

MODERN MUSIC

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FOUR SYMPHONIES BY CHARLES IVES

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THE strange neglect of Charles Ives at this time can be ascribed only to our musical apathy. The literary figures of New England's golden age, with whom Ives ranks in spirit, are coming alive again through the efforts of writers like Van Wyck Brooks and F. O. Matthiessen. But out of Ives's great body of works few pieces have been performed, and these only by adventurous singers and pianists. Our orchestras have almost entirely overlooked him. Even on the occasion of his seventieth birthday this year, not one conductor of a major symphonic group felt the need to present a work in his honor.

In solitude, Ives's original mind and soaring imagination developed a technic of expression which owes nothing to Europe but is as daring as the innovations of Schönberg or Stravinsky. When Europe still considered Debussy a modernist, Ives was writing polytonal and atonal music, experimenting with multiple rhythms, acoustical juxtapositions and quarter-tones.

Because all his orchestral music, except the Scherzo from the *Fourth Symphony* and the *Three Places in New England*, is still unpublished, it has seemed inaccessible. And so the misconception has grown that it is difficult. Yet it presents no more problems than works by Stravinsky, Bartok, or Milhaud. Much of this manuscript music is simple and beautiful and could easily be performed.

The idea that all the symphonies except the fourth are dull and conventional is another illusion not based on fact. Each represents an important stage not only in Ives's development, but in the whole of American music. When we leaf through these scrawled and much anno-

tated pages we sense the real restlessness and boldness of a pioneering spirit.

At twenty-four Ives, who was still at Yale studying with Horatio Parker, composed his first symphony (1897-98). Surrounded by the current symphonic successes, he took Mendelssohn, Raff, and Tchaikovsky as his external models. The brilliant orchestration, clear architecture and pleasing melodies must have made his teacher proud – with some misgivings.

This symphony has a key designation of D minor – the only one by Ives to follow that convention. But the development section of its first movement, an allegro in strict sonata-form, is surprisingly modern. In a ninety-bar treatment of an harmonic sequence through all the choirs of the orchestra, Ives solves his musical problem in a way Vaughan Williams might today:

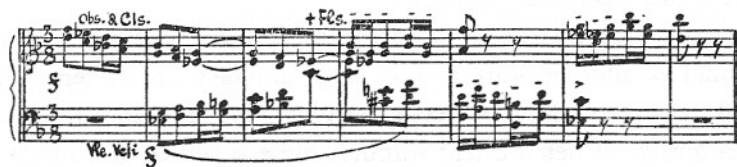


The principal melodies grope their way above. Here even the scoring is unusual. The recapitulation, with its brilliant Beethovenesque coda, brings us back to the nineteenth century.

The slow movement is indebted to Mendelssohn's organ sonatas, but is elusively American, like a country organist's reverie. The Scherzo, a gossamer bit of scoring, has a delicate woodwind theme.



Later violins enter in imitation, followed by 'celli and basses, and the whole rises to an aerial whirl. Strangely out of its time, the canonic weaving of the Trio's second subject suggests an Edmund Rubbra symphony.



The standard finale uses all the Tchaikovsky tricks of sequence and swirling orchestration, yet the brashness and vitality are Ives's own. What the impact of Ives's personality on his time might have been, we can only guess. The symphony was not performed then, nor has it ever been played since.

III

Two years of creative groping preceded the second symphony, in which an entirely new influence on idiom and form appears. But it is really an old influence, for Ives, the son of a country organist and bandmaster, had been exposed since childhood to the music of New England. In this symphony he repudiates the European models. Unconventionally, a slow prelude, somber and introspective in mood, forms the first movement. An organ-like melody



is followed immediately by a theme whose startling harmonies suggest Prokofiev.



It is at the end of this movement that Ives makes his first symphonic use of American material. A quotation from *O Columbia the Gem of the Ocean* appears as a counter-theme in the horns. A brief oboe recitative links the Andante to the gay and rollicking Allegro, whose simple tunes and galloping rhythms recall the village band.



Ives has described the third movement as a "take-off, a reflection of the organ and choir music of the Long Green Organ Book of the sixties, seventies, and eighties." To close this restful piece, of such deep feeling, the flute plays a quotation from *America the Beautiful*.

The Finale's *maestoso* introduction is based on a proud horn motive. It builds to a full sonority which introduces the *Allegro*, originally part of a previously composed *American Overture*. Against an exhilarating barn-dance tune, fragments of *De Camptown Races* are heard. Ives calls the second subject, a variant of *Old Black Joe*, "a kind of reflection of Stephen Foster and the old barn-dance fiddling over it."

The image shows a musical score for the third movement of the finale. It consists of two systems of staves. The top system includes staves for Violins (Vio. (Sord.)), Horns (Hrn. (Solo)), and Piano (Pia. Vol.). The bottom system includes staves for Violins (Vio.), Horns (Hrn.), and Piano (Pia.). The score is marked with various dynamics and performance instructions: *Meno*, *ppp*, *mf*, *p*, *Div.*, *Div. Rall.*, and *Rall.*. The music features complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines, with the piano part providing a harmonic and rhythmic foundation.

The first theme returns to overwhelm everything. Then the whole pattern is repeated with subtle variations in color and harmony. Now it is decorated by fragmentary quotations from folk and patriotic themes. Some are not easy to identify, since only a few notes of the original melody are preserved, and they are quickly caught up in the rushing speed of the dance. Then at the coda the trombones proclaim the entire *Columbia* song with a loud thumping hooray on the bass drums. It is as though Ives were telling the whole world of his proud heritage. This movement might be called a musical Currier and Ives. The symphony orchestra has been swept aside to make way for country fiddlers and the firemen's band, for a Fourth of July jubilation, the shouting of children, a politician's speech, and Old Glory.

But the conductors of the time shied away from these "Salvation

Army tunes." Brahms, who used *Gaudeamus Igitur*, appeared on their programs, while Ives's second symphony, except for a reading by the Hyperion Theatre Orchestra of New Haven, remained unperformed.

III

Far from being discouraged by this neglect, Ives immediately began a third symphony. This quiet work, in three movements, is lightly scored for an orchestra of single woodwinds, two horns, trombone and strings. It was composed between 1901 and 1904 while Ives was active in the insurance business in New York. The spirit of the great camp meetings, once so popular in Danbury, runs through this symphony. It is based on old hymn-tunes, and its fervent longing is expressed without show or bombast. Ives, in the role of preacher, speaks words of comfort, tenderness and hope.

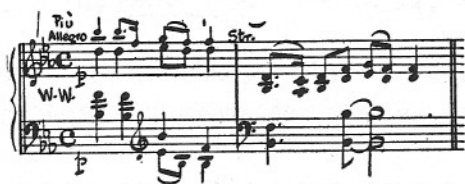
A serene opening moves on to a passage whose harmonies might have been imagined by Gesualdo.



Then *O for a Thousand Tongues* is treated in free fugal fashion



and the first mood returns. In the second movement there is less intensity. Ives told me that he wished to represent the games which little children played at the camp-meeting while their elders listened to the Lord's word. He creates the effect in a kind of clapping phrase.



The final *Largo* treats, in free rhapsodic form, the gospel hymn *Just*

as *I Am*.

In its deep sincerity this symphony is like the great Bach chorales. Its religion has none of the mystic elements of Franck, Elgar, or Wagner, but is pure New England. Gustav Mahler was so impressed when he saw the score that he took it back to Austria. But Ives's fate still pursued him. Mahler died that year, and this noble work has never been performed.

III

The fourth symphony, written between 1910 and 1920, is the most elaborate and ambitious of Ives's works. It is scored for an immense orchestra, large percussion section and chorus. And it contains the simplest music and the most complex ever written.

Ives refers to the Prelude as the "What and Why which the spirit of man asks of life." Its strong opening is based on the hymn *Watchman, Tell us of the Night*. Immediately after this, a second orchestra, composed of harps and a few violins placed at some distance from the main orchestra, sets up a kind of musical backdrop. It attempts no melodic counterpoint but establishes an harmonic haze of sound in an entirely different key. The effect is indescribably beautiful; it is like nothing else in music. Against this, solo 'cello and piano express the searching and questioning of the soul.

Slowly

Solo Cello

Piano

2nd Orch.

2 Voc.

The hymn returns, now sung by the chorus, and is dominant to the end. The entire movement is only eight pages in score, but its simple dignity is unforgettable.

The succeeding movements are "the diverse answers in which existence replies." The first of these is "not a Scherzo in the accepted sense

of the word, but rather a comedy, in which exciting, easy and worldly progress through life is contrasted with the trials of the Pilgrims in their journey through the swamps and rough country. The occasional slow episodes – Pilgrims' hymns – are constantly crowded out and overwhelmed by the former. The dream or fantasy ends with an interruption of reality – the Fourth of July in Concord." This amazing Scherzo uses all the devices of modern music. Its percussion effects alone are as daring as anything by a Varese. A great extroverted physical piece, it hurls the listener into an intoxicating complexity of hymn-tunes, jazz, ragtime, fiddle music and folk-like fragments.

The third movement is a magnificent Fugue. Its simple diatonic harmonies seem especially serene after the Scherzo. Ives calls it "an expression of the reaction of life into formalism and ritualism," but these words convey little of its quality. *From Greenland's Icy Mountains* is the principal theme, *Coronation* the counter-subject. After an impassioned climax, there is a coda of extraordinary poignancy. Over a string *pianissimo* the clarinet's lovely, questioning melody

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet. The top system consists of a single staff for the clarinet and a grand staff for the piano. The clarinet part is marked "Slowly" and begins with a melodic line. The piano accompaniment is marked "mp" and "molto espr.". The bottom system continues the piano accompaniment with a more complex rhythmic pattern.

is answered by the reassuring strains on the solo trombone of *Joy to the World*.

The Scherzo of the fourth symphony is modern music liberated, but the Finale belongs to some distant future. After the opening bars, which recall the Prelude, it uses no themes, quotations or motives, no harmonic or rhythmic patterns. Each instrument pursues its own path in ever-changing rhythms, breaking into its own themes. The chorus sings

a wordless vocalization. The effect is of a *great sound*, an enormous tutti which swells and recedes. An Oriental would describe such music as the "pure state" which exists in space, chaotic, all-embracing. Whether it can give us musical pleasure in the sense we conceive it today, only a performance can show. But, although the first three movements of the fourth symphony have been presented separately, the great Finale still awaits performance.

This symphony is grand in conception, but Ives planned a fifth on an even larger scale. The *Universe Symphony* was to be played outdoors, with five or six orchestras, bands and a chorus of hundreds. Ill-health has forced him to leave this project in sketches. But his dream reveals the adventurous and transcendent hope of an indomitable spirit. Neither bitterness nor compromise has weakened his strength of purpose. Some day, perhaps, the path he has trod as pioneer will be familiar to everyone.