

Roy Harris (1898-1979)

Symphony No. 3 (1939)

*First performance:* February 24, 1939, Symphony Hall, Boston, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitzky cond. *First Tanglewood performance:* August 3, 1940, Serge Koussevitzky cond. *Most recent Tanglewood performance:* July 27, 1974, Eugene Ormandy cond.

“Let’s not kid ourselves,” wrote Roy Harris to the composer and lexicographer Nicolas Slonimsky in 1951, “my Third Symphony happened to come along when it was needed. The first season it was greeted with the same boos and bravos as have been all my works. Then *Time* magazine hailed it as the most important American symphony, and the Third Symphony was in.” It came along, assured, instantly and forcefully intelligible, exuberant with physical energy and aflame with ethical aspiration, at a point when we were ready to receive a strong and unmistakably American symphony.

The whole issue of an “unmistakably American symphony,” of a specifically American symphonic style, seems perhaps naïve and irrelevant now; in the 1920s and ’30 it was a burning question. Roy Harris was among the most vigorously vocal of those musicians who rejected the idea that our popular styles and genres gave adequate representation of the American character. He felt as well that there existed a distinctively American tone of voice, manner, and vocabulary in music. In 1933, the year of his first symphony, which he actually called *Symphony 1933* and which Koussevitzky hailed as America’s first tragic symphony, Harris published an essay called “Problems of American Composers.” In it, after an impassioned description of the American landscape and character, he proposes that just as the American composer’s moods “are not warmed-over moods of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European society, [neither] is his musical material rearranged and retinted formulas of the standard classics which our audiences, teachers, and critics, and our imported conductors and performers have been trained to think of as the only possible music.”

Harris was forty-one when the premiere of the Third Symphony by Serge Koussevitzky and the BSO in February 1939 propelled him into prominence. (Piston was similarly slow to emerge, as was Carter later on, but Copland was famous in his twenties, while Sessions and Thomson established themselves as significant figures in their thirties.) His official Opus 1, a piano sonata, was written at thirty-three, and it was not until he was twenty-six that Harris decided to be a composer. When he saw that music was his vocation, he went to two teachers, Henry Schoenfeld and Arthur Farwell, who shared solid German training and a commitment to using indigenous American materials in their concert music. In 1926, Harris had his first important public performance when Howard Hanson conducted an orchestral Andante in Rochester. That year, he joined the procession of American musicians heading for Paris to acquire craft and discipline from Nadia Boulanger, as Copland had done a few years before.

In January 1934, Serge Koussevitzky took up the cause of the *Symphony 1933*. As an American composer, one could not have had a better friend than Koussevitzky, and the Boston Symphony, whose concerts were also broadcast, was of utmost importance in the building of Harris’s reputation. Under Koussevitzky it introduced five of his first six symphonies, and during Koussevitzky’s tenure as music director the BSO performed the Third more than a dozen times over ten years in Boston and elsewhere. In later years, as public taste moved away from the “strong-arm” movement of the ’30s into which he had fit so well, Harris was a less visible figure than formerly; nonetheless, he continued as a prolific and vigorous writer in the large instrumental and choral forms. The number of his symphonies grew to fifteen by 1978 (not including the 1952 symphony for the West Point band).

The title page of the Third Symphony includes the words “In one movement.” The single movement does, however, fall into clearly articulated sections, to whose succession Harris provided this roadmap:

- I. Tragic—low string sonorities
- II. Lyric—strings, horns, woodwinds
- III. Pastoral—woodwinds with a polytonal string background
- IV. Fugue—dramatic
  - A. Brass and percussion dominating
  - B. Canonic development of materials from Section II constituting background for further development of Fugue
- V. Dramatic—Tragic
  - A. Restatement of violin theme of Section I: tutti strings in canon with tutti woodwinds against brass and percussion developing rhythmic motif from climax of Section IV
  - B. Coda—development of materials from Section I and II over pedal timpani

Elliott Carter, reviewing the symphony in 1940—he called it “a folklore work with literary overtones”—put some critical flesh on the bare bones of the composer’s outline: “Musically, Harris’s Third Symphony represents a step toward simplification, so that only the most typical and fundamental characteristics are expressed: It is in five block-like sections, each one with a dominating idea so definite that its character can be grasped at once.... The articulation of phrase and of section is always clearly marked: transitional material is almost completely eliminated. Voice leading is arranged to give a contrapuntal impression even in places where harmony predominates; counterpoint with one part well emphasized dominates the entire piece.” The opening, a cello melody whose first unfolding is subtly punctuated by the violas at phrase-endings, is a remarkable example of Harris’s melodic gift and sense of paragraph. Equal to this “tragic” section in fantasy and control is the “pastoral,” where, against a background of shimmering, nervously vibrating chords in the strings, woodwinds (some brass, too, later on) project a sequence of melodic fragments, all related, but with no two quite the same. Finally, it is perhaps of interest to note that the ending with its obsessive timpani strokes represents Harris’s second thoughts, replacing an idea more abrupt and of less definite finality.

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