

NWCR818

Johana Harris

Plays the Music of Roy Harris



Roy Harris (1898-1979)
Sonata Op. 1 (1928) (14:48)
1. I. Prelude (2:04)
2. II. Andante ostinato (7:53)
3. III. Scherzo; Coda (4:51)

Little Suite (1938) (4:16)
4. Bells (1:23)
5. Sad News (1:11)
6. Children at Play (0:33)
7. Slumber (1:09)
American Ballads (Set I) (1942-45) (9:42)
8. I. The Streets of Laredo (2:04)
9. II. The Wayfaring Stranger (1:49)
10. III. The Bird (1:19)
11. IV. Black is the Color (1:19)
12. V. Cod Liver Ile (2:18)
From *Piano Suite in Three Movements* (1942)
13. Occupation (2:55)
14. Contemplation (6:08)
15. Toccata for piano (1949) (3:08)
Robert Evett (1922-1975)
16. Sonata No. 2: *Chorale en rondeau* (1957) (8:48)
Carlos Chávez (1899-1978)
17. Sonatina for piano (4:44)
Johana Harris, piano.

Total playing time 57:03

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Notes

These performances by legendary pianist Johana Harris are taken from recording sessions carried out during the late summer and early fall of 1987 at the Hollywood-based Crystal Studios of engineer-producer Andrew Berliner. Over a period of three months the seventy-four year old Johana committed to tape more than a hundred works, covering a time span of some five centuries, by thirty-five composers, to which were added a pair of extended improvisation sequences (one of her long time specialties). The anthology as a whole was aimed at showcasing both the extent of her repertoire and her remarkable artistry which had flowered over a period of some sixty years. It was also a reflection of Johana's discriminating taste and very personal approach to programming. All of the music meant a great deal to her though at the sessions she chose to record only particular movements of works. Remarkably, the ambitious project was begun without a particular label in mind for release. MCA Classics showed interest in a CD release of the series but got only as far as bringing out twenty-eight tracks of Bach and Debussy. The resulting two CDs, however, enjoyed a regrettably short catalogue life, for hardly six months following their release, MCA opted out of the classical music field.

To represent twentieth-century music of the western hemisphere in her anthology, Johana Harris chose the work of five composers, three of whom appear on this recording. She began with the handful of solo piano pieces by her marital and professional partner of forty-three years, Roy Harris (1898-1979), one of the key figures on the creative scene in American symphonic music during the middle third of the twentieth

century (along with Hanson, Copland, Piston, Barber, and Schumann). Two of the other composers represented in the collection, John Edmunds (1913-1986) and Robert Evett (1922-1975), studied with Roy Harris at Cornell University and Colorado College respectively, while the third, Jake Heggie (*b* 1961) was a piano student with Johana and became her second husband in 1981. (Since Johana's death in 1995 he has been making a name for himself as a remarkably gifted composer for the voice.) The one composer chosen from south of the border was Mexico's Carlos Chávez (1899-1978). On this recording, we have the Roy Harris works, plus the single pieces by Evett and Chávez.

The Roy Harris *Sonata for Piano* is one of his significant achievements from the period of his study with Nadia Boulanger (1926-29). Also from this period were a *Song Cycle on Words by Whitman* for women's chorus and two pianos, the *Concerto for Piano, Clarinet, the String Quartet*, and the *American Portrait Symphony* (given a rehearsal reading by Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, but never publicly performed). Elements of the *Sonata* appear to have been sketched out prior to Harris's European sojourn, but the excitement of a brief return voyage to New York in November 1928 proved a major stimulus toward finishing the work: "I was determined to put this intoxication into a musical form which one musician could utter on one instrument—something of ringing steel—taut—swift—impatient of the wisdom of our yesterdays."

The opening Prelude, declamatory and dramatic (*Maestoso, con bravura*), lasts barely more than two minutes and grows

autogenetically out of the initial descending fourth. In her performances, Johana Harris takes a sixteen bar composer-sanctioned cut that makes the movement sound even more taut, reaching the finish line in two minutes flat. The Andante ostinato slow movement embodies the lyrical essence of the work and has been described by the composer as “a variation study of two melodic types.” One is the 11/4 left-hand bass pattern, the other, moving concomitantly, is in Harris’s words “a free scale line polytonal pastoral style of melody.” The total effect is an amalgam of linear serenity and great harmonic richness. The breezily brilliant *Scherzo* builds from its initial four-note germ into a bracing study in the form of two- and three-part invention. A cadenza leads directly into a highly rhetorical *Coda* (again *Maestoso, con bravura*) built largely on materials from the Prelude and concludes (*Con tutta forza*) with a massive succession of polytonal chords. Robert Evett, in a December 1969 *Atlantic Monthly* article on Harris, sums up the Sonata as “an affront to the listener—a punch in the gut, a slap in the face.”

Pianist Harry Cumpson, an early Harris proponent, gave the Sonata its world premiere on February 24, 1929 as a part of the Copland-Sessions concert series at New York’s Little Theatre. (Though it may have been the most substantial piece on the program, it was the Virgil Thomson-Gertrude Stein *Capital Capitals* for male quartet and piano that stole the show in terms of audience reaction.) Johana Harris’s first recording of the Sonata was done for RCA Victor in mid-December 1937 and released in August 1939.

The early Roy Harris “in your face” style persisted most notably in such works as the *Symphony 1933*, the first version of *When Johnny Comes Marching Home—An American Overture*, and the choral pieces *A Song for Occupations* and *Symphony for Voices*—both based on Walt Whitman texts. However with the coming of Johana into his life as wife number four (they were married on October 10, 1936 at Union, Oregon), the Roy Harris musical language began to take on a perceptibly gentler image, reaching its apogee in the celebrated Third Symphony (1939).

Roy Harris, the self-made man, and, to a significant degree, an autodidact in matters musical, was now living under the same roof with a highly-trained fellow musician. Johana’s cultivated musicality may not have wholly diluted the distinctive early Harris idiom, but he did move away from rhythmic and harmonic abrasiveness and toward a rich-hued modal-infused lyricism. The full extent of Johana’s direct influence on Roy’s compositions has become subject to a great deal of speculation, but her impact on his later writing for piano is significant.

Late 1938 saw Roy and Johana well ensconced at Upper Montclair, New Jersey where Roy commuted to Princeton for his teaching at the Westminster Choir School, and where he completed the Third Symphony. When plans for its premiere by the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington D.C. did not materialize, Roy partially allayed his disappointment by composing a five-minute mini-suite for piano as a Christmas gift for Anne Norton, daughter of M.D. Herter (“Polly”) Norton, a patron and musical collaborator (on the string quartet transcription of Bach’s *Art of the Fugue*). The four brief movements of the *Little Suite* reveal Harris to be an adept and poetic miniaturist. Bits of the Christmas carol “Joy to the World” turn up in *Bells*, surrounded by rich polychordal textures. *Children at Play* is an evocative thirty-second study in seven-eight time with irregular metrics for the right hand. Dan Stehman in his 1984 study *Roy Harris: An American Musical Pioneer* (Twayne Publishers; Boston) characterizes the *Little Suite* as “an excellent introduction to Harris’s harmonic style.”

This is Johana Harris’ third recording of the *Little Suite*. The

first dates from 1939 and was titled “Children’s Suite” when RCA Victor used it as a fourth-side filler for her initial recording of the Sonata. The second was part of a Harris group done for MGM records in the middle 1950s but never released, as MGM bowed out of the classical recording picture in 1959.

From Upper Montclair, Roy and Johana moved on in 1941 to Cornell University, this time as academic colleagues, and then in 1943, to Colorado College which saw them through the latter years of World War II. While in Colorado much of the Harris activity outside the classroom involved radio broadcast concerts and other entertainment for the Sixth Army Air Forces troops stationed at nearby Fort Logan. (By this time, Roy had been achieving major successes with his *Folksong* Symphony, not to mention attending the nationwide broadcast of The Fifth Symphony with Serge Koussevitzky’s Boston Symphony Orchestra.) A major stock in trade for Roy and Johana’s broadcasts and live appearances was the American folk song repertoire whose musical language came as second nature to both. The ever-volatile Roy handled the commentary while Johana with her fine singing voice took care of the music, adding to the mix her flair for clever and brilliant improvisation. This in effect provided the seedbed for the *American Ballads*. They were intended initially, it seems, as interludes in a 1942 series of fifteen broadcasts over Denver’s radio station KOA under the auspices of the Rocky Mountain Radio Council. As Roy put it in his introduction for the Carl Fischer publication of *Set I* (1947), “so many pianists and pupils requested the interludes that it became necessary to enlarge them somewhat to make them long enough for separate piano pieces.” Ten were planned for Carl Fischer publication, but only the first series of five were completed. Two others did make it to light in the mid-1980s and were published in 1987 by the California State University Roy Harris Collection, as edited by Roy’s musical executor, Dan Stehman.

Here it must be said that the Roy Harris treatment of folksong material is a far cry from that of Aaron Copland or Virgil Thomson. Harris brings to bear his own special brand of harmonic textures. The atmosphere throughout the set, save for the extroverted “Cod Liver Ile,” is for the most part spare, ruminative, even brooding as in “Black is the Color of My True Love’s Hair.”

“Streets of Laredo” is the familiar Southwest tale of the cowboy shot in a brawl and his subsequent funeral rites: “O beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly...” (see Lomax’s *Cowboy Songs and other Frontier Ballads*, Macmillan, New York, 1938). “Wayfaring Stranger,” also known as “John Riley,” was for many years the signature tune associated with folksinger-actor Burl Ives, with whom the Harrises enjoyed a warm friendship. Save for the beginning and the end, the Harris treatment is essentially ruminative. “The Bird” offers an interplay of “The Blackbird and the Crow” (or “Leatherwing Bat,” as learned from Burl Ives) along with the Appalachian tune “Hop Up, My Ladies.” For the hauntingly beautiful “Black is the Color of My True Love’s Hair” as adapted by John Jacob Niles, Harris uses only the first line, but brings to bear the fullest measure of his harmonic resourcefulness, leaving the music at the close in a state of timeless suspension. “Cod Liver Ile” was originally an 1870’s British music hall song that found its way into the Newfoundland fishery as a kind of sea chantey (see Elizabeth Briston Greenleaf and Grace Yarrow Mansfield’s *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland*; Harvard University Press, 1933). “O doctor, dear doctor, o doctor, dear John, / Your cod liver oil is so pure, so strong / I’m afraid of my life, I’ll go down to the s’ile, / If my wife don’t stop drinking your cod live ile.” (So runs the refrain). In the Harris version, we get a spirited

jig with all the harmonic-rhythmic trimmings. The first Johana Harris recording of the *American Ballads* was for MGM in the mid-1950s, but like the *Little Suite*, unreleased.

Over their first half-dozen years of marriage, Roy had made various attempts to come up with a large-scale solo piano work for Johana. While he was more successful production-wise in the concerto medium—writing three piano concertos, a two-piano concerto and two fantasias for piano and orchestra, all of which Johana premiered—a satisfactory big solo work failed to materialize. G. Schirmer had announced in the 1930s a “Second Piano Sonata” and RCA Victor had promised a set of “Four Etudes.” Finally, on a 1942 commission from the League of Composers for its twentieth anniversary, Roy assembled a nine-minute Piano Suite in Three Movements. Only the exquisite middle movement, *Contemplation*, was wholly new. The first movement, *Occupation*, is a powerful elaboration on the African-American railroad work song, “Tie Shuffling Chant” (“Ho, boys cain-cha line ‘em?”), that appears in the 1940 *Singing Through the Ages* anthology that Roy had prepared with Jacob Evanson. In pianistic guise, it emerges as a highly effective study in sonority and harmonic texture as applied to African-American speech rhythm. *Contemplation* takes the form of variations on the hymn tune “Slane” (“Be Thou My Vision, Lord”). The whole calls for the pianist to execute most subtle shadings and coloration at the lower end of the dynamic range. The later pages are replete with delicate *fioritura* ornamentation, evocative, according to Harris, of his boyhood memories of having to be in church while his thoughts were of the beauties of Nature outside. The third movement, *Recreation* (not recorded by Johana), is akin to the finale of the *Little Suite*: onomatopoeic imagery of childhood play with amusing references to familiar nursery songs and dances. Johana gave the first performance of the complete three movements set at the League of Composers anniversary concert at New York’s Museum of Modern Art on December 27, 1942.

The three-minute *Toccata for Piano* was written to mark the 1949 American Music Awards program of the *Sigma Alpha Iota* musical sorority, which took place at the Hotel Drake in Chicago, August 29, 1950. However, Johana had given the piece a trial run over Nashville’s radio station WLAC the previous fall. Beveridge Webster gave the first public performance at New York’s Carl Fischer Hall on January 23 as part of a publisher’s promotional concert.

Roy had made a previous try at a toccata for Johana in 1939, but was dissatisfied with the outcome. The music of the *Toccata* in its definitive 1949 guise adds up to florid display in a twentieth-century baroque manner recalling the Buxtehude or early Bach organ works in toccata style; but the treatment of the thematic material has its own special resonances, notably in the placing of chordal punctuation after each of a series of highly varied and virtuosic quasi-recitative episodes. In her performances, Johana, with Roy’s acquiescence, chose to abbreviate the lyrical matter with the aim of further tightening the music’s structure. As with the *Little Suite* and the *American Ballads*, Johana’s mid-fifties recording of the *Toccata* for MGM remains unissued.

Robert Evett studied composition under Roy Harris at Colorado College between 1941 and 1947. During the latter years of this period, he published an illuminating essay, “The Harmonic Idiom of Roy Harris,” in the spring 1946 issue of *Modern Music*. He pursued further studies at the Juilliard School with Vincent Persichetti and subsequently achieved an outstanding reputation as music critic, writing for *The New Republic*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Washington Star*. As a composer, he cultivated a somewhat austere neo-classical musical language that was tempered occasionally by a powerful emotive aspect. The *Chorale en rondeau*, the final movement

of his 1952 Second Piano Sonata, stands as a prime exemplar.

Carlos Chávez was the founding father of the twentieth-century school of Mexican music—a figure comparable in that milieu to Béla Bartók in Hungary. In 1922 he became exposed at first hand to the European *avant-garde* via Berlin, Vienna, and Paris, and in 1924 composed three sonatinas: for piano, violin and piano, and for cello and piano. *Sonatina for Piano* is in five sections (*Moderato*, *Andantino*, *Allegretto*, *Vivo*, *Lento*) and might be described as spare, flinty, and compelling.

The Chávez and Evett works, as performed here by Johana Harris, are both first recordings.

Johana Harris was born as Beula Duffey in Ottawa, Canada, shortly before midnight on New Year’s Eve of 1912 (her official birth date is listed as January 1, 1913). From earliest childhood, she displayed preternatural aptitude for music in general and the piano in particular. By age seven, she began serious piano study, first under Bergthe LaVerde Worden and a few years later with Liszt pupil Henry Puddicombe. By her tenth year, what with her excellent teachers and a relentlessly ambitious mother, Beula was being billed as “Ottawa’s Wonder Child Pianiste.” A string of private and public recitals was followed by a family move to New York where she came under the tutelage of Ernest Hutcheson, who was to become dean and later president of the Juilliard School. She herself wound up at Juilliard on scholarship at age 14 and the following year was to become the youngest faculty member in the institution’s history. Upon graduation in 1933, she was off to Berlin for voice study at the Berliner Hochschule and to all intents was on the verge of a major career. But fate intervened by way of a Juilliard summer faculty party in the summer of 1935, where she encountered Roy Harris, who was himself well on the road to fame as the most vital American symphonic composer of the day. Within a year they were married and Roy had her name changed to Johana in homage to J.S. Bach (but with one “n” dropped for numerological reasons, according to Roy).

During her years with Roy and thereafter, Johana carried on as recitalist, though as time went on and five children began to fill the household, more and more energy went into teaching. This was especially the case when she was not collaborating with Roy on his various music festival and broadcast ventures. As academic colleagues, the couple had joint sojourns at more than a dozen academic institutions. For all the acclaim she reaped from her recital and many radio broadcasts, Johana balked at being tied up with any of the major concert managements.

Johana’s recording career began in 1937 with RCA Victor, for whom she did Roy’s Piano Sonata and Piano Quintet and in between the Bach-Busoni Chaconne in its first-ever recording. With William Primrose, there was Roy’s *Soliloquy and Dance for Viola and Piano*, as well as unissued recordings of Bach, a Schubert Sonata, and a Bach double keyboard concerto with Jeanne Behrend. There were no further major label recordings until the 1950 performance for Columbia of Roy’s Violin Sonata with Josef Gingold. Limited edition issues were made of the Ginastera Piano Sonata No. 1, the Piston Piano Quintet, and the Prokofiev Flute Sonata, all from the ASCAP-sponsored 1952 Pittsburgh International Festival of Contemporary Music. Non-commercial LPs came from the 1950 Cumberland Forest Festival with the Schoenberg Six Little Piano Pieces, the Debussy Cello Sonata, and Roy’s Piano Quintet. Not until the middle 1950s did major recordings come to pass, this time for the MGM label, for whom she did a substantial Debussy series, plus the Bloch Piano Quintet, and Roy’s *Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra* and the cantata, *Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight*. The unhappy fate of these recordings is noted elsewhere in these notes. An unissued

recording of Roy's Violin Sonata for EMI with Yehudi Menuhin is believed to have been done also at the time.

Later recording activity by Johana, prior to the 1987 Andrew Berliner series, is sporadic: Roy's Piano Quintet and the Violin Sonata with Eudice Shapiro for the Los Angeles-based Contemporary label, the Duo (Sonata) for Cello and Piano on Auda (CD reissue on Music and Arts), the Piston Piano Quintet in 1984 for the Vox sister label, Pantheon, plus a run of performances during the 1980s for Varèse Sarabande (Roy's Piano Quintet and Concerto for Amplified Piano, along with an issue of a 1960 performance of the Piano Quintet in a version for string orchestra retitled "Concerto"). Most of the Varèse Sarabande material has been reissued on CD by other labels, namely Music and Arts, and Citadel.

The greater part of Johana's pianism is documented on broadcast tapes retained in institutional archives and libraries, in particular the Roy Harris Collection at California State University, Los Angeles, which holds several hundred performances beginning with those of the 1950s.

— David Hall

Note: I am indebted to Dan Stehman, Louise Spizizen, and John Heggie and their work over the past twenty years for much of the information and insight that has gone into these notes.

Every producer wishes, perhaps, for just once in his life, to have the opportunity to direct a true genius; Johana Harris was such a person. Absent were the disconcerting behavior patterns sometimes found in today's music industry. Johana Harris is talent with discipline. Spontaneity of feeling and emotion in the form of musical communication was the essence of her work. She might take a friend aside, and say "something has been on my mind all day," and then play that something, perhaps just a few measures of Bach or Chopin. Then she'd smile conspiratorially, as if they had just shared an exquisite moment of art. She was a pianist from the old school. Johana loved the sound and the feel of the piano and the four centuries of music she played came alive at her fingertips. There was never a second "take." She played as if it were her music... indeed it was.

She knew Roy's music at least as well as he did. Anyone following the printed scores while listening to her play would likely find discrepancies. Because Johana and Roy were so connected, it is impossible to say which version is definitive. Surely, her changes were not accidental.

As Johana Harris interprets the music of her husband Roy, we glimpse heaven and savor her sweet playing like vintage wine to be appreciated and remembered.

— Andrew Berliner
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Production Notes

Produced and engineered by Andrew Berliner. Recorded at Crystal Studios, Hollywood, California, August–November 1987. Baldwin piano courtesy of the Baldwin Company, Los Angeles, California.

Digitally mastered by Robert Wolff, engineer, Sony Music Studios, New York City.

Publishing:

Sonata Op. 1: AMP; *Little Suite* and *Sonatina* for Piano: G. Schirmer;

American Ballads and *Toccata*: Carl Fischer;

Occupation and *Contemplation*: Belwin Mills;

Sonata No. 2: Peer International Corp.