



Walter
PISTON

String Quartets
Nos. 1, 3 and 5

Harlem Quartet

Ilmar Gavilán, Violin

Melissa White, Violin

Juan-Miguel

Hernandez, Viola

Desmond Neysmith,

Cello



Walter Piston (1894-1976)

String Quartets Nos. 1, 3 and 5

Born in Rockland (Maine) on 20th January 1894, the American composer Walter Piston was largely self-taught as a musician. Having studied at Massachusetts Normal Art School, he seemed set for a career in engineering, though earning money by playing the piano and violin in dance bands and, between 1917 and 1921, violin in orchestras and ensembles directed by Georges Longy. During the First World War he joined the Navy Band, where he took on the saxophone as well as other brass and woodwind instruments. In 1919 he entered Harvard University as a music student, where his teachers included A. T. Davison and Edward Burlingame Hill. He graduated five years later, and then pursued advanced studies at the École Normale de Musique in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, Paul Dukas and George Enescu. His first surviving works date from this time and reveal a neoclassical elegance, leavened with the expressive intensity of an earlier generation as was eschewed by most of his American contemporaries studying in Paris.

Returning to Boston in 1926, Piston joined the music staff at Harvard, where he was to remain until his retirement in 1960. Composition was largely restricted to the summer vacations, notably in a series of works commissioned for the Boston Symphony Orchestra by his long-time advocate Serge Koussevitzky (though it was a measure of Piston's abilities as a conductor that the former tended to let him direct his own premières). Further support came from Aaron Copland, whose comments on the qualities of his craftsmanship were later echoed by Stravinsky. This technical security made him an ideal teacher and pedagogue, his many students including Elliott Carter, Leonard Bernstein and Frederic Rzewski, while his influence continued through a series of textbooks that he wrote; in particular the treatises on *Harmony* (1941), *Counterpoint* (1947) and *Orchestration* (1955) still command respect in music schools and departments throughout the world and have been translated into numerous languages.

By his own admission a slow worker, Piston gradually amassed a select catalogue with few occasional and no redundant works. His skill as an orchestrator enabled him to compose directly into full score, while his mastery of the full range of compositional techniques was deployed rigorously yet without drawing attention to itself. Although he essayed works with a descriptive element (referring to places and also events in regions where he grew up and worked), he favoured abstract genres. Several concertante works, written for artists such as the violinist Salvatore Accardo, harpist Nicanor Zabaleta and the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, confirm the respect in which he was held by many leading musicians. Otherwise, his output centres on the eight symphonies and five string quartets that were written over the greater part of his career; indeed, his contribution to the quartet can rank with Elliott Carter and Ben Johnson as the most important produced by an American musician.

Never a household name to the extent of Copland or Bernstein, Piston was the recipient of numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for his *Third and Seventh Symphonies*, Naumberg Award for his *Fourth Symphony* and the New York Music Critics' Circle Prize for his *Second Symphony, Viola Concerto and Fifth Quartet*. He was elected to several American cultural institutions, while the French government made him Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. He continued composing until his death in Belmont (Massachusetts) on 12th November 1976.

The *First String Quartet* dates from 1933, making it contemporary with the *Concerto for Orchestra and Suite* for oboe and piano. Its three-movement form is one to which Piston almost always adhered, while the musical idiom shows the absorption of Stravinsky and Hindemith. The first movement opens with a rhythmically incisive theme for all four instruments, leading to a more lyrical second theme announced by

viola. There follows a lively and typically resourceful development, with both themes heard in various combinations, before a varied reprise (the second theme now sounding even more plaintive heard in the upper register) and a brief but forceful coda. The second movement centres on a pensive theme that, initially heard on cello, is musically discussed by the whole quartet as the expressive tension gently rises and falls. A central section features aspects of the theme over a more animated rhythmic basis, all four instruments joining in an angular *fugato* that ushers in a full presentation of the theme and so brings about the raptly inward ending. The third movement sets up an immediate contrast with its bristling first theme, featuring hectic imitation between instruments and some dexterous *pizzicato*, the music heading with an unflinching momentum to its energetic close.

The *Third String Quartet* dates from 1947, making it contemporary with the *Third Symphony*, the *Second Orchestral Suite* and the *Divertimento* for woodwind and strings. Bartók is undoubtedly present in the music's rhythmic trenchancy and its powerfully intense melodic writing. The first movement begins with a robust theme that is more yielding than the comparable theme of its predecessor. The second theme, too, creates less contrast – its expressive character unfolded more succinctly. The music builds powerful momentum going into a development that binds these two themes together; the reprise following almost as an extension of this, before the coda wraps up matters with a surge of energy. The second movement begins with a long-breathed melody shared between the instruments, setting up an intricate web of counterpoint to which the more emotive central section contrasts with its emphasis

on unison writing. The first melody returns to bring about an introspective ending. The third movement springs into life with an animated theme whose folk-music inflections give it real impetus. A more passive theme serves as contrast, but it is the first theme and its transformations that ensure an incisive close.

The *Fifth String Quartet* dates from 1962, making it contemporary with the *Seventh Symphony* and the *Capriccio* for harp and strings. Premiered in Berlin, it interestingly makes use of the twelve-note method that Piston had had recourse to, albeit less extensively, during the previous three decades. The first movement commences with a lively theme that finds his contrapuntal writing at its spikiest. The second theme contrasts in being one of his most expressive and harmonically rich creations, then aspects of both themes are brought together in the extensive and emotionally varied development. There is no formal reprise as such; rather the music continues to evolve before a curt rhythmic coda. The second movement commences with a richly scored theme that unfolds in a curve of steadily arching intensity, very different from the sparingly scored idea that follows almost as an interlude. The initial theme is developed at length, building to a climax of finely wrought intensity before a brief recall of the interlude theme and then a searching conclusion. The third movement is launched with an excitable theme that throws up various related motifs in its wake. A more relaxed theme provides contrast, but it is the initial theme that at length returns to drive the music onward to its impetuous close.

Richard Whitehouse

Harlem Quartet

Ilmar Gavilán, Violin • Melissa White, Violin • Juan-Miguel Hernandez, Viola • Desmond Neysmith, Cello

From left to right: Desmond Neysmith, Melissa White, Juan-Miguel Hernandez, Ilmar Gavilán



The Harlem Quartet is an ensemble comprising First-Place Laureates of the Sphinx Competition for young Black and Latino string-players. Its mission is to advance diversity in classical music while engaging young and new audiences through the discovery and presentation of varied repertoire, highlighting works by minority composers. The quartet is featured annually during the national Sphinx Chamber Orchestra Tour. In 2009 the Quartet performed by invitation with Itzhak Perlman at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, made its London debut, was featured on *The Today Show* and gave two performances at the White House. The group has been featured on WNBC, CNN, in addition to past and future collaborations with Paul Katz, Carter Brey and Misha Dichter. The Harlem Quartet, a Sphinx ensemble, is managed by Sciolino Artist Management (SAM) of New York City.

Playing
Time:
49:43

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Walter
PISTON
(1894-1976)

String Quartets Nos. 1, 3 and 5

String Quartet No. 1 (1933)

- | | | |
|----------|----------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | I. Allegro | 17:25 |
| 2 | II. Adagio | 6:22 |
| 3 | III. Allegro vivace | 8:00 |
| | | 3:03 |

String Quartet No. 3 (1947)

- | | | |
|----------|---------------------|--------------|
| 4 | I. Allegro | 15:22 |
| 5 | II. Lento | 5:05 |
| 6 | III. Allegro | 5:13 |
| | | 5:05 |

String Quartet No. 5 (1962)

- | | | |
|----------|---------------------|--------------|
| 7 | I. Allegro | 16:56 |
| 8 | II. Adagio | 4:41 |
| 9 | III. Allegro | 8:05 |
| | | 4:09 |

Harlem Quartet

Ilmar Gavilán, Violin • Melissa White, Violin
Juan-Miguel Hernandez, Viola
Desmond Neysmith, Cello

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AMERICAN CLASSICS

Much lauded in his lifetime, Walter Piston is remembered chiefly today for his eight *Symphonies*, the two *Violin Concertos* (8.559003) and the popular ballet, *The Incredible Flutist* (8.559160). This recording presents three of the five string quartets, which range from the lithe neo-Classicism of the *First Quartet* and the rhythmic trenchancy and intense melodic writing of the *Third Quartet* to the forceful yet accessible *Fifth*. This is the Naxos début of the Harlem Quartet, an ensemble comprising First-Place Laureates of the Sphinx Competition for young Black and Latino string players. More of Piston's chamber music is available on 8.559071.

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