

AMERICAN COMPOSERS. IX

Charles Ives

HENRY COWELL

CHARLES E. IVES is the father of indigenous American music, and at the same time one of the freshest and most experimental composers today.

Many before Ives have tried to utilize American folk material; men like Stephen Foster practically composed folk songs. But much of their product took on a banal European flavor because they invariably altered the original rhythms (often fascinatingly irregular) to fit the current European modes in meter and note-length. All those slight deviations of pitch in the musical scale of the American village folk, wrought out of deepest ecstasy, were "arranged" for the conventional European major or minor tuning. Worst of all, a school-book, hymn-like four-part harmonization was imposed on everything. The original life and fire of the music were completely squeezed out.

Ives was born in 1874 in Danbury, then a small Connecticut town where native music thrived. His father, a musician, conductor of the band and experimental enough to be interested in acoustics, was evidently a splendid influence. He did not try to standardize the viewpoint of his son, who heard all the local music in its charming and naive entirety, from which wide source he was later inspired to create a new musical fabric.

As a child he heard the kind of village band in which all the members did not play exactly together. Someone was always a fraction ahead or behind, some one a bit sharp or a bit flat. Occasionally the bass-tuba would be an indistinguishable pitch, almost a percussion noise. The trumpet, or rather the cornet, might feel jolly enough to play quite independently, eventually finding a way to get back in with "the bunch." Or perhaps Ives heard the fiddler at a dance, not only unconventionally not in



CHARLES E. IVES

tune but not wanting to be. Through slips and slides, and slightly off pitch tones which could loosely be called "quarter tones," he created the exactly proper music for the village dance. Kreisler and Heifetz are masters of their art, yet neither could play the fiddle in an old American dance. They would not know where to accent, where to dip and pull the tone, where deliberately and joyfully to be "off tune!"

Ives was also influenced by village church music. While a wheezy and often out-of-tune-to-the-point-of-discord harmonium would play simple hymn concords as a base, the congregation soulfully sang in nebulous pitch around the supposed notes of the tune. The unmusical ran along behind, a bit flat, or with great self-assurance, over-aiming at the notes and sharpening on the high ones! The harmonium would sometimes play the tonic chord while the dominant tones were sung in the hymn, or vice versa. The congregation sang with impassioned fervor adding its own vital accents and pitches, usually against the wishes of the organist, who held to the extreme conventions and musical proprieties.

These and a thousand other idiosyncrasies exist all through American village and country music. Typically American, they distinguish our folk art from the folk art of the Europeans. Yet the "cultivated" musicians who have collected and published these songs of our people unconsciously and without question have weeded out all irregularities, so that not the slightest suspicion of original, indigenous, or truly American feeling remains in the published versions. The notes taught in the very village schools today while "correct," are a miserable and vain echo of the living art of the older folk. The fine spirit of minstrelsy in the songs and dances, the spontaneity of folk-singing, are rapidly dying out.

All these elements of back-country New England music were assimilated by Ives and made a deep impression. With sure creative instinct and sensitive ear, he began early to build himself a music in which he could express them. Inspired by a feeling rooted in the spirit of this music, he raised his whole musical structure from the ground up. It was impossible for him to confine himself in the scale, harmony and rhythm systems of

cultivated Europe. A new and broader musical architecture was essential, a scheme of things permitting the use of all that is to be found in American folk music. Without discarding basic musical culture but dismissing irrelevant pedantry, he was able to include all the extra-European features of the folk-music as actually performed, and thus make himself a new, solid foundation. From the rock-bottom of American soil, and with breadth of concept, he proceeded to write, each work going further than the last; and through feeling rather than a mechanically thought-out plan at last created an individual style. His music finally travels far from its folk origins toward symphonic works of length and complexity. As Burbank created a flower world of unsuspected loveliness by selecting and cultivating undeveloped tendencies in plants, so Ives took the apparently slight threads of American folk-music, and, by sympathetic cultivation, wove a new musical beauty. These music ways of the people are not the whole basis of Ives' art, but they are important, and characteristic of his original approach.

The style of his finest music is one of richness and outpouring of warmth and largesse. It is a humanity that expresses itself in sound. No element of music, no matter how unpopular, is uninvited—every one is made warmly welcome in his world. It is a music universal in its use of different materials and shades of emotion. Ives' wizardry is greatest in weaving together irreconcilable elements into a unity of purpose and flow, in joining them by a feeling of cohesion as well as by the logic of a system. With others such free combinations might engender a hodge-podge, with Ives the result is a grand music, of purpose both lofty and wide. Spiritually and artistically there is a great bond between Ives and Walt Whitman.

The art of Ives has depth and ecstasy, humor and sadness, commonness and exquisiteness. To translate into words the feeling of any music is futile—one must hear the music itself. But perhaps with words we can analyze the means used and briefly survey what actually are the processes in the music.



First of all, to understand Ives one must consider his view-

point. He believes music is a vehicle of expression, not so much personal and of the composer (though this also is included), as a general human expression. He regards a composition almost as a living organism; the composer gives the germ, the performer aids its growth by widening the initial concept.

Therefore, although there are always certain delicately balanced sounds about which he is very particular, Ives gives the performer unusual latitude. If the performer is great, Ives believes, he will add creative fire to the composer's; new and unexpected beauties will be born and the work will increase and flourish with each rendition, a faith which has set difficulties before Ives in finding the best way to write down his music. There are passages which he feels may be played in any of several different ways without injury to the composition. This has led to the solution of many problems of notation and many characteristic features in his score. He gives directions in a certain place to play loudly if the performer's feelings have been sufficiently aroused; if not he is to continue softly! Frequently there is a choice of measures, even of individual notes. Sometimes very full chords appear with the direction that if the player wishes he may omit certain ones, or add still more! In some places sections may even be repeated.

There is also a marked independence of the individual voices in his orchestral works. A full polyphony is thus achieved: each voice is apt to have its own melody and yet the harmony of the whole is never lost, for all synchronize in a rich unity of sound. Players are often asked to use a rhythm of their own against the rhythms of the rest of the orchestra, but are required to come out together at some specified point. Writing for two orchestras playing simultaneously, each different in harmony, melody and rhythm, he arranges for them to finish together; but I remember an instance in which one ends somewhere in the middle and the other goes on. The idea came to Ives from the impressions he received playing in the town band: as it marched along another band might be playing a different work at the same time, passing in the opposite direction. First he would hear from far off the counter-tune of this group; as it drew near there would be a confusion of dissonance, then as it drew farther away again, its mu-

sical line would grow clearer and clearer until the same counter-tune emerged. A good example of this part-writing is in *Washington's Birthday*, where the orchestra changes from an allegro to a slow movement. The viola, however, still full of the feeling of the allegro, continues to play an altered version of it against the rest of the orchestra's adagio. One can find many such examples in Ives' music.

Ives notates many things which are not to be found in any other music. He has placed on paper rhythms often performed, but never before scored and then has gone on to writing down rhythms never before used. Similarly with melody. If he wishes to suggest the feeling of a country fiddler playing with scales unconventionally tuned, he does not write down approximate tones of our scale, but attempts to transcribe the exact shades of pitch.

This has led to his interest in "quarter-tones," and other intervals of less than a half-step which are to be found in many of his works. In the same way, he has notated the actual lengths of tones held by the pedal. Writing down a scale with the pedal held, he found that all the tones had to be expressed as a chord. Such a chord had never been seen on paper before and was a great sensation; yet similar chords are actually sounded by every Chopin player. The writing of these chords led to their later use as a new and independent sort of harmony. Ives has also taken special interest in the refinements of tone-quality and in delicacies of dynamics. His original notations in themselves indicate his overflowing musicality, the wealth and fertility of his invention.

While he was developing his materials and style, Ives attended practically no concerts, certainly none in which "modern" usages were shown. Yet in some of his works, Ives with his innovations precedes his famous European contemporaries, Schönberg and Stravinsky. Schönberg began writing in the dissonant style that made him famous late in 1910; the first completed works were made public in 1911. At that time, too, Stravinsky threw off the shackles and branched out independently. But it was in 1896, when Debussy and Strauss had just written their radical works and were the world's most devilish com-

posers, that Ives began using materials not found elsewhere for many years.

Ives' original tendencies were apparent in his boyhood. From 1886 when he began, perhaps not very seriously, to imitate the sound of drums on the piano, to about 1895, he made occasional and tentative use of "off-rhythms," polychords, sudden modulations, and even polytonality. In the period from about 1896 to 1906 he began to take these experiments further. The drum imitation of his early work was carried forward into polyharmonic writing; an occasional snatch of ragtime rhythm grew into a consistently carried out style with shifted accents, etc. He used such materials in music otherwise in older style until 1906 when he wrote *In the Cage*, the first piece which entirely abjures the more traditional manner. From 1906 to 1916 he wrote all his larger works, perfectly welding together the new musical materials. During the war period, Ives did not write, and since then, he has composed only a few songs, 1919-21.

It is remarkable that Ives should have progressed so far, building as he has from the soil up, from the fundamental spirit of the New England American folk. Most of those who work from primary beginnings find the start so difficult that they do not advance a great distance, and it remains for others to continue their work. Schönberg and Stravinsky had the examples of Debussy, Strauss and others whom they knew well, to aid them.

In *Putnam's Camp* one finds the ejaculatory rhythm which Stravinsky later made famous, a rhythm of off-beats sharply accented, with the same dissonant harmony always continued. In Ives' symphonic work, *Second Orchestral Set*, written near the beginning of the century, is to be found a sort of syncopation and accent now associated with jazz; a type of rhythm only recently adopted by "serious" music, and considered to be original in jazz. It is the latest mode in the orchestral works of Gershwin, Copland and Gruenberg.

Especially characteristic of Ives is the remarkable rhythmic scheme to be found in *The Housatonic at Stockbridge*, an interwoven texture of rhythms. They are used against each other at the same time, forming a harmony of rhythm just as tones are used together for harmony of sound. Just why harmony of

rhythm has remained practically undeveloped, or why there has been prejudice against the idea of different simultaneous rhythms, is hard to say. They sound magnificent, and are in current use among all peoples of the world, except in the conventional music of Europe. Ives goes further in rhythmical development than any other composer. His use of cross-rhythms is, through long experience, so free that one seldom finds a simple underlying rhythm mechanically thumped out on every beat. There are variations by figures or patterns, by accents or phrasing inside each of his rhythm schemes.

In *Washington's Birthday*, one finds counterpoint rather than harmony of rhythm; each of the parts has a constantly changing figure, the rhythms varying in different parts at different times. Rhythm-polyphony and rhythm-harmony make a polyphonic style in the sound essential. It would be hard to find a greater freedom than in the combination of melodies in *Washington's Birthday*, yet a harmonic feeling binds all the melodic parts together and makes them sound almost homophonic. Strong harmonic unity is essential in a style so diversified rhythmically and melodically lest the whole structure fall apart. As it is, Ives' style has a powerful harmonic surge and sounds far less complex than it looks on paper.

Ives has also developed "poly-harmony" and even in his early works of the late 1890's, one finds chords of contrasting tone-systems placed against each other. In many cases polychords are used one after the other, and there is interplay of feeling between the component chords of the polychord.

Melodically, Ives also has something unusual to say. He is not afraid to utilize melodies so simple that other men shun them, or occasionally to use extremely complex structures. In *Washington's Birthday* there is an interesting case, in the flute part, of a well-developed atonal melody (Ives uses either atonality or tonality, as he chooses.) based on proceeding by a half-step, but with the interval sometimes widened by placing the notes in different octaves. In the final variation, a span of five octaves is reached—a truly pianistic idea, as the piano is the only instrument on which tones so separated hang together melodically. Like atonality, this idea of wide melodic skips is

usually credited to Schönberg, but is to be found earlier in the work of Ives.

Countless other examples could be given of new developments by Ives; his fecundity seems inexhaustible. However his main interest is not in material as such. The discovery of so many new worlds of musical resources results from a powerful musicality, which demands freedom of expression. Not content like superficial radicals to merely tear down, when he found it necessary to reject an older standard, he created a new one to take its place. Such creations he has made and still makes in every field of music, and the result is a wonderfully universal, rounded-out whole, not dryly technical, but fascinatingly human and charming, and grounded on an emotional basis.

Recently Ives has won astonishingly favorable reviews from some of the world's great critics. He is beginning to get the recognition he so richly deserves for he has long been the victim of misunderstanding and stupid fault-finding. More recent criticisms that his texture is too thick, have been equally superficial. That is, of course, because the trend now is toward thin music. There is no reason why music should not develop in richness. Those who believe in rigidly fixing every note, in having an absolutely exact and crystallized form for music complain of his minstrel-like qualities, and of the freedom he permits his interpreters; yet there is no reason to suppose that music will not grow in freedom as well as in preciseness.

Many of the characteristics of Ives' music are momentarily out of style. But no one can predict that his work will not eventually achieve wide public favor. Public favor comes to those great enough to be independent. Ives is independent and truly great. Both in spirit and invention he is one of the leading men America has produced in any field.

THE WORKS OF CHARLES E. IVES*

DATE		PUBLISHER
1897	First Symphony in D	
1902	The Celestial Country (cantata for baritone, vocal quartet, two horns, organ and string orchestra)	
1903	Second Symphony	
1905†	First Piano Sonata	
1897-13	One-hundred-and-fourteen songs	
1907†	Third Symphony	
1910	Concord, Mass. 1840-60 (piano sonata) I. Emerson II. Hawthorne III. The Alcotts IV. Thoreau	Lithographed copies
1913	Holidays in a Connecticut Country Town (orchestral set) (a) Decoration Day (b) Fourth of July (c) Washington's Birthday	Edition Adler
1906	Set for Theatre Orchestra (a) In the Cage (b) At the Inn (c) In the Night	New Music
1913†	Elegy for Chamber Orchestra	
1908-14	Three Places in New England (orchestral set) (a) Boston Common, The St. Gaudens' Monument: Shaw and His Colored Regiment (b) Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut (c) The Housatonic at Stockbridge	
1910-12	Fourth Symphony The second movement is published by	New Music
	Three Pieces for Unison Chorus and Orchestra	
1912	A Man—Lincoln, the Great Commoner	New Music
1915	The Masses	
1921	An Election	
1900†	Three Violin Sonatas	
to	A String Quartet	
	Two Overtures for Orchestra	
1915†	Three Quarter-tone Pieces	

All the unpublished music of Mr. Ives is
available in photostat or mimeographed copies

*For the difficult work of compiling this list (which may be incomplete in some details as Mr. Ives is now living abroad and his activity extends back over several decades), MODERN MUSIC is indebted to Mr. Nicholas Slonimsky of Boston, who has conducted many performances of these works both here and abroad.

†These dates are approximate.