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IVES TODAY: HIS VISION AND CHALLENGE

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"NO matter how sincere and confidential men are in trying to know or assuming that they do know each other's mood and habits of thought, the net result leaves a feeling that all is left unsaid; for the reason of their incapacity to know each other, though they use the same words. They go on from one explanation to another but things seem to stand about as they did in the beginning because of that vicious assumption. But we would rather believe that music is beyond any analogy to word language and that the time is coming, but not in our life-time, when it will develop possibilities unconceivable now, – a language, so transcendent, that its heights and depths will be common to all mankind."

Few composers in our time have come to grips with the basic problems of musical expression, and certainly few have taken so definite a stand as does Charles Ives in his interesting *Essays Before a Sonata* (1920, now out of print.) Reading them, one cannot help feeling that such a man with such ideas *must* be capable of writing exceptional music. The tone is elevated, the wit brilliant. Here, as in his music, Ives reveals himself a devout believer in transcendental philosophy, in the immanence of God in nature, in the glorious mission of music which is to be achieved only when freed from the pedestrian ideas of professional musicians, in the ability of man to grasp the divinity behind nature through feeling and not through artificialities of logic. Of American music he says that a composer who believes in the American ideal cannot fail to be American whether he uses folklore or not. Of performing musicians he says that the composer must lead the way, the performer must figure out how to play the music. The book is a little masterpiece; it should be known to all musicians.

The difference between Ives and other mystical composers, Scriabin for instance, is that he believes neither in ritual nor in the methodical training of the intuition which raises man from one level of consciousness to another, leading to a denial of the physical world. Ives follows Emerson. For him the natural world reflects the spiritual, and so is of great concern. Hence the divergence between the patterned music of the Russian and the free, almost random music of Ives.

Ives' dissonance differs from that of most other composers who use it to express physical excitement, sensations of pleasure and pain or effects of distortion in the manner of the modern painters, or to reflect spiritual conflict, as in the works of Baudelaire. Ives is always in quest of the transcendental. On the surface of his work, the infinite complexity of nature, the rapidly changing moods of forest and plain, the web of counterbalancing forces appear confused and dissociated. But Ives' involved texture, while mirroring this superficial confusion, at the same time attempts to show the larger harmony of rhythm behind the natural process. Faith in the purpose and goodness of nature rather than concern over its savage conflicts and hostility determines his choice of moods. In his essays he says that Debussy, in works like *La Mer,* appears interested only in the physical aspects and never sees beyond them.

Ives, with his exalted goal for musical expression, believes that composers should be free always to follow their highest instincts. Difficulty of performance is the performer's problem, not his. The quest for performances, for payment for music, for success, are beside the point. Ives himself makes his money in business and so has been as free in his pursuit of music as one of his instrumental parts, whose bar-lines, rhythms, notes and speed do not tally with the rest of the orchestra. He is as difficult to assimilate into the pattern of the organized musical world as such a part is into an orchestral texture. He has persistently refused royalties, prefers not to have his music copyrighted so that performers may feel free to take liberties and usually insists on paying for publication. Thus he strictly preserves his amateur status, while his reputation – based rather on what has been written about him than on the few performances of his music – constitutes a threat to the professional world.

All who have written about his music, and their number is legion, are convinced that if performed it would meet the expectations aroused by his famous ideals. It probably would – provided the listener made several allowances. He must be ready to grant that the quotation of familiar tunes, with which the music is studded, is a device sufficiently pow-

erful to evoke the particular feelings apostrophized. Then there is also the amount of detail left to the interpreter's discretion. The polyrhythms, which appear to be precisely written, obviously call for an improvisatory technic hard to achieve in ordinary rehearsals. Bernard Herrmann and Nicolas Slonimsky have faced this problem most squarely. Herrmann claims that with the proper rehearsal, everything in Ives is playable. A few years ago he boldly gave an Ives series over C.B.S. and brought to the air several highly effective pieces, among them the *Largo for Strings* and the very affecting first and third movements of the *Fourth Symphony.* Taking advantage of Ives' suggestion that performers should "interpret" the works to suit themselves, Herrmann re-orchestrated part of the first movement and ironed-out some of its rhythmic complexities. But such a procedure followed without great understanding of the music could easily rob it of characteristic qualities.

Another artist, John Kirkpatrick, whose performance of the *Concord Sonata* is well-known, also following Ives' expressed intentions, takes certain liberties with the polyrhythms. With great care and devotion he molds the music into a very moving auditory experience. That Kirkpatrick's conception can be found in the notes is unquestionably true, but it is also true that a good but unsympathetic musician might give a chaotic and unintelligible account of the same score. It is all a question of whether one can enter into the spirit of this music and then recreate it. Such a challenge is good for the profession, it demands a vision that goes beyond the notes.

A quick glance at Ives' total output – which can now be studied in print or in photostat (eleven volumes of chamber music and six of orchestral scores) in the Library of Congress, the Fleisher Collection and the American Music Center – reveals many interesting facts. The music shows a rather spasmodic development, from the product of a youthful organist with a classical background playing in a Presbyterian church, to the elaborate works most of us are familiar with. There has been, from the start, a preoccupation with hymns, marches, and other native American music. The *First Symphony,* written in the '90's has a fetching, naive quality; it shows influences of Mozart, Bach and Beethoven and at the same time some strange harmonic progressions that resemble early Shostakovitch. The *Second Symphony,* following almost immediately, reveals chromatic influences, Franck, Brahms and Dvorak. It is made up of arrangements of earlier organ works and an older overture. The *Third,* for small orchestra, although written only a little later, is a new departure. It has a slow first and last movement and a folksy middle one that is gentle and full of

charm. The first is made up of unusual progressions and the last is quite Franckian. Then comes a complete break. The *Fourth Symphony,* written about the time of the last war, is full of the surprising effects most musicians associate with Ives, which were not noticeable in his earlier works.

There are two other symphonies, *Holidays in a Connecticut Country Town* (Washington's Birthday, a very solemn and beautiful Decoration Day, an extremely elaborate and wild Fourth of July and a dithyrambic Forefathers' and Thanksgiving Day) and a *Universal Symphony* which has remained a rough sketch for the last ten years. *Holidays,* like the *Fourth Symphony,* is in his most advanced style and shows all the facets of Ives' music, as do also the *Second Orchestral Set,* the *Theatre Set, Three Places in New England* and a few works in the chamber music volumes. In these latter there are, besides, what at least to this writer appear to be parodies of modern music like his satirical songs about modern life.

The orchestral scores of his later period make use of several devices which deserve more comment than they have received so far. Ives is fond of using a separate instrumental group, playing some kind of ostinato figure and maintaining its own tempo behind a fast movement and even behind a slow one but in different rhythm. This seems designed to give the natural setting of trees and sky against which he places human events. The transcendental background of faint sounds usually starts and ends a movement which may depict, in rather literal fashion, by quotation of themes and in other ways, the noisy or religious or patriotic episodes of everyday life. This latter music is often naively pictorial, while his style verges on impressionism and takes on the most advanced dissonance when it represents the transcendental.

Ives' range is remarkably broad. He offers us the rural, homely qualities of Whittier, the severity of Emerson, the fancy of Hawthorne and the meditation of Thoreau. These moods return again and again in all his later works. The contrast between the transcendental polyrhythm and polytonality, and the human music of hymns, dance and march, is always present.

This year, on October 20th, Ives will celebrate his seventieth birthday. Yet real consideration of his music still lies in the future. However fascinating it may be to speculate about, its actual sound will be more enthralling. Let us hope, for our sake, as well as for his, that performances will not be too long in coming. He has waited now for many years. The musical public has known all about him for more than ten. It is about time for a real demonstration.