

Exploring the Piano Music of Roy Harris



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Roy Harris

Project

The piano music by American Roy Harris (1898-1979) has been largely neglected by pianists and scholars alike since the composer's death. In an effort to increase the awareness of the works by this composer, who was both a central and controversial figure in 20th-century American classical music, we presented a lecture-recital featuring three works that we

considered representative of his style: *Piano Suite in Three Movements*, *American Ballads (Set I)*, and *Toccata*. We began by reading all available books and articles on Harris, including his own writings, and exploring his orchestral and vocal works in an attempt to see how his piano works fit in to his oeuvre. Through our research we found that Harris spent much of his life intent on establishing an "American" sound, with especially personal ideas about harmony and inclusion of folk elements. Our lecture-recital highlighted our findings, including discussion, analysis, demonstration, and performance of these three pieces.

Early Years

Roy Harris was born in a log cabin in Lincoln County, OK on Abraham Lincoln's birthday- an auspicious beginning for an improbable composer! He moved with his family to California at age 5, where he learned piano fundamentals from his mother, and played clarinet in the school orchestra. Following a period of odd jobs that included driving a truck, he determined to become a composer. Early studies with Arthur Farwell (1924-25) were followed by three years in Paris with the celebrated Nadia Boulanger (1926-29). Although the strong-willed Harris did not always yield to his teacher's dictates, he acquired from Boulanger an appreciation for Bach, Beethoven and the Renaissance masters, particularly in terms of melody, form, and counterpoint. During this period, his first "serious" work, the Piano Sonata Op. 1 (1928) was completed.



Dutton, March 6, 1939, after the concert given for the benefit of the Lili Boulanger Memorial Fund. From left to right: Walter Pasco, John Carpenter, Nadia Boulanger, Roy Harris, Serge Koussevitzky, Mr. Bakewell, Mme. Dittus, Jean François, Edward Hill

Works for Solo Piano

Sonata, Op.1 (1928/29)
Little Suite (1938)
Piano Suite in Three Movements (1939-42)
American Ballads, Set I and II(1942-45)
True Love Don't Weep (1944 – unpublished)
Toccata (1949)

Career

Following his return to the United States, Harris achieved success as a composer relatively soon, beginning with his "Symphony 1933." The 1930s proved especially fruitful for him, both in terms of compositional output and in popular recognition of his work. In 1939, Harris completed his Third Symphony, which survives in today's symphonic repertoire as his most-played and best-known work. These early successes helped solidify his determination to make a living solely as a composer, through commissions and teaching positions at numerous universities around the country.

In 1936, Harris married his fourth wife, Canadian Beulah Duffey (whom he renamed Johana). Johana Harris was a virtuoso pianist who premiered many of her husband's works and was a vital influence in his life, both personally and musically. The degree to which she influenced his piano writing, as well as his other compositions, is not fully documented and remains open to speculation.

Throughout his life Harris championed the cause of American music through festivals and by teaching generations of young composers. He composed well into his later years, continuing in the same style of his earlier works. In light of classical music's increasingly experimental aesthetic, Harris's music was eventually perceived as old-fashioned, and experienced decreasing popularity over the years. Today his piano music is rarely heard, and much of it is currently out-of-print.

An "American" Sound

Harris was called the "White Hope" of American music by John Tasker Howard and his 'Western' status contributed largely to his success as a composer. With his legendary birth story, rural/agrarian childhood, and Scotch-Irish ancestry, Harris proved the ideal representative of homegrown talent. He was also a self-made composer who distanced himself from modern academics in music and turned to folksong for inspiration. While one can interpret the open sonorities and folk elements of Harris's music as 'American,' the timing of Harris's maturity as a composer also went hand in hand with America's need to discover its own sound, distinct from European models.

Style Characteristics

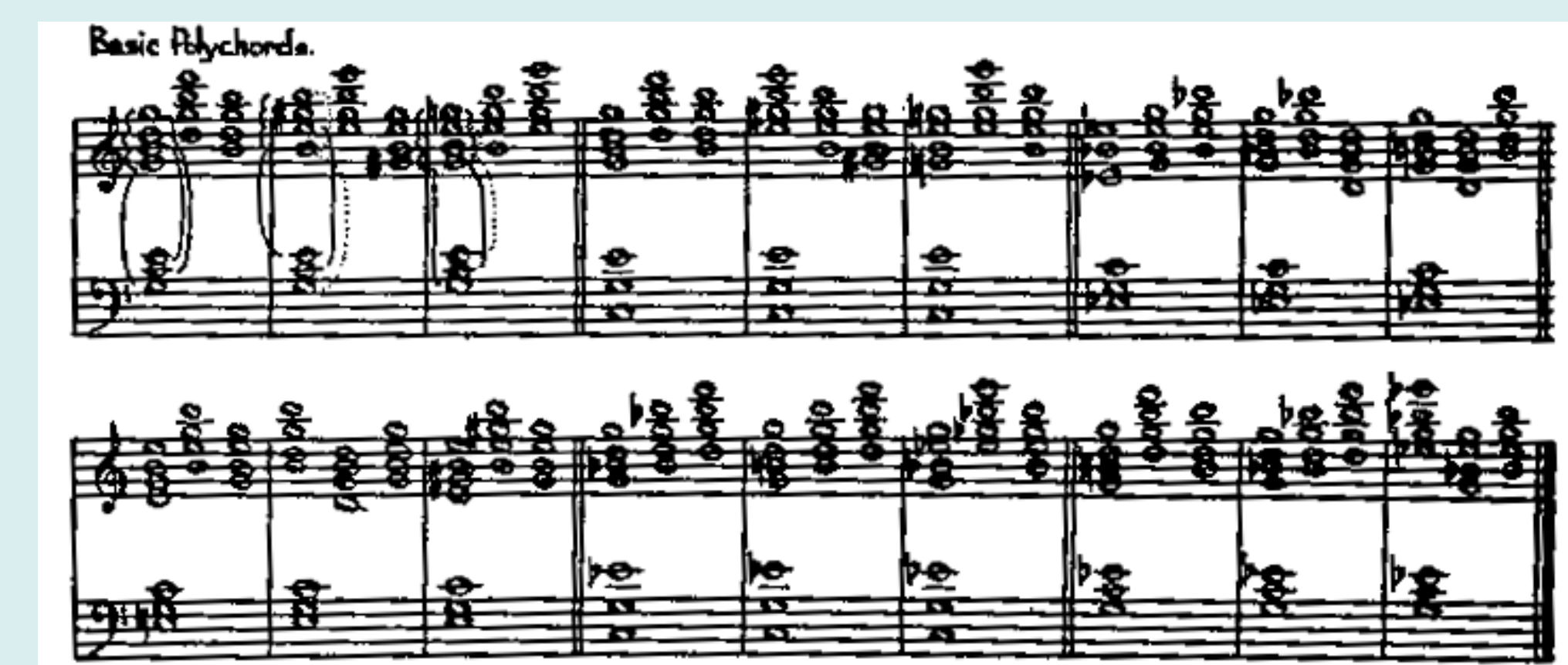
Harris had a unique approach to melody and harmony in that he set forth certain principles that guided all of his compositions. In his piano music, we see represented in miniature the same concepts that he applied to his larger works

MELODY

- Basic types:
- Relatively short
- Long and slowly unfolding
- Short motivic ideas
- Autogenetic Principle
- Combined modes and assimilation

HARMONY

- Basic Functions:
- Architecture of Tonalities
- Melodic Delineation
- Dynamic Resonance
- Cadences: Strong vs. Weak
- Bitonality/Polychordal
- Overtone series/Chordal relationships



Evett, Robert. "The Harmonic Idiom of Roy Harris." *Modern Music*, Spring 1946.

Ex. 5 Harris: Examples written especially for this article



Slonimsky, Nicolas. "Roy Harris." *The Musical Quarterly*, January 1947.