

**CHARLES EDWARD IVES (1874–1954) , 217**

*Donald Walker*

Charles Edward Ives (1874–1954), the son of a professional musician, was born in the small city of Danbury, Connecticut. Taught by his father, Ives demonstrated early on an interest in new sounds and unusual compositional techniques.

He graduated from Yale University in 1898. His two principal mentors there were choral conductor John Cornelius Griggs (1865–1932) and composer Horatio Parker (1863–1919). Griggs was interested in nontempered tunings and encouraged Ives's musical experiments. Parker, while not interested in musical experiment, was nevertheless a thorough teacher. Under Parker, Ives began his first symphony and first string quartet. The young composer also gained informal musical experience playing with a theatre orchestra whose musicians willingly tried out some of his briefer experiments.

Faced with the necessity of earning a living, he remembered his father's warning that "a man could keep his music interest stronger, bigger and freer if he didn't try to make a living out of it." Ives opted for a life in the insurance business and over the next several years built a successful career by day while composing at night.

Although he penned a great deal of music, nothing Ives wrote was performed in public between 1902 and 1917. In the latter year, he arranged a semipublic performance of the third violin sonata. Shortly after this concert, Ives suffered a heart attack and was obliged to stay away from his office for an entire year. While convalescing, he prepared the second piano sonata (1910–1915) and an outline of the esthetic behind this work titled *Essays before a Sonata* (1970). Following its private printing in 1920 and the publication of a volume of *114 Songs* in 1922, Ives sent copies of these works to musicians and music schools throughout the United States.

In the fall of 1923, he met French pianist and concert entrepreneur E. Robert Schmitz. The pianist encouraged Ives to complete *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces*

Page 218

(1923–1924) for one of his concerts in 1925. In 1927, Schmitz arranged for the premiere of two movements of the composer's *Symphony no. 4* (1909–1916).

Avant-garde composer and publisher of *New Music* Henry Cowell saw the *114 Songs* and invited Ives to contribute something to his magazine. Ives sent Cowell the score of the second movement of the fourth symphony, who published it in 1929. Cowell also introduced Ives to Nicholas Slonimsky, who conducted the American and European premieres of Ives's *Three Places in New England* (1908–1914) and *Fourth of July* (1911–1913) in 1931 and 1932, respectively.

Ives retired from the insurance business in 1930. His health grew worse and he eventually suffered a second heart attack in 1938 that left him an invalid for the rest of his life, but after pianist John Kirkpatrick performed Ives's second piano sonata to critical acclaim in 1939,

performances and honors came to the composer with increasing frequency. Soon, the first commercial recordings of his compositions were released and Henry and Sidney Cowell began the first book-length study of his life and works.

It is generally agreed that the individual most important to Ives's development as an avant-garde composer was his father George Ives (1845–1894). George encouraged his son to listen omnivorously and nonjudgmentally. The young composer grew to love natural sounds for their intrinsic complexity and for the feelings they engendered. He cultivated the pleasures of replicating on traditional instruments the intricate sounds of vast crowds, drums, bands, bells, and weather. Later composers John Cage and George Crumb were both influenced by Ives's fascination with sounds for their own sake.

George also taught his son to bring an open mind and an improvisational spirit to his application of rules and conventions. He told the boy that dissonances did not always have to resolve “if they didn't feel like it.” Ives wrote that his father allowed “a reasonable amount of a ‘boy's fooling’ if it were done with some sense behind it. . . . For instance. . . tune. . . in F, and accompaniment in E flat—then. . . throwing off the last eighth note of a phrase and beginning the tune (on repeat) on that off-beat” (Kirkpatrick, 1972). Unlike his contemporary Arnold Schoenberg, who created new normative procedures that he hoped would supplant nineteenth-century practice, Ives espoused the principle that anything is possible and should be tried. He wrote, “why tonality as such should be thrown out, I can't see. Why it should always be present, I can't see. It depends, it seems to me, a good deal—as clothes depend on the thermometer—on what one is trying to do, and on the state of mind, the time of day or other accidents of life.” The influence of this aspect of Ives's esthetic on later avant-gardists Cowell and Steve Reich cannot be overemphasized. From the time of his first contact with Ives onward, Cowell's music abounds with rich admixtures of Eastern and Western, and primitive and “scientific” techniques. Reich has stated that he found valuable models for his own work in Ives's efforts to forge a synthesis of popular and art music.

Although many aspects of Ives's work are rooted in earlier practice, virtually

Page 219

all of his mature works must be considered radical in their attention to the pervasive modification and variation of every aspect of music. With Ives, even the characteristic strong and weak beats of themes and even the style of a passage might be varied if such modification provided new insight into the “reality” of the material.

Ives is most frequently identified with the use of thematic quotations. Indeed, more of his pieces than not contain at least one reference to preexisting music

Ives's frequent use of quotations has troubled some critics of his music, who find in it an excessive dependence on extramusical content or a failure of thematic inventiveness. Nineteenth-century composers had often referenced well-known tunes for extramusical purposes. Ives, however, also brought tunes together because he perceived intervallic, harmonic, or rhythmic similarities between them that had nothing to do with their programmatic baggage. The

composer justifies his use of preexisting music by writing that he sought in his work to reflect life in all its complexity. He wrote, “there can be nothing ‘exclusive’ about a substantial art. It comes directly out of the heart of experience of life and thinking about life and living life...[and] if local color...is a true pigment of the universal color, it is a divine quality, it is part of substance in art—not of manner.”

Robert P. Morgan proposes another intriguing explanation for Ives’s use of quotations, suggesting that the composer purposely interrupts the linear flow of his material with them so that the listener is obliged to hear each work “spatially” (i.e., to hear each and all moments as equal to one another and not as proceeding hierarchically toward some specific goal). In other words, one is freed to listen to various parts of the whole at will—rather as one might view a painting. Morgan quotes Ives’s “Conductor’s Note” to the fourth symphony in support of this theory. Here, Ives mentions, “bringing various parts of the music to the ear...as the perspective of a picture brings each object to the eye.” A similar approach—dubbed “moment form”—was later explored by Karlheinz Stockhausen and other European avant-gardists during the 1960s.

Between 1895 and 1915, Ives probably examined and used more systems of pitch organization than any other composer. He experimented with polytonality, atonality, forms of serialism, and mixtures of all of these at a time when the expanded tonality of Aleksandr Skryabin was considered the most daring musical language on the planet.

Ives’s earliest avant-garde works were nine choral psalm settings (1894–1901, 1924). These works are particularly rich in tonal pitch experiments. *Psalm 24* for instance, uses chords that diverge from focal pitches by different intervals in each successive phrase. *Psalm 67* is written in two simultaneous keys, while *Psalm 150* pits diatonic and chromatic choirs singing in the same key but proceeding at different rates of harmonic rhythm.

Although initially much of what Ives wrote was “tonal” in that it departed from and returned to a focal pitch, by 1898 Ives was deriving pitch continuity from remembered natural or social events. In *The Yale-Princeton Football Game*

Page 220

(1899), the composer sought to replicate “the old wedge play” by devising a texture that begins with all twelve notes sounding at once, then, as Ives observes, “gradually pushing together down to one note at the end.” Later, in *Halloween* (1906), Ives imitated the effect of a night-time bonfire, where “the four strings play in four different and closely related keys...canonic, not only in tones, but in phrases, accents and durations.”

By 1901, Ives had written atonal lines and counterpoint that maintained a high degree of variety and dissonance through the avoidance of pitch repetition, tonal intervals, and focal pitches. Among the earliest works in this category is *From the Steeples and the Mountains* (1901–1902). *Steeples* also features an unusual retrograde technique in which the individual measures of the first portion of the work are later heard in reverse order.

*Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*, ed. Larry Sitsky (Bloomsbury, 2002)

Ives's acute hearing predisposed him to an interest in tuning systems. His *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces* is one of the first significant modern works to explore the compositional potential of a twenty-four tone subdivision of the octave. In "Some Quarter Tone Impressions" (1970), Ives was the first modern composer to postulate guidelines for a quarter-tone harmonic system.

Ives also freely juxtaposed dissimilar systems of pitch organization to suit his expressive ends. The best illustrations of this kind of pitch exploration are *The Unanswered Question* and *Central Park in the Dark* (both in 1906). In the first work, a string chorus plays slow moving, consonant, diatonic homophony beneath agitated solo wind instruments that play disjunct, chromatic counterpoint. In *Central Park*, a string chorus plays soft, dense, dissonant counterpoint while wind instruments play snatches of tonal melody. In later years, Ives took the further step of combining quarter tone and tempered ensembles in the *Universe Symphony* (1911–1928).

Ives was perhaps the most avid rhythmic innovator of the first half of the twentieth century. His approach to rhythm excluded nothing and sought to include everything he heard or could imagine. He was the first composer to use polyrhythms and polymeters extensively. In the second movement of the fourth symphony, he recreates the chaos of a great crowd by means of a dense overlay of winds and percussion playing as many as fifteen or more different bits of popular and abstract material embodying simultaneously a great variety of rhythms and meters. He uses similar techniques in other orchestral works, including the *Fourth of July* and *Three Places in New England*.

As early as 1901, Ives began to work with nontonal rhythms. In *From the Steeples and the Mountains* and in *The Cage* (1906), Ives invents rhythms that proceed according to abstract patterns such as movement from long to short values without repeated durations. *Over the Pavements* (1906–1913), by contrast, grew out of his wish to recapture the street sounds outside his new apartment "of people going to and fro...the horses, fast trot, canter, sometimes slowing up to a walk...an occasional trolley throwing all rhythm out." This work contains so-called irrational rhythms, such as quarter-note triplets in the time of five-eighth notes. Although many composers, including Elliott Carter,

Page 221

Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio, and others, have since used such rhythmic material, Ives alone worked with these resources before 1915.

Ives was the first to juxtapose nontonal and tonal rhythms. The chief effect in *The Gong on the Hook and Ladder* (1911) derives from the out-of-synch sounds produced during a parade by a marching band (keeping perfect four-four time) and the gong on a fire company's engine (speeding up or slowing down depending on whether the engine was going up or coming down hills).

Ives was also the first composer to write uncoordinated passages that juxtaposed specifically notated independent streams of material. In the *Unanswered Question* (1906), quick, asymmetric, measured outbursts by wind instruments freely interrupt slow, continuous, measured string writing. The parts of both instrumental groups are written in four-four meter, but, in the

final pages, following a long silence, the winds suddenly burst forth on their beat one at an indeterminate point in the midst of the strings' measure. The instruments then proceed to the work's end without ever again sharing a downbeat. Such procedures later became important attributes of the works of Henry Brant and many other composers.

Ives also composed the earliest substantial body of works employing metric modulation as a developmental technique. This technique, later much used by Carter, may be seen in *Over the Pavements*, the *Piano Trio* (1904–1905), the second piano sonata, and other works. Metric modulation aims at a frequent change in the basic pulse through an overlapping of parts proceeding simultaneously at different speeds. For example, a line in continuous eighth-note quintuplets may begin in a passage proceeding in triple meter, and, if the composer brings this new voice to the fore—by emphasizing it registrally, dynamically, or by assigning quintuplet values to more and more instruments—the listener begins to hear a “modulation” of basic pulse from three quarters to five eighths.

Ives also scored with great imagination. The viola “fiddle” solo in the “wrong key” and the mouth harp accompaniments in *Washington's Birthday* (1909) and the four sets of bells with brass in *From the Steeples and the Mountains* are characteristic examples of Ives's avant-garde orchestral writing. George Crumb and many other midcentury composers have noted their debt to Ives's inspired eagerness to project special emotional qualities through the employment of unusual timbral resources.

Although he was not the first to distribute instruments spatially in the performance environment, Ives certainly conceived more different effects and used more unusual spatial arrangements than previous composers had done. A fine example of this practice is the distant choir of five violins and harp in the fourth movement of the fourth symphony. Ives wrote at length about musical space in “Music and Its Future” (1933). In this essay, he recalls “[t]he writer remembers hearing, when a boy, the music of a band in which the players were arranged in two or three groups around the town square. The main group...played the main themes, while the others, from the neighboring roofs and verandahs, played the variations...a man...living nearer the variations insisted that they were

Page 222

the real music and it was more beautiful to hear the hymn come sifting through them.” Similar ideas in Ives's music became a central component in the works of Henry Brant and were later fashionable for a time with European composers like Stockhausen and Boulez.

Ives also explored the concert context itself as no composer before him had done. *Halloween* was “written for a Halloween party and not for a nice concert.” *Chromatimelodtune* (1919) was written as an “Ear Study (aural and mental exercise),” while the *Universe Symphony* was planned as a “contemplation in tones, rather than music (as such), of the mysterious creation of the earth and the firmament, the evolution of all life in nature, in humanity, to the Divine.” Such works paved the way for the theatre pieces and “happenings” of La Monte Young and many other midcentury American avant-gardists.

*Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*, ed. Larry Sitsky (Bloomsbury, 2002)

It is evident that Ives was an avant-garde composer of the highest type. He never wrote merely to shock, to call attention to himself, or to denigrate the works of others. He sought, rather, to elevate his listeners by celebrating the complexity and interrelatedness of life's manifold attributes. Paradoxically, he never cultivated the role of "avant-gardist" and could not have imagined himself on the fringes of society. Ives would have been far happier if the public of his day had followed him "onto the mountains."

## **SELECTED WORKS**

*Psalms 14, 24, 25, 54, 67, 90, 100, 135, 150* (1894–1901, 1924)

*The Yale-Princeton Football Game*, for chamber orchestra (1898)

*Harvest Home Chorales* (1898–1901)

*From the Steeples and the Mountains* (1901–1902)

*Piano Sonata no. 1* (1901–1909)

*Four Ragtime Pieces*, for chamber orchestra (1902–1904)

*Piano Trio* (1904–1905)

*Three-Page Sonata* (1905)

*All the Way around and Back* (1906)

*The Cage* (1906)

*Central Park in the Dark*, for chamber orchestra (1906)

*Halloween* (1906)

*Largo Risoluto #1, 3* (1906)

*The Unanswered Question*, for chamber orchestra (1906)

*Soliloquy* (1907)

*Over the Pavements*, for chamber orchestra (1906–1913)

*Piano Studies* (1907–1909)

*Three Places in New England*, for orchestra (1908–1914)

*A Farewell to Land* (1909)

*Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*, ed. Larry Sitsky (Bloomsbury, 2002)

*Washington's Birthday*, for orchestra (1909)

*Symphony no. 4* (1909–1916)

*Second Piano Sonata* (1910–1915)

*The Gong on the Hook and Ladder*, for chamber orchestra (1911)

*Fourth of July*, for orchestra (1911–1913)

Page 223

*Tone Roads #1, 3*, for chamber orchestra (1911–1915)

*Universe Symphony* (1911–1928)

*Calcium Light Night*, for chamber orchestra (1912)

*Decoration Day*, for orchestra (1912)

*December* (1913)

*Gyp the Blood or Hearst, Which Is Worst?*, for chamber orchestra (1912)

*In Re Con Moto et al* (1913)

*Like a Sick Eagle* (1913)

*Lincoln* (1913)

*Chromatimelodtune*, for chamber orchestra (1919)

*Three Quarter-Tone Pieces* (1923–1924)

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