



# AMERICAN CLASSICS



## WALTER PISTON

### Violin Concertos Nos. 1 and 2

#### Fantasia for Violin and Orchestra

**James Buswell, Violin**  
**National Symphony of Ukraine**  
**Theodore Kuchar**



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A M E R I C A N C L A S S I C S

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## **Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra (1939)**

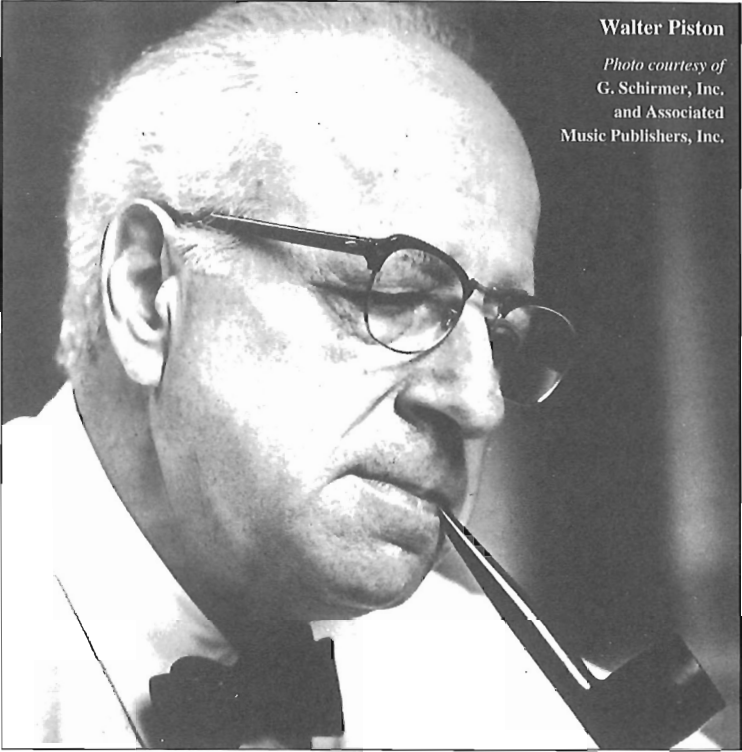
- 1** I. Allegro energico *8:19*
- 2** II. Andantino molto tranquillo *6:34*
- 3** III. Allegro con spirito *6:44*

## **4 Fantasia for Violin and Orchestra (1970) *14:31***

## **Concerto No. 2 for Violin and Orchestra (1960)**

- 5** I. Moderato *8:02*
- 6** II. Andagio *11:10*
- 7** III. Allegro *5:26*

Playing Time: **60:49**

A black and white portrait of Walter Piston, an older man with glasses, wearing a white shirt and a dark bow tie. He is looking down and to the right, with a pipe in his mouth. The background is dark and out of focus.

**Walter Piston**

*Photo courtesy of  
G. Schirmer, Inc.  
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## The Composer

Walter Piston descended on his father's side from Antonio Pistone, his grandfather, who sailed from Italy and settled in Rockland, Maine. Here the family, to seem more American, dropped the final "e" from their name. Walter Hamor Piston, Jr., was born in Rockland on 20 January 1894, where he lived until he was ten and then moved to Boston. During World War I he was in the U.S. Navy. Stationed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he served as a member of the Aeronautics Division band, playing the saxophone. After the Armistice he entered Harvard University, graduating summa cum laude in 1924. On a John Knowles Paine Traveling Fellowship from Harvard, Piston spent two years in Europe from 1924 to 1926. He studied composition with Paul Dukas at the École normale de musique, and also took private lessons from Nadia Boulanger. From 1926 until his retirement in 1960 Walter Piston was a member of the faculty of Harvard University, where he was (from 1951) Walter W. Naumburg Professor of Music. His students agreed that Piston brought together to the classroom, musical scholarship, humanity, wit, and empathy, making him one of the most significant musical educators of his time. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1948 and in 1961, and was three-time winner of the New York Music Critics Circle Award. Walter Piston wrote four books on the technical aspects of music which are considered to be classics in their fields -- *Principles of Harmonic Analysis* (1933); *Harmony* (1944); *Counterpoint* (1947); and *Orchestration* (1955). Few American composers have composed so extensively and yet with such uniform excellence. His work habits were remarkably methodical; he rarely altered or revised his music once it was put on paper, and his handwriting was calligraphic. With two exceptions, he never wrote for voices. Nicolas Slonimsky once observed: "Walter Piston has reached the stardom of the first magnitude. He has not exploded into stellar prominence like a surprising nova, but took his place inconspicuously, without passing through the inevitable stage of musical exhibition or futuristic eccentricity." Piston died in Belmont, Massachusetts in 1976. Today, he is best known for his ballet *The Incredible Flutist*, his two violin concertos, eight symphonies, and numerous wonderful chamber works.

## The Works for Violin and Orchestra

During an interview in 1958, Walter Piston stated: "The major problem for the composer must be to preserve and develop his individuality. He must resist the constant temptation to follow this or that fashion. He must find what it is he wishes to say in music and how best to say it, subjecting his work to the severest self-criticism... Strength of will and faith in one's creative gift are essential... The composer must judge for himself in these matters, with self-reliance based on a thorough knowledge of his craft and a capacity for independent thinking as an individual creative artist."

Piston's individuality and Americanism is very evident in his Concerto No.1 for Violin and Orchestra of 1939. The work was dedicated to Ruth Posselt, who also premiered the work on 18 March 1940 with Leon Barzin conducting the National Orchestral Association in Carnegie Hall, New York. Piston's own notes on the work were printed in the program booklet and in later notes when the work was frequently performed by Hugo Kolberg. Piston wrote: "The opening movement is an Allegro energico in 3/4 time and has a sonata form. D major is the tonality. The first theme is given out by the solo violin after introductory chords. This main theme is composed of two elements, one broad and lyric, the other rhythmic in character. The second theme is quiet, simple, first accompanied by muted strings. The development section is based upon the two elements of theme I. There follows a regular recapitulation resolved into a coda in faster tempo. The slow movement is an Andantino molto tranquillo in 4/4, the tonality is F minor. The introduction presents the theme first as a flute solo. The form of the music is that of a theme with variations. Three variations of the theme follow. Finally, we hear the recapitulation of the theme entrusted to the solo violin. The last movement is an Allegro con spirito again in the main key of D Major. It is set in the form of a rondo in 2/4 meter. The first theme is announced by the solo violin after a short introduction. The second theme is a rhythmic transformation of the second theme of the first movement. The third theme is heard as a canon between horn and solo violin, over a staccato accompaniment. The cadenza combines theme II and III, before a coda concludes." According to biographer Howard Pollack, Piston's Violin Concerto No.1 is "closely modelled after Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto. From the standpoint of nationalism, their first movements are the most personal, their slow movements are subtly tinged by popular song, and their finales are clearly evocative of national dance. The nationalism of the Piston

Concerto, however, does not preclude a contrapuntal sophistication typical of its composer; and one finds a good deal of melodic inversion, contrapuntal inversion, and canon in the score. There are also two striking thematic transformations: the first movement's second theme becomes the last movement's second theme, and the slow movement theme becomes the finale's episodic E minor theme. Piston, ever crafty, has the solo violin simultaneously play both transformations in the cadenza to the last movement. It is as if Bach wrote the Tchaikovsky Concerto -- in America!"

Piston's Concerto No.2 for Violin and Orchestra was commissioned by the Ford Foundation through Joseph Fuchs, to whom it is dedicated. It was composed during the winter and spring of 1959-60 and first performed on 28 October 1960 with Mr. Fuchs as soloist and the Boston Symphony Orchestra under the direction of William Steinberg. As was the case with the First Violin Concerto, Piston provided somewhat dry notes for the new work: "The first movement is in binary form, in which the second part is a recapitulation of the first part, with some variation and development. There are two contrasting themes, each presented by the solo violin. The first theme is legato and expressible in character, the second is a little faster, more angular and rhythmic. The over-all key is G. The slow movement consists of four closely integrated sections, on a single theme of serene and tranquil nature over an accompaniment of divided violas. The second section is marked by a duet between the solo voice and the flute treating the melody in canonic variation. In the third section the theme appears in varied form in the orchestra while the solo plays a decorative obbligato. The final section is a coda to the movement. The tonality is E. The third movement is a lively rondo with two themes, in the form ABABA. The tonality is A." Concise, crisp and, musicologically, to the point, Piston's description of his work does not mention the dissonant harmonies, lush textures, changing tempos and soloistic brilliance of this work. The second movement could best be described as melodramatic, dark and full of tender simplicity. The finale is a sparkling, lilting, mercurial rondo, where the violin is never submerged and never has to fight to be heard while it soars with ease and elegance.

The Fantasia for Violin and Orchestra was commissioned for Salvatore Accardo and the "Congregation of the Arts" at Dartmouth College by Mario di Bonaventura, and was first performed on 11 March 1973, by Accardo and the Dartmouth Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Bonaventura. According to Piston biographer, Howard Pollack, the composer

was decidedly impressed with Accardo's virtuosic interpretations of Paganini and Bach. As a result, Piston created in the *Fantasia* a solo part full of "fast, tricky passages of Paganinian virtuosity, as well as slow, supple melodies of Bachian intensity." The *Fantasia* is divided into five sections, bracketed by "Lento" sections that have been described as "painfully aware and transcendently serene". These beautiful sections encase the "Allegro" (a musical commentary on an overwhelmingly hectic world), an "Adagio" (where the violinist's tragic aria is given support by the orchestra's dark chords), and an "Allegro energico" (the most joyous sections, with an almost "desperate" quality to it). According to Pollack, "these 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." The *Fantasia* is a deeply profound work from Piston's last years.

Program Notes by Marina and Victor Ledin, © 1998, Encore Consultants.

## Thoughts on the works for violin and orchestra by Walter Piston

By James Buswell

When I matriculated as an undergraduate at Harvard College in 1966, I fully expected to make the acquaintance of Walter Piston and, if possible, to study under him. It was a great disappointment to discover that he had retired just a few years before. My own priorities were to study as much as possible outside of music during my Harvard years, and accordingly I majored in Renaissance painting and sculpture, getting to know many more of the distinguished professors of art history than those in the music department where, it was mischievously rumored, "music was to be seen and not heard."

But long before arriving in Massachusetts, I had been schooled in all three of Mr. Piston's famous texts: *Harmony*, *Counterpoint*, and *Orchestration*. They appealed to me enormously as being extraordinarily lucid and straightforward, eschewing much of the jargon that seems to pollute so many other theoretical music texts.

As a young performer I was aware that this man had written several works for violin and orchestra, and a good bit of chamber music as well, but his music seemed to have been



pushed to the back of people's libraries. One always heard the deadly words, "well-crafted, but a bit academic." Upon starting to work on the two Violin Concertos, and the Fantasia, I was more than a little surprised by the sheer vitality, the lyrical sweep, and the rhetorical power of these works. This was a man whose head and heart worked very well together.

Just as with his theoretical prose, there is a freshness and directness in his music that avoids cliché but also refuses unnecessary complexity which may impress the academic snob while discouraging the innocent music lover. From 1939 to 1970, Piston's style evolved considerably. I cannot agree with the composer who is quoted as having said self-deprecatingly, "No matter what technique of composition I employ, it always comes out sounding like the same old Piston."

Piston's sensitivity to those artists for whom he was writing is remarkable. No one ever spun out a more glorious musical line than Joseph Fuchs, for whom the second movement of the Second Concerto is tailor-made. And Salvatore Accardo's agility and pyrotechnics clearly inspired the Fantasia.

I am honored to have the opportunity to bring these three important works to the attention of the general public at the turn of the century. Perhaps Mr. Piston rests a little easier in his final resting place across the street from my apartment in Watertown, Massachusetts, knowing that these works are being enjoyed by a wider audience.

## **The Performers**

### **James Buswell**

Violinist, James Buswell, has long enjoyed a phenomenal career as a concerto soloist, recitalist, chamber musician, conductor, lectureer, and educator. Since his solo debut with the New York Philharmonic at age seven, he has appeared with most of the major orchestras in the U.S. and abroad, and with great conductors such as Leonard Bernstein, George Szell, William Steinberg, Leonard Slatkin, Sir Malcolm Sargent, Zubin Mehta, André Previn, Erich Leinsdorf, Seiji Ozawa, and Michael Tilson Thomas. As a solo artist, he has performed nearly one hundred works for violin and orchestra spanning three centuries.

A former member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Mr. Buswell appears frequently as a guest artist at Lincoln Center and in other music festivals such as those in Santa Fe, Marlboro, Sarasota, Italy, and Australia. Mr. Buswell studied at the Juilliard School where he was a pupil of Ivan Galamian, and at Harvard University where his major field of study was Renaissance Art. For more than a decade he was a Professor of Violin and Conductor at the Indiana University School of Music. He now makes his home in Boston where he is a Professor at the New England Conservatory. His instrument is the Levêque Stradivarius of 1720.

### **Theodore Kuchar**

The conductor Theodore Kuchar was born in 1960 and was appointed Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine in 1994. Trained as a violinist and later a violist, Mr. Kuchar graduated from The Cleveland Institute of Music and served as the principal violist of leading orchestras of Cleveland and Helsinki. In 1980, Mr. Kuchar was awarded the Paul Fromm Fellowship from the Boston Symphony Orchestra to undertake advanced study and performance at Tanglewood, where he worked with Leonard Bernstein, Colin Davis, Seiji Ozawa and Andre Previn, and in Cleveland where he worked under the guidance of Lorin Maazel. In 1989, he was awarded a bronze medal by the Finnish Government in recognition of his work in performing and promoting that country's music, both in Finland and abroad. Since 1990, Mr. Kuchar has served as Artistic Director of the

Australian Festival of Chamber Music. In 1996 Mr. Kuchar received three additional appointments, in the USA. In August, 1996 he commenced duties as Music Director and Conductor of the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra and newly established Sinfonia of Colorado in Denver whilst simultaneously serving as Professor and Director of Orchestral Studies at the University of Colorado's College of Music, one of the USA's largest and most prestigious musical institutions.

### **National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine**

The National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, formerly known as the Ukrainian State Symphony Orchestra, is recognised as one of the most accomplished symphonic ensembles of the former Soviet Union and one of the greatest exponents of the eastern European symphonic repertoire in the world today. Established in 1937, the Orchestra's first chief conductor was Nathan Rachlin, who conducted the world premiere of Shostakovich's Eleventh Symphony, and who remained in this position for the next 25 years, until 1962. His successors as music directors have included Stepan Turchak, Feodor Gluschenko and Igor Blazhkov. In 1992, Theodore Kuchar was appointed Principal Guest Conductor; in 1994, the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine appointed Mr. Kuchar Artistic Director and Principal Conductor. Under Mr. Kuchar's direction, the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine has today become the most frequently recorded orchestra of the former Soviet Union. During the past three years, the orchestra has recorded nearly 40 compact discs for the Naxos and Marco Polo labels.

**NAXOS**



A M E R I C A N C L A S S I C S

Playing  
Time:  
**60:49**

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# WALTER PISTON

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James Buswell, Violin

National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, Theodore Kuchar

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AMERICAN CLASSICS

Walter Piston wrote music of clarity, nobility, longing tenderness, wit and elegance. His craftsmanship was admired not only by his students at Harvard, but by all great composers of this century. Piston's works for violin and orchestra are extraordinary examples of his musical gifts and mastery of instrumental technique. Internationally recognized violinist James Buswell imbues these works with authority and tonal strength.



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