An American Concerto (1995) for violin and orchestra
analysis and commentary by Carson P. Cooman

American composer Gwyneth Walker's ***An American Concerto*** (1995) is a three-movement concertante work for violin and orchestra. The orchestra specifications are 2.2.2.2/2.2.1.0/2perc/strings. It is about 15-18 minutes in length with movements of 4, 7-9, and 4-5 minutes respectively.

The three movements of the work are entitled "A Burst of Energy" (referred to as "Burst"), "A Reflection" (referred to as "Reflection") and "Another Stroll" (referred to as "Stroll"). In her program notes, Walker describes the language of the work as follows:

> *This work is entitled **An American Concerto** since its musical language strongly embodies what we have come to associate with typically 'American' music. The rhythms are definite and the harmonic language is open and clear.*
>
> *The listener might hear the three movements of this concerto as distinct elements from the American musical heritage – rock, folk, and jazz. Certainly these influences will be felt. Or perhaps these categories merge into one (American) composer's style.*[1]

This analysis will examine these statements in the context of the music of the concerto. Walker's compositional style has often been described by performers and critics as "American", "direct", "open", "clear", and "uncluttered." By examining how ***An American Concerto*** is constructed, we are able to see how these descriptors are apt, and how they can apply to Walker's musical language in the general sense.

Even without the composer's express acknowledgement of the rock, folk, and jazz influences, just one listen through to the piece reveals that these influences form an important aspect of Walker's composition style. Furthermore, this concerto stands as a model for how the concerto genre 'functions' throughout her output.[2] It also provides insight into Walker's own philosophical thinking about the needs of new concerti in the late 20th and early 21st century.

If one takes Walker's general "assignments" of the influences to each movement, we can. However, the overall work has larger-scale unifying style elements which are notable.

Throughout this analysis, most examples are shown from the piano reduction version of the concerto simply for ease of examination of the chords and harmonies. However, there

[1] http://www.gwynethwalker.com/anameric.html

[2] As of 2004, Walker's catalogue also contains concerti for cello (1995), trumpet (1997), tuba (1995), oboe (2003), clarinet (1991), bassoon (2000), and percussion (1993).

are a few examples also given (in the case of orchestration) from the full orchestral score of the work.

Overall Comments

One aspect worth commentary in the work is the overall harmonic language and plan – which is structured most noticeably around intervals of 4ths and 5ths. These "open" intervals are important to the sound of this piece and the sound of Walker's music in general.

Beyond the uses of 4ths and 5ths to build the local harmonies of the piece (which will be shown as each movement is examined), in a "quasi-Schenkerian" sense the whole tonal plan of the work can be analyzed based on these intervals.

Each movement of the work has a definite key center which is maintained throughout. "Burst" is centered on D, "Reflection" on C, and "Stroll" on G. If we take the tonal center of the last movement (G) as a "global cadence point", we can see the tonalities of the other two movements as representing a 5^{th} and 4^{th} above the movement respectively – thus serving as global dominant and subdominant of the final movement's key center of G. (When arranged as D-G-C, this harmonic scheme also forms a chord of stacked 4ths, a sound which is common to the concerto's language.)

Some of Walker's music is harmonically "goal oriented" – moving from one point to another (and perhaps back again) in response to a text or schema. Examples include songs from ***Though Love Be a Day*** (1979) for voice and piano and ***I Thank You God*** (1998) for SSA choir and piano. These works move to alternate key centers (in particularly the "second harmonic pole" and explore "mediant relationships") for the purposes of their harmonic trajectory.[3]

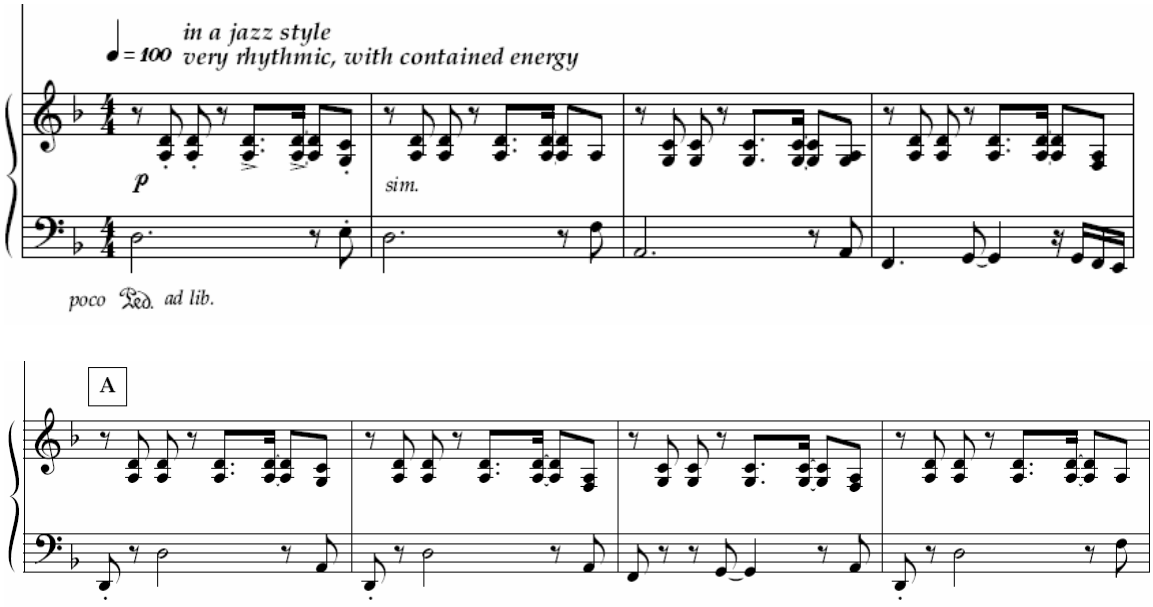
However, ***An American Concerto*** does not possess this property. (There is, however, one important mediant relationship in the last movement.) For the most part, each of the three movements of the work stays nearly entirely within the tonal center that it establishes at its start – rather than trying to establish a new key center or seek a new modulatory goal. What Walker achieves in the concerto, is a harmonic linking between all three basic tonal centers of the work (D-C-G). Through careful diatonic and modal borrowing, Walker establishes a connection between these tonal centers. This idea will be returned to after each movement is examined in turn.

[3] See Walker's own analyses of these works at: http://www.gwynethwalker.com/research.html

"A Burst of Energy"

The opening movement of the concerto borrows three primary elements from the language of rock music: 1) a repeated syncopated rhythmic texture (a "groove"), 2) harmonic progressions; 3) the idea of harmonic pattern repetition with melodic changes over the top.

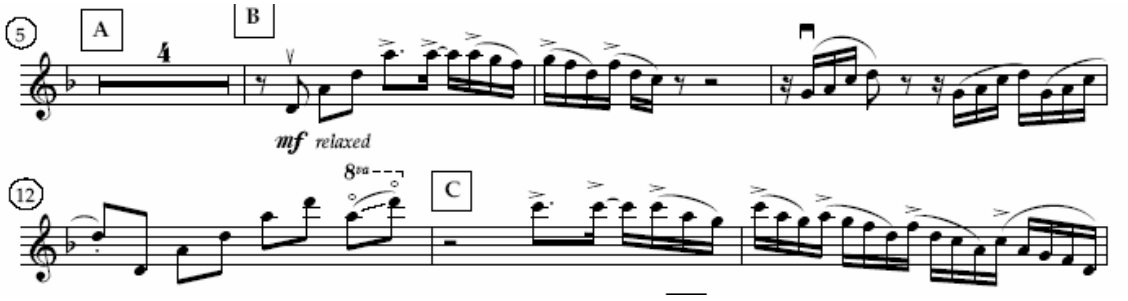
The opening 8 bars of the concerto are for the orchestra alone and establish two important things: 1) the syncopated rhythmic groove of the movement; 2) the basic harmonic progression.



In these bars, a harmonic bass line is established of D-A-F-G which will serve, in a variety of forms as a ritornello throughout the movement which is structured as a loose rondo.

The violin enters in m. 9 with the concerto's main melody, a theme which fixates on the intervals of 4ths and 5ths. Note the opening flourish's alternation of 5ths and 4ths and the outline that 4ths and 5ths have to the shape of the 16th note runs which follow.

The syncopation in the opening melody (marked by the accent marks on what would normally be "off-beats") is also important throughout the rest of the movement and derives from the syncopation of the opening orchestral groove.



After this violin's opening statement, the movement then proceeds for a period (m. 13-64) in a manner of repeating the basic harmonic patterns. The bass line of the work moves between D-A-F-G in a variety of combinations. Often a harmonic/bass pattern is repeated multiple times with slightly different melodic or textural commentary. The violin and orchestra sometimes hocket each other as different wind instruments "take solos" over the harmonic bass patterns.

This texture is related to jazz influences. The movement bears a making "in a jazz style" at the beginning and the orchestral players and soloist are featured in this soloistic manner much like players in a jazz band might be "introduced" to the audience in a set.

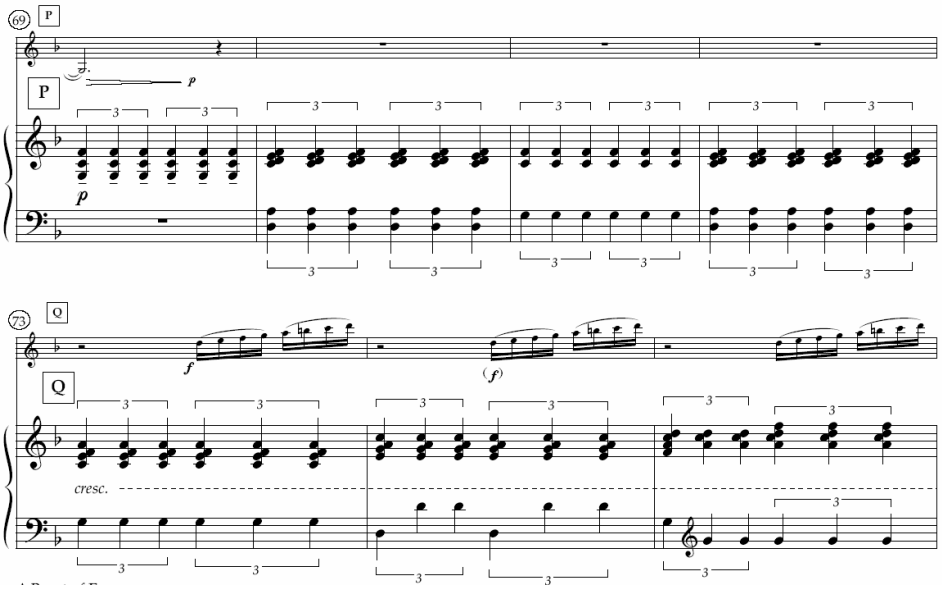
The composer has described this part of the work as following a basic pattern: First, an orchestral instrument is introduced, the violin then joins in its melodic commentary, and then that newly introduced instrument remains a part of the texture of the rest of the movement.

Thus, after the violin's initial solo at m. 9, the clarinet enters at m. 13, joined by the violin. Measures 17-24 serve as a statement again of the ritornello material. At m. 25, the flute presents a solo, joined then by the violin and clarinet (it has not been forgotten!) from the previous solo section.

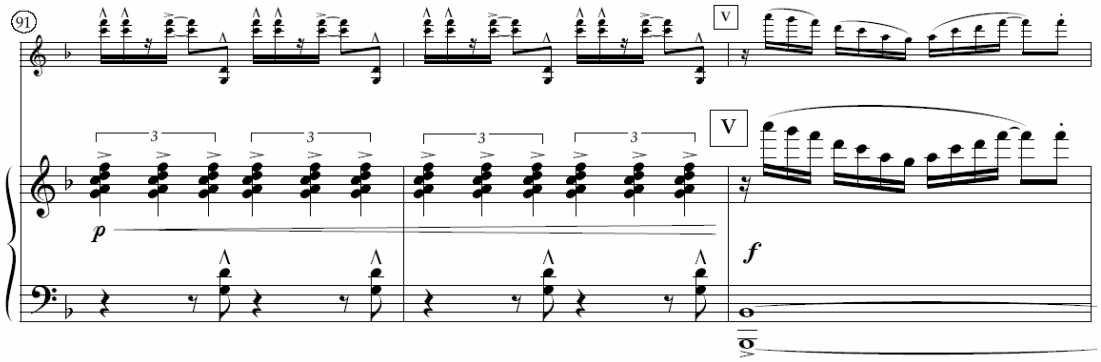
At measure 29, the oboe is the soloist, joined by violin, flute, and clarinet. At measures 37, the bassoon has a solo, joined then by all the previous solo instruments.

At measure 51, the brass are introduced and this is followed by development/extension material and a "build-up."

Measures 65-76 explore a slight harmonic alteration for coloristic effect. In m. 65, the violin substitutes B-natural for B-flat in its downward scalar passages. The orchestra picks this harmonic alteration up in m. 69 with a series of quarter-note triplets which alternate over pedals of D and G, moving upwards to lead towards another statement of the ritornello at m. 77.



This next statement of the ritornello leads to another section with a G pedal before a surprise move to a B-flat pedal at m. 93. This is the first time that B-flat has been established as a tonal center.

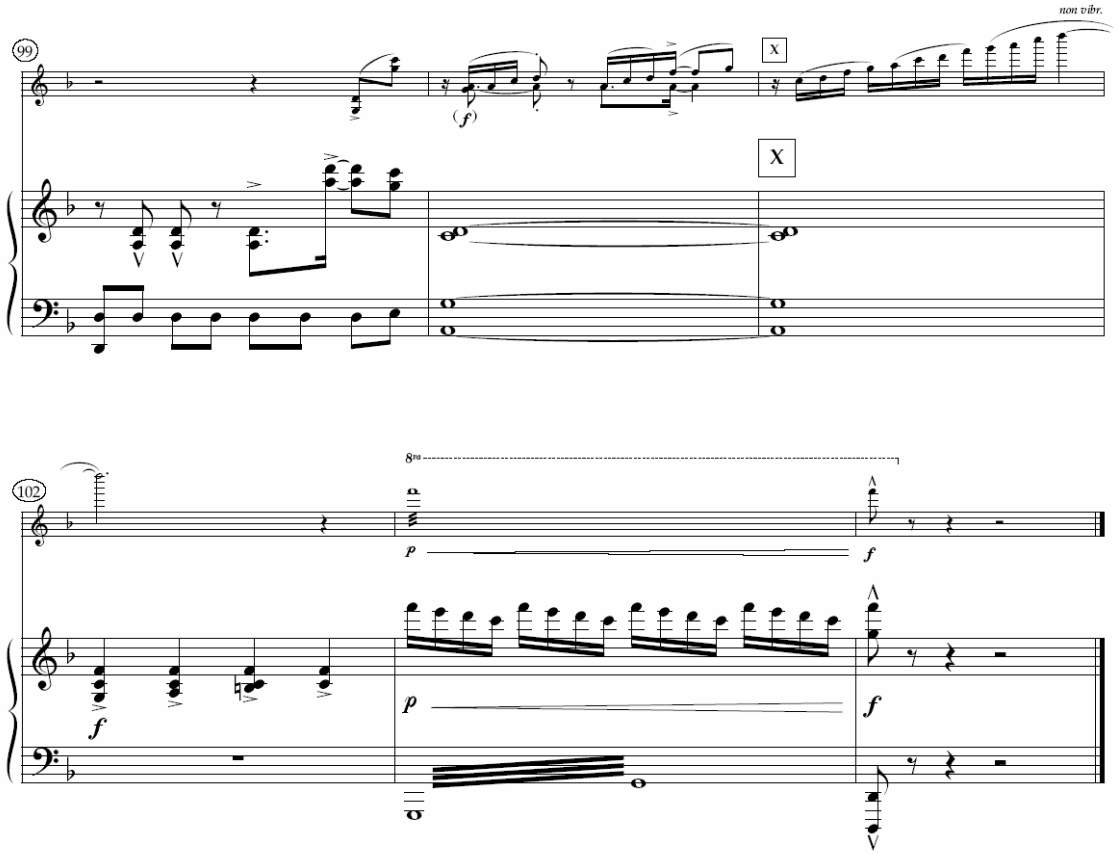


The purpose, however, is to aid in the re-assertion of the D minor tonality after the coloristic substitution of B-natural in the earlier section. This B-flat pedal then allows for a step-wise motion upwards (in a common "rock" cadential pattern) of Bb-C-D. Thus, the tonal D is reestablished at m. 97 before.

This section of the "cadenza" (at m. 93) is also one in which the entire orchestra joins with the violin soloist. Thus, in the same structural manner as the first part of the movement, the violin has first presented cadenza ideas, and then the orchestra joins with it.

Measures 99-104 of the work constitute the very brief coda of the movement, but they actually serve as a small microcosm – a recapitulation of the basic harmonic trajectory of the entire movement that has gone before. Measures 99-100 serve as a reiteration of a

shortened form of the basic groove pattern of the early part of the movement. Measure 102 then provides a short recapitulation of the "quarter-note triplet" section (mm. 69-76), including the B-natural alteration. Measure 103 reasserts the G pedal (from mm. 83-92) and then m. 104 provides the final cadence stroke back on D – the center of the movement.



Thus, harmonically, this movement retains entirely in the key of D minor. There is no progression away from this tonal center. Even in passages where another harmony may be sustained for a period, the ear always hears it in relation to the original D minor and can know that it will soon return.

The orchestration of this movement is straightforward with their being two levels of texture at most times: 1) rhythmic/harmonic groove; 2) melodic figuration. The percussion provide a consistent beat pattern throughout the work, varying it slightly here and there. They are the rhythmic foundation of the groove. The strings (sometimes accompanied by the bassoon) present the harmonic foundation of the groove.

The other winds and brass often then join with the violin in melodic figuration. There are numerous passages in which they double the violin's line for a period, or play with it in canon, or trade off sections with it.

The rhythmic language is one characterized by syncopation. The syncopations exist for the purposes of creating energy and a bouncing rhythmic drive throughout. The 4/4 meter is retained consistently throughout to provide a constant metric low-level groove. The percussion groove reiterates this pattern.

"A Reflection"

The second movement of the work is its emotional center. It is longer than the other two movements combined and has an extended musical discourse.

The movement is dedicated "in memory of Daniel J. Robbins" and in this provides two cases of "extra-musical" synergy. Gwyneth Walker tells the story of this dedication:

> *Danny Robbins was a dear neighbor and friend [in Braintree, Vermont]. He passed away just when I was writing the music. In fact, I woke up one morning, started writing, felt Danny's presence with me...and a few hours later, another neighbor phoned to say that the had passed on. He had leukemia, and died at age 60.*
>
> *Moreover, when I was out in Walla Walla working with the orchestra [for the premiere], a number of players said to me "This music reminds us of watercolor paintings of landscape." ...*
>
> *When I got home, I told Genie Robbins [Danny's wife] about the comments. She told me that Danny's favorite pastime was painting watercolor landscapes.*[4]

Walker's music is rarely "about or inspired by people." Unlike some composers, she does not have a large number of memorial works in her catalogue. The other notable example is ***In Memoriam*** (1980) for solo cello, written in memory of her uncle, and ***Crossing the Bar*** (2000) for voice and piano, written in memory of her mother. However, these works are always deeply felt meditations – creations in music inspired by aspects of that person's life of personality that always transcend the circumstance to make a larger emotional statement.

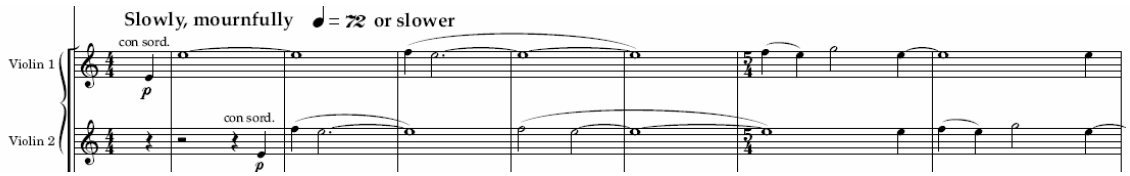
Because of the inspiration, and dedication to her neighbor, this movement is greatly inspired by the landscape of Braintree, Vermont and the beauty of the natural world visible there. The landscape in which she lives has influenced many of Walker's works (most notably ***The Light of Three Mornings*** (1987) for chamber orchestra).

From Walker's original schema, this movement is designated as containing "folk" influences. The most obvious example of this influence being the principal melody: a simple original tune with folk characteristics.

[4] Letter to the author, September 20, 2004

Although it was mentioned earlier that this movement is centered in C major, there is an extended introduction for the orchestra alone which establishes a feeling of A minor. However, it accomplishes this using wisps from the C major melody.

Measures 1 – 44 provide an "atmospheric introduction" to the folk-song section of the movement. In this introductory section, however, the main folk-song melody is hinted at. The strings present an interlocking pattern of phrases from the melody.



However, the "heard" tonality of this presentation is A minor, and not the eventual C major. This is because of the minor third E-G which is outlined and the reliance on the F natural. Thus, the G-natural becomes a modal leading tone in the ear to an imagined a minor.

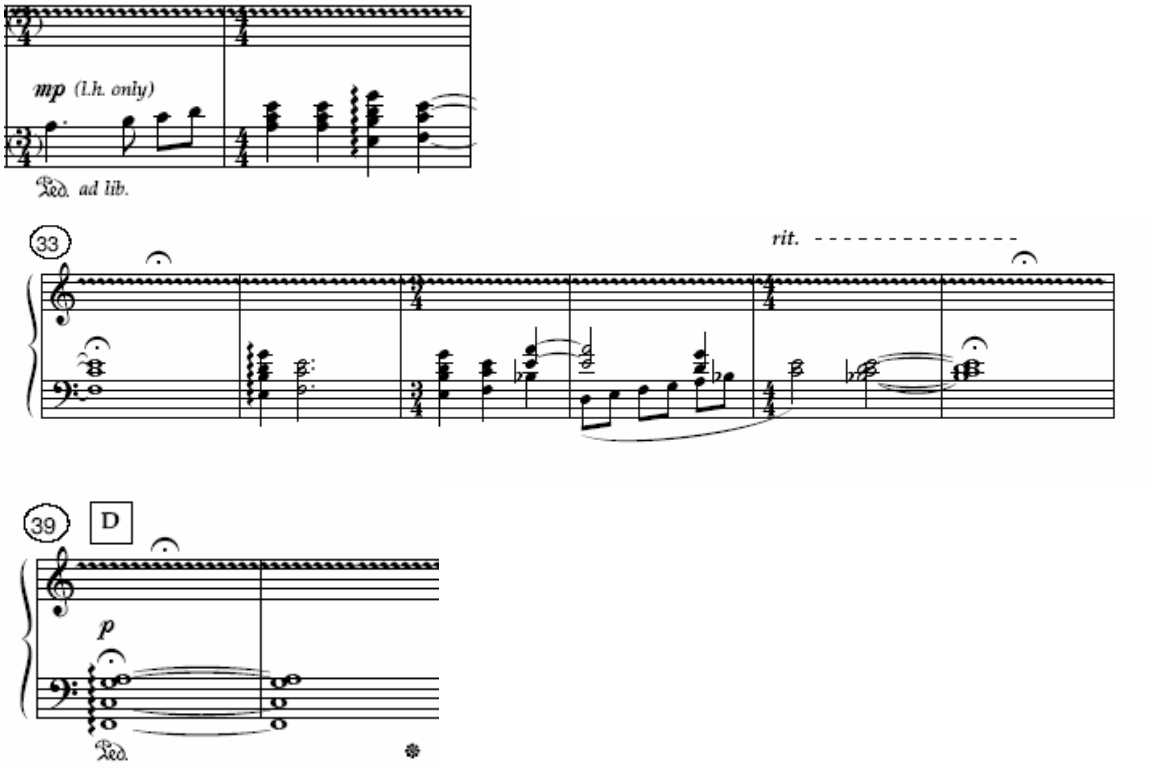
The sound of this opening section is one of "wide open space", a landscape. The texture is similar to the opening of the third movement of ***About Leaves*** (1997) for chamber orchestra, another portrait of the natural world – blurred textures, muted strings, crossing simple lines.

The composer has described aspects of this opening section in relation to visual pictures of Braintree:

> *The flutes and oboes entering in m. 18 are the birds in the distance. The trumpets can resemble any sort of call, even a hunting call. The open fifths are again to resemble open space. The horns, bassoon and trombone at m. 31 might be the rising of the mist, and opening into light. All of these sounds are used to create the setting, which is Braintree, Vermont on a summer or early Fall morning.*[5]

[5] Letter to the author, September 24, 2004

At m. 31, the bassoons and brass present what is the main "chorale" theme of the movement. This theme is very important because it presents a harmonic link between A minor and F major. It begins clearly in A minor, but adds a B-flat that serves clearly as subdominant to an F9 chord at m. 39.



This process of establishing the hints of F major is very important to the main section of the work.

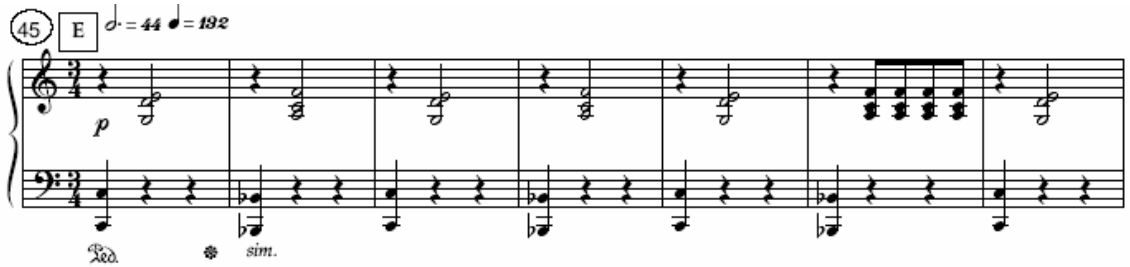
The harmonic language of the core of this movement is centered in C major, but with a mixolydian (or subdominant) borrowing of B-flat. Thus, the role of F major becomes important.

C major is important to the composer as a key representing "purity" and "simplicity." She has often employed it for this extra-musical connotation. A good example can be found in the final movement of ***Craftsbury Trio*** (1990) for violin, piano and cello.

At m. 45 the movement's main material begins with (as in the first movement) an orchestral only setup of a basic harmonic pattern over a simple "walking figuration." Walker describes the rhythm as follows:

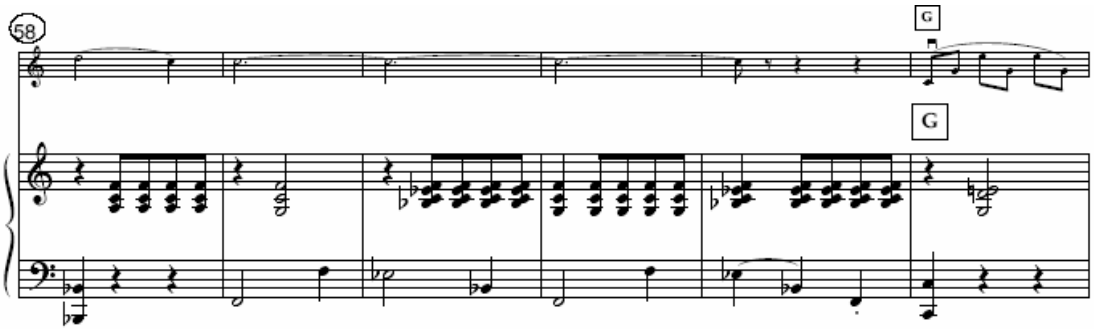
> *The accompaniment patters set the tempo for a person out walking on a country road. Not a 2/2 march. Not a brisk 4/4. Rather, a leisurely walk, of perhaps one*

step per measure. [This is, of course, Danny Robbins out walking.] The slight tapping of the bongo in the background might be heard as a woodpecker.[6]



The violin then enters at m. 53 with the folk-like melody. The composer has described it as "the sort of melody one might hum to him/herself."

The accompaniment to this melody is colored by the mixolydian borrowing of the B-flat and F major sonorities. In m. 60, another borrowing occurs with a bass note and chord centered on E flat. In this case, the E flat is a mixolydian borrowing in F major which had been established in the previous bar.



Walker describes the use of this mixolydian/subdominant borrowing as the progression "subdominant of the subdominant":

Folk music sometimes employs a progression which I entitle the "Subdominant of the Subdominant." This is obviously a very "falling" motion. In the key of C, this would involve a motion from the tonic, C, to B flat, as the Subdominant of F, to F (the Subdominant of C) eventually back to C. One might use such a progression if

[6] Letter to the author, September 24, 2004

one were out walking gently, letting ones feet fall onto the ground, and letting the gentle motion of the walk carry one forward.

This progression would be the opposite of aggression. Rather, this would be someone as gentle as Danny Robbins, who loved to paint watercolors of the landscape, going out for a morning walk.[7]

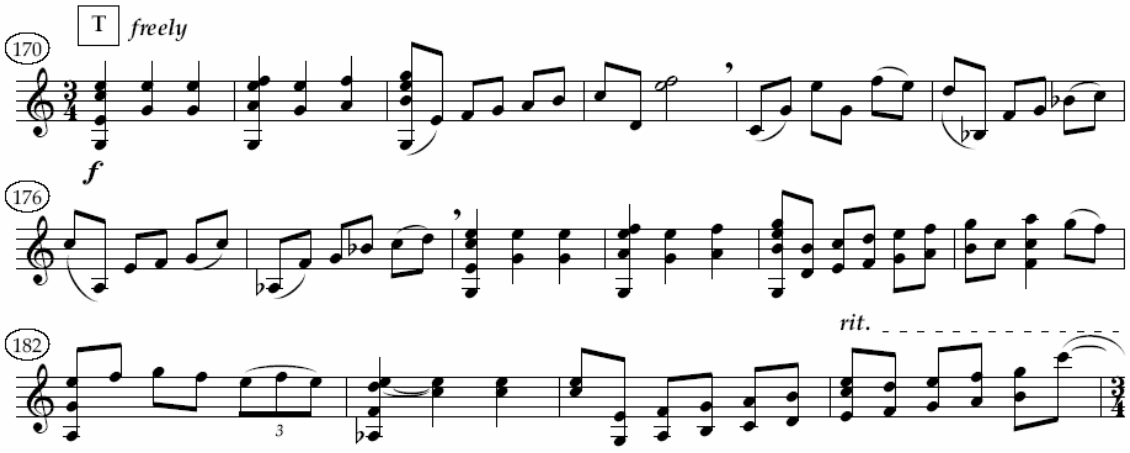
Melodically, the violin provides embellishments of its basic melodies. The harmonic trajectory for this section of the work follows from the above described patterns.

At m. 111, the "chorale" melody returns in the orchestra as a brief interruption before a restatement of the folk-melody returns at m. 127.

From m. 151 onwards, the remainder of the movement could almost be described as an extended "accompanied cadenza." It is a flexible soliloquy for the violin with interruptions and slight commentaries from the orchestra.

The harmonic support for these excursions comes from the previously established harmonic areas of the movement, and particularly the harmonic implications of the "chorale" theme.

At m. 178, the violin presents the principal melody totally unaccompanied. Quadruple, triple, and double stops are frequently included in the texture. This gives the section a strong feeling of a folk fiddler playing a melody all alone. It has a rough-hewn poetic edge to it



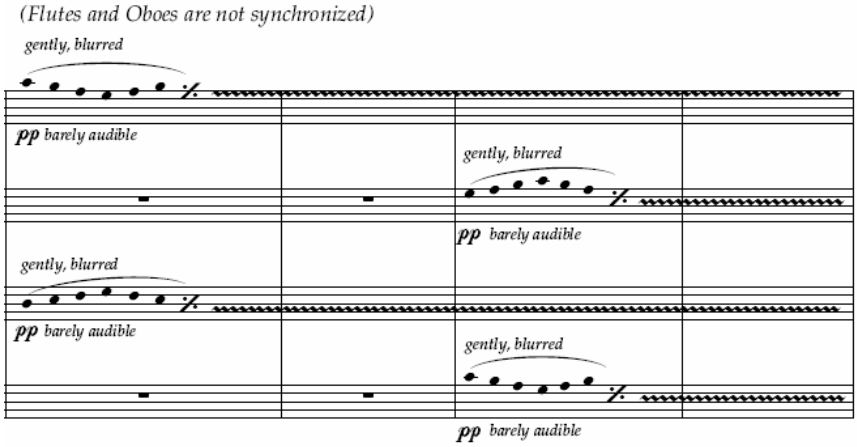
The orchestra re-enters at m. 186 with the F9 chord again, and proceeds along a harmonic pattern derived from the chorale theme. The violin emerges from this again in another extended unaccompanied cadenza at m. 208.

[7] Letter to the composer, September 24, 2004

Suddenly at m. 209, the orchestra and violin engage in a passionate outburst together at full volume. The melodic contour of the outburst is derived from the principal melody. Harmonically, the passage moves downward through a partial chromatic sequence to land on F again before moving to a D in the bass – to setup the final harmonic resting point.

The movement ends with the violin playing one last upwards gesture, echoed by the glockenspiel. The harmonic support for these final gestures is a C major chord in second inversion – thus with a G as its bass. This serves two important functions: 1) providing an open ending to the movement (since it is not the last movement); 2) emphasizing the G as a bass – which will be immediately picked up in the third movement, which is centered on the G minor tonality. The "upward" nature of the gestures represent a movement "towards heaven", appropriate for a piece in memory. The "gentler end" nature of the second inversion chord used also fits with the title of "reflection."

Orchestration-wise, this movement makes use of one of Walker's most often employed textures, gentle "aleatoric blurs." In m. 18, the winds establish an unsynchronized pattern which is repeated as quickly as possible to create a texture and basic harmony. (The violins join in this texture at m. 30). The effect is thus one of sustained harmony, but with a gentle energy pulsing within it.



This texture is important in the movement as it is employed by both orchestra and soloist to create a "timeless" atmosphere at crucial points in the movement. Its non-metrical characteristics create a sense of freedom and spaciousness which are an important characteristic of folk music.

In the case of this work, Walker has described this texture as a portrayal of "mist rising in the morning."

This movement is one of Walker's most emotional orchestral movements because of its direct power. The atmosphere of the opening leads to the simplicity of the folk-like principal tune. This contrasts with the seemingly inevitable passionate outburst at the end of the movement, followed by the brief coda – a release of energy. The dramatic arc when listening is very strong.

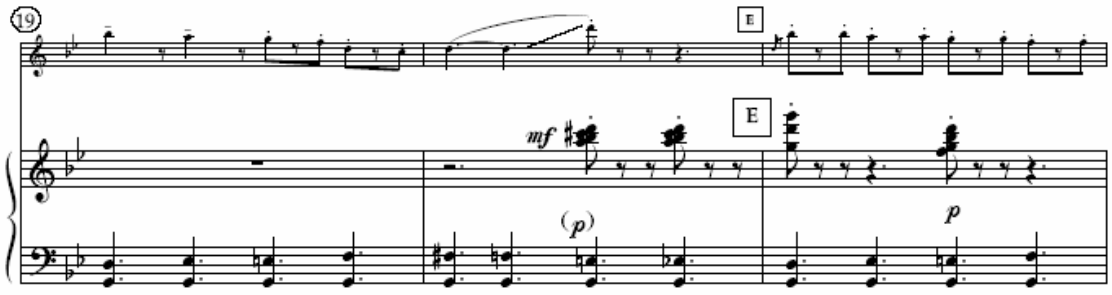
"Another Stroll"

The third movement of the concerto is a "jazz excursion" in a light spirit. The notated 12/8 meter acts as a written out "swing rhythm" where the triplet feel simulates swung 8ths. This strolling texture pervades the movement.

The title "Another Stroll" comes from a reference to the dedicatee and commissioner of the concerto, violinist Susan Pickett. Walker's work ***Fantasy Etudes*** (1992) for violin and piano had been recorded and frequently performed by Pickett – which led to the commissioning of the concerto. The last movement of ***Fantasy Etudes*** is a "jazz excursing" entitled "Strolling on Frederick Street" (inspired by the street in San Francisco.) Since Pickett had commented to the composer that she enjoyed that movement of the etudes very much, Walker decided to make the last movement of the new concerto a similar movement – the same meter, key, and feel. Hence the word "another."

Centered in G minor, the movement again begins with an orchestral only introduction which sets forth the basic harmonic patterns. A descending chromatic jazz bass line is the opening material over which a swinging melody enters at m. 5. The violin throughout this section provides non-pitched "commentary" – firstly by drumming on the body of the instrument ("gentle, nonchalant finger tremolo on body of the violin, as if anticipating a stroll") then by quiet high glissandi, which had also been heard in the first movement as a coloristic effect.

The harmonic motion in this movement comes about primarily through chromatic scales – such as the one exploited at the beginning and then a chromatic scale starting at an interval of a 5th over the bass (G). These "walking bass" patterns are characteristic of jazz.



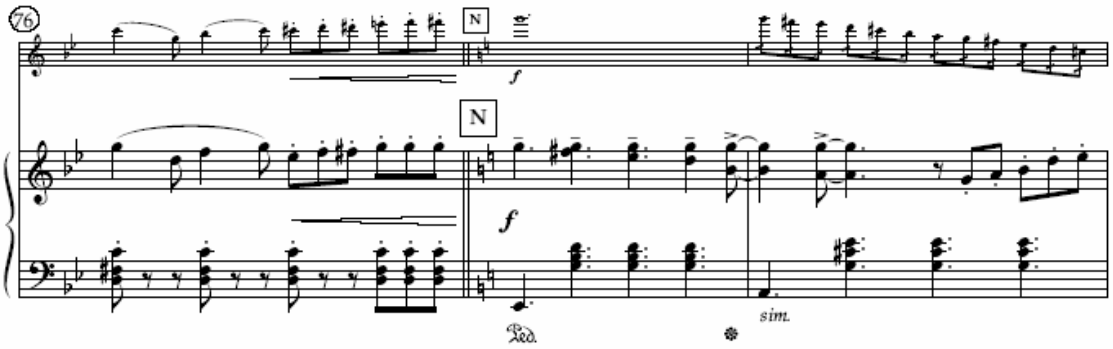
In the manner of how a chromatic scale moves, the shapes and contours of the movement can be seen as one of either moving upwards or downwards. For example, the opening violin melody (at m. 17) has a downward contour, which predominates its texture.

The harmonic trajectory of the first section of the movement is similar to the first movement in that basic harmonic patterns are repeated with alterations to the melodic support. Also, like the first movement, the form is that of a loose rondo, with a ritornello consisting of the main theme as first presented at the violin's initial entrance.

The large number of accidentals and chromatic tones in this movement come about not because of some large-scale harmonic motion, but rather from the chromaticism which is characteristic of the style. They become elaborations of tones from the numerous chromatic scales.

The one harmonic motion in the movement occurs at m. 77 is a surprising large-scale motion and is an example of a mediant relationship, a harmonic motion common in Walker's work.

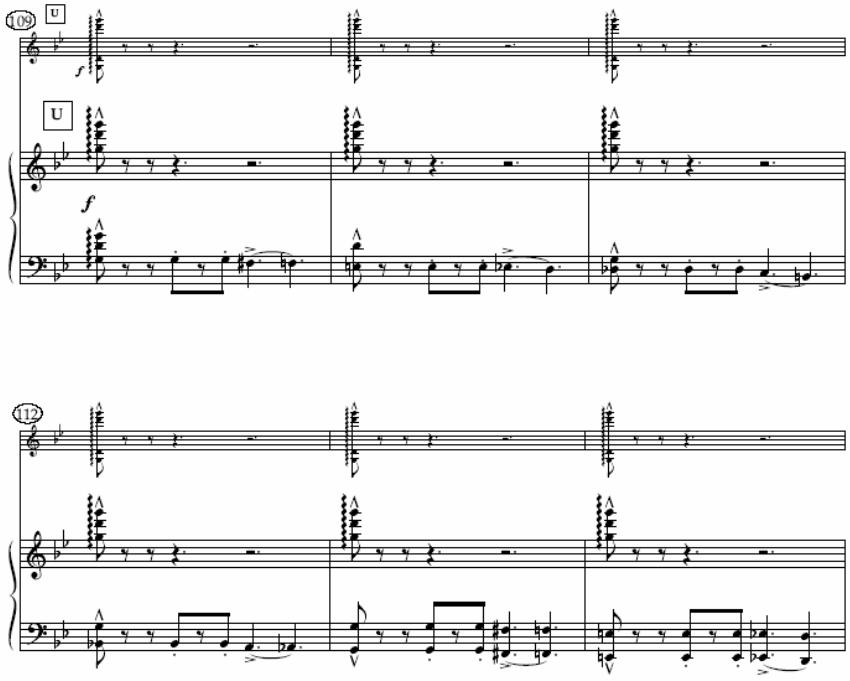
After a passage of 4 measures sitting on a pedal D dominant 7th chord the melodic G of m. 76 is suddenly reinterpreted in m. 77 as the mediant of an E minor chord which sets the new tonality at m. 77.



This section of mm. 77-92 is a brief excursion setting off from E minor. It is a section of free harmonic relationships connected by intervals of 4ths and 5ths roving between extended triads and dominant 7ths: E minor, A dominant 7th, G minor, C dominant 7th, B-flat minor, and E-flat dominant 7th. It settles in a passage of E major before extended the E chromatically downward in m. 92 to land back in G minor at m. 93. This little "excursion" is a short departure from the stroll atmosphere. Perhaps a section of sidewalk was being repaired and the walker had to temporarily cross over to the other side, before returning.

The aural effect of this brief tonal excursion is that the strength of the G minor basic tonality becomes joyfully reaffirmed at m. 93 with its return. The section that follows returns to the chromatic extensions of the first section.

The passage beginning at m. 109 takes the chromatic scale that has served as the basis of the movement and extends it for 7 bars over pedal chords in the violin.



The final section of the work is a brief "punctuated cadenza" for the violin which presents roving excursions in G minor over harmonic support recalling the previous sonorites of the movement.

In the final two bars of the work, the violin tunes its G string down while playing tremolando to sound like the end of a jazz set where the instruments perform "fall offs." The orchestra plays one last punctuated chord in closure to establish the G minor tonality, with harmonic extensions of jazz chords.

The orchestration employed in this movement is similar to the first movement with low winds, percussion, and strings providing the rhythmic groove. The percussion battery employs a cowbell – a characteristic sound popular to Walker's music. Since her studio is on a dairy farm in rural Vermont, the sounds of cowbells are familiar ones to her ears. The texture is one of light energy – not the driving energy of the first movement, but rather a more gentle energy, exactly in the character of the "stroll."

Concluding Comments

In the variety of concerti that Walker has composed since 1990, she has explored a key principle: that of practicality. For Walker, the role of the concerto in the late 20th and

early 21st century is not one of Romantic excess and heroism. She does not conceive her concerti as virtuoso showpieces to "belong" to a certain soloist.

Her concerti are designed as a manner of "local heroism", designed to showcase soloists and principal players in community, regional, and professional orchestras in the USA. They are appealing and direct pieces where the soloist and orchestra dichotomy is not controlled by some complicating ideological principles. They are simply engaged in a musical dialogue together – exploring the same material for musical ends.

A good example of this sort of egalitarian (perhaps "American") thinking comes in the first movement where all the orchestral instruments are shown as soloists (in the "jazz band" manner), led by the violin. Thus, the role of "soloist" is not something held onto exclusively by the concerto's protagonist.

Walker's concerti are thus accessible to play and do not require any kind of "ridiculous virtuosity" on the part of the soloists. They have been frequently and enthusiastically performed.

An American Concerto is an example of this model. It was commissioned and premiered by the Walla Walla Symphony Orchestra in Washington State, USA in honor of their concertmaster, Susan Pickett. It has proven to be a successful piece with other orchestras in this manner.

Let us return to the adjectives which opened this article – ones that are often applied to Walker's musical language: "American", "direct", "open", "clear", and "uncluttered."

The "open" sonorities of 4ths and 5ths pervade the work.

The "directness" speaks through form and sonority – "clear" and "uncluttered." Harmonies are presented clearly, forms are clearly delineated, and the emotional map of the work is clearly presented. From the bursting force of "Burst", to the powerful emotional impact of "Reflection', to the light-hearted fun of "Stroll", the purposes and affects of the movements are clearly articulated.

Through this examination of ***An American Concerto***, the structure and harmonic trajectories of each movement have been shown. The key centers of D, C, and G are explored. The key centers of D and G have a harmonic connection to begin with, and Walker provides a firm connection between C and G with her mixolydian/subdominant borrowing of the B-flat in the C major texture, and the importance that F major tonality is given.

Aspects of unifying large-scale form have also been noted in the free rondo conceptions of the outer two movements and the more flexible fantasy of the second movement – structured around its material.

Furthermore, by examining the influences of rock, jazz, and folk on the specific movements of the concerto, we can see how these influences have come to be assimilated into Walker's personal compositional style. This is how we can see how the adjective "American" comes into play.

The movements are not actual "rock, folk, or jazz" pieces, but rather contemporary American "excursions" inspired by these musical traditions. In the same manner that Dvorak or Tchaikovsky incorporated the local color of their own native musical traditions into their concerti, Walker too has taken the musical language of her own country and and made it her own.

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All musical examples are from the published scores of ***An American Concerto.***

Carson Cooman is an American composer and musicologist. As a composer, his music has and continues to be performed around the world and has been commissioned by numerous organizations. As a musicologist, he has written many articles and given lectures on subjects relating to American and Australian contemporary music. He holds a degree in composition and musicology from Harvard University.