

The Composition of the Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion  
by Walter Piston

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

To my wife, Holly A. Taylor

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My wife Holly leant her impeccable musical intuition, advice, and support, inspiring new creative possibilities and the vigor to attain them. Family and friends not only loved and listened, they practiced and performed, advised and revised. Scores of musicians rehearsed and concertized new and often challenging music. Without reservation, the musicians volunteered their time in addition to the chaotic professional and full family schedules they keep, simply for their art and to help out a fellow musician.

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I walked the grounds of the Boston Marathon bombing site on a daily basis to research at the Boston Public Library. Never has entering library doors been so poignant. I am ever grateful to those guardians of humanity, the librarians, who care for the history of what we are capable. Kimberly Reynolds and the staff at the Boston Public Library, Steven Gerber and the staff of the George Mason University Library, and workers at the Library of Congress have been of invaluable help to me with uncanny patience as request slips piled up, emails flooded in, and questions persisted.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE COMPOSITION OF THE CONCERTO FOR STRING QUARTET, WIND INSTRUMENTS AND PERCUSSION BY WALTER PISTON

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With the intent of contributing new research to the body of knowledge on Walter Hamor Piston (1894-1976) and his work, this paper covers the composition of his final piece, *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* (1976). The research includes an introduction to the work and life of Piston in order to establish the empirical nature of the composition. A history of the work is reviewed, from conception to the premier. Piston's compositional process as it pertains to the work is derived from original drafts and letters among other sources. Finally, compositional techniques and philosophies implemented in the piece are analyzed.

The *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* is the last piece Piston composed and the final concerto in a series of late concertos which exemplify a redefined conception of variation and are formed differently than works in previous style periods. As Piston recounted of the first concerto in the series, writing the

*Cello Variations* would make “an interesting project: to make one continuous work—variations, but not theme and variations, rather six or seven ways to regard a musical idea, different aspects or facets, each growing out of another.”<sup>1</sup> A decade later, his notion of variation became even more organic. While writing the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* in 1976, he simply stated, “I hear a sound and I write it.”<sup>2</sup> The resulting work thus represents the music vocabulary of Piston. While he had reexamined how to form his works and the flow of ideas, the work still largely proves to be an extension of compositional techniques acquired over a lifetime of learning.

The second component to this dissertation is an original composition by the author, *Concerto for String Quartet and Orchestra*. While the piece is not directly modeled after the focus of the research, *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Piston, elements from studying Piston inevitably entered into the new composition. The *Concerto for String Quartet and Orchestra* by Mark A. Taylor may be found on file at George Mason University, protected under copyright, and on his website ([www.CompositionTaylor.com](http://www.CompositionTaylor.com)).

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Piston and Peter Westergaard, “Conversation with Walter Piston,” *Perspectives of New Music* 7, no. 1 (Autumn-Winter 1968): 13.

<sup>2</sup> Mark DeVoto, “In Memoriam: Walter Piston (1894-1976),” *Perspectives of New Music* 15, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1977): 243.

## INTRODUCTION

Walter Hamor Piston (1894-1976) was an influential twentieth-century American musician, who worked as an author, teacher, and composer. He is perhaps best known today for three of his textbooks, *Harmony* (1941), *Counterpoint* (1947) and *Orchestration* (1955).<sup>3</sup> Innovative in his time, these books have been translated into numerous languages and endure in multiple editions as references even to the present.<sup>4</sup> Piston taught at Harvard from 1926-1960, teaching both privately early on and small classes throughout his career.<sup>5</sup> Notable students include Elliott Carter (1908-2013), Leroy Anderson (1908-1975), Irving Fine (1914-1962), Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), and Samuel Adler (b. 1928) among others.<sup>6</sup> These students carried on the legacy of Piston in different ways, becoming prominent composers, teachers, and authors in their own right.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Piston, *Counterpoint* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1947).

Walter Piston, *Harmony* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1948).

Walter Piston, *Harmony*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Revised and expanded by Mark DeVoto (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1978).

Walter Piston, *Orchestration* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1955).

A lesser known precursor to *Harmony* is the text by Walter Piston, *Principles of Harmonic Analysis* (Boston: E.C. Schirmer Music Co., 1933).

<sup>4</sup> See Howard Pollack, *Walter Piston* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 165-176, for an overview of his writings.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Pollack, *Harvard Composers: Walter Piston and His Students, from Elliott Carter to Frederic Rzewski* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992), xiv.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, xiv-xv.

Piston composed in many standard Western Art Music genres. His oeuvre includes eight symphonies, nine concertos (including his *Concerto for Orchestra*, 1933, and *Concertino for Piano and Chamber Orchestra*, 1937), five string quartets (not including his unpublished *Minuetto in Stile Vecchio*, 1927), three pieces for solo piano, and a ballet among other orchestral and chamber works. Piston was primarily an instrumental composer, though he did write five choral works.<sup>7</sup> While perhaps not the most famous American composer of the twentieth century, Piston “was the best Boston-based composer of the century, and the first to win real international renown. . .” according to Howard Pollack.<sup>8</sup> Works by Piston were championed by fellow composers Igor Stravinsky, Elliot Carter, Aaron Copland, Virgil Thompson, and Leonard Bernstein. Performers of his works, most prominently Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, were also great supporters.<sup>9</sup>

One of the goals Piston maintained throughout his life was to learn from performances of his pieces what worked and what did not. In a 1962 interview with Wilfrid Mellers, Piston emphasized “if there’s anything a composer *has* to do, he *has* to hear his music when he’s finished in order to go on.”<sup>10</sup> With careful observation of the effectiveness of his own music and study of contemporary trends as an educator, his

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<sup>7</sup>Howard Pollack, "Piston, Walter," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed March 4, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mutex.gmu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/21851>.

<sup>8</sup> Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, xii.

<sup>9</sup> Pollack, "Piston, Walter," accessed March 4, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Mark DeVotto, Walter Piston and Wilfrid Mellers, “Two Composers on American Music at Mid-Century: Walter Piston in Conversation with Wilfrid Mellers, 1962,” *American Music* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 127. Italics taken from transcript.



compositional technique grew with each piece. As a result of this steady and even compositional vocabulary expansion, style periods can be somewhat difficult to ascertain.

While Pollack makes a convincing case for understanding the works of Piston in several subgroups according to the chapters in *Walter Piston*, his music may be more broadly classified into three style periods.<sup>11</sup> In the first period, 1925-1938, we find the heavy influence of Nadia Boulanger. Both Carter and Copland note his ability to acquire contemporary trends and implement them with a refined sense of craftsmanship. Carter states that a “rejection of the Romantic gestures and emotional attitudes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also marks the music of the time. This was absorbed by Piston along with other characteristics of modern music. . .”<sup>12</sup> Carter notes of his early music, “There are chromatic and diatonic elements, linear counterpoint, impressionistic harmonies, twelve-tone techniques, and asymmetrical rhythms, sometimes combined within a single work.”<sup>13</sup> In 1941 Copland states, “Piston’s music, if considered only from a technical viewpoint, constitutes a challenge to every other American composer. It sets a level of craftsmanship that is absolutely first-rate in itself and provides a standard of reference by which every other American’s work may be judged.”<sup>14</sup>

*Three Pieces for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon* is a popular work by Piston and represents his first style period well. Pollack points out that Piston himself acknowledged the influence of Hindemith and Bach. Paul Dukas labeled the piece “Stravinskique,” and

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<sup>11</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, vii.

<sup>12</sup> Elliott Carter, “Walter Piston,” *The Musical Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (July 1946): 358.

<sup>13</sup> Carter, “Walter Piston,” 362.

<sup>14</sup> Aaron Copland, *Our New Music* (New York: Wittlesey House, 1941), 182, quoted in Carter, “Walter Piston,” 362.

wrote that a “connection with Schoenberg is less obvious, and involves the use of short chromatic motives to construct larger melodies.”<sup>15</sup> With invertible counterpoint and melodic inversions, cross rhythms and chromaticism, “the assimilation of such disparate influences gives the *Three Pieces* a character all its own.”<sup>16</sup>

In what may be deemed the second style period, 1938-1966, one finds in the work of Piston that which he describes of his 1955 Fourth Symphony. It is “melodic and expressive and perhaps nearer than my other works to the problem of balance between expression and formal design.”<sup>17</sup> Piston grew more popular in this period and gained wider recognition, perhaps due to the accessible nature of his writing. Piston continues about the Fourth Symphony, “It should not prove complex to the listener in any way.”<sup>18</sup>

As Carter writes of the 1938 work by Piston, “*The Incredible Flutist* marks a turning point.”<sup>19</sup> While Piston retained a strong sense of defined form and craftsmanship in his writing, “*The Incredible Flutist* is as popular a work as one can imagine a composer like Piston writing.”<sup>20</sup> Fanfares, a march, traditional and popular dances are included and showcase Piston’s ability to write in a more melodic and broadly accessible style. Pollack comments that “in this lighthearted score, Piston’s music is rich and sensual, whether it be the elegant diatonicism of the ‘tango,’ the chromatic triads of the ‘Spanish waltz,’ or the more thoroughly chromatic tiptoe music for the clandestine

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<sup>15</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Ferguson, *Masterworks of the Orchestral Repertory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), 419, quoted in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 111.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Carter, “Walter Piston,” 368.

<sup>20</sup> Ross Lee Finney, “Piston’s Violin Sonata,” *Modern Music* xvii (1939-40): 210.

lovers.”<sup>21</sup> Many pieces during this period maintained a sense of lyricism, such as the 1965 *Pine Tree Fantasy* with three themes “related to folk song.” Other works started to move more into the highly chromatic variation style that would exemplify his late style, such as the 1966 *Trio No. 2* for violin, cello and piano which includes melodies and contrapuntal inversions derived from a twelve-tone row.<sup>22</sup>

The third style period, 1966-1976, is one dominated by one movement concertos. Within these one movement pieces, tempo, articulation, and orchestration changes maintain a sense of overall sectional structure. In the 1967 *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra*, ABA form is even found within most variation sections which structure the piece. An idea that variation, “but not theme and variations, rather six or seven ways to regard a musical idea, different aspects or facets, each growing out of one another,” is defined by Piston and in these late works.<sup>23</sup>

A description of the *Cello Variations* of 1966 is helpful in understanding this period. Pollack breaks the piece down into seven or possibly eight variations (the possible eighth being the coda) by tempo, though they are not labeled as such in the score. A smaller scale variation may be at work here, though. Pollack points out the piece has “melodic language, based, as Piston tells us, on a musical idea—probably the cello’s opening three notes, G#-E-D#.”<sup>24</sup> Westergaard compared this style of variation to the perpetual variation style of Schoenberg to which Piston replied, “I suppose you could

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<sup>21</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 144-6.

<sup>23</sup> Piston and Westergaard, “Conversation,” 13.

<sup>24</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 149-50.

say that. Probably one could apply it to more music than one might suspect.”<sup>25</sup> Though only the piece for cello is labeled as variations, the *Clarinet Concerto*, *Violin Fantasia*, *Flute Concerto*, and *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* all fit a similar style.

Throughout these style periods, rather from piece to piece, Piston built an enviable compositional vocabulary. He learned with each piece, from those written in a way that would please his teacher, Nadia Boulanger, to those more easily understood by a broader audience. By his final period and especially his final work, his style must have been pleasing to himself as he simply stated, “I hear a sound and I write it.”<sup>26</sup>

The research in this paper includes the historical context, compositional process, and analytical considerations for the final work of Piston, the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. The research reviews the investigations and conclusions of other authors and theorists about the life and work of Piston in order to establish a backdrop for which this study is set. The history of the piece itself is traced from conception to premier. The compositional process for the piece is derived from original sketches and letters among other sources. Analysis is approached according to the form of the piece, melody, and harmony. In studying the beauty of the work in detail, this paper also serves to peak interests as a call for more research on as well as performances and recordings of music by Piston. Innovative analyses and landmark recordings are awaited and will serve the dual purposes of creating accolades for the researchers and performers who bring them to fruition and raising awareness of a

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<sup>25</sup> Piston and Westergaard, “Conversation,” 13.

<sup>26</sup> DeVotto, “In Memoriam,” 243.

masterful composer. This study serves as a stepping stone for such ambitious minded individuals.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

We have a broad understanding of the life, teaching, writing, and composition of Walter Piston. Those looking to research the composer consistently consult four types of sources. The Boston Public Library is the main source for primary documents. It houses both an entire room dedicated to Piston (the “Piston Room” adjacent to the “Koussevitzky Room”), containing printed music and holograph forms, as well as a Rare Books and Manuscripts Department, which holds his manuscript scores.<sup>27</sup> As Pollack notes, Piston willed “his personal effects to the Boston Library, except for his tapes, which he gave to the Library of Congress.”<sup>28</sup> This is quite a treasure, considering that Piston’s hand was so clean the contract with Associated Music Publishers (AMP) states that his manuscript should be reproduced as the publications. Piston also “mostly worked, in pencil, on a single draft, erasing as he went along,” adding to the value of the collection due to its rarity. The thoroughness of the collection he left behind is also impressive as Piston saved a great deal of his work and sketches.<sup>29</sup>

The Library of Congress is a second source for primary and secondary documents. In addition to sketches, his tapes, and printed materials, the Library of

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<sup>27</sup> Boston Public Library website, accessed March 4, 2013, <http://www.bpl.org/research/music/spmusic.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 177. Pollack also notes here that, “There are, however, not too many discarded pages among the Piston sketchbooks in the Library of Congress and the Boston Public Library.”

Congress houses the Aaron Copland Collection.<sup>30</sup> Copland and Piston were both students of Nadia Boulanger in the 1920s in Paris. They remained in contact throughout their lives, complimenting each other and respectfully disagreeing on such contemporary subjects as American nationalism in music.<sup>31</sup> In addition to letters and publications by Copland on Piston, there are collections for Leonard Bernstein, Irving Fine and Ross Lee Finney which contain correspondences and pictures related to Piston.

Piston's published writings give valuable insight into the practical philosophies that guided his teaching and composing. Four textbooks present Piston's understanding of the mechanics of music. Twenty articles for books, periodicals, and programs detail theoretical ideas such as "Harmonic Rhythm," practical ideas as with "Problems of Intonation in the Performance of Contemporary Music," reviews of theoretical ideas by others from Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky to Roger Sessions, and philosophical ideas such as "Can Music be Nationalistic?"<sup>32</sup> In addition to his books and articles, the program notes written by Piston for his own works often contain light theoretical, practical and philosophical insight into his music.

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<sup>30</sup> Library of Congress website, accessed March 4, 2013, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihis/loc.natlib.ihis.200033532/default.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Piston is quoted by Ellen Pfeifer in "Walter Piston musician of the moth," *High Fidelity/Musical America* 24 (Aug. 1974): 4-5, as summarizing, "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 that was written by an American. He had to agree, but he felt there ought to be vernacular," quoted in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 174.

<sup>32</sup> A complete list of writings by Piston may be found in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 236-7.

Finally, excellent but limited research has been done on Piston and may be categorized according to his life, teaching, writings, and compositions. The research of Howard Pollack is consulted for most academic work related to Piston from 1982 to present. He has written two books on the composer. The first is *Walter Piston*, a revision of his 1981 thesis for Cornell University.<sup>33</sup> His book is a well-researched survey of the life and works of Piston. In addition to a thorough review of the sources mentioned above, Pollack includes quotes from interviews and correspondences with the author and those close to Piston. Information taken from primary sources can be found on his personal life, music education, compositions summarized chronologically and divided into seven broad styles, teaching/writings, and philosophies. The author also took the time to catalogue awards and honors, works and a discography in the appendices.

As the 247 page book contains information on all his works, published and unpublished, only a general summary of styles and pieces may be provided. Elliot Carter comments as early as 1946 that “because of the number and variety of Piston’s compositions, it is hard to discuss them in the detail they deserve without taking a great deal of space. Certain broad points can be made which throw light on them as a whole.”<sup>34</sup> Pollack uses such an approach. The author notes classical forms when present, points to program notes on form by the composer, and often divides pieces into sections according to tempo markings. His writing on the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* may serve as an example. Pollack provides the circumstances for its commission, anecdotes about the dedicatees, information about the premier and

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<sup>33</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*.

<sup>34</sup> Carter, “Walter Piston,” 361.



reception, as well as descriptions of the work itself. Pollack states that the piece is in a combined “sectional and variation form,” with “five variations, which form a fast-slow-fast-slow-fast design. . .” The concerto is compared to “a nineteenth-century tone poem” with its various “moods.”<sup>35</sup>

Pollack also puts the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* in context of other works by Piston as he does with other pieces throughout the book. It is classified within “a series of concertos-the *Cello Variations* (1966), the *Clarinet Concerto* (1967), the *Violin Fantasia* (1970), and the *Flute Concerto* (1972). . .”<sup>36</sup> He also notes the relationship of Piston to those premiering the work by referencing other pieces. The Portland Symphony Orchestra had commissioned *Pine Tree Fantasy*, completed in 1965, and Piston is quoted by Pollack, “I admire that wonderful Portland Quartet, for they gave me the finest performance of my Fourth Quartet that I ever heard. When your director, Vermel, asked me if I would be interested in writing a work for them, I responded quickly.”<sup>37</sup>

In *Walter Piston*, Pollack largely relates the life of Piston through summations and stories of his compositions (seven of ten chapters). While Piston was alive, accounts of his life also focused primarily on his career as a composer. The most noteworthy of these accounts is the article by colleague and onetime student, Elliott Carter. Written for *The Music Quarterly*, Carter frames Piston’s childhood, experiences as a young adult, training, and career choice as a teacher in the context of his compositions. At the age of

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<sup>35</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 163.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Harold Brown, *Portland Symphony Orchestra Programs* 52, No. 1 (1976-77), 34.

eleven, Piston received a violin from his father and in “teaching himself to play on both the piano and violin, music began to assert its ascendancy.”<sup>38</sup> Carter notes of the time prior to studying music at Harvard:

When the United States declared war, he volunteered for service in a Navy band; counting on his unusual ability to master an instrument, he claimed he could play the saxophone. Called up, he rushed off to buy an instrument and to borrow a manual from the public library; and in a short time he knew enough to be able to hold his own in a band stationed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology throughout the war. . . But this is only a trivial indication of a penetrating knowledge of musical instruments gained before and after this time. . . His knowledge of the registers of the instruments and their qualities, and the type of writing idiomatic for each is evident on every page of every score.<sup>39</sup>

Carter describes Piston as a diligent student of traditional technique at Harvard, graduating “summa cum laude.” A French influence is mentioned, but Carter writes relatively little about Piston’s time with Nadia Boulanger, though Carter also studied with the master.<sup>40</sup>

Carter paralleled the traits that made Piston an excellent composer with those that made him an excellent teacher:

His own compositions have been praised as exhibiting a new academicism; they have also been condemned for the same reason. If the academic method consists in drawing up a system of rules that solve every problem of musical composition including that of expression, Piston’s music as well as his teaching follows a very different direction. His opposition to facile, routine solutions is obvious even in

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<sup>38</sup> Carter, “Walter Piston,” 355.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 356.

<sup>40</sup> It is worthy to note that Carter discarded many of his compositions from his time with Boulanger. This article was written in 1946, just a few years after he turned away from writing in a Boulanger influenced style. A sketchbook from his time with Boulanger exists at the Library of Congress with markings from Boulanger. Though Carter turned away from Boulanger’s style, he acknowledges how important the study and performance of Bach cantatas were on his development and was influenced by studying early choral works by Perotinus (circa late 12<sup>th</sup>, early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries), Guillaume de Machaut (c1300-1377), and Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1613).

the detail of his music. For in it, frequently repeated figures, static harmonies, and extended parallel motions are the exception rather than the rule. The broad application of general principles that give ample chance for freedom attracts him most. . . This emphasis on principles rather than on codifications enables him to teach student composers without dictating their choice of style.<sup>41</sup>

These insights by Carter are valuable for multiple reasons. Carter studied with both Boulanger and Piston. As a student and composer, Carter had a practical and working knowledge of both the teaching and compositional techniques of Piston. With this background, Carter was able to articulate trends in the music of Piston to this point with specific examples through score study and knowledge of contemporary movements from serialism to the avant-garde.

While a third of the article is dedicated to framing Piston's life in terms of composing, the remainder of the article investigates his actual compositions. At the time the article was written in 1946, Carter felt it appropriate to divide these compositions into two periods. The first period includes works composed up to 1938. Carter states that "in the first period [Piston] is occupied with integrating and assimilating modern techniques. . ."<sup>42</sup> He comments that Piston "brings material from many different sources and purifies it of freakishness," citing the *Suite for Oboe and Piano* for its linear counterpoint, the opening of the second movement of his First Symphony for its impressionistic harmonies, and the third movement of the *Partita for Violin, Viola, and Organ* for its twelve-tone technique.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Carter, "Walter Piston," 360-1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 363.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 362, 365, 366, 371.

Carter states that 1938 marks a second style period where “there is an urge towards directness and simplicity” starting with *Carnival Song* and *The Incredible Flutist*.<sup>44</sup> In the second period as defined by Carter, there is more of a melodic focus. Evidence of this style is found in a “Mozartean synthesis and a more plastic joining of different materials” in his *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, a “melodic sweep that suddenly appears” in the *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* from materials that “suggest in a very discreet way various kinds of popular music,” and the “beautiful, songful” Second Symphony. Carter states that “the most extreme step in the direction of relaxedness” may be found in the *Quintet for Flute and String Quartet*.<sup>45</sup>

The article concludes by paying respect to a colleague and teacher. Around the time of Piston’s death, articles about him echoed that respect and appreciation for both his contributions to composition and teaching, often with personal touches. Nicolas Slonimsky worked up an early profile of Piston for a 1933 publication by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University (now Stanford University), recognizing him as a noteworthy modern composer. He concludes,

Among American composers, Walter Piston appears as a builder of a future academic style, taking this definition without any derogatory implications. There are composers who draw on folklore, and there are composers who seek new colors, new rhythms, and new harmonies. Walter Piston codifies rather than invents. His imagination supplies him with excellent ideas, and out of this material he builds his music, without words, descriptive titles, and literature. He is an American composer speaking the international idiom of *absolute music*.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 363.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 369-71.

<sup>46</sup> Electra Slonimsky Yourke, ed., *Nicolas Slonimsky: Writings on Music*, vol. 3, *Music of the Modern Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 194-5. A footnote on p. 194 reads that the article by Slonimsky was “originally published in 1933 by the Board of

In 1936, Isreal Citkowitz wrote that “the development of Piston’s style resolves itself into a revaluation of neo-classic criteria into truly classic ones” (a portrait of Piston is also included in this article by his wife and painter, Kathryn Nason).<sup>47</sup> Copland included Piston in an article for the same periodical, “Our Younger Generation—Ten Years Later,” acknowledging it was a mistake not to include him in the 1926 article, “America’s Young Men of Promise.”<sup>48</sup>

In addition to music journals, newspapers also paid tribute to the composer. The *Boston Globe* wrote an article on him for his eightieth birthday, highlighting not only his achievements but his Boston heritage, noting that he said he was like the trees of Boston, “deep-rooted and taken for granted.”<sup>49</sup> Upon his death, obituaries paying respects came from newspapers, such as *The Washington Post*, as well as music journals, such as *The Musical Times*, *Tempo*, and *Perspectives of New Music*.<sup>50</sup>

Like Carter, DeVoto is a New Englander intimately aware of the work of Piston. Thirty-one years younger than Carter, DeVoto studied under Piston at Harvard after all his text books had been published. DeVoto was familiar with Piston’s written work

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Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University; republished in 1962 by Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, Inc.”

<sup>47</sup> Isreal Citkowitz, “Walter Piston: Classicist,” *Modern Music* xiii (January-February 1936): 10.

<sup>48</sup> Aaron Copland, “America’s Young Men of Promise,” *Modern Music* iii, no. 3 (May-June 1926): 13-20.

Aaron Copland, “Our Younger Generation—Ten Years Later,” *Modern Music* xiii, no. 4 (May-June 1936): 3-10.

<sup>49</sup> “Walter Piston is 80,” *Boston Globe* (Boston), January 20, 1974.

<sup>50</sup> “Composer Walter Piston,” *The Washington Post*, November 14, 1976.

“Walter Piston,” *The Musical Times* 118, no. 1607 (January, 1977), 64.

Paul Rapoport, “Walter Piston 1894-1976,” *Tempo* 120 (March 1977), 23-4.

DeVoto, “In Memoriam,” 243-4.

through personal study, as a student of Piston, and eventually as a teacher. DeVoto notes that at the young age of fifteen, he obtained the first edition of *Orchestration*, “Piston’s *Orchestration* was published in 1955 and I bought it that same year. I still regard it as the best of all texts on the subject. . . .”<sup>51</sup> He notes that when the third edition of *Harmony* was released, fellow classmates recognized newly published concepts Piston taught in Music 218, Studies in Twentieth-century Music, “such as the extended secondary dominant principle.”<sup>52</sup> DeVoto taught from that edition starting in 1964 at Reed College. By 1975, when W.W. Norton & Company asked for critiques of the book, it was his “nine-page single-space letter, supplemented by three pages of examples” that prompted Norton Music Editor Claire Brook to look into a collaboration on the fourth edition between Piston and DeVoto. The two worked on the project, on their own and through letters and two visits from March 1976 until the passing of Piston in November. These were his final months, the months immediately following the passing of his wife Kathryn Nason, and the months when he completed his *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the work resulting from the *Harmony* collaboration, DeVoto has three items in print on Piston. The first is the obituary written in the wake of his passing for the *Perspectives of New Music* Spring/Summer 1977 journal. It takes into account

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<sup>51</sup> Mark DeVoto, “Walter Piston, Practical Theorist,” pdf of speech given at Harvard University (April 18, 1994), 5, accessed on March 4, 2013, <http://www.tufts.edu/~mdevoto/Piston.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 6.

Piston's "American neoclassicism," knowledge and application of Serialism and atonality, teaching, and character.<sup>54</sup>

The second item is a transcription of a speech given by DeVoto at Harvard, Notre Dame and then the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1994 for Piston's birthday centennial. In "Walter Piston, Practical Theorist," DeVoto summarizes Piston's texts, recounts the story of how he came to work on the fourth edition of *Harmony* and recognizes that Piston approached theory from the standpoint of an observer. He quotes Piston from the "Introduction" to the first edition of *Harmony*:

If we reflect that theory must follow practice, rarely preceding it except by chance, we must realize that musical theory is not a set of directions for composing music. It is rather the collected and systematized deductions gathered by observing the practice of composers over a long time, and it attempts to set forth what is or has been their common practice. It tells not how music will be written in the future, but how music has been written in the past.<sup>55</sup>

At the time, the statement was quite novel as was using examples from music in the canon.<sup>56</sup>

DeVoto also wrote an introduction to a republished 1962 interview of Piston by Wilfrid Mellers. The introduction gives the interview context, points out how articulate Piston was in everything he did, and provides ideas for how his works may be divided

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<sup>54</sup> DeVoto, "In Memoriam" 243-4. In Piston and Westergraad, "Conversation," 15, Piston tells an anecdotal story about tonality, "I once experimented by asking all the quartets I knew who played the Schoenberg quartets, 'How do you go about getting it in tune?' They all seemed puzzled at first, but finally practically all said, 'We keep playing until it sounds in tune to us.' I said, 'Fine,' but I wondered if that was what Schoenberg wanted. Although the more I feel I know Schoenberg's music the more I believe he thought that way himself. That brings us back to the question of whether or not tonality has collapsed. And it isn't only the players; it's also the listeners. They will hear tonality in everything."

<sup>55</sup> Piston, *Harmony*, 1.

<sup>56</sup> DeVoto, "Practical Theorist."

into three periods. The interview both reiterates and clarifies concepts Piston presented in “Can Music Be Nationalistic.”<sup>57</sup>

Carter and DeVoto represent the bookends of the teaching career of Piston. Pollack writes an account of his teaching and students “from Elliott Carter to Frederic Rzewski.”<sup>58</sup> Pollack quotes a personal letter he received from Charles Shackford in October of 1977, who had experienced a Piston composition seminar:

Piston was given more to asking questions than to making statements. Each utterance was well thought out; there were no wasted words. He encouraged students to comment on each other’s work. The atmosphere he engendered was gentle, quiet and thoughtful. He had a keen gift for recognizing creative ability and knew how to encourage it. In the presence of pretension he could be scathing.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps because of the “gentle, quiet and thoughtful” atmosphere he provided, his criticisms were greatly appreciated and his praise cherished. John Vincent, whose modal compositions were rooted in “a boyhood love for the folk and church music of Southern blacks and backwoods whites,” commented on Piston that his “penetrating criticisms did much to insure the validity of my ideas during the development stage.”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Leroy Anderson recalls, “My biggest disappointment came the day he handed me back one of my pieces with the comment that it sounded like improvisation. I was crushed. . . . But he was right.” He goes on to share his appreciation, “Piston’s advice was good and

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<sup>57</sup> DeVoto, Piston, and Mellers, “Two Composers,” 119-128.

Walter Piston, “Can Music be Nationalistic,” *Music Journal* 19 (Oct. 1961): 7.

<sup>58</sup> Pollack, *Harvard Composers*.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 445.

<sup>60</sup> John Vincent, *The Diatonic Modes in Modern Music* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1951), vii, quoted in Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, 41.



I've never forgotten it.”<sup>61</sup> Musicologist, music critic, composer, and teacher Sam di Bonaventura was so proud of an “A” he received on a counterpoint assignment from Piston that he framed it and hung it in his office at George Mason University.<sup>62</sup>

Though most of his students regarded him as an excellent teacher, Piston did not try to impose his style on his students. Leonard Bernstein wrote of Piston in an October, 1977 letter to Pollack, “Everything he taught me has stuck—especially the example of his highly refined ear, and his non-pedantic approach to such academic subjects as fugue. . . I loved his own music (and still do) although I cannot say that I was particularly influenced by it stylistically (as I was by Copland)—except in the matter of craftsmanship and clarity of sonic intention.”<sup>63</sup> Piston emphasized balance and form, connections between contrapuntal, orchestrational, and harmonic techniques of old masters such as Bach and Mozart as well as artistic individuality. Pollack notes that “Piston emphasized stylistic consistency and artistic variety, as well as the need to be objective. . . As a composer, a theorist, and a teacher Piston adapted principles learned from Dukas and Boulanger to his own sensibility.”<sup>64</sup> The individuality of his students was as important to Piston as it was to his teacher, Boulanger. He expresses, “I am very proud of the fact that none of my students writes music like any other, and none writes music like me, grazia a Dio.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Eleanor Roberts, *Boston Sunday Post*, March 22, 1953, interview with Leroy Anderson, quoted in Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, 22.

<sup>62</sup> Conversation with Dr. Glenn Smith on March 1, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, 105.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 423.

<sup>65</sup> Salzman, “Piston: Ex-teacher,” *New York Herald Tribune*, March 31, 1961, quoted in Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, 436.

Pollack concludes his research on Piston and many of his students with a summation of Piston as a teacher:

Most of Piston's students became teachers themselves and led distinguished careers in major colleges, universities, and conservatories across the country. Others became prominent as performers, conductors, and writers. By the 1990s, Piston's influence was so widely disseminated as to be virtually incalculable. The nature of this legacy was equally elusive. Each former student, trained to "think for himself," performed as he or she best saw fit. There were distortions, adaptations, repudiations, and extensions of whatever it was that was learned from Piston. The variety itself was a legacy of sorts. If Piston was, as described by Carter, a "ray of light," then his students formed a complex prism, refracting the light into a multitude of varied colors.<sup>66</sup>

The successful careers of students of Piston are a testament to his teaching. The writings and analyses on Piston and of his works by students are valuable for their unique perspective, in part because that perspective was partially crafted by Piston.

Contemporary views by those not as close to Piston as his students provide insight into the times and thought processes of those who wrote about his works. Critics, composers and theorists have found an interesting subject in Piston from early in his career to present day. An excellent catalogue of such critique through 1981, ordered by piece, may be found in the work of Pollack, *Walter Piston*.<sup>67</sup>

A survey of these critiques and analyses is a survey of style changes in both the work of Piston and the times. A simple mention of the *String Quartet No. 1* by Piston was made in the "Forecast and Review: New York, 1934" article by Theodore Chanler. Chanler writes that the piece is an "exceptionally fine quartet. . . a work which is far superior to his recently heard orchestral suite" and "had that aloofness of music which

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<sup>66</sup> Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, 447.

<sup>67</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 227-36.

does exactly what it sets out to do, without tentativeness or strain of any kind. . . since everything was cast in its definitive form.” Chanler notes that views of the times on definitive forms “without tentativeness or strain of any kind” caused people to “find it uninteresting on that account.”<sup>68</sup> Clear use of form earned Piston the respectful label of “classicist” by Citkowitz in a 1936 article.<sup>69</sup>

By 1938, Piston was well established and composed for and conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra, his *Symphony No. 1*. A critic remarks that Piston is “most gifted,” with a backhanded compliment and comment on the times that his “melodically sterile” writing is “in fashion of late years:”

Besides, Mr. Piston is, as everybody knows, one of the most gifted of that erstwhile younger generation of American composers which is now entering on artistic middle age. He is a thorough musician. None of the arts of composition is concealed from him. He has learned the lessons of modernism, has adopted the twentieth-century manner of musical thought, as is quite natural. He speaks the musical speech of his time. If he seems melodically sterile, we must recognize that melody has not been in fashion of late years. If he seems to display no great originality, why, how many original composers are there in a generation?<sup>70</sup>

The same year, *The Incredible Flutist* was performed, a work far from “melodically sterile” which drew attention to the composer and marked the second phase of his writing style according to Carter.<sup>71</sup> Ross Lee Finney writes of the piece that “Little complicated dissonance disturbs the conservative listeners and it has melody that would

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<sup>68</sup> Theodore Chanler, “Forecast and Review: New York, 1934,” *Modern Music* xi (1933-4), 142-7.

<sup>69</sup> Citkowitz, “Walter Piston: Classicist,” 3.

<sup>70</sup> J.B.D., “Walter Piston’s First Symphony Played,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 9, 1938, 10.

<sup>71</sup> Carter, “Walter Piston,” 363.

delight a child.”<sup>72</sup> Finney believes that Piston has always had concern for “elegance and conciseness of his melodic materials. . .” and that “His style, like that of Darius Milhaud, shows little change from work to work.” He regards “this consistency of idiom as no weakness, but as the basis of fine talent. . .”<sup>73</sup> Finney points to contrast between clarity of melodic material presented in contrapuntal lines and a “blurring or fogging of contrapuntal lines which results in a kind of impressionism that is never obvious. . .” as a consistent defining characteristic of works by Piston as of 1939.<sup>74</sup> A brief analysis of the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* illustrates points made by Finney. Finney concludes that *The Incredible Flutist*, “a popular work of charm,” and *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, showing “increased intensity of expression,” are achievements that “will make the American composer valued by the environment of which he is a part.”<sup>75</sup>

In the late forties, Piston had a reputation as a master craftsman. He was recognized for his sense of balance as well as his ability to manipulate different styles. An assessment of his *Trio* by Joseph Kirschbaum is that “Piston has integrated contemporary and older techniques in such a clear and logical manner that the problems of balance seem trivial.” He observes that the tonally based music is “freely colored by elements of linear counterpoint, atonality, polytonality, impressionistic harmonies and parallel chord streams.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Finney, “Piston’s Violin Sonata,” 210.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>76</sup> Joseph Kirschbaum, “The Trio by Walter Piston,” *Bulletin of the American Musicological Society*, no. 11, 12, 13 (September 1948): 80.

As Piston aged, his works were often regarded as being in good taste. Clifford Taylor writes in “Walter Piston: For His Seventieth Birthday” that “If Piston’s work has any meaning, then, beyond the known facts of its construction, it is the symbolization of such an enviable state of sensibility, to which only a few seem to be heir.”<sup>77</sup> Taylor echoes and expands on the idea of Kirschbaum that the music of Piston is tonally based, stating, “Piston’s work is essentially tonal in this sense of implied triadic structure and its association of root and fifth.”<sup>78</sup> Taylor goes to great lengths to emphasize use of the third by Piston, even in quartally dominated sonorities in the *Partita for Violin, Viola, and Organ*. Taylor searched for dominating tonal emphasis and textures found in the *Violin Concerto*, *Quintet for Wind Instruments*, *Symphony No. 7*, and *String Quartet No. 5* by Piston at a time when the concept of atonality was often debated.<sup>79</sup>

Two dissertations on works by Piston emerged from Cornell University during his lifetime. In 1964, Robert Donahue compared phrase structures in string quartets by Piston and Bartok, finding basis for both in traditional forms.<sup>80</sup> Harris Lindenfeld compared the second, sixth, and eighth symphonies of Piston, finding similarities in formal structure and triadic makeup.<sup>81</sup> Another dissertation, also from Cornell, was started in Piston’s lifetime, but not completed until 1981. One of the last letters Piston

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<sup>77</sup> Clifford Taylor, “Walter Piston: For His Seventieth Birthday,” *Perspectives of New Music* 3, No. 1 (Autumn-Winter 1964): 102.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>79</sup> Note the previous mention of remarks by DeVotto (also a Berg scholar) and Piston on atonality.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Laurence Donahue, “A Comparative Analysis of Phrase Structure in Selected Movements of the String Quartets of Bela Bartok and Walter Piston,” (D.M.A. diss., Cornell University, 1964).

<sup>81</sup> Harris Nelson Lindenfeld, “Three Symphonies of Walter Piston, an Analysis,” (D.M.A. diss., Cornell University, 1975).

received was from William Austin asking that his student, Howard Pollack, be able to engage Piston for work on a dissertation. Pollack's dissertation became the premise for the most authoritative book on the composer, *Walter Piston*.

A great deal of information is available on the life of Piston, from primary documents held in pristine condition at the Boston Public Library to great work by researcher Howard Pollack. Evidence of the teaching style of Piston is found in his own writings, student accounts as well as correlations made between the compositions of Piston and his students. Surveys of style periods, trends and general analyses of his music may be found from the 1930s-on. While his symphonies, to an extent his quartets and a few select pieces have been given in-depth analysis, much of his music still needs to be thoroughly researched.

The concertos from 1966 to the end of his life are of particular interest for the new stylistic direction and conception of music Piston decided to take. These pieces include the *Cello Variations*, *Clarinet Concerto*, *Violin Fantasia*, *Flute Concerto*, and *Concerto for String Quartet*, *Wind Instruments and Percussion*. As Pollack notes, these pieces are all "in one movement and that combine sectional and variation form."<sup>82</sup> In the Westergaard interview, Piston commented on a change in style with the first of these, the *Cello Variations*:

When Rostropovich asked for a cello concerto I thought, "I've done so many concertos, all in three movements." The plan "fast-slow-fast" is not bad. But I have on occasion heard entire programs of my works, and heard that way I have found it a bit dreary. The idea of movements is a little hackneyed, and I thought, "Wouldn't this be an interesting project: to make one continuous work—

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<sup>82</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 163.

variations, but not theme and variations, rather six or seven ways to regard a musical idea, different aspects or facets, each growing out of another.”<sup>83</sup>

By the time Piston wrote the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*, large scale “ways to regard a musical idea” alluded to his recent variation forms, but were not as obvious. His 1976 statement, “I hear a sound and I write it,” is justified by the abstract nature of the piece in comparison with Piston’s body of work as a whole.<sup>84</sup> It is the goal of this researcher to add to the growing body of knowledge of the works by Walter Piston with an extensive study of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. To date, there is no such extensive study available.

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<sup>83</sup> Piston and Westergaad, “Conversation,” 13.

<sup>84</sup> DeVoto, “In Memoriam,” 443.

## HISTORY

From the conception of the work through collaboration with the Portland Symphony Orchestra to its premier, the history of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* spans eight years. In September, 1968, Piston had a telephone conversation with Paul Vermel, conductor of the Portland Symphony Orchestra, about commissioning a new work.<sup>85</sup> After several personal setbacks, Piston was able to finally complete the piece for the premier, which took place less than three weeks before his passing on November 12, 1976.

The new work, in fact, was not originally specified as a string quartet concerto. It was conceived as a 5-15 minute symphonic work composed for the Maine sesquicentennial celebration of 1970. The work was commissioned by a committee, appointed by the governor and the Maine State Commission on the Arts and the Humanities, advised by Vermel. When asked who should write the work, Vermel suggested Piston. Piston was to be given “cart blanche” freedom of style on the project

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<sup>85</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 30 September 1968, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston. Correspondences between Piston and friends, performers, directors, and managers pertinent to the composition of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* may be found in: MS Mus. Piston Box 8, Folder 11; MS Mus. Piston Box 9, Folders 1 and 9; and MS Mus. Piston Box 12, Folders 9 and 10.



as long as the instrumentation and difficulty were kept “reasonable” for the Portland and Bangor symphonies. Piston agreed.<sup>86</sup>

Vermel moved forward on the project, having a contract drawn up. Performances were expected to take place in 1969 and 1970 for the Maine celebrations. Peter Re, conductor of the Bangor Symphony Orchestra, also committed to performing the work.<sup>87</sup> A news release was sent out on November 25, 1968 announcing “a special symphonic work commemorating Maine’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of statehood.” The release informed readers that Piston said he “would be glad to compose a piece for the 1970 celebration free of charge.” A tentative premier date was set for March 17, 1970 by the Portland Symphony followed two days later by a Bangor Symphony premier.<sup>88</sup>

Within a year of the proposal, the new dates of April 5 and April 7, 1970, were scheduled for the Bangor and Portland premiers, respectively. The work was to be titled “Overture to the State of Maine.” Russell Burleigh, Portland Symphony Orchestra manager, understood that Piston was expected to attend the Bangor premier and offered financing and accommodations for Piston to attend the Portland premier as well.<sup>89</sup>

By late December, 1969, Vermel had still not received the overture. Burleigh decided to contact Piston, writing that he was “looking forward with enthusiasm” to the Portland Symphony Orchestra premier of the piece. He remarked that Vermel was “very

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 7 October 1968, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>88</sup> “Symphony Will Commemorate Anniversary,” 25 November, labeled *New England Newsclip* (Bangor, ME) in the Walter Piston Collection, Rare books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>89</sup> Russell Burleigh in a letter to Walter Piston, 16 September 1969, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

anxious to see and hear” the new work.<sup>90</sup> Piston promptly responded that he would not be able to complete the commission:

The recent months have brought a steady procession of frustrating and upsetting events making life almost unbearable and the creating of music well nigh impossible. . . thought for the Maine commission has been reduced to a point where it would be most unwise to risk a last minute disaster. . . I am sad and embarrassed, as I know how much you were counting on me. . .<sup>91</sup>

The lack of creative output from Piston was unprecedented. As Pollack identifies, Piston went three years during this time (from the 1967 *Ricercare* to the 1970 *Violin Fantasia*) without releasing a major new work. The brief *Ceremonial Fanfare* for brass and percussion was composed in 1969, but required far less work than the majority of pieces during this period.<sup>92</sup>

The “frustrating and upsetting events” Piston wrote of mark the beginnings of the very difficult last decade of his life. Pollack cites a personal interview with George Humphrey, “Piston’s last years were plagued with difficulties. Diabetes and old age enfeebled his sight and his hearing.” According to Humphrey, Piston did not like wearing hearing aids because they distorted sound. Pollack also notes Piston’s wife, Kathryn Nason, was “an invalid for some time” before her death in 1976.<sup>93</sup>

In June of 1973 the collaboration between Piston and the Portland Symphony Orchestra was resurrected. Again Vermel wrote Piston to confirm a phone conversation, this time thanking him for keeping “the door open for our proposal.” As the

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<sup>90</sup>Russell Burleigh in a letter to Walter Piston, 29 December 1969, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>91</sup> Walter Piston in a letter to Russell Burleigh, 1 January 1970, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>92</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 153.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 11, 205.

sesquicentennial had passed, the piece was to be written in honor of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Portland Symphony Orchestra for the 1974-75 season. The duration of the project was increased as a 15-30 minute work was proposed. Vermel gave the choice of a string quartet concerto, an organ concerto, or a symphonic work to be completed by January, 1975. A recording of the Portland Symphony String Quartet playing music by Piston was included with the letter.<sup>94</sup>

Piston modified the first choice presented to him by suggesting the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. Later, in a phone interview with Harold Brown, Piston noted that he wrote for such instrumentation because of his admiration for the Portland Symphony String Quartet and a desire to clearly distinguish them from the rest of the ensemble. Brown writes of his conversation with Piston:

I asked Dr. Piston what prompted him to write this work. “You know,” he said, “I admire that wonderful Portland Quartet for they gave the finest performance of my Fourth Quartet that I ever heard. When your (former) director, Vermel, asked me if I would be interested in writing a work for them, I responded quickly. I had a wonderful time writing it, for the idea intrigued me. You know, in most concerti for quartets, the soloists are swamped by the strings of the orchestra; so I wrote mine for winds and percussion only. . .”<sup>95</sup>

Vermel thanked Piston, finding the proposed instrumentation “excellent and very intriguing.”<sup>96</sup> Piston said of the instrumentation, “It’s quite a novel sound, difficult but

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<sup>94</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 25 June 1973, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>95</sup> Brown, *PSO Programs*, 34.

<sup>96</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 31 December 1973, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

intriguing to work on.”<sup>97</sup> Just as he had promised in 1968 for the Maine sesquicentennial collaboration, Piston wrote that he would not accept payment for the work. As Vermel penned, “Your refusal of a fee is somewhat embarrassing but it is a beautiful gesture which honors us and which, I assume, our Board of Trustees will accept!” A January 1, 1975 deadline was proposed so that the work could be programmed for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary season.<sup>98</sup> The new premier was scheduled for February 11, 1975. Vermel requested on behalf of the quartet that their parts be sent ahead of time so that the ensemble had ample time to prepare.<sup>99</sup>

A later performance date was suggested by Piston. Vermel accepted the suggestion, writing back that the Portland Symphony Orchestra had rearranged their schedule in order to accommodate Piston. The new premier was rescheduled for March 11, 1975. Vermel again asked on behalf of the quartet that their parts be sent early. Piston responded positively.<sup>100</sup>

With good intentions to have the work completed for a premier in less than a year, Piston encountered more difficulties. About a week after his positive response, he fell in his home and broke his hip. After a stay in Massachusetts General Hospital, Piston returned to his summer home in Vermont, the site where many of his compositions were

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<sup>97</sup> Johanna Seltz, “‘Six Lessons’ To Composing,” 1974 newspaper clipping found in the Walter Piston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>98</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 24 August 1973, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>99</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 31 December 1973, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>100</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 23 February 1974, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

realized. By late April, Piston wrote that he was “at home and back at work” to the MacDowell Colony, but unable to travel.<sup>101</sup>

His condition was severe enough that by mid August, he still could not attend the MacDowell Colony medal ceremony in his honor. Nevertheless “some 400 other guests showed up” for the ceremony on August 18, 1974 and Piston was honored “in absentia.” Former recipients of the medal included Aaron Copland, Robert Frost, and Georgia O’Keeffe among others.<sup>102</sup>

It was not until after taking the late spring and all of summer to recover that Piston informed Vermel of his broken hip. Despite the injury and subsequent time in the hospital, Piston was still able to work. In early September, Piston let Vermel know that “the concerto can be called a ‘work in progress’ - even in bed at the hospital.” His ambition was still to finish the work by the latest deadline, January 1, 1975. Piston committed himself solely to the concerto and decided not to take on any more commissions.<sup>103</sup>

In the interim of hearing from Piston, Vermel was negotiating new professional prospects. Vermel had now accepted the position of director of the Champaign-Urbana Symphony, though he still needed to complete his contract by finishing the season with

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<sup>101</sup> William Schuman on behalf of the MacDowell Colony in a letter to Walter Piston, 25 April 1974, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston. Walter Piston in a letter to Paul Vermel, 10 September 1974, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, William Schuman on behalf of the MacDowell Colony in a letter to Walter Piston, 16 April 1974, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston. “Piston Honored by MacDowell Colony,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY) 19 August 1974.

<sup>103</sup> Walter Piston in a letter to Paul Vermel, 10 September 1974, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

the Portland Symphony Orchestra. The concerto was to go on as programmed and Piston was informed that rehearsals would begin on March 14, 1975. Vermel requested that the music be sent two weeks prior to the first rehearsal, giving him a more “flexible” deadline than the one previously agreed upon.<sup>104</sup>

The new “flexible” deadline would not be met. Piston wrote to Vermel a month later that he was better “physically more than mentally, [as] things are crowded with all sorts of problems and duties.” The “problems and duties” slowed his creative output as he returned home to Massachusetts from Vermont. Piston writes in the same letter that “the Concerto is moving slowly for lack of free time and thought.” A request was made for the concerto premier to be held off until the next season. Mindful of the integrity of the work, a line stating “the work will be better for it” is penned, but then crossed out. Now six years from his initial contact with Piston about the collaboration and ending his time with the Portland Symphony Orchestra, Vermel was disappointed, but understanding.<sup>105</sup>

Work on the concerto eventually slowed to a halt. The reply below to Vermel’s letter of October 31, 1974 is written by Piston on the bottom of Vermel’s letter:

Dear Paul,-

I am sorry to report that the Concerto has not progressed in the past three months, that is to say I have not found what I want. It is not so much because of my physical condition, which is fairly good considering, but rather because of the continual problems, frustrations, interruptions, etc. of every day living in these times. I feel it would be better for both of us to forget about scheduling the

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<sup>104</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 13 September 1974, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>105</sup> Walter Piston in a letter to Paul Vermel, 24 October 1974, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston. Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 31 October 1974, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

Concerto for any particular time. If and when it appears sure the performance can be at some future date, however remote. Let me know if this is bearable.

Yours sincerely, W.P.<sup>106</sup>

Despite the demands of taking on a second new post, Vermel remained flexible and willing to accommodate Piston. In addition to now directing the Champaign-Urbana Symphony, Vermel had accepted a position at the University of Illinois. While the other performances in the 1975-76 Portland Symphony Orchestra concert series were to be conducted by guest conductors competing to be the new director, Vermel was to return to guest conduct the April 8, 1976 concert. Vermel proposed programming the concerto on that concert, stating that he would need the score and parts by March 1, 1976 “at the latest” if Piston was interested.<sup>107</sup>

Piston was interested, but on his own time. He replied to Vermel, “I can’t do it, the way things are.” Piston requested to not be limited by a deadline, so that he would have time to write “a good one.”<sup>108</sup> Vermel graciously freed Piston of any deadline, outlining how to proceed:

1. [The quartet is] interested and anxious to perform the concerto when it is ready. (By the way their contracts have been renewed, so that they will be around for some time). They have a New York manager, Albert Kay. So that, when the piece is ready, he will be able to promote it with them.
2. Although my involvement in it is now questionable, I entertain fond hopes to be invited to guest conduct the P.S.O. in the future and still be able to perform it with the quartet. But that is no longer the prime issue.

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<sup>106</sup> Penned by Piston on the bottom of the letter from Paul Vermel to Walter Piston, 31 October 1974, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston. The date is approximated as mid March due to the March 30, 1975 response by Vermel.

<sup>107</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 30 March 1975, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>108</sup> Walter Piston in a letter to Paul Vermel, 15 May 1975, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

3. I would very much like for the quartet to meet you and play for you if this can be arranged and for you to hear them – You will be able to judge of their quality and abilities and it might be helpful for the future.

They would like to have this opportunity (especially to have some coaching suggestions on your own quartet which is in their repertoire).

4. I shall be in Urbana June and July but you might like to respond to Mrs. Vetterlein [assistant to the manager of the Portland Symphony Orchestra] directly at the P.S.O. – If you are agreeable to such meeting, it could be arranged some time next season at your both conveniences.<sup>109</sup>

The next several months were productive for Piston, despite his outlook the previous May. On January 5, 1976 Burleigh wrote to Piston, “We have heard through rumor of a friend of Julia Moseley [Adams], our Quartet’s violist, that you are well along with your work on it. . .” Burleigh was interested in confirming the rumor, checking for a possible completion date, and making sure that Piston understood that Vermel would not be conducting the Portland Symphony Orchestra the next season.<sup>110</sup>

Though it seemed Piston was “well along” with his work on the concerto, he was still reluctant to create a deadline and did not want to schedule it for the coming season. Piston responded to Burleigh, “As for the piece, it is approaching completion but I do not dare as yet to set a date. There are too many unforeseen problems, crises, and interruptions having nothing to do with the work in hand, that make living hard these days, let alone planning ahead.” With Vermel no longer slated to be the conductor, Piston confirmed that the original quartet would still be the one to premier the work. The

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<sup>109</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 26 May 1975, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>110</sup> Russell Burleigh in a letter to Walter Piston, 5 January 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston. The Portland Symphony String Quartet violist, then named Julia Moseley, is now Julia Adams. Correspondences with the author reference Julia Adams. All other citations reference Julia Moseley for the sake of consistency with other sources.



Portland Symphony String Quartet had been in his mind for the piece since the proposal on June 25, 1973.<sup>111</sup>

Over the next months leading up to the performance, the Portland Symphony String Quartet and Piston became more familiar. On January 17, 1976, Piston was interviewed on “Morning Pro Musica,” a program by Albany Medical College, station WAMC. According to a birthday card to Piston from cousin-in-law of quartet violist, Moseley, Piston had “complimentary remarks about the Portland String Quartet.”<sup>112</sup>

In April the quartet came to visit Piston. In addition to playing for and working with him, the quartet also took a picture with Piston and Gina, his dog, which was to be later used for publicity for the concert. Within the next few months the quartet performed his *String Quartet No. 4* on concerts in seven locations, including multiple countries, as well as on Public Television.<sup>113</sup>

While it seemed from Burleigh that Vermel would no longer conduct the premier, Vermel was still interested in the piece. In February 1976, he wrote to Piston that he would like “to perform it, and hopefully in Portland with the intended quartet. If not, somewhere else.” Vermel inquired about progress on the piece. Very much interested in Piston’s work, he let Piston know that he would be conducting the *Pine Tree Fantasy* as

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<sup>111</sup> Walter Piston in a letter to Russell Burleigh, 9 January 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>112</sup> Margaret N. and Austin C. Chase in a birthday card to Walter Piston, 20 January 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>113</sup> Julia Moseley in a letter to Walter Piston, 19 September 1976, with a picture dated April 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

part of a bicentennial celebration and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Portland Symphony Orchestra on the concert previously intended as the premier of the concerto.<sup>114</sup>

In the midst of apparent productivity on the piece, renewed interest from Burleigh and the Portland Symphony Orchestra, a radio interview, and increased interests with the quartet, tragedy struck Piston once again. On February 19, 1976 Kathryn Nason succumbed to her illness. Condolences streamed in from friends and colleagues to Piston for the loss of his partner of over fifty years. An art gallery with her works was put on in March, bringing in friends to support Piston.

Dealing with the loss of Kathryn and handling her estate, keeping up with condolences, attending the gallery in March, and collaborating with the visiting quartet in April, Piston managed to finish the concerto by May. Piston writes to his longtime friend, Betty Thorndike, on May 20, 1976, “The piece for the Portland Symphony Quartet is done but no date of performance is set, probably next season.” While he was able to complete the concerto, the idea of attending the performance did not appeal to him as he continued, “It is doubtful that I shall go-the receptions, etc., are too much, as I know from other occasions.” As Pollack notes, Piston felt overwhelmed with settling the estate of his deceased wife and writes, “The executor’s help is dealing with thousands of problems and occupying my mind all the time.”<sup>115</sup>

Thorndike was there for Piston for moral support, to help keep his mind occupied, and to provide friendly feedback on various aspects of the concerto. In addition to the

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<sup>114</sup> Paul Vermel in a letter to Walter Piston, 9 February 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>115</sup> Letter from Piston to Thorndike dated May 20, 1976 in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 12.

letters discussing Kathryn with Piston, Thorndike also sent genealogy reports to Piston as she investigated her own. In January and October of 1976, she sent tracings of his maternal lineage. In June she let Piston know she would like to go to the premier as well as court the quartet to perform his music on Mt. Desert Island. By October, Thorndike confirmed her attendance at the concert and let him know how much he would be missed if he could not indeed attend.<sup>116</sup>

With the concerto completed in May, preparations on the parts of the performers and representatives of the Portland Symphony Orchestra commenced. On September 19, 1976 Moseley wrote to Piston, excited about the work which they had already started to rehearse. She was grateful that Piston had decided to dedicate the work to the quartet, finding their names at the top of the music. Moseley, too, expressed her hopes that Piston would attend the concert.<sup>117</sup>

Burleigh wrote to express his thanks for the concerto as well and let Piston know he would be missed at the premier. Piston was given an update, “Work is progressing nicely. Our orchestra starts rehearsals this weekend and we are all looking forward to the grand occasion in two weeks time.”<sup>118</sup>

“The grand occasion” was significant for multiple reasons. In addition to being the premier night for the new Piston work, it was also the season opener for the orchestra, and featured Bruce Hangen as the new director of the orchestra. Of seven conductors

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<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth Thorndike in a letters to Walter Piston, 23 January, 22 June, 13 October 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>117</sup> Julia Moseley in a letter to Walter Piston, 19 September 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>118</sup> Russell Burleigh in a letter to Walter Piston, 12 October 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

permitted to guest conduct the orchestra the previous season in hopes of becoming the new director, Hangen earned the position. Hangen, too, contacted Piston to invite him to the October 26, 1976 premier. Hearing from members of the quartet that Piston does not enjoy “all the affiliated hullabaloo of media interviews, being acknowledged on stage, etc.,” he promised that Piston would be able to attend discretely. Hangen was also interested in having Piston attend the dress on October 25 so that he could provide further insight.<sup>119</sup>

Thirty-six years after the performance, Maestro Hangen was still willing to take the time to share his thoughts from that time:

As this was my very first concert as the new, 29-year-old Music Director of the PSO, the piece had been commissioned from Mr. Piston before my time. Beginning with my predecessor, Paul Vermel, the PSO had begun a practice of commissioning a work from an American composer approximately every other year. This piece was simply a continuation of that practice.

...The Concerto was therefore given to me with the expectation and hope that I would do it on my first concert, featuring of course the Portland String Quartet in collaboration.

I vaguely recall having a one or two rehearsals between just the Quartet and me in advance of the orchestra. And I believe the Quartet by that time had had their parts for the piece for maybe a month or two.

... We had the normal 4 rehearsals that any professional orchestra has for any typical subscription program. I don't recall any extraordinary effort we had to produce to make the piece come about. I do recall -- as I would with bringing to life any new composition -- a general excitement and enthusiasm and sense of importance that we were doing something meaningful.

Due to ill health, Mr. Piston did not attend rehearsals or the performance.

...What little I remember of the piece at this point includes very positive thoughts on the work's creative ideas; the notion that it's a concerto for string quartet accompanied only by the non-string sections of the orchestra; a very strong, classical sense of structure and rhythmic propulsion; and a lasting

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<sup>119</sup> Bruce Hangen in a letter to Walter Piston, 14 October 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

impression that this was indeed a successful composition suitable for successive performances...<sup>120</sup>

John Thornton, writer for the *Evening Express* newspaper, reported the dress rehearsal to be a success. “Monday night at dress rehearsal I heard the work for the first time. About 17 minutes long, it is magnificently fashioned, inventive without being avante garde, logically explorative, full of melody, laced with subtle changes in dynamics and rhythms.” Thornton went on to encourage readers to attend the premier as they “may be as impressed with its vitality and imagination as I was at rehearsal last night.”<sup>121</sup>

When the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* finally premiered on October 26, 1976, Maestro Hangen was one of many who found it to be a “successful composition.” Judging by a photo taken by Peter Darling at the City Hall Auditorium on the night of the premier, almost every seat was filled.<sup>122</sup> The twenty-nine year old new Music Director of the Portland Symphony Orchestra, the Portland Symphony String Quartet, and members of the ensemble created a performance worthy of an encore. After a brief moment of silence upon the conclusion of the piece, applause erupted and did not cease until the quartet came out to play again. Fittingly, they performed the final movement of the *String Quartet No. 4* by Piston. While Piston did not witness the performance live, accounts of the event and praises came to the eighty-two year old Piston by mail.

Betty Thorndike wrote to Piston the next day:

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<sup>120</sup> Bruce Hangen in an email to the author, 25 June 2013.

<sup>121</sup> John Thornton, *Evening Express* (Portland, ME), 26 October 1976.

<sup>122</sup> Peter Darling, “Historic Concert,” *Evening Express* (Portland, ME), 27 October 1976, photograph.

The concert was tremendous, especially your part and very warmly received, resulting in bringing the quartet out several times and their playing an encore of your quartet's last movement. . . John and I had very enthusiastic chats with the quartet group and the new conductor afterwards. I can't tell you what a thrill this all was. Warmest congratulations.<sup>123</sup>

Betty Thorndike was so taken with the performance, two weeks later she had friends over for supper and to hear a recording of the premier played on "our FM station Mon., Nov. 8<sup>th</sup> at 8 PM." The Maine Public Broadcasting Network (MPBN) presented the concert in its entirety on WMEA FM 90.1. Reception, however, was too poor for Thorndike and her friends to hear the performance well. A tape of the performance was made, Thorndike remarked, "which Robert J. Lurtsema produced very successfully on Morning Pro Musica."<sup>124</sup> Pollack found that Piston had heard this tape before he passed.<sup>125</sup>

John Thorndike, treasurer of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, commented, "Dorothy and I enjoyed hearing your new concerto in Portland a couple of weeks ago. It was a most interesting piece, and we enjoyed very much hearing its world premier! As you must have heard by now, it was very well received by the audience. . ." He added that he hoped it would come to Boston soon.<sup>126</sup>

Harold Brown, chairman of the Portland Symphony Orchestra, wrote:

I personally found your concerto most gratifying. It started somewhat surprisingly mild, but it built and grew as it proceeded, so that at the close I found

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<sup>123</sup> Elizabeth Thorndike in a letter to Walter Piston, 27 October 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>124</sup> Elizabeth Thorndike in a letter to Walter Piston, 10 November 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston. Newspaper clipping of an advertisement for the program found in the Walter Piston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>125</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 163.

<sup>126</sup> John Thorndike in a letter to Walter Piston, 9 November 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

it a very moving experience. I believe this was the general effect on the audience, too, according to solicited remarks at the reception following; also judging from the profound silence at the close of the work.

The quartet was so soundly applauded that they returned for an encore, playing the last movement of your Fourth Quartet – a stunning piece!<sup>127</sup>

Brown went on to give technical assessments by the performers, “The quartet reported that the concerto ‘lies well’ for every instrument, including the orchestral instruments. Various members of the orchestra have concurred on that, which attests to your competency in writing for them.” Brown concluded with appraisals of reviewers John Thornton and Clark Irwin, with their articles on the concerto attached.<sup>128</sup>

Thornton, who had also attended the dress rehearsal, gave positive appraisals of Piston and his new work, new director Bruce Hangen, and the Portland Symphony String Quartet. He notes that the new work “was given a well disciplined reading by the orchestra and a beautifully articulated performance by the quartet. . .” continuing that “the Piston work displayed in its 17 minutes the kind of music writing that has established Maine’s celebrated composer as one of the greatest the nation has ever produced.” Thornton described the work as moving from a “short staccato series of crescendi measures and the swirl of ‘no-key’ playing by the quartet” to a “serene and meditative end” spanning “a series of fascinating and subtle variations.” Like Hangen, Thornton foresaw an enduring quality in the work, writing that it “certainly should

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<sup>127</sup> Harold Brown in a letter to Walter Piston, 27 October 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

become a staple of orchestra programming, and no effort should be spared to have it recorded by the PSSQ [Portland Symphony String Quartet].”<sup>129</sup>

Irwin, a relatively new staff writer according to Brown, took a different approach to his review, remarking that for “a concert goer who likes his music to lift him on a surge of power, or induce tranquil musings or engage him in a catchy melody, there are problems.” Irwin assessed the piece as “not an easy piece to appreciate” because it was “unconventional” as “themes are not developed in the accustomed sense.” He believed that “the first section of the concerto baffles the listener’s efforts to perceive a form. . . which is not to say the section is formless” because its unity was in feeling “tentative, restless, distracted.” Irwin sought out one such “concert goer,” Daniel Johnson of Falmouth, who said, “I didn’t like the Piston piece.” All must not have had the same opinion though, as the title of the article is “Piston’s Work Impresses.”<sup>130</sup>

Perhaps the most poignant review of the work came in letter form from the quartet violist, Julia Moseley. Moseley was grateful to be part of the premier. She was also grateful for the viola part in the concerto, “May I personally thank you for the viola solo at the end of the work. It is a most compelling musical line, so perfectly suited to the instrument, and a wonderful contribution to the literature.” She pondered about the end, “It seems to bring the concerto to a very philosophical conclusion, particularly with the discord at the end which is at the same time so beautiful yet unsettling. I would imagine that these moments express much of your thoughts and feelings about both art and life.

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<sup>129</sup> John Thornton, “Symphony Opener: Vigorous, Dashing” *Portland Press Herald* (Portland, ME), 27 October 1976.

<sup>130</sup> Clark T. Irwin Jr, “Piston’s Work Impresses,” *Evening Express* (Portland, ME), 27 October 1976.



Am I correct?" Moseley then hinted that the quartet would like to perform the work in the future.<sup>131</sup>

Piston would not get a chance to hear such a performance. Less than three weeks after the premier, Walter Hamor Piston, Jr. had a heart attack in his home. He died on November 12, 1976.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Julia Moseley in a letter to Walter Piston, 31 October 1976, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>132</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 12.

## COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

To date, there is no extensive study of Piston's compositional process. A basic understanding of the process helps to pinpoint the compositional philosophies Piston ultimately implemented in the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. The process demonstrates his expressive intent from conception to interaction with performers. Studying the concrete evidence we have of practices Piston used to write numerous other pieces, we understand what parts of the process became instinctive by the time the string quartet concerto was composed allowing for less filtered, more expressive writing. While it is important to identify the careful calculations that went into each phase of the process, the musical intentions behind the calculations must not be overlooked. Piston's compositional process included an initial compositional challenge, early conceptions of a work, sketches, drafting, proofing, and sometimes interaction with performers.

### **Compositional Challenge**

Commissions provided Piston the compositional challenges he needed to begin writing a piece. Piston was given some choice in selecting instrumentation for the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*, but typically approximate duration, instrumentation, and performers were pre-established by the person or ensemble commissioning the piece. With this information, work commenced.

Piston started with a vast knowledge of instrumentation, evident not only in his book on orchestration but in his writing for individual instruments. So thorough was his understanding of the instruments he was writing for, that performers often gave him the highest praise. Pollack writes that “Rostropovich could not believe that the composer of the *Cello Variations* did not himself play the cello.”<sup>133</sup> Piston wrote the *Cello Variations* largely for the instrument rather than the person. While admitting “it is impossible to put down a single note without hearing” Rostropovich, in the interview with Westergaard, Piston relates:

When he asked me to write [the *Cello Variations*] he said, “Please don’t write for the player-write for the instrument.” I think that’s a most unusual request from a virtuoso. He wants to increase the literature for all cellists. Now, I know it is a difficult piece. But it wasn’t written to exhibit things that Rostropovich can do that others can’t.<sup>134</sup>

With such knowledge, instrumentation was often the driving force behind Piston’s initial creative thought. According to interviewer Johanna Seltz, “It’s the instruments themselves that are usually Piston’s greatest inspiration.”<sup>135</sup>

As Pollack suggests, the prospect of a successful performance influenced Piston in selecting specific instrumentation for his pieces. Piston was asked if the instrumentation for his *Divertimento for Nine Instruments* was selected for expressive means:

To tell the truth, I don’t even know. . . I think I must have chosen the instrumentation first, because I don’t remember any process of having an idea and saying, “This would be good for two basset horns and a piccolo.” I’ve been tied

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<sup>133</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 149.

<sup>134</sup> Westergaard, “Conversations with Walter Piston,” 164.

<sup>135</sup> Johanna Seltz, “Walter H. Piston: Six Lessons to Composing Renown,” *Valley News* (West Lebanon, NH), 31 August 1974.

down on a great many of my works with commissions. I think I am tempted to accept commissions because I am sure of a performance of the piece. But as soon as you do that you've got to find out what are going to be the resources to play it. For instance, if half-way through the piece you decide you want three harps, you're running the risk of losing a performance right then and there. So I think probably I've decided things on a practical basis quite a lot. Because what I want to do always is to hear the work and learn from it, and go on to the next work which I hope will be better. I still feel that way.<sup>136</sup>

Once instruments were selected, the expressive means of the instruments heavily influenced his writing. His Sixth Symphony (1955) is perhaps one of the best examples. The piece was written for the Boston Symphony and dedicated to the memories of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky.

Not only had Piston grown up personally and professionally with the sounds of the Boston Symphony, but it was Koussevitzky and his orchestra who had given Piston his debut commission in the United States after returning from studies with Boulanger. Piston wrote of composing the Sixth Symphony:

While writing my Sixth Symphony, I came to realize that this was a rather special situation in that I was writing for one designated orchestra, one that I had grown up with, and that I knew intimately. Each note set down sounded in my mind with extraordinary clarity, as though played immediately by those who were to perform the work. On several occasions it seemed as though the melodies were being written by the instruments themselves as I followed along. I refrained from playing even a single note of this symphony on the piano.<sup>137</sup>

Piston may have had a similar experience writing the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. He knew the Portland Symphony Orchestra intimately from working on the *Pine Tree Fantasy*. Not only did Piston have a recording from Vermet of the Portland String Quartet, but Piston heard them as regular performers of his

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<sup>136</sup> WGBH interview, 19 January 1974 in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 101.

<sup>137</sup> Walter Piston, "The Sixth Symphony," *Boston Symphony Orchestra Programmes 76* (1955-56), 284; in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 117-8.

works and others on public radio. From Brown's interview with Piston, we know that the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* was inspired specifically by the Portland String Quartet.<sup>138</sup> Portland String Quartet Violinist Ron Lantz noted that the quartet was familiar with most of Piston's string quartet works and regularly programmed them. Piston commented of the Portland String Quartet, "I love the way they play my music."<sup>139</sup>

Piston considered not only the instrumentation and performers, but how they both played into the type of work that needed to be composed. There is evidence of Piston's thoughts on writing two types of pieces that apply to the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*, concertos and chamber works. Composing concertos presents a unique set of considerations. Not only did Piston consider the featured instrument, but how it might fit with and against the ensemble. He wrote of the *Concerto for Viola and Orchestra* (1957):

The viola has greater tone weight [than the violin], but it cannot penetrate or soar, unless permitted to do so by carefully adjusted accompanying parts. . . The two most important problems in this combination of viola solo with orchestra proved to be balance of sound and association of tone colors. These problems are not exactly peculiar to this combination, but they seemed here more pronounced and ever present. I was more than ever impressed with the necessity for the most intimate knowledge of every instrument. Likewise indispensable is the faculty of hearing mentally what one writes, and writing accurately what one hears mentally. The scoring had to be of a transparency to allow the solo voice to be heard in all registers at all times.<sup>140</sup>

Piston considered similar questions of "balance of sound and association of tone colors" in chamber works. Piston's notes on the 1956 *Quintet for Wind Instruments* state:

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<sup>138</sup> Brown, *PSO Programs*, 34.

<sup>139</sup> Telephone conversation with Ron Lantz on December 30, 2013.

<sup>140</sup> Walter Piston, "Viola and Orchestra," 1138-40 in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 125.

The makeup of the traditional woodwind quintet may be said, in a sense, to be ideal as chamber music, in which the individual voices' blend complement one another without giving up any of their distinction and independence. These five instruments differ strikingly in tone color, tone weight, intensity, dynamic range, expressive power and technical capability. Furthermore, each instrument by itself presents similar differences between the parts of its range. Difficult and fascinating problems arise from these physical facts, not only for the composer but for the performer as well.<sup>141</sup>

The knowledge of the instruments themselves as well as their balance in ensemble was acquired over years of experience. As Pollack writes, "It was perhaps these 'difficult and fascinating problems,' that discouraged Piston from completing a wind quintet he had begun in 1930, but with thirty years of experience and a text on *Orchestration* behind him, this second attempt is. . . expert and inspired."<sup>142</sup>

In the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*, Piston had to combine the techniques of writing for large and chamber ensembles in concerto form. Pollack states that "neither 'orchestral' nor 'chamber' music, the *String Quartet Concerto* fulfills Piston's own prediction, made in 1967, that the future of the symphony orchestra might lie in its flexibility."<sup>143</sup> The quartet, performers, and conductor premiering the work attested to Piston's technical writing prowess for individual instruments and their combinations in such a unique manner.

### **Conception**

Once the compositional challenges of duration, instrumentation, and performers were set, pitches, rhythms, and form started to emerge. Pollack finds that according to

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<sup>141</sup> Walter Piston, record liner notes for the *Quintet for Woodwind Instruments*, the Boehm Quintette, Orion ORS 75206 in Pollack, Walter Piston, 122.

<sup>142</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 122.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 163.

Piston's conversation with Margaret Fairbanks in 1967, Piston started with a general concept before writing. Discussing origins of an idea, Piston is said, "The initial stages are the most mysterious, but one shouldn't wait too long for this."<sup>144</sup> As the initial stages produced musical thought that began to formulate more concretely, Piston did not feel the need to be confined to a desk to force ideas. In an interview prior to the premier of his *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*, Piston told Thornton, "Well, I compose all the time. . . when I'm driving in traffic. . . when I'm working the garden. . . matter of fact some of my best thoughts come while I'm wheeling fertilizer in my wheelbarrow."<sup>145</sup>

When Piston did sit down to put pencil to paper, the process could take quite some time. More often than not, much of his work would be erased. Piston explained in the interview with Seltz:

'A woman in Belmont once asked if her daughter could come and watch me compose. She was very talented, the mother said, and it might do her good,' Piston laughs. 'I told her it wouldn't be very interesting—I sit in a chair, don't make a sound, stare at a piece of paper, and once in a while I make a mark on it. The worst part of it is I'm likely to rub it all out on Friday. I've probably thrown out 10 times as much music as I've kept. It's surprising, though, how much music you can write.'<sup>146</sup>

Piston pondered each note he put down carefully. Most pieces did not have the melodies "written by the instruments themselves as [Piston] followed along" as they did in the Sixth Symphony, but were crafted with the ramifications of the slightest alterations and additions in mind:

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>145</sup> John Thornton, "Piston: Composer's Work in World Premier Here Tonight," *Evening Express* (Portland, ME), 26 October 1976.

<sup>146</sup> Johanna Seltz, "Walter H. Piston."

You always keep an open mind on this all through the piece. I used to tell my students, as soon as you put one note you've changed the conditions, and then you have to consider the others in relation to this, whereas before you put it down, you're free. On the other hand, you've got to be ready to throw that away, and that takes courage if you've done quite a lot of good looking pages. . . I write about ten times as much music as I keep.<sup>147</sup>

Piston noted that an ideal compositional process involved more than one's own compositional challenges and musical thoughts. He held a firmly rooted belief in studying the music of others, stating, "You have much more solidity and better chance of a fruitful path if you continually study the music of the past instead of just sitting down and composing."<sup>148</sup> He emphasized this point with his students, "I always told my students to study the music of the past to see what has been done, if only to avoid doing it again."<sup>149</sup>

Piston was cautious, however, about framing his own music in the context of music history. Asked about his style, Piston joked that it was "mid-Victorian," but continued "I try not to worry about that. I want each piece to come out as it would come out."<sup>150</sup> Such a sense of ingenuity while being well versed in historical and contemporary techniques allowed him to produce the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*.

### Sketches

The hard evidence we have of his creative process lies not in "the mysterious" initial stages or in recollections of thoughts while "wheeling fertilizer," but in several

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<sup>147</sup> Walter Piston to Margaret Fairbanks, 1967 in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 177.

<sup>148</sup> Johanna Seltz, "Walter H. Piston."

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.



sketchbooks spanning his career left to the Boston Public Library by Piston. They may be found in “MS Mus. Piston Box 6” of the Piston Collection in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Department. The sketchbooks contain phrase workings, tone rows and twelve-tone procedures, reductions with notes for instrumentation and harmonies, as well as form maps indicating structure, dynamics, and/or key areas. Figures for measure numbers and piece durations can also be found, most often in or near the form maps. There are no sketches clearly marked as the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*, but the types of markings Piston made throughout sketchbooks are consistent with many found in the manuscript draft of the concerto. The sketchbooks also span decades of his career and provide good insight into Piston’s thought process.

Practicing what he preached to his students, Piston’s care for the addition of each note and transformation of melody is evident in his phrase sketches and alterations from the sketchbooks. The sketchbook phrase workings are beneficial to understanding the compositional process of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. They help us understand a practiced thought process and align in style with the few sketches Piston left in the string quartet concerto. In fact, the only examples we have of Piston’s alterations of melody for the concerto come from comparing similar melodies within the piece and a few viola sketches at the end of the draft.

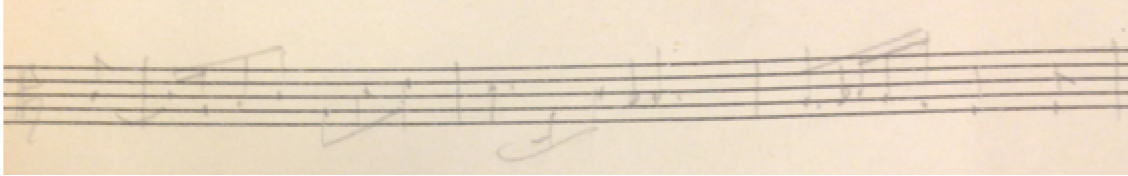
Pollack points to the careful crafting found in the sketchbooks of the opening clarinet melody from the “Adagio” of the Second Symphony by Piston.<sup>151</sup> The following

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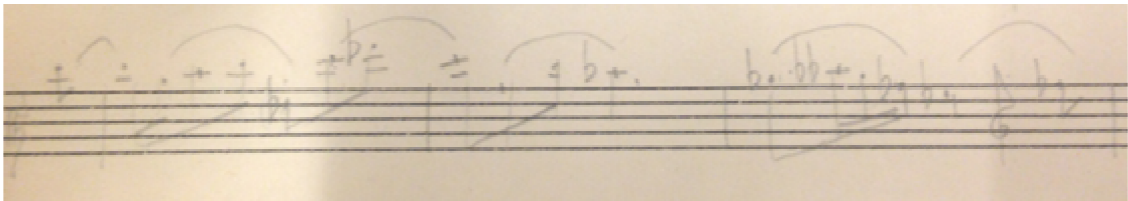
<sup>151</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 83.

musical examples, found on the same page of his sketchbook, are examples of a melodic alteration:

**Musical Example 1 Original Melody from the Piston Sketchbooks, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**

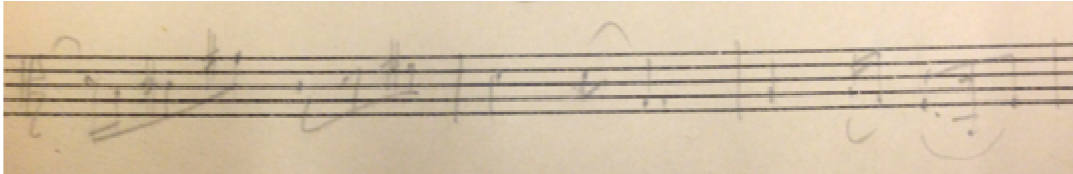


**Musical Example 2 Melodic Alteration from the Piston Sketchbooks, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



From the first example to the second there are several alterations: 1) there is an octave shift; 2) bowings are added; 3) the fourth beat of the first measure drops a major sixth from beat three rather than a minor third; 4) the sixth beat of the first measure is lowered a half step; 5) the rhythm in the second measure begins with straight eighths instead a dotted eighth and sixteenth; 6) the third measure is lowered a half step; 7) the last note ascends an octave (an anacrusis to the next phrase). Another example taken from the same page of the sketchbook shows similar melodic contour, rhythms, and range of Musical Example 1, but with different intervallic content and bowings:

**Musical Example 3 Intervallic Alteration from the Piston Sketchbooks, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



More prominent than melodic sketches in the sketchbooks, are partial scores and reductions. Three stave reductions are the most common. Piston wrote abbreviations for instrumentation and harmonies into many of these reductions. While Pollack remarks that “Piston mostly worked, in pencil, on a single draft, erasing as he went along,” his sketchbooks provide insight into how he thought of works before drafts were realized.<sup>152</sup>

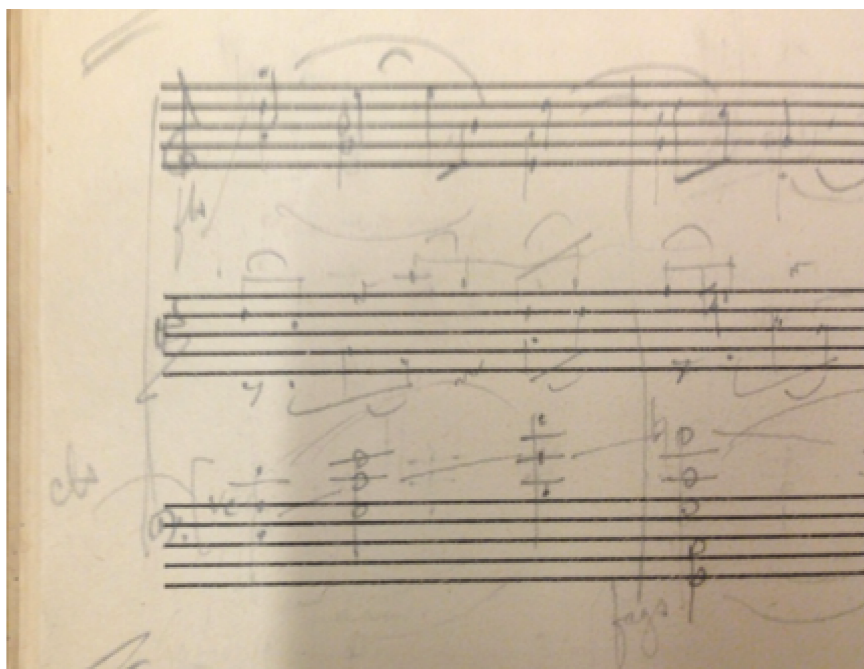
Musical Example 4 reveals several considerations by Piston. Instrumentation abbreviations for woodwinds and strings are found including clarinets, flutes, cellos, and bassoons (“cls,” “fls,” “vc,” and “fags,” respectively). The bass clef staff demonstrates typical application by Piston of quartal sonorities used as blocks of sound, only in this case conceived before complete orchestration was set to paper. The alto line reveals clear counterpoint between two inner voices. The treble line is a melodic line integrated into the quartal sonorities shared in the bass. Phrase markings in the upper two staves and a connecting line in the lower staff help bring out the intent of each voice.

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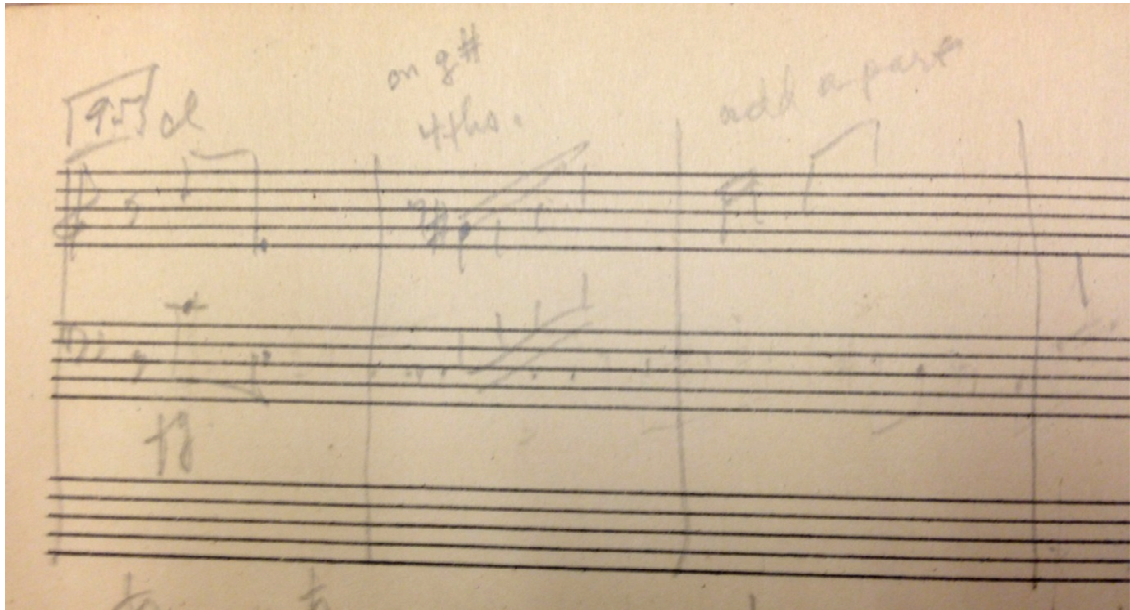
<sup>152</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 38-40.

Musical Example 5 is more abstract with three staves barred, but only two with notes. An indication to build fourths on the G# in measure two is present, as are rhythmic markings without specified pitches:

**Musical Example 4 Three Stave Reduction Sketch by Walter Piston from the Piston Sketchbooks, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



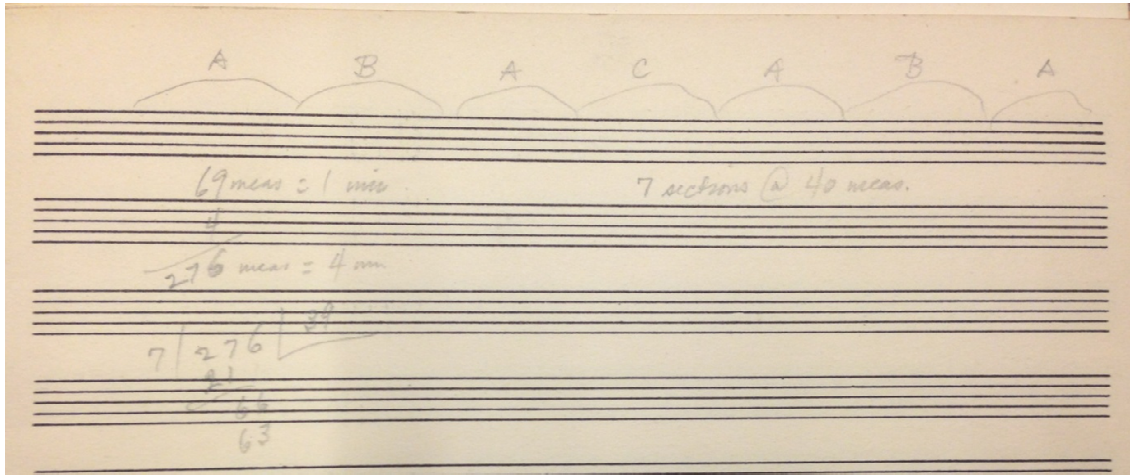
**Musical Example 5 Sketch with Rhythmic, Harmonic, and Instrumentation Markings by Walter Piston from the Piston Sketchbooks, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



Such a reduction has not been found for the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. If indeed one does not exist, it supports the theory that Piston truly did “hear a sound” and write it while composing the string quartet concerto. The result would be a more intuitive style of writing.

Form maps frequently preclude reductions in the sketchbooks and drafts by Piston. The way Piston conceived the form maps clarifies his expressive intent. While we do find basic classic forms seemingly repurposed (such as the rondo in Musical Example 6), we also find more inventive forms with indications for deeper musical plans.

**Musical Example 6 Rondo Form Map with Measure and Time Equations by Walter Piston from the Piston Sketchbooks, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



Musical Example 7 provides a more complex form map. Sections are formed with measure groupings, key areas are both written and notated, boxed measure numbers outline broader formal structure, a dynamics map is included for the first half, and an indication for “full strings 8-9 min.” appears in the last section.

**Musical Example 7 Complex Form Map by Walter Piston from the Piston Sketchbooks, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**

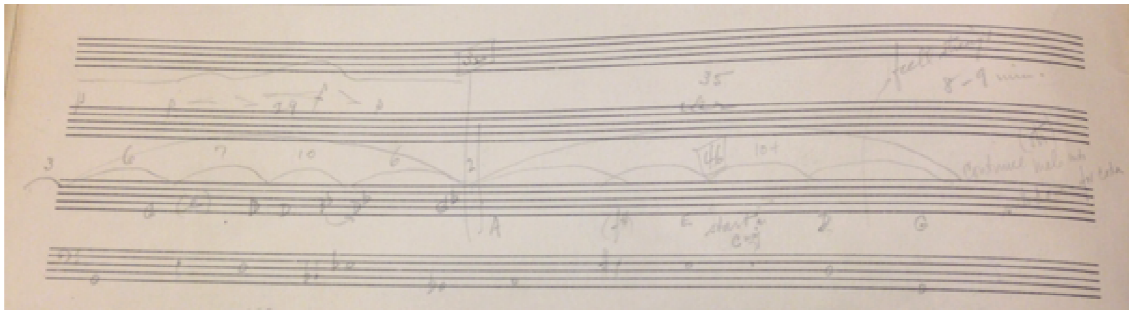


Diagram illustrating a complex form map for a musical piece, showing dynamics and structural markers.

**Dynamics:** *p* (piano), *f* (forte), *p* (piano).

**Structural Markers:** 32, 46.

**Notes:** 3, 6, 7, 10, 6, 2, 46.

**Chords/Notes:** G (e), DD, Bb Db, Gb, A, (f#), E start in C maj, D, G.

**Annotations:** full strings 8-9 min., Continue (str) melo into subdom for Coda.

The sketch books contain several form maps detailed with expressive implications as part of broad compositional planning. Pollack notes that Piston outlined a complete plan for dynamics, texture, style, instrumentation thoughts, and key for *Carnival Song* (1938). A typed form map of the sketch is provided in *Walter Piston* by Pollack.<sup>153</sup>

Pollack also identifies Piston's use of the sketchbook to decide on titles and conceptual impressions for pieces. In the *Partita for Violin, Viola and Organ* (1944), Piston had several working titles for the movements, though he settled on a traditional

<sup>153</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 63.

format (“Prelude,” “Sarabande,” Variations,” and “Burlesca”). Pollack recognizes that in addition to sketches of “precompositional decisions about tonality, rhythm, form, and tempo,” Piston left notes on “specific moods.” The “Sarabande” was originally labeled “tender,” the “Variations” were labeled “serious, enigmatic,” and the “Burlesca” was labeled “rough, not humorous.” Evidence of the care Piston took to select words representing appropriate moods in the partita suggest performers should pay close attention to indicators in all his pieces in order to bring out the appropriate expressive intent. In the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* we find such carefully considered terms as *con fuoco*, *sottovoce*, and *espressivo* among others.

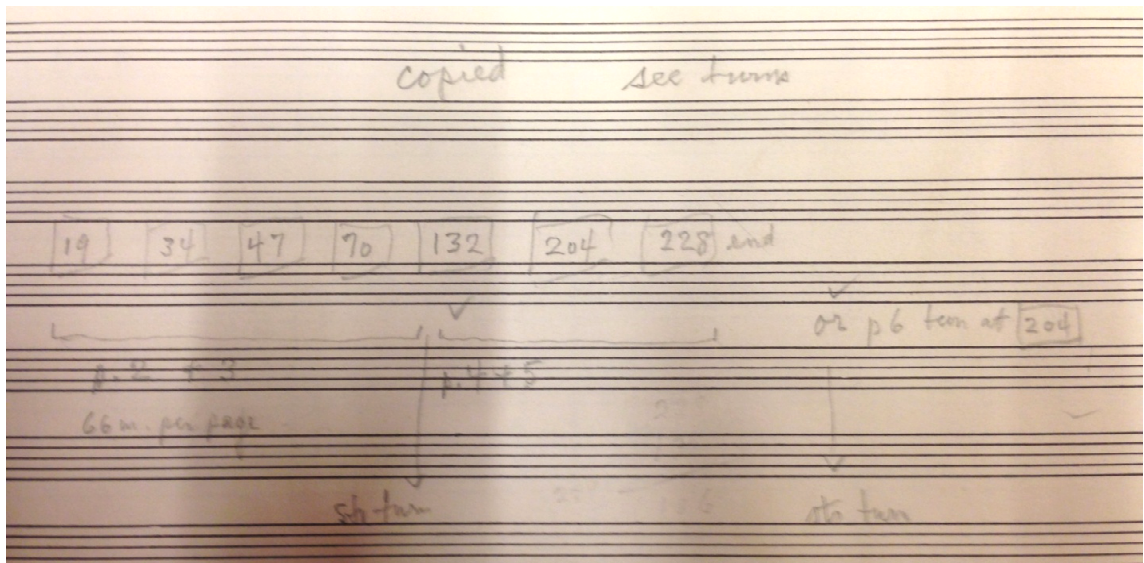
### **Drafts**

Given the compositional challenge, a piece was conceived, mental or physical sketches were created, and the piece was drafted. Piston’s drafts, held in the “Ms v. Mus. Piston” portion of the Walter Piston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, at the Boston Public Library, are a valuable source for anyone studying his music for performance or research. While we must rely on sketches from other pieces to determine the thought process for the conception of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*, drafts of the piece do exist. When referenced against other drafts and considered with the way other pieces were conceived, the creation of the string quartet concerto may be pieced together. We find structural points as viewed by the composer, several steps in Piston’s compositional process, and significant errors that to date are not corrected in the published score.



On the front page of the draft of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* is an outline of structural points in the piece. The structural points are marked as boxed measure numbers resembling rehearsal cues. Rehearsal cues in the published version do not align with the draft at all as they are simply marked every five measures. It appears the primary use for Piston of the outline is to identify page turns for copying the string parts (see Musical Example 8).

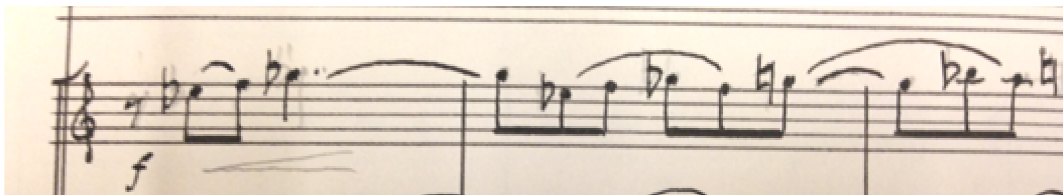
**Musical Example 8 Outline of Rehearsal Cues and Page Turns for String Quartet Parts in the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



Measures 19-131 are marked for pages 2 and 3, while measures 132-end are marked for pages 4 and 5 (though a final checked remark has a page 6 starting at measure 204). Piston's careful planning in this respect allowed for at least two measures of rest for each page turn by the performers. In the compositional process, these markings would have been added only after at least an initial version of the draft was complete.

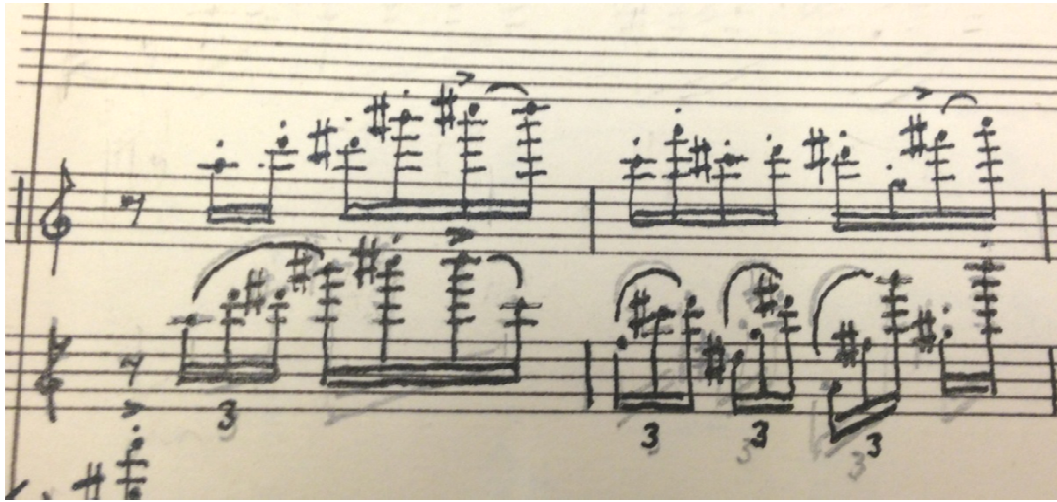
Different edits by Piston, determined by whether he wrote in pencil or pen (and if pen, the shade), help us to determine the compositional process through the drafting stage. We know from remnants left below the black ink that at least some of the work, if not all, was written in pencil first. The erased marks in Musical Example 9 are taken from the first violin part in measure 36. The crescendo marked in pencil is also found in the published score.

**Musical Example 9 Pencil Markings Beneath Ink Markings in the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



The process is not unique to the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. We also find it in measures 315-6 of the *Flute Concerto* (Musical Example 10).

**Musical Example 10 Pencil Markings Beneath Ink Markings in the *Flute Concerto* by Walter Piston, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



After Piston drafted the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* in ink, he used three distinct media to edit the score. Edits were made with the original black pen, pencil, and a faded black or blue ink. Exactly when, where, and how these edits took place is uncertain. We know from Vermel's letters that Piston was aware of a desire by the Portland Symphony String Quartet to have the parts early. In April 1976, Piston met with the quartet. In May 1976, the piece was complete. There are markings outlining string quartet page turns in pencil on the front of the draft. Hangen, conductor of the premier, received a score with multiple errors. Piston replied that Hangen was not sent a correct version of the score. Hangen shared the story in June 2013:

I recall getting a copy of the score at my home in Denver late spring or during the summer before moving to Portland, and finding myself consumed with having to correct all kinds of note, dynamic and other minutiae mistakes. Once completing that task, I telephoned Mr. Piston to run the mistakes by him for affirmation. And after a fairly lengthy conversation of fact-checking, he says that I must have

received the first, not revised version of the score. . . I believe that the revised and corrected score [the draft in the Walter Piston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, at the Boston Public Library] was corrected by Piston himself, and certainly before we went into rehearsal.<sup>154</sup>

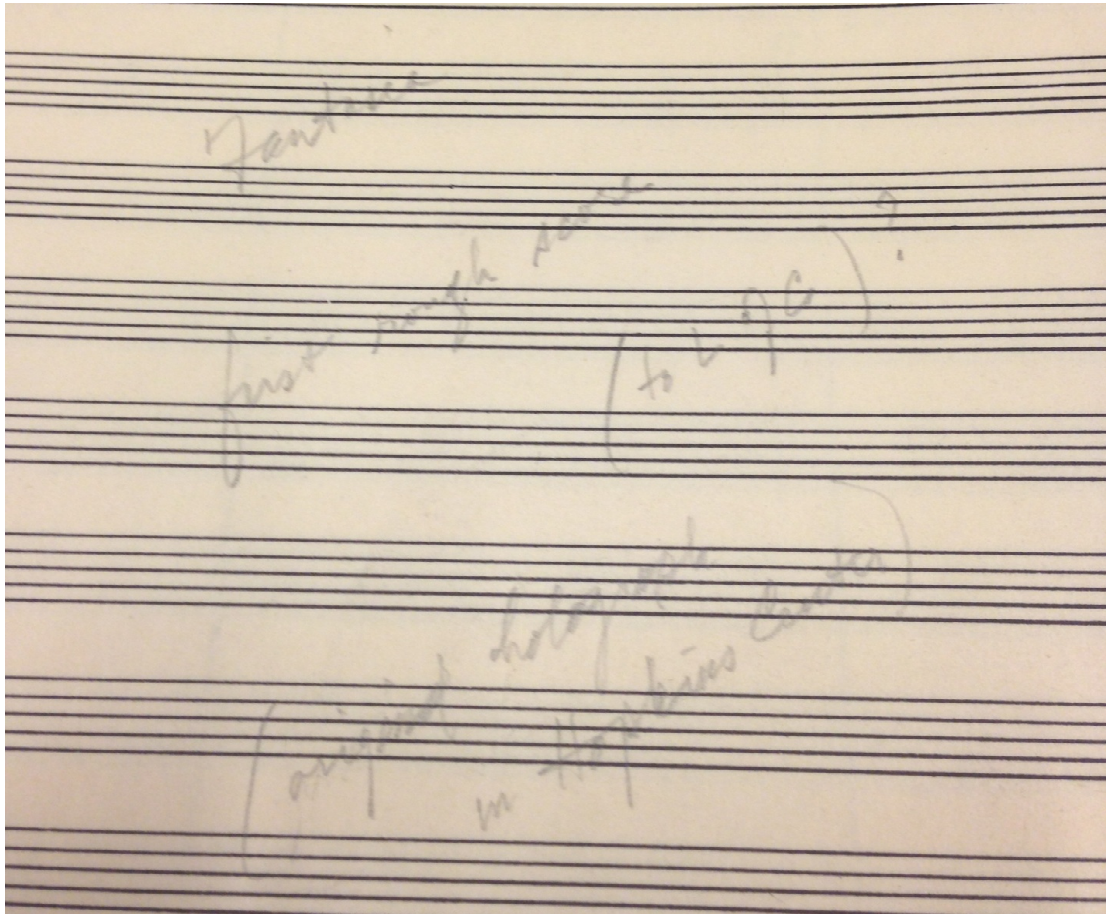
Either Piston used multiple drafts or he considered both scores untouched by the publisher as well as proofs to be “rough” scores. A note for his *Fantasia for Violin and Orchestra* is evidence. “Fantasia first rough score (to L of C)? (original holograph in Hopkins Center)” is in Piston’s hand (*Musical Example 11*). According to letters to and from the Library of Congress, Piston had an ongoing arrangement to donate scores and receive valuation letters in return which could be used for tax purposes.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Email from Bruce Hangen to the author, 25 June 2013.

<sup>155</sup> Correspondences between Walter Piston and the Library of Congress found in the Walter Piston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

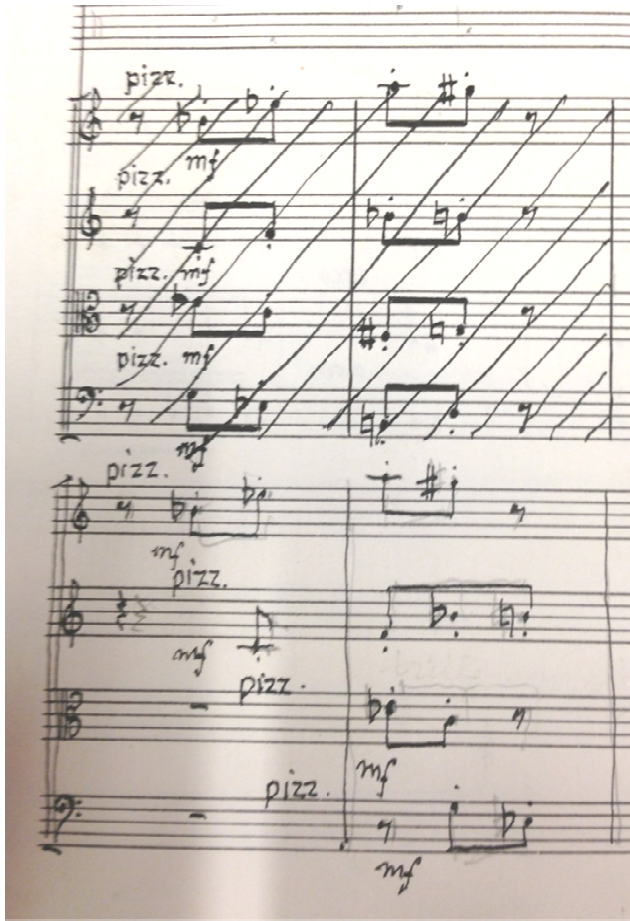
**Musical Example 11 Note About “First Rough Score” to *Fantasia* for Violin and Orchestra by Walter Piston, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



The dark black pen edits in the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* were most likely done relatively shortly after the black notes were penned. Musical Example 12 is a reworking of measures 93-4. The original black ink manuscript is crossed out and substitute bars are first penciled and then inked in below for the quartet.

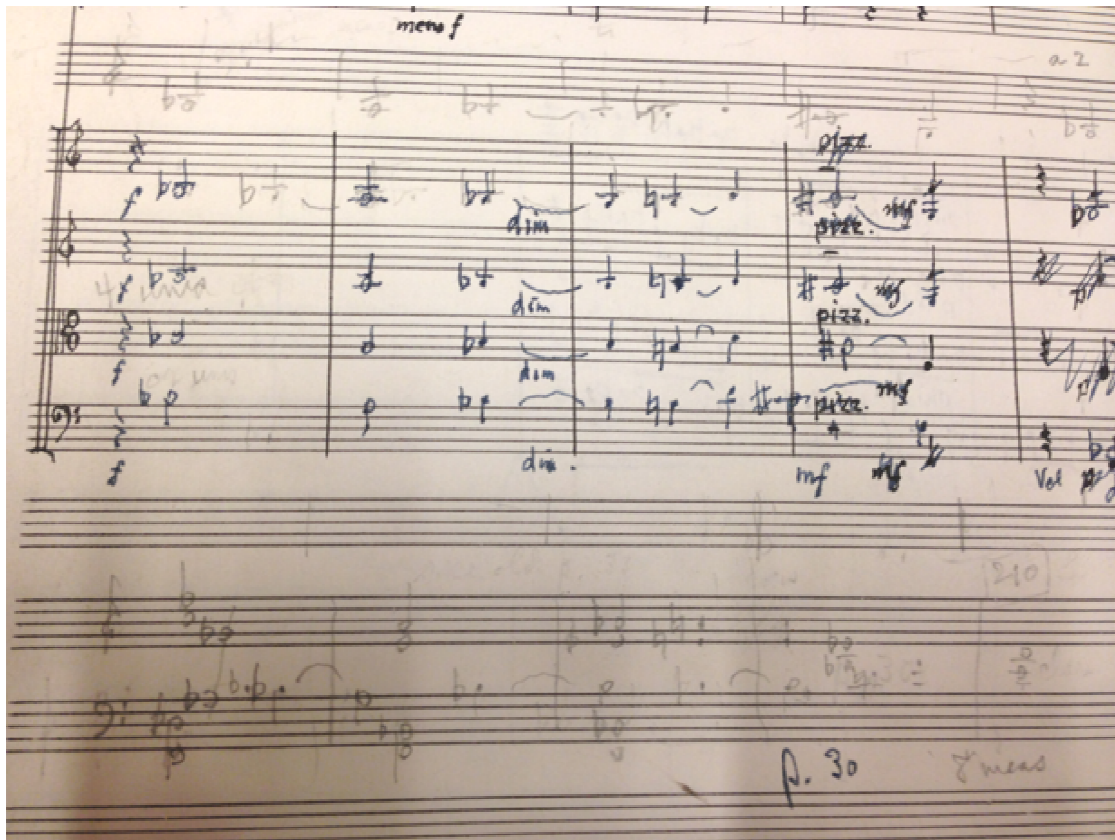


**Musical Example 12 Ink Corrections to the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, m. 93-4, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



Musical Example 13 is of interest for a number of reasons: 1) measure 206 in the draft contains pencil markings similar to those that might be found in the sketchbooks; 2) the penmanship of both the pencil and ink is uncharacteristically messy for a Piston draft; 3) there was decision to eliminate the pizzicato in the quartet leading into the final viola solo; 4) while the penciled-in line above the first violin part is the version maintained for publishing (the B $\flat$  in measure 206 was eliminated), there is an “a2” above the B $\flat$  in measure 210 and yet no voices rejoin anywhere in the score at that point.

**Musical Example 13** Pencil Corrections to the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, m. 206-10, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books



The final pages of the draft, labeled pages 31 and 31a by Piston, are also of interest. One might speculate that the top of page 31 was the work's original ending as it follows the pattern of penciled manuscript inked over and is an example of Piston's characteristic neat writing. The passage includes an abbreviated ten bar viola solo. This ending is crossed out in faded black or blue ink (Musical Example 14).

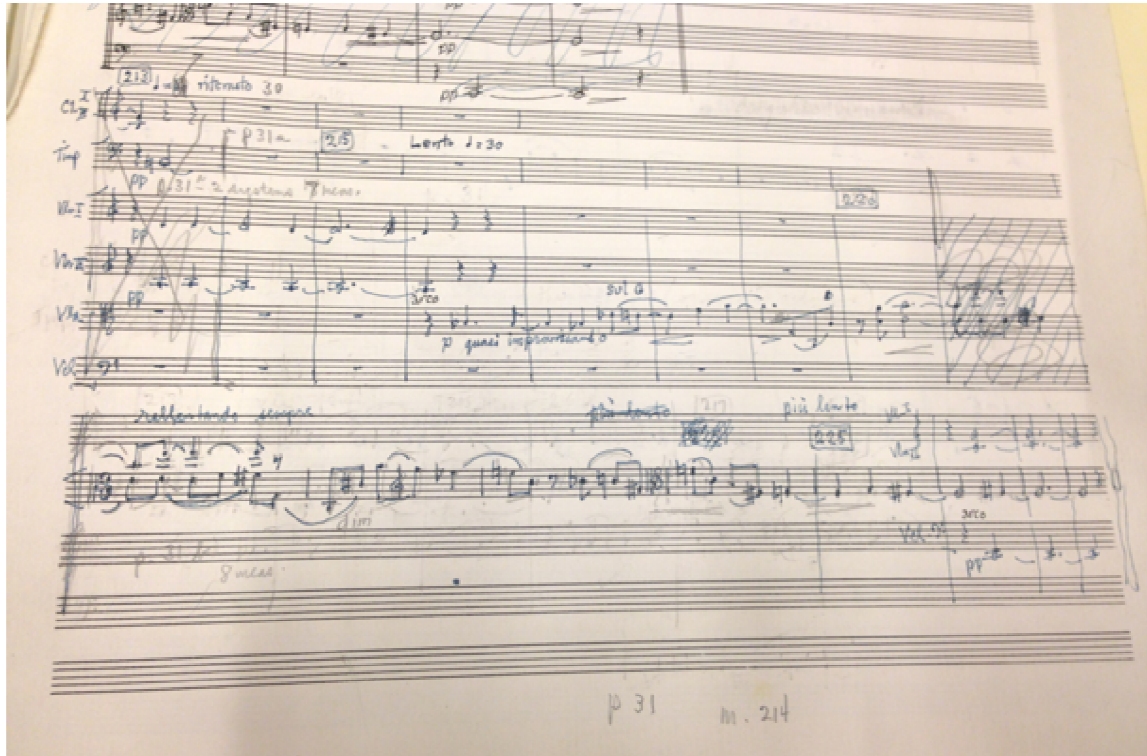
**Musical Example 14 Viola Solo Draft from the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Top of Page 31, m. 213-end, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a Viola Solo. The score is written on a page with measures 213 to 220. The tempo is marked 'ritenuto' and 'Lento'. The score includes staves for Viola (V.), Violin I (V. I.), Violin II (V. II.), Viola (V.), and Percussion (P.). The score is heavily annotated with blue ink, including 'quasi improvvisando' and 'quasi improvvisando'. The score is written in a draft style, with many corrections and changes. The tempo is marked 'ritenuto' and 'Lento'. The score includes staves for Viola (V.), Violin I (V. I.), Violin II (V. II.), Viola (V.), and Percussion (P.). The score is heavily annotated with blue ink, including 'quasi improvvisando' and 'quasi improvvisando'.

Below the original ten bar solo is an expanded thirteen bar solo written in pencil and overwritten with light black or faded blue pen. Bar lines are penned in draft fashion. Changes include augmented rhythms and altered double stops (compare Musical Example 15).



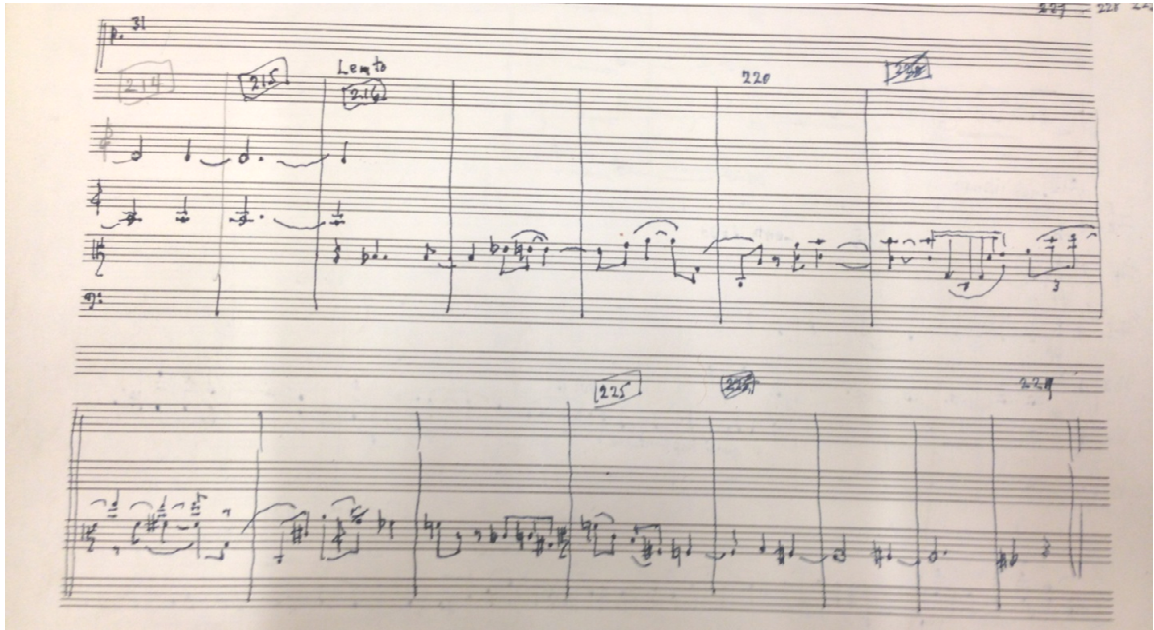
**Musical Example 15 Viola Solo Draft from the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Bottom of Page 31, m. 213-end, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



Page 31a yields two more solos. The solo at the bottom of the page is in faded black or blue ink and in sketchbook style writing.<sup>156</sup> It is thirteen bars and has bar lines marked for the other quartet parts but concludes as a solo, without the full quartet chord (Musical Example 16).

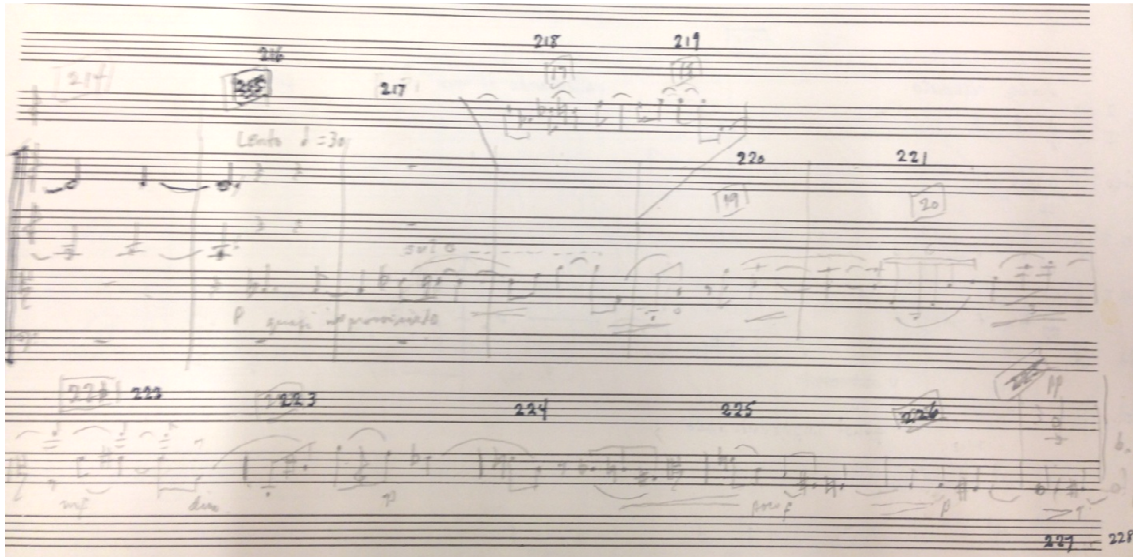
<sup>156</sup> Note that above where the inked music begins, *Musical Example 20*, it is labeled “p. 31” rather than “p. 31a” as it is at the top of the page, *Musical Example 21*. It is possible the penciled writing was a sketch for at least one of the others. The bars added in above the originally penciled staves may not be in the other thirteen bar phrases because they were not present at the time.

**Musical Example 16 Viola Solo Draft from the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Bottom of Page 31a, m. 214-end, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



The version closest to the published draft is the penciled solo with added bars at the top of page 31a (Musical Example 17). Here we find the complete melodic line of the solo, though the final three measures with the quartet are not present (most likely for lack of space). Performers should consider that “Sul G” is marked in three of the four versions, but not in the published score. It extends from beat two of measure 217 to the end of measure 219 in the closest version to the published score (the pencil version at the top of page 31a). The pencil version has “poco forte” written after the crescendo in measure 225. Another interesting change that was made for the published score is the F on beat three of measure 226, which is marked as an F# in two of the four draft versions. A mistake that was only made in the published version and not marked by Piston in the proofs is the sixteenth rest in measure 220, which should be an eighth rest.

**Musical Example 17 Viola Solo Draft from the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Top of Page 31a, m. 214-end, Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books**



In the draft of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*, we find the same type of care taken in the reworking of melody that Pollack saw in the clarinet melody from the “Adagio” of the Second Symphony. Many emphasize Piston’s technical compositional prowess in form and contrapuntal writing. As Piston remarked and examples of reworked single melodic lines reveal, however, he spent much time focusing on expression. The reworked melodic examples are not systematic intervallic calculations, but improvisational like writing based on intrinsic expression. Expression is found in labored detail in crafting the line and communicating timbre and precise intent with markings such as “Sul G” and “poco forte.” This type of detail was greatly appreciated by performers looking to bring out the composer’s intent. As Lantz

commented, Piston “was exactly what you hoped a composer would be” in that attention to the details performers needed to bring out the nature of the music were there.<sup>157</sup>

Once the drafts of pieces were complete, Piston received comb-bound proofs. In addition to their format and printing style (a photo-reproduction of his manuscript), proofs include blank staves. In the published score they are eliminated.<sup>158</sup> In the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* the proof, like the published score, has rehearsal cues every five measures. As with the structural rehearsal cues from the draft, the proof rehearsal cues are boxed and written in Piston’s hand.

Piston made corrections to proofs (and some drafts) by circling and/or rewriting the error and placing a note at the bottom of the page. The corrections to the proof of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* are not corrected in the published score. This is most likely due to the fact that Piston died in 1976, but Associated Music Publishers, Inc. did not publish the piece until 1978. See Table 1 for a list of errors based on the proof (excluding the eighth rest correction in the viola part of measure 220 mentioned previously).

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<sup>157</sup> Telephone conversation with Ron Lantz on December 30, 2013.

<sup>158</sup> Comparisons done at the Boston Public Library, Boston.

**Table 1 Errors in the 1978 Published Score of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston**

| Measure       | Instrument(s)      | Correction   |
|---------------|--------------------|--|
| <b>5</b>      | String Quartet     | Beat 6 should be tied  |
| <b>13</b>     | Oboe 1             | Last note is an E  |
| <b>22</b>     | Percussion         | Xylophone enters on forte  |
| <b>33</b>     | English Horn       | First note is a written G#   |
| <b>34</b>     | Flutes             | Missing a whole rest   |
| <b>37</b>     | Cello              | Last note in the measure is an eighth note   |
| <b>43</b>     | Cello              | Beat one is a C#   |
| <b>46</b>     | Woodwinds & Horn   | Woodwinds need an eighth rest for beat six, horn is missing a whole rest                                     |
| <b>49</b>     | Violin 1           | Beat four is an A $\flat$ (and ties into measure 50)   |
| <b>64</b>     | English Horn       | Last note in the measure is a written B natural  |
| <b>70</b>     | Clarinet 1         | Sixth eighth note is a G   |
| <b>76-7</b>   | Brass & Percussion | Measures are missing whole rests   |
| <b>78</b>     | Flutes & Oboes     | Last two notes are F and C   |
| <b>85</b>     | Trumpet 1          | Beat three is a written E natural  |
| <b>119-20</b> | String Quartet     | There should be eighth rests on beat 3 of measure 119 and beat 1 of measure 120 (replacing the quarter rest) |
| <b>179</b>    | Viola              | A flats should be marked   |

### Interaction with Performers

Piston was not a composer who extended his compositional process by giving performers verbal instruction on how to execute a work. Rather, he extended creative freedom to the performers and listeners. “I never like to tell a performer how my music should be played,” Piston is quoted. “I feel that way with listeners, too. They shouldn’t be told what a composer meant, they have a right to react. I like to think there’s a different interpretation for everyone.”<sup>159</sup>

Piston only revisited works to make major changes when he approved the request from an intended performer. Not including minor corrections and revisions, significant

<sup>159</sup> Johanna Seltz, “Walter H. Piston.”

alterations were made on three occasions. The largest revisions were made to his 1973 *Flute Concerto*. At the request of Doriot Anthony Dwyer, the flutist for which the concerto was written, Piston expanded the coda as well as the opening of the “Allegro.” Dwyer informed Pollack in a letter that she collaborated with Piston on some of the changes, stating “He sent the one version which was changed before he wrote it permanently, and I changed a few things once again, of which he approved. He also said I could make my own cadenza or add to his.”<sup>160</sup>

Pollack articulates that not all changes were made by Dwyer as “there are numerous refinements of a more minor sort throughout the entire ‘Allegro,’ including added orchestral parts that could not be the work of Dwyer.” Pollack identifies the other two pieces with changes as being the *Viola Concerto* and *Capriccio* and only at the request of the intended performers.<sup>161</sup> As Hangen noted, there were several alterations that needed to be made to the first *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* score he received, but an updated score sent in time for rehearsals did not need major revisions.

Minor changes were readily conceded by Piston at the request of the performers for the sake of artistic liberty. Lantz recalled the type of interaction Piston had with the Portland String Quartet while rehearsing the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. After playing the piece for Piston, the quartet inquired about some slight changes they had made to tempos. Piston was pleased with the

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<sup>160</sup> Doriot Anthony Dwyer in a letter to Howard Pollack, 12 July 1977 in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 158-9.

<sup>161</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 159-60.

liberties they had taken and responded, “Sounds great to me!” While metronome markings are specified in the piece, Piston explained that he often came up with them sitting at the piano and that they were “not exact.” Though Piston left a lot to interpretation, Lantz noted that he would make comments like, “a little more time here, a little livelier here.”<sup>162</sup>

In his interaction with performers, Piston let the music stand on its own. As Lantz articulated, the music was always treated as absolute music. Neither Piston nor the performers felt the need to associate it with stories or anecdotes to bring out the expressive qualities of each line. Extrinsic associations were not needed for the Portland String Quartet because of the care Piston took in the way he wrote evident in his compositional process. As Lantz stated, “Piston is very clear in the way he writes.” Only in one or two sections might the quartet talk about a feeling in a certain section to help unify the sound. This was not to say that the music was centered on structural or technical qualities, though. Lantz remarked that Piston’s music is “not just an abstract kind of disjunctive technical writing. It is about the line... even in the fast movements and especially in the slow movements.”<sup>163</sup>

### **Rate of Composition**

The rate at which Piston composed the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* is difficult to determine. There is no concrete evidence of exactly what he wrote at given times. An approximate rate must be ascertained from what we do know about his general compositional process, the rate at which he

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<sup>162</sup> Telephone conversation with Ron Lantz on December 30, 2013.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

historically composed works, and letters identifying when the work commenced, actually occurred, and was “in progress.”

We have seen that Piston’s typical compositional process involved the following: 1) presentation of a compositional challenge; 2) conception; 3) sketches; 4) work on a draft; 5) revisions of a proof; 6) discussion with performers. Depending on the piece, parts of the process might be omitted, such as discussion with the performers. We know the compositional challenge with duration, instrumentation, and performers were set by the summer of 1973 based on correspondences between Piston and Vermel.<sup>164</sup> According to Hangen, the piece was finalized prior to the rehearsals leading up to the premier, which took place on October 26, 1976.<sup>165</sup> A span of over three years to complete a piece is unprecedented by Piston and not an accurate reflection of his rate as we know he had several setbacks preventing him from composing during certain periods.

Another way to help determine his rate of composition, then, is to identify how Piston worked historically. Pollack comments, Piston “would often joke that it would take him one hour to decide upon a note, and another hour to decide to erase it.” While composing the *Prelude and Fugue for Orchestra* on August 31, 1934, Piston wrote to Claire Reis, chairman of the League of Composers, that he was “a very slow composer”.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Correspondences between Walter Piston and Paul Vermel during the summer of 1973 in the Walter Piston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston.

<sup>165</sup> Email from Bruce Hangen to the author, 25 June 2013.

<sup>166</sup> Walter Piston in a letter to Claire Reis, 31 August 1934 in Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 38-40.



Though Piston considered himself a “slow composer,” Pollack notes that *The Incredible Flutist*, a full ballet score, was composed in months.<sup>167</sup> Piston composed *The Incredible Flutist* “section by section, making arrangements for piano four-hands, and recording them with Fiedler for Wiener’s use in rehearsal.” This process was part of collaboration between the musicians, dancers, and set and costume designers to assure the ballet could be rehearsed and ready for the premier on May 30, 1938.<sup>168</sup> An interview for a local newspaper years after the composition states that Piston “had worked many late nights during the winter of 1938 finishing the music for ‘The Incredible Flutist,’ giving it to the copyist page by page.”<sup>169</sup>

In fact, many of Piston’s compositions were completed within a season. *The Incredible Flutist* was written during the winter “at a small desk before a window” in Belmont, MA, but as Pollack notes, “he did most of his composing during the summer months” in Woodstock, VT.<sup>170</sup> In 1974, journalist Johanna Seltz described his summer

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<sup>167</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 177.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>169</sup> “An Interview with Walter Piston,” newspaper clipping found in the Walter Piston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston. The article is based on an interview with “Mrs. Samuel L. Powers of the Music Committee and Gretchen Hildebrand, oboist with GBYSO,” the Greater Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra, now the Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra (BYSO).

<sup>170</sup> “An Interview with Walter Piston,” Howard Pollack. “Piston, Walter.” *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed July 9, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mutex.gmu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/21851>.

cottage studio as “filled with piano and paper.”<sup>171</sup> His oeuvre of large works itself testifies to his work ethic and speed.

The *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* was not composed in a single season, but also did not take the three years to write (from instrumentation being set to the premier). Letters provide a little insight into his creative periods.

During the summer of 1973, the work commenced. He definitely worked on the piece while in the hospital in late March of 1974 and continued over the summer at his Vermont home. Piston was asked in August 1974 if he would keep composing, to which he replied, “Will I keep composing? Of course, I can’t stop. I was just in the hospital for a broken hip and I heard someone whisper outside my door—there’s a man in there writing music.”<sup>172</sup> By October 1974, though, the work was “moving slowly” and a postponement was requested.

At least through May 1975, no major progress on the concerto is indicated. The next word of progress is not heard until January 1976, when Piston stated that the work was “nearing completion.” By May 1976 it was complete according to the letter from Piston to Thorndike.<sup>173</sup> The total time of “work” on the concerto as described by Piston, appears to be a little over a year based on this information.

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<sup>171</sup> Johanna Seltz, “Walter H. Piston.” Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 10, notes that while he had a Steinway grand piano in Belmont, ME, he kept a Kranich and Bach in Woodstock, VT.

<sup>172</sup> Johanna Seltz, “Walter H. Piston.”

<sup>173</sup> Letters to and from Walter Piston in the Walter Piston Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston. For detailed information on these letters, see the chapter in this paper titled “History.”

**Purpose**

Upon deconstructing Piston's compositional process, we find that deliberate decisions were made at every step. Piston was practical about everything from instrumentation considerations to balancing those instruments. He meticulously wrote in a fashion that needed no clarification or extrinsic inspiration by those performing his works. When he interacted with performers, the focus was on them making music. These deliberate decisions were not made with repurposing traditional forms in a neoclassical style, exercising contrapuntal technique, nor being part of any doctrinaire movement in mind. The care in calculation was made with the intent of a successful musical performance. Though the lengths Piston went through in his compositional process to ensure the music stood on its own and needed no labels, the one he used is perhaps most appropriate. The music of Walter Piston is "expressive."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Edwin Safford, "He keeps a diminishing art very alive and very well," *The Providence Journal* (Providence, RI), 17 November 1968.

## ANALYSIS

Over his career Piston earned the reputation as a craftsman, a classicist, and an academic. The reputation was well founded as Piston had a vast understanding of compositional techniques evident in his teachings, textbooks, articles, sketchbooks, and compositions. His approach to music was thoughtful and well-educated. In his late phase, Piston maintained his thoughtful and well-educated approach, but strove to produce a newly constructed unfolding of sounds and emphasized a focus on expression in his music.

Not only do we find expressive intent upon studying his compositional process, but in analyzing the product itself. While others conceived of Piston attempting to strike a balance between form and expression, Piston viewed form as the vehicle for the expression of an artist. In his late phase, Piston's artistry extended beyond the ability to manipulate musical material within a given form to the ability to manipulate ideas of form.

The *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* is the final artistic statement of Walter Piston. It is the culmination of ideas about the purpose of form initiated in the late phase and ideals of artistic expression sought throughout his life as a composer. It is the experienced, unbridled, artistic voice of an octogenarian expanding his technique, even in his final years, and in doing so expanding the breadth of

his expression. His final expressive achievement and the techniques used to create it deserve careful analysis.

### **The Late Phase**

An understanding of the thought progression on form through study of the late phase concertos helps in understanding the attainment of Piston's artistic goals in the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. The shift in thought from movement-based traditional structures to what he considered "variation" of musical ideas given shape by sectional writing is demonstrated in his pieces and confirmed by quotes from the composer. Upon writing the *Cello Variations*, he decided that "the idea of movements is a bit hackneyed."<sup>175</sup> As previously described, his thoughts of variations consisted of ideas growing out of one another. In addition to what we know about Piston's cognitive process for shaping this piece from his own word, he also penned double bars throughout the piece to mark the variations. Descriptive tempo, style, and metronome markings also help to distinguish the variations in the score and audibly.

Pollack notes that cases may be made for double bar sections being broken in two based on styles and tempi. Arguments could thus be made for six, seven, or eight variations. Even with minor discrepancies analysts may have about the specific number of variations, a clear structure organizes the piece that, as Pollack describes, "has an improvisatory quality—sometimes tentative, sometimes impulsive."

While the title ("*Variations*") and double barlines distinguishing sections indicate Piston again returning to a classic form, Piston's interview with Westergaad proves that

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<sup>175</sup> Piston and Westergaad, "Conversation," 13.

the thought process for the piece is centered on the term form being a verb rather than a noun. The form was an act of self-propelled creation, not the repurposing of a shell for new musical content. The *Cello Variations* marked the beginning of the mindset that eventually led to the creation of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*.

With the success of the *Cello Variations*, Piston continued to experiment with the fluid concept of “variation,” though reverted to familiar formal models. In the *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra*, four variations frame a more accessibly structured, less improvisatory-like piece. Sections of the *Clarinet Concerto* contain “clear-cut ABA design, except for the binary, and more complex, ‘Assai lento.’”<sup>176</sup> This would be the last time Piston reverted to the familiar formal models.

Piston continued to distance himself from convention and strived to advance his writing in his next concerto. According to Michael Steinberg, Piston stated that the *Violin Fantasia* would “not be a full-dress concerto.” Steinberg quotes Piston, “That three-movement thing is too stereotyped now.” Though written in a similar style to the *Cello Variations*, Piston was attempting to expand his artistic boundaries. He noted of the piece that there was a “danger of repeating yourself. I always want to do something new, at least for my own sake.”<sup>177</sup>

His answer to the stereotyped “three-movement thing” was the same sectional one-movement style structure he settled on for the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind*

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<sup>176</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 149-51.

<sup>177</sup> Michael Steinberg, “Composer Turned from Composing to Music,” *Boston Globe* (Boston), 19 January 1969. In typical Piston humility, he concluded, “But you know, it always comes out the same old Piston.”

*Instruments and Percussion.* The program notes from the *Violin Fantasia* list the tempo markings for the piece as movements would be listed, only with no numerals:

*Lento sereno*                      *Allegro*                      *Adagio*  
*Allegro energico*                      *Lento*  
(Played without interruption)

The author of the program notes describes the form as follows:

The work is in one movement, divided into several sections. A quiet *lento sereno* opening in the orchestra prepares the way for the first calm solo entry after which the textures thicken into an *allegro* section. A craggy orchestral interlude then leads to a solo violin cadenza signaled by timpani. This is succeeded by a dark *adagio* section which is swept away by triplets in the strings into an aggressive *allegro energico*. Finally, the *lento* of the opening returns for a musing end.<sup>178</sup>

Pollack writes that the “five sections not only form a slow-fast-slow-fast-slow arch, but are themselves arched, and may be thought of as a set of variations.”<sup>179</sup> Piston did not discard all notions of traditional form, as classic concerto features such as the cadenza were maintained, but created a new style of concerto form in the context of his late phase philosophies.

In his penultimate concerto, Piston wrote just three continuous sections (this time identifying them as movements though they follow the same formal principle as the previous “sectional” concertos). While ternary shapes within the sections help to make the piece cohesive, Piston again achieved new sound and expressive means. In an interview with the *Boston Globe* he said, “It’s the same old Piston, which means that it’s mine but that everything I do is a new experience for me. There are new sounds in the

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<sup>178</sup> Program notes, *The Dartmouth Symphony Orchestra*, Dartmouth College, 11 March 1973.

<sup>179</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 156.

piece. I made progress.”<sup>180</sup> Pollack likens the sounds by section as “a recitative, aria, and cabaletta” with connections as “certain elements romantically interweave throughout the whole” work.<sup>181</sup>

Piston himself hinted at the form, but was tentative about influencing performers and listeners with too much verbiage. He explained, “All I can say is that it’s a three-movement piece. There is one movement which is an exercise in growth controlled by design, but I can’t explain how the work should be performed or what the music is about.” He stopped there, the interviewer summarizing Piston’s belief that “his ideas about the piece are now ‘irrelevant,’ because once a work is finished it is no longer his.”<sup>182</sup>

Be it his own variation design distinguished by barlines, as in the *Cello Variations*, or symmetrical ABA and arch structures, as in the *Violin Fantasia*, Piston’s attention to form is apparent. Piston, however, did not want people to overlook the intent in his music because of the form. At the onset of his late period he was asked about labeling his music neoclassic. Edwin Stafford reports, “Walter Piston’s music has frequently been called neo-classic for its formal, exceptionally developed structure. He firmly disclaims the label—‘A term invented by critics. . .’”<sup>183</sup>

Piston viewed that too great a focus on structural elements of his music detracted from his expressive intent. Safford questioned Piston about what William Austin wrote

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<sup>180</sup> “BSO to premier new flute concerto,” *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), 23 September 1972.

<sup>181</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 158.

<sup>182</sup> “BSO to premier new flute concerto.”

<sup>183</sup> Edwin Safford, “He keeps a diminishing art very alive and very well,” *The Providence Journal* (Providence, RI), 17 November 1968.



in *Music in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, “when pressed [Piston] defined his goal as ‘the perfect balance between expression and form.’” Piston responded to Safford, “That sounds like baloney, one of those statements they force you to make. What I was trying to get in there was one word, ‘expression.’ It’s only fairly recently people discovered my music was expressive.”<sup>184</sup>

A focus on movement and section titles, as well as tempo and expressive marks provides a broader insight into the music than analyzing the form alone. Piston took great care in labeling movements in order to bring out his intended expressions. He explained the movements of the Fourth Symphony to Safford, “Piacevole”—“it does not mean peaceful but pleasing”—“Ballando”—“That means dancing, and it should be played that way.” Other movements are labeled “Contemplativo” and “Energico.”<sup>185</sup>

Piston resisted labels such as neoclassicism and the need to justify his piece according to them. He is quoted in his late phase, “The worst thing today is subjugation of the individual. In all ways. In music, I think a composer should compose in any style that pleases him, and that’s where I part company with my students. They were getting awfully doctrinaire. . .”<sup>186</sup>

## **Form**

With his vast writing experience, forming ideas of sectional variations in different guises, striving for newness in each work, and repudiating his “doctrinaire” students, Piston wrote his final work, the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and*

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Steinberg, “Composer turned from painting.”

*Percussion*. Sections are vague because they are not separated by barlines, easily accessible forms, or clearly defined symmetry. They must be identified rather by their expressive intent defined by tempi, articulations, and expression marks. Piston alluded to the piece being a set of variations, but the term had been redefined in theory through his interviews and in practice through his late phase concertos.

The structure was not obvious to Brown, so he contacted Piston before the premier. In the program notes, he informs concert goers that “a concerto for string quartet is a rare form, and such a new one presented problems for this annotator; so a telephone call to the composer proved to be the answer.” Based on the phone call to Piston, Brown wrote:

The concert is in one eighteen-minute movement, but it utilizes the trio sonata concept of fast-slow-fast movements (in this case, connected sections with coda). However, it is a genuine *concerto*, not a *concerto grosso*. It has strong contrasts, mixed meters (5/8, 6/8, etc.), *fuoco* passages, a very slow section (marked  $d=30$ ), and a short viola cadenza at the end. When asked about the formal construction, Piston replied, “It’s a set of variations, in a way, with the themes growing out of one another.”<sup>187</sup>

Pollack writes that the structure of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* is a combined “sectional and variation form.”<sup>188</sup> He divides the piece into “five variations, which form a fast-slow-fast-slow-fast design, cover a broad range of feeling: the first is madcap; the second is melancholy and nostalgic; the third is witty; the

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<sup>187</sup> Brown, *Program Notes*, 34.

<sup>188</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 163.

fourth is contemplative; and the fifth is marchlike and festive.”<sup>189</sup> Thornton simply describes the piece as “a series of fascinating and subtle variations.”<sup>190</sup>

Rehearsal cues for the quartet were indicated on the title page of the manuscript draft, where Piston was working out the quartet page turns. The rehearsal cues provide some insight as to where “the themes growing out of one another” begin to grow in new directions. Measure numbers for the rehearsal cues are 19, 34, 47, 70, 132, and 204. The rehearsal cues mark significant structural points. An analysis of the structural points reveals Piston’s genius in forming a fluid, expressive, and cohesive piece without being systematic.

Table 2 is a broad outline of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. The table contains basic information such measure numbers (M.), tempos, translations of the tempos, and metronome marks (M.M.). Based on his description of the piece, which did not include measure numbers, Pollack’s terminology is included alongside summaries of events where Piston indicated quartet rehearsal cues. Section (Sect.) and subsection (Sub.) labels by the author are included as general guideposts.

The subsections with a “prime” affixed indicate stronger connections with their non-prime relatives than the other sections, but are by no means literal repetitions. Subsection “a” and “a prime,” for example, are textural inversions by timbre and contain similar rhythms and motions, but the pitch content is different. Though the connections may be slight, enough referencing material is there to relate the prime sections.

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Thornton, “Symphony Opener.”

Table 2 Form Considerations in the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston

| M.  | Tempo            | Translation                     | M.M.             | Pollack Label                   | Piston Rehearsal Cue                                     | Sect. | Sub.           |
|-----|------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|--|-------|----------------|
| 1   | con fuoco        | with fire                       | $\text{♩} = 96$  | madcap                          |  | A     | a              |
| 19  |                  |                                 |                  |                                 | Resembles opening, inverted texture                      |       | a <sub>1</sub> |
| 34  |                  |                                 |                  |                                 | Sequence, layering, transitional                         |       | b              |
| 47  | lento            | a slow tempo                    | $\text{♩} = 30$  | melancholy & nostalgic          | Vln solo, Fl solo supported by fragments, quartet mirror | B     | c              |
| 58  | poco più mosso   | a bit more moved                | $\text{♩} = 54$  |                                 |  |       | d              |
| 70  | tornado al tempo | returning to the tempo          |                  |                                 | Return to c, like solo vln only                          |       | c <sub>1</sub> |
| 73  | lento            | a slow tempo                    | $\text{♩} = 30$  |                                 |  |       |                |
| 79  |                  |                                 | $\text{♩} = 80$  | witty                           |  | C     |                |
| 132 |                  |                                 |                  |                                 | String quartet cadenza                                   | D     |                |
| 137 | ritenuto subito  | suddenly held back              | $\text{♩} = 76$  | contemplative                   |  |       |                |
| 145 | con fuoco        | with fire                       | $\text{♩} = 96$  |                                 |  |       |                |
| 160 | lento            | a slow tempo                    | $\text{♩} = 30$  |                                 |  |       |                |
| 171 | allegro energico | a fast, lively tempo with vigor | $\text{♩} = 104$ | marchlike & festive             |  | E     |                |
| 204 | tenuto           | held, sustained                 | $\text{♩} = 76$  |                                 | Climax, breakdown into viola cadenza                     |       |                |
| 216 | lento            | a slow tempo                    | $\text{♩} = 30$  | simple, poignant, & bittersweet |  | Coda  |                |

The “A” section consists of the first forty-six bars. Pollack designated it the “madcap” section. With the help of Piston’s rehearsal marks, we find a vague “a, a prime, b,” form where “b” serves as a transition into the next major section.

Beginning at the first rehearsal cue Piston establishes cohesiveness, yet implements his philosophy of variation. The first two bars of measure 19 are exactly like the opening. When the string quartet enters in the third bar (again on the second beat) variation begins. The quartet no longer is in parallel octaves and fourths, but the voices still continue in similar motion. “Vigorous” staccato eighths played by the quartet resemble the wind instrument writing from the opening, rather than the legato lines and slurs found in the opening quartet parts. Though the intervallic content is different, the shapes of the quartet lines also resemble the opening wind instrument writing.

Divisi oboes and clarinets are comparable to the opening quartet writing in the sixth bar (measure 24) of the variation. They are joined a few bars later by more wind instruments playing legato and slurred in unison rhythm. A textural inversion by timbral means is the result. Compare measures 7-10 in Musical Example 18 with measures 26-29 in Musical Example 19. In these bars the rhythms, articulations, and melodic shapes are exchanged between the wind instruments and the quartet. Rather than using literal repetition, Piston not only exchanged the voices for new expressive potential but varied their content for the sake of interest and fluidity.

[illegible]

**Musical Example 19** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston,  
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**con fuoco** ♩ = 96 (♩ = ♩ sempre)

27 28 29

Piccolo

Flute I  
II

Oboe I  
II

English Horn

Clarinet in B $\flat$  I  
II

Bass Clarinet  
in B $\flat$

Bassoon I  
II

Horn in F I  
II

Trumpet in B $\flat$  I  
II

Trombone I  
II

Timpani I  
II

Trgl.

Tamb.

Percussion  
4 players

susp. Cym.

**con fuoco** ♩ = 96 (♩ = ♩ sempre)

Solo Violin I

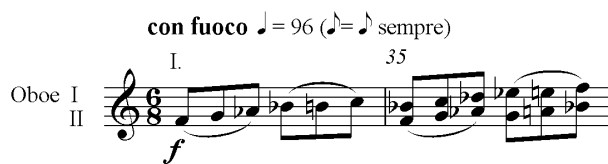
Solo Violin II

Solo Viola

Solo Violoncello

Transitions were essential to allowing Piston to maintain a fluid, one movement form, without needing to break the sections into separate movements. The first transition begins in measure 34 where the instrumentation thins from a large ensemble to a solo violin, dynamics diminish from forte to pianissimo, and the tempo retards by sixty-six beats per minute to measure 47. Piston used two techniques for transition, sequence (Musical Example 20) and imitative counterpoint (Musical Example 21).

**Musical Example 20** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Oboes, m. 34-5. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.



**Musical Example 21** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Violins, m. 36-7. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

While Piston had moved away from the “stereotyped” multimovement form, he applied many of the principles to his late sectional writing phase that he had in his movement-based writing previous phases. The second section is similar to many of his



second movements in how it contrasts the previous section in tempo, style, dynamic, and density. It is cited as being “melancholy and nostalgic” by Pollack.

Lento at thirty beats per minute, the “B” section is the only one Piston used the indicator “espressivo.” The three places he marked *espressivo*, measures 48, 65, and 73, are of formal interest for the melodic and harmonic treatments by Piston, giving formal weight to his expressive intent. Beginning in measure 48, a solo melody in the violin is supported by fragmented chromatic echoes in the other quartet parts. In measure 57, the expressive line is passed to a solo flute as the violin joins the accompanimental role with the quartet. The second place Piston marked *espressivo* is measure 65, where the two violins pair in parallel fourths for two measures, supported by an inversion of the same melody paired in parallel fourths by the viola and cello (Musical Example 22).

**Musical Example 22** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, String Quartet, m. 65-6. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

The musical score for measures 65-66 of the String Quartet by Walter Piston is presented for four parts: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The tempo is marked *lento* with a quarter note equal to 30 beats per minute. The key signature has one flat (B-flat major or D minor), and the time signature is 4/4. Measure 65 begins with a rest for all parts, followed by a melodic line in Violin I. Measures 65-66 show the two violins playing in parallel fourths, while the viola and cello play an inverted version of the same melody. Dynamics are marked *mp espr.* at the start of measure 65, *mf* at the start of measure 66, and *cresc.* at the end of measure 66. The score includes slurs, ties, and crescendo/decrescendo hairpins.

The final *espressivo* marking is found where the solo violin melody of measure 48 is quoted in the first violin and viola parts in measure 73 (Musical Example 23). With great insight into Piston’s intent with such a section, Julia Adams recalled how the quartet “emphasized the lyricism that is so frequently the essential contrast in [Piston’s] formal constructs.”<sup>191</sup>

**Musical Example 23** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, String Quartet, m. 73. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

lento ♩ = 30

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

In addition to the lyricism Adams wrote of, Piston also used rhythm and articulation in order to achieve contrast without separating movements. While Piston did not mark it as a rehearsal cue, a new direction with the variations is clearly audible as the “C” section. Pollack simply termed it “witty.” Associations with the “a prime” subsection of “A” may be made. The quartet plays staccato eighths and sixteenths almost exclusively throughout the section, occasionally intertwining arco and pizzicato. When

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<sup>191</sup> Email from Julia Adams to the author dated January 2, 2014.

they are not imitating the quartet, the wind instruments often play accented quarters or legato eighth runs to contrast the quartet. The expressive possibilities of these articulate and rhythmic interactions should be emphasized to bring out Piston's intent. As Adams wrote, "Dr. Piston heard in our playing a genuine enthusiasm for his music. We like the rhythmic vitality, but did not approach it percussively as some players might (a great disservice in my opinion)." <sup>192</sup>

Similar to the *Violin Fantasia*, Piston retained a cadenza for the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* from traditional concerto form. The "D" section is a string quartet cadenza, extending almost forty bars. Several aspects of the cadenza can be compared with a traditional cadenza. The wind instruments and percussion hold a cluster chord, trilling at first, for the first five bars (measures 132-6). Not only does the last two bars of the sustained sonority recall the opening bars of the piece with stacked fourths and fifths by instrument, staccato eighth/eighth rest rhythms, and full instrumentation, the chord perhaps serves as a dominant functioning setup for the cadenza that follows.

The cadenza-like passage is both a microcosm of string quartet writing technique and a recollection of past musical events in the concerto ("contemplative" according to Pollack). Various bow and articulation styles are included such as multiple down bows, marcato, legato, staccato, slurs, slurred staccato, and pizzicato. Rolled chords, trills in various registers, and exaggerated dynamics in extended registers (i.e. the pianissimo at the end of a diminuendo run up to the G#6 in measure 164 of the first violin) showcase

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

Piston's knowledge of writing for such an ensemble. Performing unisons and imitative counterpoint well, matching bow styles precisely, subtle and extreme changes in dynamics, as well as gradual and abrupt changes in tempo are required to play the piece, communication techniques an established string quartet masters.

Recollections of past musical content from the concerto are found throughout the cadenza-like passage. A "con fuoco" passage beginning in measure 145 recalls the opening of the piece. Sudden shifts between pizzicato and staccato arco allude to the "C" section. The "lento" in measure 160, featuring the solo first violin with fragmented accompaniment, is a nod to the violin solo of measure 48. Piston penciled in "nuances (see [48](#))" beneath the quartet staves on the manuscript draft of the score, confirming the connection. The voices of the quartet are united in octaves for the last measure of the cadenza, a stringendo to the final section with full ensemble.

Rather than using a ternary form and returning to the "A" section after the cadenza, however, Piston uses the full forces of the ensemble to setup his final expressive statement. The "E" section beginning in measure 171 may be characterized for its lack of counterpoint. Voices are typically homorhythmic in unisons, fourths, or fifths. The resulting transparent texture to be performed "allegro energico" is what Pollack describes as "marchlike and festive."

The brass is featured more prominently in this section than in the others, notably the climactic measures 204-11. An aggressive climb with accented sequence begins on the lowest strings of the viola and cello in measure 190. The rest of the quartet and then larger ensemble join the ascent. Finally after hearing extended registers reached by the

woodwinds and strings in measure 203, the fortissimo featured brass sound. The section is soon brought to a close once the quartet joins the brass, however, and a diminuendo and trattenuto terminate the section.

The final statement of the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* is arresting. Symmetry of sections, large ensemble contrasts, support from the quartet, and momentum diminish to a halt. The form concludes with an unforeseen coda.

Piston achieved the “most perfect and the most profound” symmetrical arch in his *Violin Fantasia*. When asked to adjust the coda of the *Flute Concerto*, he adjusted the opening “Allegro” to ensure the symmetry of the piece. The *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* follows a “fast-slow-fast-slow-fast” sectional design.<sup>193</sup> The lento coda breaks the symmetrical trend of movements in his last few concertos.

A solo viola, not in counterpoint to a larger ensemble and not accompanied by the other members of the quartet, makes the “final statement.” Evident from Piston’s compositional process according to the manuscript draft, the viola cadenza was the last section composed. It was reworked numerous times, a source of great importance for Piston.

In breaking from his established form and symmetry, Piston emphasized the expressiveness of his music in his final piece. There is a “quasi improvvisando” marking by Piston beneath the solo indicating ownership that should be taken by the performer

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<sup>193</sup> Pollack, *Walter Piston*, 156.

perhaps because Piston believed “once a work is finished it is no longer his.”<sup>194</sup> Adams confirmed this sentiment, recalling:

...we played and he listened. I believe he wanted the music to speak for itself. He was more interested in our response to it than in his control of the performance. It was as if his work was done and now it was in our hands. This is quite a unique approach – and much appreciated by performers. He respected that.<sup>195</sup>

Audience members respected his final expressive statement with a moment of silence upon the conclusion of the premier. Though Piston would not share his reasons for concluding the piece with the viola cadenza, Adams wrote:

Piston's choice of the viola is so well suited to express what I call a "human register" - a "common voice". I specifically asked Dr. Piston about the meaning of this closing statement when the PSQ visited him at his home as we were preparing this work. But he would not give me his opinion. I accepted that as his gift to the interpreter - to give maximum freedom of expression to the player. That seemed to me to be a guiding principle for him in general. In this place, I do not see an alternative. It is likely that at his age he was summing up life experiences and specifically chose to close quietly, ever slowly and moving poignantly up a half step from F natural to F sharp at the very end. This is one thing that the PSQ did not debate - since it was in my hands and they respected that. But the music itself seems quite clear.<sup>196</sup>

## **Melody**

Piston took great care in fashioning his melodies. His compositional process included reworking melodies, as Pollack points out about the clarinet melody from the “Adagio” of the Second Symphony based on the sketchbooks. We also find the selection and ordering of twelve-tone rows in the sketchbooks as well as twelve-tone procedures applied to extended rows. In his *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and*

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<sup>194</sup> “BSO to premier new flute concerto.”

<sup>195</sup> Email from Julia Adams to the author dated January 2, 2014.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

*Percussion* melodies, evidence suggests they were crafted from an intuitive approach based on over fifty years of writing experience, rather than a system. Any of the melodies from the concerto could easily be substituted into the chapter on writing quality melodies from his *Counterpoint* book.

Four melodies in the concerto of great interest for their placement, prominence, and relationships are analyzed here. The four include the viola cadenza, violin solo at measure 48, violin solo at measure 160, and opening quartet statement. They are analyzed in terms of their pitch contour and intervallic trends.

Musical Example 24 is the viola cadenza. It is the “final statement” by Piston (identified as such by Moseley), what listeners are left with at the conclusion of the piece. The cadenza is also the only unaccompanied melody in the entire piece. From the manuscript draft, we know Piston spent a great deal of time on it as there are five versions. Extensive use of an augmented unison/minor second characterizes the melody and is one of the germs indicative of melodic material throughout the piece. Adams stated that “the idea of dissonance and resolution seems to me to be the overwhelming emotional/musical statement in the concluding viola solo.”<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Email from Julia Adams to the author dated January 2, 2014.

**Musical Example 24** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Viola, m. 216-30. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

Viola

*Lento* ♩ = 30

*p* *quasi improvvisando*

*rallentando sempre*

*più lento*

*dim.*

*pp*

A fairly symmetrical broad curve extends from the initial B $\flat$ 3 to an F5 (measure 223) and back to an F $\sharp$ 3. Steps and skips are generally balanced. Pitch and intervallic analyses reveal no row treatment. This is confirmed by the varying pitch contents of sketches in the manuscript draft (see Musical Examples 14-17). There are, however, intervallic trends which reveal relationships with other melodies and sequencing in the piece. The ascending motion in measure 217, a perfect fourth followed by an augmented unison, is reiterated in measure 218. The same intervals are found sequenced four times in descending motion in measures 224-5, the fall from the climax to the lowest note of the melody.

Notice the first three notes of measure 225 create a falling fourth and a falling minor second rather than a falling augmented unison. A differentiation between intervals based on enharmonic note names is not necessary in analyzing music by Piston, unless the focus is on his approach to the psychology of reading music. He states:

In a contemporary idiom, such as twelve-tone music, for example, his judgment of intonation being based on tonal feeling, the average string or wind player will



either be quite lost, or he will unwittingly contribute a sense of major-minor tonality foreign to the intent of the music. Even in music less contemporary in language, if tonal aspects are not readily discernible, extra rehearsing and study become necessary, and complaints are voiced that the music is written in a needlessly complex way. “Why write F-flat? That’s E.” And double sharps are often changed to their enharmonic equivalents, by editors as well as performers.<sup>198</sup>

Perfect fifths and octaves are also noteworthy in the melody. When used melodically, they are exclusively found on the pitches G and C. This occurs in the melodic scoops of measures 219-20, 221, and 222-3. G3 and C3 fall on open strings, showcasing the full range of the instrument and allowing more fingering/timbral options. The exclusive use of G and C for perfect fifths and octaves, and only in the context of an accompanimental style scoop, becomes more interesting when the final chord is considered. The viola cadences with a chromatic turn on F#3. When the other voices of the string quartet join in, they play C3, C4, and G5.

The violin melody beginning in measure 48 introduces the “B” section. The opening motif recurs with structural implications two more times in the piece. The melody is briefly quoted in measure 73 by the first violin and viola, and is referenced by Piston (“nuances (see 48)”) below measure 160 in the manuscript draft. It consists predominantly of skips, making it angular with three peaks. With few exceptions, the steps are minor seconds/augmented unisons, again characteristic of melodic germs throughout the piece. In measures 48, 49-50, 50, and 54 the falling half steps are emphasized rhythmically with dotted quarter/eighth slurs. The entire measure 48 is

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<sup>198</sup> Walter Piston, “Problems of Intonation in Contemporary Music,” in *Instrumental Music: A Convergence at Isham Memorial Library Harvard University May 4, 1957*, ed. David G. Hughes (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 74.

transposed up a perfect fourth (with enharmonic spellings) at measure 54, the final peak, as well as measure 73, where it is transposed down one and two octaves for the return of the *lento* in the “B” section.

**Musical Example 25** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Violin I, m. 48-57. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

Piston noted that the melody in measure 160 was like that of 48, but with “nuances.” An analysis of the melody at measure 160 in comparison to 48 helps reveal his idea of melodic variation. While both melodies begin with the same three pitches, their pitch contents differ dramatically afterwards. Principles of the phrases, however, may be related. The melody at measure 160 consists predominantly of skips making its contour angular like the melody at 48, only with four peaks in just five bars. With few exceptions, the steps are again minor seconds/augmented unisons. Longer note values at the peaks emphasize the falling half step germ. The opening germ of 160 is transposed up a perfect fourth (with enharmonic spellings) by measure 165. “Nuances” also include rhythmic changes such as the addition of quintuplets, sixteenths, triplets, and a trill.

**Musical Example 26** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Violin I, m. 160-5. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

Violin I

Lento ♩ = 30

160 161 162 163 164 165

*p* *p* *p* *cresc.* *mf* *dim.* *pp*

The opening string quartet melody, to be played “with fire” (*con fuoco*), has the important roles of presenting a forged string quartet timbre and introducing the half step germ as a melodic device upon its opening. In measure 3, the quartet is introduced as a united sound against the larger ensemble in contrast to a concerto grosso sound where the quartets are an extension of their sections and the larger ensemble. The opening melody is therefore best understood when presented in all four voices of the string quartet. With a few exceptions, voices are in interlocked parallel octaves and fourths across the quartet. The parallel motion sonority, which is in rhythmic and stylistic counterpoint against the rest of the ensemble, establishes what may be deemed a string quartet timbre. While the parts are played by separate instruments, they combine to form a united and distinguished voice (Musical Example 27).

**Musical Example 27** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, String Quartet, m. 3-6. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

**Con fuoco** ♩ = 96 (♩ = ♩ sempre)

The musical score is for a string quartet, measures 3 through 10. It is written for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The tempo is 'Con fuoco' with a quarter note equal to 96 beats per minute. The time signature is 5/8. Measures 3-6 are marked with a forte 'f' dynamic and feature a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. Measures 7-10 show a chromatic ascent in all parts, with dynamics increasing from 'cresc.' to 'più f'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Even with the exceptions to the parallel fourths and octaves, a general phrase contour is maintained. Looking at the first violin and viola parts, we find an octave ascent from the first note in measure 3 to the peak in measure 9. Piston emphasizes the climax by altering the second violin and cello part from parallel fourths to create a chromatic run up to the major sevenths (an inverted minor second) sonority of measure 9. Predominantly stepwise motion makes for a smooth curve. Stepwise motion is

emphasized with slurs, while most skips are given separate bowings (also facilitating the technique of the performers).

### **Harmony**

Piston employed several harmonic devices in the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. The harmonic devices used are not new to his compositional vocabulary, but are familiar practices found in much of his oeuvre. In the concerto Piston often used fourths, wrote in parallel motion to strengthen and add sonic depth to lines, harmonized melodies by using fragments from the melody in layers, penned imitative counterpoint, inverted melodies for harmony, and created cluster chords for blocks of sound.

Perfect fourths are found in all sections of the piece. The opening sonority is a cluster chord, but when two of an instrument sound in harmony (i.e. first and second flute), they are paired in fourths. The string quartet melody starting in measure 3 is largely in fourths. Many lines are harmonized at first with parallel fourths, such as the first three beats of sequenced measures 34 and 35 (Musical Example 28), the entrance of the winds and horns in measures 102-4 (Musical Example 29) in stylistic counterpoint to the quartet just as the quartet was to the larger ensemble in the opening, and the chromatic ascent in measures 126-8 to the larger ensemble chords which “overtake” the quartet before their cadenza. The climax of the piece takes place when a unison ascent in the woodwinds and quartet crescendo to the fortissimo trumpet call in fourths at measure 204 (Musical Example 30).

**Musical Example 28** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Clarinets, m. 34-5. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

**con fuoco**  
♩ = 96 (♩ = ♩ sempre) 35

Clarinet in B $\flat$  I  
II

*f*

**Musical Example 29** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Woodwinds and Horn, m. 102-4. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

♩ = 80  
103 104

Piccolo

Flute I  
II

Oboe I  
II

English Horn

Clarinet in B $\flat$  I  
II

Bass Clarinet in B $\flat$

Bassoon I  
II

Horn in F I  
II

**Musical Example 30** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, Trumpets, m. 204-9. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

*tenuto* ♩ = 76 205 206 207 208 209

Trumpet in B $\flat$  I  
II

*ff* *meno f*

Parallel motion is most often used with fourths as noted above, but is also used elsewhere and with other intervals to strengthen lines and add sonic interest. In the opening string quartet melody, the fourths are first broken by a series of three parallel fifths surrounding the first peak on the downbeat of measure 5. Parallel motion is used in all voices to introduce the “C” section. It is also found extensively in the “E” section, from measure 181-203, the lead into the climax.

In the concerto we also find the contrapuntal techniques of imitative counterpoint and inversion to create harmony, though not extensively. Measures 167-9 contain fugato, each voice entering at the fourth of the previous voice (Musical Example 31). Inversion, with pairs of instruments starting in fourths, is found in measures 65-6 (Musical Example 32). Similar pairings of voices in inversion are present in measures 84-8 and 126-30.

**Musical Example 31** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, String Quartet, m. 167-9. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

The musical score for measures 167-169 of the *Concerto for String Quartet* by Walter Piston is presented for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The tempo is marked *lento* with a quarter note equal to 30 beats (♩ = 30). The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score shows parallel motion in fourths and fifths across the four voices. Measure 167 begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes. Measure 168 continues the parallel motion, and measure 169 features trills in the upper voices. The score is written in 4/4 time.

**Musical Example 32** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, String Quartet, m. 65-6. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

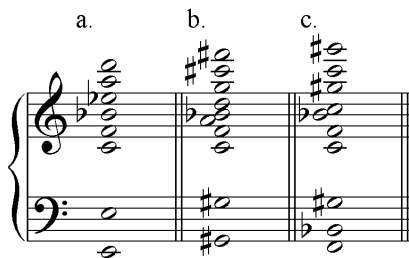
Cluster chords serve as large blocks of sound in the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. The wind instruments and percussion open the piece with such blocks in the first three measures. As forte staccato eighth notes followed by rests, they setup the stylistic and rhythmic counterpoint between the larger ensemble and the legato, slurred quarters and eighths of the string quartet. This type of sonorous event happens in four places.

Musical Example 33 contains reductions of the pitch content from the various occurrences. Musical Example 33a occurs in measures 1-3 and 19-21, 37b in measure 6, and 33c in measures 132-6. Excluding the bass, “a.” consists of stacked fourths. All are perfect intervals except for the E $\flat$  5 to A5 (an augmented fourth). In “b.” there are two sets of stacked fourths (G#3 to B $\flat$  4 and A4 to F#6), each set containing a tritone. When



the octave doublings are eliminated from “c.” we are left with one chord of stacked fourths with one tritone (G#, C, F, and Bb).

**Musical Example 33** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, block cluster chord examples reduced from the wind instruments and percussion



Music Example 34 is a reduction of the opening to the string quartet cadenza beginning in measure 137. With several sustained notes (many of them open strings) and abundant seconds, the chords appear to be blocks of dense sound. While still dense, one discovers definite direction in voice leading upon hearing them.

**Musical Example 34** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, reduction of the string quartet parts, m. 137-41



Musical Examples 35 and 36 are of the same reduction with only notes falling or rising in pitch to another included. Stem directions have been changed for clarity.

Measure 137-8 (Musical Example 35) shows all voices fall a half step, one of the connective germs throughout the piece, except for the bass rising a half step. Measures 139-40 (Musical Example 36) shows all voices ascend a half step, except for the whole step ascent of the E4 to F#4.

**Musical Example 35** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, reduction of moving lines in the string quartet parts, m. 137-8

*ritenuto subito* ♩ = 76  
138



**Musical Example 36** *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion* by Walter Piston, reduction of moving lines in the string quartet parts, m. 139-40

♩ = 76  
140



**Musical Example 37** Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion by Walter Piston, m. 227-30. Copyright © 1978 (Renewed) by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

**Lento** ♩ = 30  
228 229 230

The musical score shows four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The tempo is Lento (♩ = 30). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The dynamics are marked *pp* (pianissimo). The measures 228, 229, and 230 show a chromatic cadence in the strings, with the Viola part being the most prominent.

The final chord of the piece must be considered from the vocabulary of melodic and harmonic usage by Piston in the piece. Though the chord is a new sonority in the piece in terms of its pitch content, it is made up of familiar elements. As described in the section on melody, Piston sets up the final sonority throughout the viola cadenza beginning in measure 216. The pitches G and C are brought out by intervallic and register change as harmony might be in a Bach solo string instrument suite or partita. The F#, also the opening and climactic tone of the first quartet melody, is approached by a chromatic melodic cadence, G-F-F#.

If the chord is considered according to harmonic and melodic tendencies from earlier in the piece, its origins are debatable. Augmented fourths, diminished fifths, and perfect fifths are abundant, but not categorically so. Reordering the pitches as G, C, and F# produces a quartal sonority like those found in previous block chords or the parallel

fourths used to strengthen melodic lines. Reordering the pitches as F#, G, C produces a derivative of the minor second/perfect fourth motive. Piston wrote of analyzing harmony:

We have the right to judge unfamiliar music against the background of conventional usage, and to find in it musical meaning in so far as it appears to have a relationship to what we feel to be musical sense. But we must realize that usage is a powerful force against the introduction of new sounds in music, and that intelligent appraisal or analysis cannot be made without consideration of the composer's intent. Knowledge of the composer's intent may be hard to achieve, even it may have to be simple conjecture, but the attempt must be made, by study of the man's origins and environment, and his other musical works. The task of the analyst, rather shall we say of the musicologist, is the two-fold one of clarifying the personal usage of the composer as far as it can be known, as well as summarizing the effect on the listener in terms of accepted musical sense.<sup>199</sup>

It is intriguing that the final sonority of the piece, a new sonority to the piece, may be considered to have “musical meaning in so far as it appears to have a relationship to what we feel to be musical sense” according to elements familiar from earlier in the work. Within “the personal usage of the composer,” Piston was able to both achieve “something new” while having it come “out the same old Piston.”<sup>200</sup> The sonority as it is written in its original voicing is expressive in its unsettling beauty. “Or,” Piston once questioned, “as a final thought, shall we not, as musicians, take satisfaction in contemplating one more demonstration of the versatility, the flexibility, the richness, the indescribable mystery, and the inescapable communicative power of all combinations of musical sounds?”<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Walter Piston, “Thoughts on the Chordal Concept,” in *Essays on Music* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Department of Music, Harvard University, 1957), 278.

<sup>200</sup> Steinberg, “Composer turned from painting.”

<sup>201</sup> Piston, “Problems of Intonation in Contemporary Music,” 79.

## CONCLUSION

By the last decade of his life Walter Piston had acquired an enviable compositional vocabulary. His musical lexicon continued to grow throughout his life as he obtained new techniques by staying current on musical trends, analyzing and summarizing fundamentals of music across centuries well enough to teach it, and constantly assessing his own work. With such technical mastery he often struggled against being compared to other great composers (from Brahms to Stravinsky), being labeled a neoclassicist, and felt a need to work towards new sounds in his own music.

Letters, teachings, and interviews suggest Piston took considerable pride in his work, veiled by an uncanny modesty for the times. The sketchbooks reveal thoughtful and thorough considerations for the music principles he preached, a respect for the musical masters who preceded him while he forged his own path. He wrote that “mastery of the technical or theoretical aspects of music should be carried out by [the person gifted for creative musical composition] as a life’s work, running parallel to his creative activity but quite separate from it. In the one he is following common practice, while in the other he is responsible solely to the dictates of his own personal tastes and urge for expression.”<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Piston, *Harmony*, 2.

Piston's "personal tastes and urge for expression" are never more vibrant than in his late concertos, culminating in the *Concerto for String Quartet, Wind Instruments and Percussion*. Techniques of centuries fully embedded in his writing, the octogenarian was able to reach the pinnacle of artistic expression. Rather than follow strict formal procedures, Piston heard sounds and wrote them into a masterfully fluid set of "variations."

The texts and teachings, life and relationships, musical understanding and musical scores of Walter Piston are fertile fields for research. Primary materials are readily available and are yet to be extensively explored. To date, limited studies are available considering the magnitude of his oeuvre and impact on others. This is especially true of detailed work on specific pieces and the tracing of specific pedagogical lineages.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Mark A. Taylor is a musician with many interests. He a music educator, named *Outstanding Teacher of the Year* for the state of Virginia by the American Strings Teachers Association in 2009. Mr. Taylor teaches at Stone Middle School and London Towne Elementary School in Centreville, Virginia, where he has been nominated for the Crystal Apple Award and Grammy's Music Educator Award. He has guest conducted various student orchestras, district and regional honors orchestras around the Commonwealth as well as the James Madison University *Spring String Thing*. Mr. Taylor recently taught music theory at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

Mr. Taylor is a published and award-winning composer. While he has explored many genres, he is primarily an instrumental composer writing both serious and educational works for his friends, colleagues, students, and professional performers. Currently, he is pursuing a doctoral degree in composition at George Mason University, studying under Dr. Glenn Smith.

As a cellist, primary teachers include F. Wayne Taylor, Brigitta Gruenther and Loran Stephenson. He now maintains a private cello studio of his own. In addition to doing freelance cello work, Mr. Taylor plays in small chamber ensembles, the M3E New Music Ensemble at George Mason University, and the Friends and Family Chamber Orchestra under the direction of his father.

Mr. Taylor earned a Bachelor of Music degree from George Mason University with high distinction in 2002, receiving the Creativity in Music Award for his class. In 2004, he earned his Master of Music Education degree from Shenandoah Conservatory in Winchester, Virginia. His work in research and composition has been presented at statewide music education conferences.

When he is not working on music, Mr. Taylor enjoys cycling. Though most trips now encompass a much smaller radius, he once took an unsupported bicycle trip from Alexandria, Virginia to Mobile, Alabama to raise scholarship money for his students to take private music lessons. Mr. Taylor, his wife Holly, and daughter Jacqueline reside in Centreville, Virginia.