

Charles Ives, Musical Inventor

By Jonathan Cott

New York Times, Oct. 20, 1974

It is by now a commonplace that the one man who established and transmitted the laws of American music—single-handedly and seemingly parthenogenetically—was Charles Ives (1874–1954), the hundredth anniversary of whose birth we celebrate today. In an appropriately pragmatic American manner, Ives created a self-begotten musical tradition simply by abrogating the prevailing esprit de docher provincialisms and the cozy Teutonic harmonies and forms of orthodox nineteenth - century American composers like Paine, Chadwick, Foote, and Ives's own teacher Horatio Parker.

In their place, Ives produced, within an incredibly brief period of not more than 12 years (1902–1914), hundreds of compositions that not only stand alone as the sole musical parallels to our nineteenth - century literary masterpieces, but which also anticipate almost every technique and development of twentieth - century musical practice—neo-classicism, 12-tone writing, serialism, tone clusters, quartal harmonics, static pitch structure, “noise,” counterpoints of sound masses, provisional and open-ended composition, collage, quotation, stylistic juxtapositions, foreground background contrasts, aleatory methods, choice of “special” ensembles, non-synchronizing groups, spatial music, and the use of polyrhythms, polyharmonies, and polytonalities.

There are, moreover, unusual foreshadowings in Ives's early “traditional” works. In a piece like the Variations on “America” for organ (composed in 1891 when the composer was 17) there occur a series of bitonal interludes that predate by five years the concluding moments of Strauss's tone poem “Thus Spake Zarathustra.” And in the cantata “The Celestial Country” (1897-99) — a composition which one revisionist critic sees as providing us “with the link, until now missing, that finally joins Ives to the march of American music history”—there is beautiful tenor aria which paradoxically presages the luxuriant “reactionary” style of late Richard Strauss. (It was just like Ives to have anticipated a counter-revolution!)

The Ives legend is wellknown: A “normal” all-American boy from Danbury, Connecticut ... raised on military and ragtime tunes, church and camp meeting hymns, barn dance and minstrel show melodies . . . played drums at seven (later piano and organ), as well as highschool baseball and football ... attended Yale University, after which he became a clerk at the Mutual Life Insurance Co. until he and his friend Julian Myrick opened their own insurance agency, from which Ives retired in 1929, a multimillionaire.

While Ives claimed symbiotic benefits from his complementary lives as business man and composer (“My work in music helped my business and my work in business helped my work in music”) there is little question, that this “split” allowed him to render unto

his musical life an uncompromising freedom to fulfill the laws which he continually discovered and created, even though his work was for the most part unrecognized or disparaged during most of his lifetime.

In his music. Ives anticipated almost every technique of 20th-century musical practice.

Well-grounded at Yale in European musical practices, Ives was fortunate to have had as both his first and most open-minded and sympathetic teacher his own father, George Ives—the Danbury town band leader and an audacious music teacher who experimented with quarter tones and who made the members of his family sing tunes like “Swanee River” in one key while he played the accompaniment in another in order to make them “stretch their ears.” When asked how he could bear to hear the local stonemason bellowing off-key at camp meetings, George Ives replied: “Old John is a supreme musician. Look into his face and hear the music of the ages. Don't pay too much attention to the sounds. If you do, you may miss the music.”

Strangely, this remark was later to be echoed in his son's “Essays Before a Sonata” (Ives's literary reveries about Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcotts, and Thoreau which served as an explanation of and a complement to his “Concord” Piano Sonata): “Why can't music go out in the same way it comes in to a man, without having to crawl over a fence of sounds, thoraxes, catguts, wire, wood; and brass? . . . That music must be heard is not essential —what it sounds like may not be what it is.” This kind of Platonic statement has been taken by a number of critics and composers to suggest that because of public and professional neglect, Ives, who only had the chance to hear a few of his works performed during his lifetime, was forced into a private world of dissociated musical discourse in which his metaphysics undermined his desire or ability to develop a coherent sense of musical continuity.

Nothing could be less true. As the composer and critic Robert P. Morgan has simply pointed out: “Whereas the main thrust of compositional activity in the first half of the century was devoted to finding a way of reconciling new compositional ‘content’ with traditional form, what Ives attempted was to develop a new kind of form for traditional musical content.” But it is important to add to this that, for Ives, form was indissolubly wedded to transcendental and conceptual thinking, ideas that come straight out of Emersonian philosophy.

Consider the following gleanings from Emerson: “The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind. . . . Thought makes everything fit for use. . The new virtue which constitutes a thing beautiful is a certain cosmical quality, or a power to suggest relation to the whole world, and so lift the object out of a pitiful individuality. . . . The nature of things is flowing, a metamorphosis. The free spirit sympathizes not only with the actual form, but with the of forms.”

These quotations not only explain why Ives—an enemy of systemization — never thought of using his technical discoveries (pitch and rhythmic series, 12-tone rows) as the foci of new musical systems (instead of just a number of several means of

organization), but in fact also suggest and explain the intent and procedures of almost all of Ives's compositions.

The composer's often-repeated childhood reminiscence about hearing four groups of band musicians playing different music simultaneously as they stood in various parts of the Danbury town square has been used to account for Ives's interest in textural multidimensionality. The bandmaster who directed these musicians, Ives recollected, told him about “a man who, living nearer the variations, insisted that they were the real music and that it was more beautiful to hear the tune come sifting through them than the other way round.”

This contrast between the “variations” and the “real music” perfectly reveals the emblematic quality of Ives's music and thought. Like the Puritan poet Fulke Greville, who was aware that he was “born under one law but was to the other bound,” Ives knew that in the world of Creation the law relating to forms was a law of succession and continual change (“variations”), just as in the realm of the Creator, the forms were changeless and non - successive (“real music”). And in his compositions, Ives attempted to present simultaneously and thereby reconcile the Real and the Transcendental, history and the cosmos, by evoking, crystallizing, and allegorizing the worlds of —those moments of epiphany in time that are charged with meaning.

Beyond the fact that Ives organized his famous quotations of hymn, marching, and ragtime tunes so as to establish certain structural relationships in his work, it is equally true that these omnipresent songs, dances, and hymns—continually decomposed and recombined—take on the role of significant vehicles by which the world of mere successiveness is transformed and metamorphosed. As Ives said about Emerson: “He seems to use the great definite interests of humanity to express the greater, indefinite, spiritual values—to fulfill what he can in his realms of revelation.” Thus the Fourth Violin Sonata concludes with the violin quietly playing the line: “Shall we gather at the river ...”, leaving the completion of the tenor “. . . that flows by the throne of God.”

Perhaps the real secret of Ives's music resides in the area of polytonality, polyrhythms, polyharmonies and polytextures. His Aise of these suggests not only our polyvalent and multiphasic universe; but also interdimensional worlds which the composer allows us to perceive at different levels of awareness. In fact, Ives's method of simultaneous presentation discloses nothing less than a world of profound synchronicity.

The sounds of river, mist and leaves created by the “interweaving in an uneven way” of the notes and phrases of “The Housatonic at Stockbridge”; the confluence of military and ragtime tunes played together in different rhythms, tempos, and keys in “General Putnam's Camp”; the congeries of transpositions, loops, multiple meters, and disintegrating hymns in the second movement of the Fourth Symphony and the emerging and receding transcendental music of the solo violins and harp in the last movement of this same symphony; the hum of night insects, a ragtime piano heard far away, and the clatter of a runaway horse in “Central Park in the Dark”—all of these passages are kept from buckling under the weight of information overload by means of a

textural transparency and a shifting of compositional materials as if through musical canal locks.

Using James Gibbons Huneker's wonderful phrase, we might say that Ives built his work on the "bases of eternity." In the simplest sense of this phrase, think of the oscillating strands of orchestral texture in "Washington's Birthday" or "The Pond," the "eternal presence" of the low organ C in "Psalm 90," or the lightest sound of bells that conclude many of Ives's works, the Third Symphony in particular --all suggesting a world of infinite and audible silence.

In a mysterious sentence in his "Essays," Ives writes: "Emerson tells, as few bards could, of what will happen in the past, for his future is eternity and the past is a part of that." This statement conveys a remarkable understanding on Ives's part of his own method, for his music ineluctably anticipates the future because it originates from a perspective that sees time as laid out, simultaneously not successively, in space. And in this sense we can understand that the nostalgic, homespun third movements both of the "Concord" Sonata and the Fourth Symphony—two of Ives's most visionary works—reveal the breathtaking logic and conception of a composer whose music goes both forward and backward to eternity. In every moment lies the possibility of eschatological revelation. The music of Charles Ives awakes these moments, presenting us with "the holy carelessness of the eternal now."