

FORECAST AND REVIEW

THE CASE OF MR. IVES

TO tell the full story of the first and second New York performances of Charles E. Ives' *Concord Sonata* at Town Hall, January 20th and February 24th is not my purpose here for that deserves a whole article. In tabloid form however, it would read as follows:

First performance: very small house.

In the next ten days: enthusiastic reviews cribbed from Ives' prefaces by critics most of whom had not been at the concert.

Second performance: packed house and disappointment of critics on hearing work, obviously for the first time.

For a good long while now many of us have been puzzled about the musical merits of the *Concord Sonata* and other of Ives' longer pieces. I came to know the sonata in the years when Stravinsky first scandalized America in person and Whiteman gave the Carnegie premiere of the *Rhapsody in Blue*. A keen time with lots of enthusiasm and lots of performances of new music to which I sometimes went with Ives himself. Sunday afternoons, after these concerts, a few of us would go down to Gramercy Park where Ives then lived, or later uptown when he had moved to Seventy-Fourth Street, to discuss the music in the calm atmosphere of his living-room, a Henry James, old New York interior. They were lively talks, new music was new and very "modern" and Ives was much interested. Often he would poke fun, sit down at the piano to play from memory bits of a piece just heard, like *Daphnis and Chloé* or the *Sacre*, taking off the Ravel major seventh chords and obvious rhythms, or the primitive repeated dissonances of Stravinsky, and calling them "too easy." "Any-

body can do that" he would exclaim, playing *My Country 'Tis Of Thee*, the right hand in one key and the left in another. His main love, however, was for Bach, Brahms and Franck, for he found in them spiritual elevation and nobility, which, like many a critic of his generation, he felt contemporary music had simplified away. To start the day fresh, he would often play a fugue from the *Well-Tempered Clavichord* before breakfast and long hours at the office. Not that he needed much cheering up, for, being a good sturdy Yankee with plenty of vitality, he poured lots of pep, salty humor and good spirits into everything he did.

During these afternoons we would coax him to try some of his own music, and as he saw we were sincere and not merely polite he would jump to the piano and play. Then the respectable, quiet, Puritan atmosphere was oddly disturbed, a gleam would come into his eyes as fiery excitement seized him, and he would smash out a fragment of *Emerson*, singing loudly and exclaiming with burning enthusiasm. Once the captain of the football team at Yale, he put the same punch into his music. It was a dynamic, staggering experience which is hard even now to think of clearly. He hated composers who played their works objectively "as if they didn't like them." This strong, wiry Yankee vitality, humor, and transcendental seriousness were very much to our taste and we always came away from Ives full of life's glad new wine and a thousand projects for the future.

In those days Ives was practically never played. Once, in 1927 at a Pro-Musica concert, two movements of his *Fourth Symphony* were given under the direction of Goossens who sat up all one night with a towel around his head trying to figure out how to keep the orchestra together in the places where the bar lines do not coincide. Ives had the percussion to his house to teach them the rhythms. It is no wonder the work didn't go any too well, for the score of the "lively movement," later published by *New Music*, has complexities well nigh insurmountable. At the time we asked why he didn't write his work more practically, so that performers could play it more accurately. He would reply that it was written as simply as possible, and then play over precisely what was written indicating that it was not as hard as all that. We remarked that certain very complicated textures would never

sound but he countered that he had already tried them out when he conducted a theatre orchestra at Yale. Then we asked why the notation of the *Concord Sonata* was so vague, why every time he played it, he did something different, sometimes changing the harmonies, the dynamic scheme, the degree of dissonance, the pace. He even made a transcription of *Emerson* with many notes changed and the dynamic plan completely altered. He said that he intended to give only a general indication to the pianist who should, in his turn, recreate the work for himself. In a footnote to *Hawthorne*, he writes: "If the score itself, the preface, or an interest in Hawthorne suggest nothing, marks (of tempo, expression, etc.) will only make things worse."

This improvisational attitude toward music, so familiar in swing, affects all of Ives' more mature work. It affects his conception of performance and of composing. Unlike Chopin and Liszt, who wrote out very accurately in note values what they improvised, Ives leaves a great deal to the mercy of the performer. In his composition, the notation of a work is only the basis for further improvisation, and the notation itself, frequently of music first conceived many years before, is a kind of snapshot of the way he played it at a certain period in his life.

The improvisation often consists in adding dissonances, harmonies and complicated rhythms to a fundamentally simple work. This is obvious in many songs, and especially in a comparison of *Hawthorne* with the scherzo of the *Fourth Symphony*, which contain much identical material, greatly overlaid with extra harmonies and complicated rhythms. The fuss that critics make about Ives' innovations is, I think, greatly exaggerated, for he has rewritten his works so many times, adding dissonances and polyrhythms, that it is probably impossible to tell just at what date the works assumed the surprising form we now know. The accepted dates of publication are most likely those of the compositions in their final state. Anyhow the question is not important. Ives himself has said that he prefers people to judge his music not for when it was written but for what it is.

Up to the time Kirkpatrick gave his performances no one had heard the *Concord Sonata* in its entirety in a concert hall. Some of us came wanting to see in the whole work what we saw in frag-

ments. We found ourselves sadly disappointed. Kirkpatrick's extraordinary feat of interpretation did make a great deal of the music assume a shape through clever dynamic planning. But all the ingenious interpreting in the world could not dispel the fact that the sonata is formally weak. Kirkpatrick played the work with more finesse and less breadth and grandeur than Ives does, but this is understandable as Ives rarely ever played the whole work through but stuck to little fragments which he particularly loved; the whole work as a piece seemed to interest him less.

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To turn to the music itself. In form and esthetic it is basically conventional, not unlike the Liszt sonata, full of the paraphernalia of the overdressy sonata school, cyclical themes, contrapuntal development sections that lead nowhere, constant harmonic movement which does not clarify the form, and dramatic rather than rhythmical effects. Because of the impressionistic intent of most of the music, the conventional form seems to hamper rather than aid, resulting in unnecessary, redundant repetitions of theme, mechanical transitions uncertain in their direction; unconvincing entrances of material; dynamics which have no relation to the progress of the piece. Behind all this confused texture there is a lack of logic which repeated hearings can never clarify, as they do for instance, in the works of Bartok or Berg. The rhythms are vague and give no relief to the more expressive sections, the much touted dissonant harmonies are helter-skelter, without great musical sense or definite progression. The esthetic is naive, often too naive to express serious thoughts, frequently depending on quotation of well-known American tunes with little comment, possibly charming but certainly trivial. As a whole, the work cannot be said to fill out the broad, elevated design forecast in the composer's prefaces.

However, there is also much good in the sonata. Usually the statement of themes is beautiful: in *Emerson*, the beginning, the first "verse" section, the allegro, and the coda; in *Hawthorne*, pages 27 to 32 which lead up to the "pilgrim's song" and the funny parody of *Hail, Columbia*; though less characteristic of Ives' best, the *Alcotts* maintains a consistent level: and *Thoreau*, with its lovely beginning and its beautiful "walking theme" is in

the best Ives manner, though it too has a long redundant section which might be relieved by cutting pages 65 and 66.

While his music is more often original than good, the good is really very personal and beautiful. Unlike that of Charles Griffes, here is a fresh and touching impressionism, different from anyone else's. With Griffes, Ives shares many formal weaknesses as well as a similar sensitivity to curious chord formations, but though he has more scope, he is less able to realize his musical purpose. Despite all the problems about music and American culture which form the interesting context of the Ives case, it is not possible on the basis of the music we know to rank him among the great originals of American art, with, for instance, Ryder and Whitman. Unlike theirs his work, though original, falls short of his intentions. In any case, it is not until we have had a much greater opportunity to examine and hear his music, that Ives' position as a composer can be determined. The present canonization is a little premature.

FURTHER NOTES ON THE WINTER SEASON

Nothing could be a greater jump than from Ives to Nadia Boulanger who during the winter conducted the Philharmonic in performances of great precision, clarity and understanding. While the Concord school was at its height, Poe was inaugurating the idea: "take care of the manner and the matter will take care of itself." Now we have an exponent of that principle in music, living and functioning among us. Mlle. Boulanger conducted several new works by Szalowski and Françaix, which clearly reflected this approach and which, though completely realized musically, were not very important. Each new piece by Jean Françaix is so much like its predecessor that it is very hard to think of something new to say about the *Piano Concerto*, performed by himself at this concert. It was a little longer and a little duller than his more amusing *Concertino* for piano and orchestra but it had the same trivial, boyish charm, agreeable to hear and not particularly agreeable to think about.

Bartok's new *Rhapsody for Clarinet and Violin* proved that a good new work if played by performers with the reputations of

Szigeti and Benny Goodman can have great success. This piece consists of two folk-dances, resembling in atmosphere such older works of Bartok as the *Allegro Barbaro*, but they are done with much greater brilliance and surety of technic. It is a work that is less important than his *Music for Strings, Harp and Percussion* of last year, but shows the same care in construction and many of the same beauties.

At last we had an opportunity to hear Stravinsky's *Concerto for Two Pianos*, excellently played by Steuermann and Gimpel at a New School concert. It sounds even better than it looks on paper, and proves to be one of Stravinsky's finest works. As this composer comes more and more to grips with the problems of abstract music he gives us increasingly important scores. For beside being intensely interesting in form and movingly serious in atmosphere, the *Concerto* is a mine of invention in sonorities for two pianos. It is good to know that a work of such great quality and seriousness could have been composed in these recent hectic years.

At this same concert there was also played an excellent quartet by Janaček, a composer whom we should hear more often.

One of the best musical programs of the year was offered at a Juilliard Alumni concert which included Aaron Copland's *Sextet* for clarinet, piano and string quartet. This arrangement of his *Short Symphony* gives a good idea of but does not supplant our impression of the very interesting orchestra piece which Copland composed before the *Statements*. It goes the limit in rhythmic invention and offers occasional hints of his later style, especially in the middle section of the slow movement which is particularly beautiful. The whole gives further evidence of the strong inventive and imaginative qualities of this individual composer and of his great musical skill.

Sometimes in Hindemith's newer works there appears an academicism disappointing in so original a creator. Rarely has any work of his suffered so much from this fault as the *Symphonic Dances*, played here by Koussevitsky. It did not however prevent the slow section of the second movement from being good Hindemith and good music.

The Boston Orchestra also played an inferior work of Vladimir Dukelsky. In *Dédicaces* Dukelsky makes use of all the old hat modernisms and puts them together in scrappy fashion. Nevertheless, as in the better *End of St. Petersburg*, there is a curious, tortured personality which is apparent in all of his very uneven concert music.

Among the young American composers, Hunter Johnson stood out for his *Andante* for flute and strings played by Carleton Sprague Smith at a W.P.A. concert. It was personal and interesting, as was, in a completely different way, Henry Brant's lyric *Viola Sonata*, also heard at the Composers' Forum Laboratory. Brant's music has taken an unexpected romantic turn that is quite fresh and new. Norman Cazden, who is talented and skillful, had *Three Sonatas*, for clarinet solo, for viola solo, and for the two together played at the Juilliard Alumni concert. These are effective and musically interesting though they tend to the kind of dryness from which solo instrumental works of this kind often suffer. They make good exercises for performers interested in new music as they are well written for the instruments.

Prize Philharmonic compromises of Van Vactor and Sanders did not prove very new. Van Vactor's *Symphony* was the kind of modernism we saw at the Chicago World's Fair—academic plan and idea with a few frills of shiny chromium. Moments in it were good though. Sanders' *Little Symphony*, a flat-footed, barn-dance version of the *Classical Symphony* was neat but humorless.

At the League of Composers' concerts, a group of very young composers performed. Harold Brown's *Experiments* were the most finished if not the most original, Herman Chaloff was the most curious, more curious and surprising than anything heard in a long time. Margaret Purcell adapted the style of the Modern Dance composer to the accordion, with amusing results. Hunter Johnson's *Serenade for Flute and Clarinet* stood out as the only work having a definite character and personality.

So far it has been a good and interesting season.



Important note: Hendrik Willem van Loon has recently pub-

lished five very interesting, vituperative *Deliberate Reflections* on the situation of the American musician in *Greenwich Time*, January 10-14, Greenwich, Conn. These are having very far-flung reverberations. Here are a few high spots: "The whole business of music in America, by and of and for Americans, has now reached a point where a few honest observations are an absolute necessity. For unless we hasten to save what can still be saved, no one in this rich and easy-going country will have a chance unless he or she happens to have been born in one of the slums of Bologna, in the attic of a Cracower suburb . . ." "We are going to have an exhibition in New York this summer . . . It will feature the World of Tomorrow. But for American musicians, it will once more feature the World of the Never-Never Land."

Of the American critic he remarks: "The American critic is as scrupulously honest as he is dull. But there again we can hardly blame him. He is terribly overworked and everlastingly pestered by the most insidious forms of publicity. Furthermore, he writes for a public that is not very well versed in musical lore.

Calling the managers, "music brokers," he says: "That little expression will show you in a general way what is the matter with the 'Music of Today' and why it may lead up to 'No Music of Tomorrow' unless we take a little interest in that particular field which to many of us means more than all the stucco *palazzi* now being raised to high Heaven on the Flushing mud-flats. . . Like every other article that has become a commodity, music has fallen into the hands of a small ring of promoters and brokers, who rule supreme and who can make or break reputations and actually do so with the callousness of gangsters."

About what should be done: "It will take years of bitter fighting on the part of the American artists themselves, for they are the ones who will have to unite for common action if they do not want this condition to prevail forever. . . . What American music needs just now is a revolt on the part of the concert-going public. . . . Music lovers of America, unite and throw off the shackles of that foreign domination which is destroying the hope of your native musicians."

Elliott Carter