HARMONIZING THE ODDITIES OF CHARLES IVES

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The Journal of Music devoted all of its September issue to Charles Ives; the New York Times Book Review section gave special attention to writers of biographical works on Ives; and two spectacular outdoor concerts drawing thousands to the area were given. All-Ives concerts are becoming commonplace and the great names in American music are paying homage to him. Why? What is all of the fuss about? A closer look into the man and his music may tell us.

Charles Edward Ives was born on October 20, 1874, in Danbury, Connecticut. The son of a Civil War bandmaster, Charles received his first musical training at a tender age. The elder Ives was an adventurer who indulged in experimentation with the nature of sounds. He speculated on the musical implications of such things as two marching bands moving in opposite directions playing different tunes meeting and passing each other. His radical experimentation also found its way into his teaching methods. Ives encouraged his son to exercise his ear by playing one melody in two different keys at the same time. His early unconventional education became apparent in every measure of his music. Even today it is oftentimes more than a casual listener can bear.

In 1894 Charles went off to Yale. He was never an exceptional student and rose above the gentleman's C in only one or two music courses.

He graduated in 1898 and divided his time between selling insurance, composing and playing the organ in local churches. There was little money in it, and the prospect of a wife and family convinced him to start his own insurance company and become a leisure-time composer. Ives and Myrick became one of the largest and most successful companies in the country.

By 1910 everyone but his wife, Harmony Tichwell, thought him an eccentric musical crank. Ives' compositions reflected his ideal that music should be more than something pleasing, sophisticated and entertaining. His compositions became

discordant and uncomfortable. People just did not want to hear anything that did not entertain them so his music was never performed and was ignored by polite society.

As his firm prospered, Ives published some of his music at his own expense giving it to friends he thought might be interested. Ives knew of no European composer later than Debussy during the period of his creativity. His compositions used elements of polytonality, polyrhythm, quarter-tones, and other devices of modern composition long before they were ever known in Europe. Ives experimented in isolation without the aid of a musically receptive society surrounding him. Redding hardly afforded Ives the advantages that Paris afforded Debussy.

Comprehension of Ives' music is impossible without a little understanding of the philosophy and character of the man who created it. Ives left us a large amount of prose in defense and explanation of his music. Much of the music he admits is not pleasing to the ear. "Pretty" melodies and ease of performance were not Charles Ives' concern. In Essays Before A Sonata he writes about the responsibilities and the problems of his music idealism:

> "A manuscript is brought to a concert master--he may be a violinist--he is kindly disposed, he looks it over, and casually fastens on one passage: "That's bad for the fiddles--it doesn't hang just right--write it like this, they will play it better." But that one phrase is the germ of the whole thing. "Never mind, it will fit the hand better this way--it will sound better." My God, what has sound got to do with music! The waiter brings the only fresh egg he has, but the man at breakfast sends it back because it does not fit the eggcup...Is it the composer's fault that man has only ten fingers?...That music must be heard is not essential--what it sounds like may not be what it is." [1]

So, it is the responsibility of the composer to write what he feels and not what audiences and performers expect. Beneath all of the frenetic prose this idea is not a new one. If composers wrote only what pleased audiences, everything would come to a halt. Stagnation would result. Progress in the arts has always rested upon the shoulders of the adventurous individuals like Ives.

He labels this disparity between the content of the piece and the way in which the content is delivered, the battle between substance and manner. The satisfactory reconciliation of these two factors Ives claims is the plight of the

artist. Frequently the artist succumbs to the temptation to be clever for the sake of being clever, letting the manner of the composition outweigh the substance. Ives warns against this:

> "A symphony written only to amuse and entertain is likely to amuse only the writer--and him not long after the check is cashed." 2

Substance is the higher of these two values: it was the spiritual element of a piece of art. The manner was the means by which the substance was displayed. Ives claimed that manner was always less important than it seemed.

The choice of the materials Ives used in his compositions was not accidental. He makes extensive use of borrowed material, drawing on a vast selection of popular social music covering the gamut from the patriotic songs and hymns to college songs and popular rag.

It is tempting to dismiss the significance of this borrowed material as being a programmatic device. In Essays Ives indicates that through the choice of this material he was trying to infuse his own music with substance:

> "The man "born down to Babbitt's Corners" may find a deep appeal in the simple but acute Gospel hymns of the New England "camp meetin" of a generation ago. He finds in them--some of them--a vigor, a depth of feeling, a natural-soil rhythm, a sincerity emphatic but inartistic--which, in spite of a vociferous sentimentality, carries him nearer the 'Christ of the People' than does the Te Deum of the greatest cathederal. These tunes have, for him, a truer ring than many of those groove-made, even measured, monotonous, non-rhythmed, indoor-smelling, priest taught, academic, English or neo-English hymns (and anthems)--well written, well harmonized things, well voice-led, well counter-pointed, well corrected, and well O.K.'d,...personified sounds, correct and inevitable to sight and hearing: in a word those proper forms of stained-glass beauty to which our over-drilled mechanisms are limited. But if the Yankee can reflect the fervency with which "his gospels" were sung--the fervency of "Aunt Sarah", who scrubbed her life away for her brother's ten orphans, the fervency with which this woman, after a fourteen-hour work day on the farm...if he can reflect such a spirit, he may find the local color that will do all the world good...In other words, if local color, national color, any color, is a true pigment of the universal color, it is a divine quality, it is a part of substance in art - not of manner." 5

So, the application of previously composed material by Ives is part of the basis of his musical thought. He not only uses it freely, but actually feels compelled to do so. He has obviously chosen this material very carefully, however we view the results.

Art to Ives was not something you could set off in a corner and admire

passively. If it was to be of value, if it was to have the substance he wrote of, art had to be alive, taking its meaning and its shape from the life of the people around it.

Well, some one hundred years later, as Ives would say, the chickens are coming home to roost. Audiences, conditioned by the oddities of avant-guard music, are listening to Ives. Perhaps it took an occasion like a centennial celebration to bring the revival into its own. Perhaps Ives is just what we need in music right now; at the least he offers us a strong guiding force lending direction to the art. Who can be sure. The fact remains that his music is alive and heard everywhere.

The next time you catch yourself cringing at a dissonant passage in the Concord Sonata or at the last chord in the Second Symphony remember the musical idealism of the man who created those sounds. It will not stop the shivers that are playing tag up and down your spine, but at least you may have an inkling of why Ives wanted them to be there.

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