

Roy Harris's *American Symphony* - 1938: Its Historical Significance and a Reconstructed
Modern Wind Ensemble Edition.

A Lecture Presentation for the College Band Directors National Association

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The Discovery of Roy Harris' *American Symphony - 1938*

On July 3, 1998, I heard on NPR's "Morning Edition" that a freelance trombone player in New York City was undertaking an interesting musical project. It seems that as he was reading Meryle Secrest's biography of Leonard Bernstein, *Leonard Bernstein: A Life*, trombonist James Pugh discovered that Roy Harris had written a piece of music for the Tommy Dorsey band. Pugh pursued additional information regarding the work, thinking that it might be significant to find a piece written for trombone by a composer of Harris' stature. Roy Harris' biographer Dan Stehman had part of the score in question, and directed Pugh toward the Library of Congress for the rest of the piece. Pugh intended to recreate the work in its original form, and he enlisted the help of some of his fellow studio musicians to make a recording of the piece.¹

My interest was immediately piqued, not because the piece might be a significant contribution to trombone literature, but because it could be a very important piece of BAND literature, having been written three years before the commissioning of *Cimarron - Symphonic Overture for Band*, which has long been thought to be Roy Harris' first piece for band. I consulted Stehman's *Roy Harris, a Bio-Bibliography* for information regarding the piece, which included three notations referencing the first or second movements of an incomplete piece written for the Tommy Dorsey band, along with two listings in Appendices. The notations cited the Library of Congress as the probable location of the manuscripts.²

I traveled to Washington, D.C. in December of 1998, having been given permission to access the Roy Harris archives in the Library of Congress by Louise Spizizen, curator of *The Harris Project* in Tucson, Arizona. The manuscript score for the complete first movement of *American Symphony - 1938* was found, along with the first page of a rough sketch score for the second movement.

Encouraged by these findings, I contacted Dan Stehman, who was very helpful and shared some insightful information about the entire Harris/Dorsey collaboration. He thought that

¹Elizabeth Blair, reporter, *National Public Radio's "Morning Edition," July 3, 1998*, Bob Edwards, host, audio recording and complete transcript (Largo, MD: National Public Radio, Inc., 1998), 5-6.

²Dan Stehman, *Roy Harris: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1991) 125, 190.

he had in his possession the parts to the intended second movement of *American Symphony - 1938*, and although he was missing the piano part, he was willing to send copies of what he had. Stehman was convinced that he had seen, at one time, a score to the second movement, and he thought it was in the Library of Congress, but I could never find a complete score.³ In fact, Stehman thought that the score to the second movement was listed somewhere as “Symphony Number 4, Second Movement,” and in the Harris bio-bibliography, Stehman lists the movement as “Sad Song,” and writes that at one point Roy Harris had given permission for the second movement to be performed alone, but Stehman could find no record of that performance.⁴ However, in his article on Roy Harris for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Donald Cobb lists a band arrangement, written in 1940, of *He’s Gone Away*.⁵ This is either a mistake, or it is the second movement from *American Symphony - 1938*, which Stehman has called “Sad Song.”

Louise Spizzen was a long-time friend and *confidante* of Johana Harris, Roy’s wife, who was in her own right, a virtuoso pianist of the highest order.⁶ She provided some information from Johana’s perspective, regarding the events surrounding the writing of *American Symphony - 1938* and the collaboration with the Tommy Dorsey band. Spizzen thought that the piece was originally intended to be a three-movement work, with the first movement featuring a piano solo and the middle movement highlighting a trombone soloist. Harris intended for the piano soloist to be his wife, Johana, and he obviously intended that the trombone soloist would be Tommy Dorsey. Johana Harris had traveled to New York to rehearse the piece with the Dorsey band at

³Dan Stehman, interview by the author, tape recording, 9 July 2000, Southwest Baptist University Library, Bolivar, Mo.

⁴Dan Stehman, *Roy Harris: A Bio-Bibliography*, 125-126.

⁵Donald Cobb, “Roy Harris,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 6th ed., vol. 8, ed. Stanley Sadie (MacMillan: London, 1980), 252.

⁶Louise Spizzen, interview by the author, tape recording, 27 December 1998, Southwest Baptist University Library, Bolivar, Mo.

the conclusion of one of their regularly scheduled performances at the Rainbow Room.⁷ The players must have been exhausted after the 9:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. dance job, and the early morning hours were not conducive to a productive rehearsal.⁸ According to Spizizen: “From about 2:00 to 4:00 a.m. one morning, Johana read the first two movements of the piece with the band, and then returned to her hotel room to draw a warm bath and write a letter to Roy, informing him that the rehearsal had not gone well, and Tommy Dorsey would not be pursuing the project.”⁹ Roy Harris was very discouraged that the Dorsey band would not be able to perform the piece, and he actually wrote on the first page of his manuscript score that the piece was “never completed because the band had no rehearsal time to devote to a new project.”¹⁰ Spizizen also felt quite confident that a piano part to the second movement of the piece would not be found, because Johana Harris was quite an accomplished classical improviser, and she would not have had a written part for that rehearsal. No piano part would have been necessary until the piece went to press.¹¹ With a copy of the manuscript scores from the Library of Congress, and the copies of the second movement parts from Dan Stehman, I was convinced that all of the existing pieces of this unfinished symphony had been found.

The Significance of the Piece As It Relates to Harris’ Other Compositions

There are many interesting aspects regarding this relatively obscure and unknown band composition, not the least of which is the title that Harris chose for the work, *American Symphony - 1938*. Did he approach this commission from the Tommy Dorsey band as if this piece would truly be his next symphony?¹² He began the work shortly after completing his

⁷Ibid.

⁸Elizabeth Blair, *NPR’s “Morning Edition,”* 5.

⁹Spizizen, interview by the author.

¹⁰Stehman, *Roy Harris: A Bio-Bibliography*, 190.

¹¹ Spizizen, interview by the author.

¹²Stehman, *Roy Harris: A Bio-Bibliography*, 190.

Third Symphony, a composition which was to become one of his most popular.¹³ One must assume that Harris intended that his fourth contribution to the major genre of “symphony” be a multi-movement work for winds, and I am convinced that the only reason this did not come to pass was because the Dorsey band was not successful when they rehearsed the piece.

In an attempt to gain a greater understanding of how *American Symphony - 1938* relates to other works in Harris’ symphonic *oeuvre*, I began to study the *Folksong Symphony*, which was completed in 1940, two years after Harris began *American Symphony - 1938*. The *Folksong Symphony* fifth movement, which is an orchestral interlude, is based almost entirely upon thematic material found in the first movement of *American Symphony - 1938*. Although there is some rearranging and development of the theme, which is based on the folk song “Jump Up, My Lady,”¹⁴ large melodic sections of the fifth movement of *Folksong Symphony* are identical to the second theme of the first movement of *American Symphony*. In even more convincing fashion, the fourth movement of *Folksong Symphony*, which Harris titled “Mountaineer Love Song,” is based entirely upon melodic and harmonic material from the second movement of *American Symphony*, which he had at one point titled “Sad Song.”¹⁵

So, Cimarron Overture was not Roy Harris’ first work for band, *American Symphony* was, and he intended that it would be his Fourth Symphony...but that was not to be.

This lecture presentation includes background information on the composer’s life and works, discussion of the compositional technique that Harris called “autogenesis,” and the piece is compared to Harris’s *Folksong Symphony*. The presentation also includes a recorded performance and a Power Point score presentation of the complete second movement, “Sad Song.”

¹³Patricia Ashley, “Roy Harris,” *Stereo Review* 21, no. 6 (December, 1968): 70.

¹⁴Dan Stehman, “The Symphonies of Roy Harris: An analytical study of the linear materials and of related works,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1973, University Microfilms: Ann Arbor, 1977), 324.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 319.