. The recording with Paul Doktor as soloist and the Louisville Orchestra under Robert Whitney is a must. This is music beyond words.

Two concertante works appeared in 1959 and 1960. The first is a Concerto for two pianos and orchestra which is very attractive and highly entertaining. It could be a show stopper if it were made know. The Violin Concerto no 2 appeared in 1960.

Piston received his second Pulitzer Prize for his Symphony no 7 written in 1960 from a commission from the Philadelphia Orchestra which Eugene Ormandy premiered at the Carnegie Hall on 14 February 1961. It was not a success at first. Harold Schonberg, who wrote prejudicial books on pianists and composers for the piano said, "It does not say anything particularly interesting. !" Nonsense. The opening movement has a tremendous thrust and is both forceful and powerful with changing harmonies and it is not trammelled by convention. The slow movement opens with an oboe solo and a beautiful string theme. The finale is boisterous and festive. Here is a composer that can write finales.

The Symphony no 8 is strikingly original and one sleeve note calls it chromatic music. The writer does not know what he is talking about. The work is dodecaphonic and remarkable. But people are so prejudiced as they hate such works before they have heard them. It is a profound work with a tremendous finale.

He was awarded prizes from the Edward MacDowell Colony and the New York Critics Society.

Some of his very late works show a weariness such as the Clarinet Concerto of 1967.

He died at his home in Belmont, Massachusetts on 12 November 1976. He was not just an academic but, at his best, a very fine composer.

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