

“A Splash of Cold Water” from *Short Set for String Quartet* (1993)
analysis and commentary by Carson P. Cooman

American composer Gwyneth Walker’s *Short Set for String Quartet* (1993) is a work in six brief movements. “A Splash of Cold Water” (hereafter called “A Splash”) is the opening movement. Walker’s program notes for the quartet describe the purpose of the movements as an American updating of traditional forms and ideas from the classical string quartet repertoire (as typified by Mozart and Haydn). Regarding this movement, she comments,

*And rather than an "Allegro" to infuse energy, perhaps "A Splash of Cold Water" will do!*¹

In this way, the purpose of this movement in the context of quartet is indeed one of introduction and “energy infusion.” It is thus a brief movement, with a concise set of musical materials and a condensed form. In this sense (of condensed form), Walker’s comparison of the movement to the opening “Sonata-Allegro” of a classical quartet is not particularly fruitful as the extent of material presentation and development of a classical “Sonata-Allegro” is not part of the purpose of “A Splash.”

This brief analysis will explore the piece in terms of three primary aspects: 1) overall form; 2) harmony; 3) rhythm and other musical features. At all times, the aural impact of the work and the effect of form and harmony on this will be considered – as this is one of the most important factors in Walker’s music.

Overall Form

The large chunks of musical material in “A Splash” can be split easily into two types – referred to for ease of use as “dance material” and “chorale material.” The “dance material” is energetic and rhythmic – usually articulated in a staccato fashion. Although it is not contrapuntal, there is an interplay between the parts which makes the texture not strictly homophonic either. By contrast, the “chorale material” is chordal/homophonic and of less overt energy. The energy contained in the “chorale material” sections is potential energy – ready to burst forth into the “dance material.” The sections of “chorale material” are shorter in length than their connected sections of “dance material.”

“A Splash” can be generally broken into these large formal sections.

Section A (“dance material”)	mm. 1-27	27 measures
Section B (“chorale material”)	mm. 28-45	18

¹ <http://www.gwynethwalker.com/shortset.html>

Section A ¹ (“dance material”)	mm. 46-73	28
Section B ¹ (“chorale material”)	mm. 74-79	6
Section A ² (“dance material”)	mm. 80-88	8
Coda (“two allusions”)	mm. 89-93	5

What these formal section breakdowns reveal is a structure that can be viewed in two ways. One is an alternation structure/”simple rondo” (with only one contrasting episode) of A-B-A¹-B¹-A²-Coda.

The other is a bi-partite structure: A-B-A¹ followed by B¹-A²-Coda. The justification for this bi-partite structure comes from the section proportions. Looking at it in this manner, two sections of the same length frame one of a different length in each case. However, at the same time, the pattern of the “chorale material” sections being shorter than the “dance material” is maintained.

Thus, in the first group, the sandwiched section (because it is “chorale material”) is shorter than its surrounding ones of nearly equal length. In the second group, the middle section (because it is “dance material”) is of a longer length.

What purpose does viewing the structure of the work in this way have? It provides a way to explain the aural impact of the piece’s building and increasing energy. One of the strongest ways to create energy is to set a structure in place, and then reduce its size. In this manner, Walker combines an “easy to hear” simple rondo structure with a structure of increasing “concentration” – thus subconsciously providing the listener with the visceral effect of energy increase.

Harmony

The harmony of the work is based around a D dorian scale, with “additions.” These additions are, however, diatonic additions, and not chromatic ones. This will be shown in more detail.

The way in which the harmony moves within the D dorian mode established is one that owes itself to the harmonic modality of American folk music and hymnody – rather than the modality of Medieval and Renaissance music. However, despite the motion of chords coming from this modality, Walker uses added tone harmony (of 6ths, 2nds/9ths, and 7ths to triadic sonorities) to create a contemporary color.

Within this modal framework, the intervals of 4ths and 5ths play a crucial role and serve as harmonic building blocks of the piece that allow for the diatonic additions to occur as a natural extension of the harmony.

Section A (“dance material”)

The opening measures (1-3) of the work establish a chord of stacked 4ths: D-G-C-F. When the C drops out in bar 4, it is still implied in the ear. The first violin’s entrance in m. 5 with “bouncing D’s” turns the chord into a D6 harmony. This basic sonority is articulated and revoiced in mm. 5-12.

Of important note is the bass line in the cello in mm. 6 and 8 which moves from the D to the G – thus referring back to the stacked 4th harmony of the opening measures. It also alludes to role that the 4th (G in this case) has as an “aural dominant” (in actuality, a sub-dominant) will have in the work. This becomes articulated very clearly in m. 13 where the viola and cello pulse together on a G-B dyad (alluding to G major) before returning to the D modality.

Thus, this opening section provides an articulation of a basic harmonic sonority. In m. 19-20, the first diatonic addition appears. The cello and viola articulate a chord progression of G-Bb-C(9)-D.

The cadential progression between a C (major) and D (minor/modal) harmony is an important one in this modal language, and it returns throughout the rest of this piece as well as in many other works of Walker’s. The C-natural becomes a “modal leading tone” – very common in American folk music. (For good examples, see the original harmonization of the American folk hymn *Wondrous Love* in William Walker’s The Southern Harmony of 1854.)

The difference between a “tonal leading tone” and a “modal leading tone” comes in the interval between the leading tone and the tonic. In a typical tonal progression, the leading tone is sharpened (C#), even in the minor, and thus a half-step is the interval between the C# and the D. A modal leading tone, by contrast is not sharpened, and thus a whole step is the interval. (This characteristic “modal cadential” sound can be found in a wide range of music – from the Medieval and Renaissance Machaut and Josquin to early American folk music.)

In this case, the added 9th is a contemporary inflection, added by Walker to the modal chord. Also, the Bb harmonic addition becomes a simple diatonic extension, for sonic purposes.

The rest of this section of the work reiterates that same chord progression in a more extended fashion (with some extensions within)– G-Bb-C-D (mm. 24-27).

Section B (“chorale material”)

This next section, of “chorale material” presents in a homophonic form all of the basic harmonic material and progressions of the work.

The reduction below shows all of the chords and their progressions in this section. Each barline indicates a “phrase” end and the half note chords are ones which are longer than the others. (The original section is in 6/8 time.)

The image displays a musical score reduction consisting of two systems. Each system has a treble staff and a bass staff. The first system shows a progression of chords in the bass line that alternates between C and D, with a stepwise descent in the final chord. The upper staves in both systems show chords in parallel 4ths. The second system continues this pattern, with the bass line moving stepwise and the upper voices in parallel 4ths.

The bass line of this section proceeds in a mostly stepwise manner. The first phrase of this section presents an alternation between the C and D chords which was alluded to earlier (and continues to be an important cadential sequence.)

By the second phrase, the upper two voices (first and second violins) move in the ubiquitous parallel 4ths. They continue in this manner for the entire rest of the section (until the last chord). In this second phrase, the step-wise bass motion provides the B-flat diatonic extension in the base.

In the third phrase, the lower two voices (viola and cello) move in parallel 3rds in mostly stepwise motion. This re-iterates the Bb diatonic extension and also adds an E-flat in the final chord – which is simply a transposition of the earlier basic sonority.

In the fourth and fifth phrases, both voice pairs are moving in contrary motion parallel 4ths. The final harmonies are repeated more than once (not shown in the above model) before the final dominant minor 9th chord.

Section A¹ (“dance material”)

The next section returns to the rhythmic patterns and tonality of the opening of the work. D dorian is re-articulated and punctuated by the stacked 4ths chords again (m. 47). In m. 51, a tremolando 4th of Ab-Eb provides a coloristic addition to the basic D modality.

In mm. 54-61, the same basic progressions and material from the opening section are repeated, including the beginnings of the G-Bb-C-D cadential formula.

However, in the last two beats of m. 61 the cello moves from C to D, rather than staying on C for the remainder of that measure. This provides a motion towards E. Suddenly in m. 62, the pattern continues to be rearticulated, but this time in E.

This “surprise” modulation comes from American rock music, in which the motion upwards tonally by a whole-step is very common. (It is not at all common in typical common period practice harmony – in fact, the tonal area one whole-step higher is almost never explored.)

The passage of music from mm. 62-73 can be reduced as below.

The image shows a musical score reduction for measures 62-73. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff contains a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, and some chords. The bass staff contains a harmonic line with chords and some moving lines. The key signature changes from one sharp (F#) to one flat (Bb) between measures 62 and 63. The score ends with a double bar line.

The musical purpose of this section is to provide a modulation to section B¹ which is centered in Eb/Ab. From the harmonic base, there is a motion from E-A, then from G-C. The 4ths thus return again in this manner. (The upper voices in this section also are centered around the motion of parallel 4ths.)

In the 2nd and 4th measures of the above reduction, those pivot chords allude back to the chords of 3rds and 4ths in the first “chorale material” section. However, this time, they are no longer diatonic. The chromatic interval of the augmented and diminished octaves (C-C# and E-Eb) provides the co-existence of harmonic material from each progression. Thus, the C# comes from the E dorian modality of measure 1. The C-natural alludes to the 3rd measure’s C-extension modality. The 3rd 4th measure’s E-natural comes from the C of the previous measure and the E-flat alludes to the upcoming Eb tonality towards which the next three harmonic chords move.

The final landing on Ab in the bass provides the 4th above Eb – the tonal center of the following section. Thus, a cadential sense is created moving into this section.

Section B¹ (“chorale material”)

This section opens identically to Section B, except it is transposed to Eb instead of the original D. The last chord of m. 75 is again a chord of stacked 4ths. In mm. 76-79, a series of pentatonic flourishes lead to the final chord consisting of a 4th and 3rd again.

The final measure of this section (m. 79) provides a focus down towards an Ab, which is the “Second Harmonic Pole” (to use a term Walker often does) of the original key of D dorian. In this sense, there has been a progression away from the original D dorian before it returns with vigor in the next section.

Section A² (“dance material”)

This section returns to the opening material again in D dorian. The same harmonic progressions and single diatonic extension occur.

Coda (“two allusions”)

The phrase “two allusions” to describe this section refers to the two pieces of material within this very short (5 measure) section. The opening measures (mm. 89-92) present an allusion to the opening four chords of Section B (“chorale material”). The last chord dissolves upwards in a dramatic glissando.

After a grand pause, the final measure alludes to the “dance material” with the “rock rhythm” (to be discussed below) of four 8th notes. The harmonic progression of this is the previously discussed C-D cadential pattern. The first inversion C7 chord is followed by an “open” D chord. (The “open” chord, without either a major or minor 3rd is a common feature of modal music.)

Rhythm and Other Musical Features

The rhythms of “A Splash” owe a great deal to American rock music. Two notable features of American rock rhythm are: 1) patterns in 4/4 with strong emphases on beats 1 and 3 and 2) patterns of four (or more) 8th notes where the accented beat is on the last 8th note and thus NOT on a typical “downbeat.”

Although “A Splash” is notated in 2/2 for ease of performer counter, it can be felt as a fast 4/4.

In particular, some rock music often particularly emphasizes the 3rd beat, so as to make it very clear that beat 3 is just as important as beat 1. By casting the work in 2/2, this

makes it very clear that quarter note beat 3 would be just as important (since it is, in 2/2, the “other” beat.)

One of the best examples of both of these features comes in the opening first violin solo (mm. 5-8; see example below) which presents a rhythmic pattern that goes through all the rest of the work. On the 3rd quarter note beat, Walker accents the pattern by using the D an octave higher. Likewise, in the second measure, on the last 8th note, the high D is employed again and is given an accent.



The meter of the work is generally notated as 2/2 with the exception of the “chorale material” sections, which are in 6/8. Before the choral sections occur, there is a bar of 11/8 (mm. 26 and 88) which is simply a free addition of 3/8 bar to a normal 2/2 bar.

By placing the “chorale material” sections in 6/8, Walker creates a sense of hidden energy, even during these slower and more peaceful parts. Since we are expecting 8th note groupings in 4 (and the half-note or quarter-note pulse), the irregular feel of the rhythm in this section gives a disruptive energy while still having its own consistency.

One of the other salient musical features of this work include the frequent inclusions of glissandi. Glissandi throughout the work are used in two ways: 1) to move from one clear chord/pitch to another (e.g., m. 83) or 2) to move to indeterminate pitches as a gesture (mm. 69 or 91). In the simplest sense, glissandi provide a tremendous amount of energy within the work. In a purely pictorial sense, the glissandi are reminiscent of throwing a bucket of water in somebody’s face – the “splash” that inspired this piece.

Conclusions

The exploration of the harmony and form in “A Splash” can be seen in fairly simple terms. The work begins in D dorian (amplified by diatonic additions), moves to a brief excursion in Eb before returning suddenly to D dorian for its conclusion. The cadential formulas and harmonic progressions owe primarily to two sources: 1) harmony in American folk music; 2) contemporary added tone excursions.

The rhythmic structure of the work comes out of American rock, and these patterns are used consistently, with the addition of glissandi for energy.

We are given the overall feeling of a coloring and amplifying of a basic D dorian modality. Again, “energy infusion” becomes the dominant theme. All of the harmonic and rhythmic structures in this work serve to achieve that goal.

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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.