

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

ONE HUNDRED AND FOURTEEN SONGS

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IN 1922 Charles Ives issued a privately printed collection of one hundred and fourteen songs which he had composed over a period of thirty years. During the first ten years of its existence this unusual volume aroused little or no comment. But apparently this neglect was of only temporary significance, since it is no longer unusual to find the songs on an occasional program of contemporary music. To make them available to a larger public many have been reprinted; seven by the *Cos Cob Press* and thirty-five others (including some new ones) by *New Music*.

Besides these one hundred and fourteen songs—an achievement in sheer output of which any man might be proud—the original edition contains an essay, or more exactly a series of loosely connected paragraphs, in Ives' characteristically animated, though diffident, style. Here one comes upon several surprising statements. In the first place, we find Mr. Ives apologizing for having published the volume at all. His excuse is that by so doing "a few clear copies could be sent to friends." But later he gives a different reason; . . . "this volume," he says, "is now thrown, so to speak, at the music fraternity, who for this reason will feel free to dodge it on its way—perhaps to the waste basket." At any rate he assures us that from his own standpoint the publication of this stout book containing "plenty of songs which have not been and will not be asked for," is merely a kind of house-cleaning. "Various authors have various reasons for bringing out a book . . . Some have written a book for money; I have not. Some for fame; I have not. Some for love; I have not. Some for kindlings; I have not. I have not written a book for

any of these reasons or for all of them together. In fact, gentle borrower, I have not written a book at all—I have merely cleaned house. All that is left is out on the clothes-line . . .”

Obviously Ives is a modest human being. But he carries modesty to an exaggerated degree, for after having apologized for presenting his fellow citizens with a unique volume of American songs he very nearly manages to apologize for being a composer in the first place—a composer, that is, in the usual sense of the term. While it is true that he did compose these songs, and admits having composed them, he wrote them only “on the side” as it were. Composing to him constitutes only one part of a busy life; as everyone knows, Mr. Ives is a successful man of business. But if we are to believe him, this does not make him different from other business men for, he says, “every normal man . . . has, in some degree, creative insight, and a . . . desire . . . to express it.” This leads him to picture for us a time when every man will be encouraged to be his own Beethoven.

But Mr. Ives is not content to pause there. It is generally assumed among us that the composer who can dedicate his life to the single purpose of musical creation without distraction of any kind is a particularly fortunate creature. Ives has little sympathy for this attitude. He holds that to devote oneself to the business of life is serious, and to devote oneself to writing music while in business is serious, but to devote oneself solely to the business of writing music is somehow not serious. It tends to impoverish the artist in the man, instead of developing a spiritual sturdiness—a “sturdiness which . . . shows itself in a close union between spiritual life and the ordinary business of life.” As one remedy for bringing the merely “professional” composer back into actual contact with reality he suggests that “for every thousand dollar prize a potato field be substituted so that these candidates of Clio can dig a little in real life. . .”

It would serve little purpose to argue this last point with Mr. Ives. But the question which is of interest is this: why did Ives take so timid an attitude in presenting his songs to the public (since he is certainly not a timid soul either in his music or in his prose style) and why did he choose to glorify the businessman composer as opposed to the so-called professional com-

poser. Let us put off attempting an answer for the moment and examine the songs instead, both for their own sake and for whatever light they may bring to bear on these two questions.

The first impression, on turning to the one hundred and fourteen songs themselves, is bound to be one of confusion. For there is no order here — either of chronology, style or quality. Almost every kind of song imaginable can be found — delicate lyrics, dramatic poems, sentimental ballads, German, French and Italian songs, war songs, songs of religious sentiment, street songs, humorous songs, hymn tunes, folk tunes, encore songs; songs adapted from orchestral scores, piano works, and violin sonatas; intimate songs, cowboy songs and mass songs. Songs of every character and description, songs bristling with dissonances, tone clusters and “elbow chords” next to songs of the most elementary harmonic simplicity. All thrown together helter-skelter, displaying an amazing variety and fecundity of imagination, but without the slightest key or guide for the benefit of the unsuspecting recipient of this original edition.

It is self evident then that this publication was not designed to give the musical public a clear conception of Ives' gifts as composer. In fact — and this seems to me to be crucial — Ives apparently not only had no public in mind when printing this book, but he hardly had even the “few friends” of whom he speaks in mind. The truth is he had only *himself* in mind. For after gathering together the fruits of thirty years' work (which, in effect, literally was a kind of “house-cleaning”) Ives found himself alone with his songs.

No artist creates for himself alone. To be cut off from the vitalizing contact of an audience, to compose in a vacuum as it were, will of necessity profoundly influence the character of a man's work. Do these songs, then, examined individually show signs of just such an isolation?

To take the least representative group first: how otherwise can we explain the publication of songs which the composer himself says “have little or no value.” He specifically names eight of these; at least fifteen more might easily be added to the list. Most of them were composed in the eighteen-nineties and belong to the sentimental, silver-threads-among-the-gold variety.

To these may safely be joined about fifteen others, written about the same time, which, if they are not quite worthless are nevertheless hardly better or worse than hundreds of songs in the same genre by other composers. The songs to French and German texts belong in this group, closely patterned as they are, after foreign models. Nevertheless, here in the shadow of Schuman, Massenet and Brahms, one catches a first glimpse of the later Ives. A somewhat daring middle section, an unexpected close or sharply-tinted chord betray the future pioneer.

The first songs of importance date from around 1900. *Where the Eagle* is an excellent example of this group, which includes *Berceuse*, *I Travelled among Unknown Men*, and *The Children's Hour*. It is only one page in length, but it is remarkable for its depth of feeling, its concision, its originality. Certainly no other American composer at the turn of the century was capable of producing a song of this worth. It is not that these songs are completely without influence (Hugo Wolf, in particular) but the emotional content is authentic; in the rich harmonies and sensuous line of the *Berceuse*, or in the charming flow and imagination of *The Children's Hour* one knows oneself to be in the presence of a real creator.

The historical significance of Ives as an innovator has been stressed in these pages.* Although the above-named songs are "modern" for their time, they are by no means revolutionary. But how else than revolutionary can one describe a song like *Walking* (dated 1902). In imitation of the village church bells heard on a Sunday morning walk, Ives essayed harmonies which are as daring, if not more so, as any Debussy and Strauss of the same period. This song plainly demonstrates the origin of much of Ives' venturesomeness; he is a musical realist, a copier of Nature. It is further illustrated in songs like *Rough Wind* (1902) and *The Cage* (1906). The latter, with its curious melodic line and its omission of bar lines, is obviously meant to suggest the turning about of an animal in its cage. It should be noted, however, that these songs are more successful as experiments than they are as finished artistic productions.

In so brief a summary, one can hardly do more than mention

*Henry Cowell: Charles Ives, Vol. X, No. 2.

the songs composed around 1908-1910 (comparatively undistinguished), or those adapted by the composer from his orchestral and chamber music.* To judge these adaptations as songs would be unfair. However *The Housatonic at Stockbridge* (which originally was a movement in a set of pieces for orchestra) and *At the River* (from the *Fourth Violin Sonata*) are admirable arrangements of what in the first place must have been cherishable music and remains so in their new garb.

Ives, like no other serious American composer before him, was fascinated by the kind of music that any village band plays. The three "war songs" and the five "street songs" are attempts to incorporate popular material into a serious musical style. His method in several of these songs is to evoke the mood of the past at the beginning with the aid of rather complex harmonies and then to give the popular music in unadulterated form. This mixture of styles is not a happy one; it results in making them the least successful of those thus far considered.

But the works on which Ives' reputation as a song composer must eventually rest are the remaining forty or more which are dated 1919-21.† Taken as a whole, and despite many and serious shortcomings, these songs are a unique and memorable contribution to the art of song-writing in America, an art that is still in its first youth among us; a contribution which, for richness and depth of emotional content, for broad range and strength of expression, for harmonic and rhythmic originality, will remain a challenge and an inspiration to future generations of American composers.

Where else in American music will you find more sensitiveness or quietude than in a song like *Serenity*, with its subtle synopations and its instinctive melodic line; where more delicate tone painting than the setting of lines from *Paradise Lost* called *Evening*; where a more rousing or amusing knockout of a song than *Charlie Rutlage* with its exciting cowboy quotations; where songs to compare with *The Indians*, or *Ann Street*, or *Maple Leaves* or *The See'r* or *The New River* (this last contains remarkable Hindemithian premonitions). There are others of course, almost as good, *The Swimmers*, *Two Little Flowers*, *Like a Sick Eagle*, *The Greatest Man*... All these are charac-

*It is regrettable that several of this group, such as *Ich Grolle Nicht*, for some reason not apparent have been included in the recent edition of Ives' songs brought out by *New Music*.—A.C.

†Many of these songs were composed at an earlier period, but were either rewritten or rearranged at the time of publication, which explains the large number bearing the date 1921.—A.C.

terized by an essential simplicity — no matter how complex the harmonic or rhythmical materials may be, there is always a directness of emotional appeal and always an unadorned, almost naive, melodic line for the voice.

These qualities are present even in songs which are not successful as a whole. *Walt Whitman*, despite the unforgettably apt setting of the phrase, "How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat," remains an unsatisfying fragment, and the deeply moving last page of *Grantchester* does not compensate for the fact that the song as a whole is not sustained. One could add other examples of songs which are mere fragments, or over-complicated in harmonic texture, or deficient in consistency of style.

Weaknesses, such as these and others — and it would be foolish to gloss them over — arise from a lack of that kind of self-criticism which only actual performance and public reaction can bring. This indispensable check on the artist Ives never had. A careful examination of these songs will convince the open-minded reader that he lacked neither the talent, nor the ability, nor the *métier*, nor the integrity of the true artist — but what he most shamefully and tragically lacked was an audience. "Why do you write so much — which no one ever sees?" his friends asked. And we can only echo "Why, indeed," and admire the courage and perseverance of the man and the artist.

Little wonder, then, if we find Ives over-timid in presenting the songs to the public for the first time; and little wonder if we find him rationalizing his position of business-man-composer until he made it appear to be the only natural role for the artist to assume in America. For Ives had every reason to be timid and to rationalize in a world which had no need for him as an artist.

This small drama which I have pictured here is by no means the drama of Ives alone, but in a larger sense is that of every American composer of serious pretensions. The problem of the audience — not a passive audience, but an active one — an audience which *demand*s and *reject*s music — which acts as a stimulus and a brake, has never been solved. Not every composer deserves such an audience, of course. But for men of the stature of Ives that audience must be found, or American music will never be born.