Charles Ives

CHARLES E. IVES IS THE FATHER of indigenous American art-music and at the same time is in the vanguard of the most forward-looking and experimental composers of today.

Many composers before Ives tried to utilize American folk-material; such men as Stephen Foster practically composed folk-songs. But some of their music yielded to banal European influences, because they invariably altered the original rhythms (often fascinatingly irregular) so as to fit the current European mode, which was nothing but 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, or 6/8 meter, and in note-lengths nothing but whole, half-, quarter-, eighth-, sixteenth-, or thirty-second notes, or, at the wildest, eighth-note triplets. Also, all the slight deviations of pitch in the musical scale of the American village folk, wrought in deepest musical ecstasy, were (and still are by most arranger-butchers) altered so as to suit the conventional European mode of tuning of the major or minor scales. And, perhaps worst of all, a schoolbook harmonization like a hymn in four-part harmony was given to all alike. Thus the process of squeezing out all the original life and fire of the music was complete.

Ives was born in 1874 in a small Connecticut town where native music lived. 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 narrow down or standardize the views of his son, but allowed him to hear all the native music in

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Apart from HC and Sidney Cowell's Charles Ives and His Music *(1955), now available in a fine new edition edited by David Nicholls (1996, see bibliography), this is Cowell's fullest appreciation of Charles Ives (1874-1954), written at a time when few people regarded Ives as a serious composer. Earlier versions of the text appeared in* Disques *III/9 (Nov. 1932) pp. 374-377 and* Modern Music *X/1 (Nov.–Dec. 1932) pp. 24-33. This version first appeared in* American Composers on American Music *(1933) pp. 128-145.*

its charming and naïve entirety, and encouraged him to think for himself. This led into a scientific-musical understanding, and to the ability to sort and utilize his many impressions and to build from them a new musical structure. Such a structure is what Ives has created.

As a child, Ives heard the village band. Not all the members played exactly together; there was always a player or so a fraction either ahead or behind the rest. The pitch of the notes was not always the same with all the instruments; some played a bit sharp, some a bit flat. Sometimes the bass tuba would be an indistinguishable pitch, almost a percussion noise. Perhaps the trumpet, or rather the cornet, would feel jolly enough to play his addition to the whole quite independently, so that his part would be altogether different from the rest of the orchestra; yet he would eventually find a way to get in with "the bunch."

Or perhaps Ives heard the fiddling to a dance. The fiddler not only did not play in tune with the conventional notion—he did not want to, and it would have been wrong if he had. His idea of music was quite different, and through slips and slides, and slightly off-pitch tones, which could go loosely under the title of "quarter-tones," he created the right and proper music for the village dance. Kreisler and Heifetz are masters of their art, yet neither one of them could play the fiddle in an old American dance. They would not know where to accent, where to "dip" and "pull" the tone, where to be deliberately and joyfully "off-tune"! The old village fiddler is as much master of his craft as they, although neither can excel in the system of the other.

Ives was also influenced by the village church music. With a wheezy and often out-of-tune-to-the-point-of-discord harmonium playing simple hymn concords as a base, the congregation sang soulfully and nebulously around the supposed tones of the tune. The so-called unmusical of the congregation sang along behind the tune in both rhythm and pitch, either a bit flat or those with great self-assurance over-aiming at the note and sharping on the high pitches! And in the hands of some of the organists, the harmonium would sometimes play the tonic chord through a passage where the dominant tones were sung in the hymn, or vice versa. Yet the singing was intense in feeling, as well as spontaneous.

Such native characteristics exist all through American village and country music. They are typically American, and are the distinctions between American folk-music and the folk-music of the Europeans from which we spring. Yet the "cultivated" musicians who collected and published these songs of our people unconsciously and without question weeded out all such irregularities and the result was that there is not the slightest suspicion of an original, indigenous, or truly American feeling left in the published versions of these songs. The sad part is, also, that the village children in the schools have learned the songs from the notes, and sing them in the narrow, stiff way they are written down, losing all the native beauty and charm of the unwritten variations, the fine spirit of minstrelsy in the songs and dances. The children naturally take for granted that their elders sing badly and that the notes taught in school are correct; whereas the truth is that the notes are a miserable and vain attempt to preserve the living art of the older folk. Thus the spontaneous way of folk-singing is being rapidly lost.

All of the elements of backcountry New England music were assimilated by Ives, on whom they made a deep impression. Having too good a musical ear and general perception to do as the others have done and remove in the cultivated version of this music all the characteristic and charming irregularities, Ives began early to build himself a music in which he could include all these mooted elements. Working with musical feeling deeply rooted in the spirit of the music rather than from a purely intellectual point of view, he found that it was necessary to build his whole musical structure from the ground up. It was impossible for him to confine himself to the known scale, harmony, and rhythm systems brought from Europe.

He therefore found it essential to form a new and broader musical architecture, a scheme of things which, founded on American folk-music, permitted the use of all the elements to be found in it. He did not discard any elements of known musical culture (except irrelevant pedantry); all of them are present in his work; but he also included the extra-European elements of the folk-music as actually performed, and made a new solid foundation on this music, which permits infinite development and cultivation. With breadth of concept, and beginning from the rock-bottom of Ameri-

can soil, he proceeded to write one work after another, each one going farther than the last; and through feeling rather than a mechanically thought-out plan he created an individual musical style. This style contains an astonishing number of elements to be found in no other music. In the end, the music goes far from its folk-foundation into symphonic works of length and complexity. As Burbank created a world of unsuspected optical beauties in flowers by the selection and cultivation of undeveloped tendencies in plants, so Ives took apparently slight elements of American folk-music, and by diligence and sympathetic cultivation found new musical beauty.

The style of his finest music is a style of richness and outpouring, of warmth and largesse. It is humanitarianism applied to sound. No element of music, no matter how unpopular, is left uninvited—all possible elements are included, and not only included but made warmly welcome in the musical fabric. It is a music not of exclusion but of inclusion, and is the most universal in its use of different materials and shades of feel ing of any music which I have ever heard. Ives is a wizard at taking seemingly irreconcilable elements and weaving them together into a unity of purpose and flow, joining them by a feeling of cohesion, as well as through the logic of his system, which, as I have indicated before, is wide enough to bring together elements of many different sorts. In the hands of many, such free combinations would result in a hodgepodge; with Ives they result in grand music. There is great similarity, artistically, between Ives and Walt Whitman.

To try to give in words an impression of the feeling of any music is futile—one must hear the music itself. Let it suffice to say that Ives's music contains endless shades of profundity and ecstasy, humor and sadness, commonness and exquisiteness. That which can with more interest be spoken of lies in the analysis of the means used and a survey of what actually takes place in the music.

As a beginning toward an analytical understanding of Ives's works, one must take into consideration his point of view. He believes in music as a vehicle of expression, not so much a personal expression of himself, the composer (although this is included also), but a general human expression. He regards a musical composition almost as though it were a living organism, of which the composer gives the germ, the performer adding to its growth by widening the initial concept. For this reason, although there are always certain delicately balanced sounds about which he is very particular, he gives the performer unusual freedom in playing his works. He does not believe in laying down an absolutely rigid pattern for performers to follow, but believes that if the performer is great and adds his creative fire to the composer's in the rendition of the work, new and unexpected beauties will be born and the concept of the work will grow and flourish. This view has made it difficult for Ives to find the best way of writing down his music. There are always passages which he feels may be played in any of several different ways, depending upon who the performer is and how he feels at the moment, without injury to the composition, since the composition is a germ idea which may develop in any of a number of different directions. Therefore, if he writes down one certain way, he fears that the form of the piece will become crystallized, and that players will fail to see the other possibilities. This idea has led him to pay particular attention to the manner of writing down works, and has resulted in a number of characteristic features of his scores. For instance, he gives directions in a certain place for the performer to play very loud if his feelings have been worked up sufficiently; if not, he is to continue playing more softly. Very frequently, also, he gives a choice of measures. When the player comes to a certain place, he chooses between two or three different measures, according to how he feels. The same idea is also carried out in individual notes: there will be very full chords written, with a footnote stating that, if the player wishes, he may leave out certain notes or, if he wishes, he may add still more! In many places it is indicated that certain measures may be left out at will. In other places, measures are given which may be added at will. In still other places, certain parts may be repeated at will. Many other similar and characteristic directions may be found.

The same fear of hampering the freedom or cramping the feelings of the performer has resulted in his creating very independent parts for each of the men in his orchestral works. Each player, with a very strong feeling for the general whole, has his own quite individual part. The result is a full polyphony, as each one is apt to have his own melody, and all may be sounded to-

gether; yet the whole synchronizes into a rich unity of sound. Individual players are often rhythmically independent also, and are asked to play a different rhythm of their own across entirely different rhythms of the rest of the orchestra, but coming out together with the rest at some specified point! In several instances he writes for two orchestras at once, each playing something different—different in harmony, melody, and rhythm. Sometimes they come out together; but I remember one case in which one of the orchestras ends somewhere in the middle, and the other goes on, the winner of the contest. The second orchestra is requested to play, not in a certain specified cross-rhythm against the main orchestra, but in an independent rhythm having nothing to do with the other; and it is indicated that they may find themselves ending anywhere within several pages in relation to the main body of the music, which is taken by the "first" orchestra. This idea came from hearing two bands passing each other on the march, each playing a different piece. Ives was marching with one of the bands; consequently the other seemed to rise in strength as it came near, and die away as it drew further away.

A good example of the Ivesian individual-part writing is in the latter part of "Washington's Birthday," in which the orchestra changes from an Allegro to a slow movement. The viola, however, is still full of the feeling of the Allegro, so continues to play an altered version of it against the rest of the orchestra's Adagio! In the same work, in the Allegro, the flute-player feels that the tempo should be faster; so he plays it faster than the rest of the men, and his measures come out a sixteenth-note shorter than those of the rest of the orchestra on this account. One can find such examples throughout Ives's music.

Ives notates many things which are unusual and not to be found in any other music, together with some things which are very common in performance, but which it is unconventional to write down. An instance of this is shown in his *Concord* Sonata, in which he writes six whole notes and a quarter-rest in 7/4 meter. This indicates the actual length of each tone, which is to be held over with the pedal, one note overlapping another. This is very frequent in practice, but I know of no other instance of its being notated. Ives recognizes, as I have said before, that the notated form of music is

only a skeleton about which the performer wraps the flesh and blood of the living being of the composition. Ives does not, however, believe in presenting in the written form only the cut-and-dried conventional outline. He believes, probably quite rightly, that this form of notation does not in the least stimulate the imagination of the performer into finding the subtle deviations which give real life and character to the music. Ives tries to induce the performer to share in the creation of the work he is playing by showing, in the written-down form, one way of really performing the piece, carefully worked out, and written down as nearly as possible in the way it actually sounds. This has led him into placing on paper rhythms which are sometimes actually performed but which have never been seen on paper before. From this as a beginning, he also developed rhythms which have never been used before but which he found ways of writing down.

Similarly, in melody, if he wished to suggest the feeling of a country fiddler who plays music with scales tuned unconventionally, he did not write down the tones of our scale which are close and let it go at that, but attempted to write down the exact shades of pitch. This increased 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 wrote down the actual lengths of tones held by the pedal. Writing down a scale with the pedal held, he found that all the tones of the scale had to be written 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 pedaler of Chopin. Seeing these chords on paper led to their use later as a new and independent sort of harmony. Ives has also taken special interest in refinements of tone-quality, in which he desires certain overtones to come out, and in delicacies of dynamics, which he puts down with care.

Thus his original notations cover all known fields of musical materials and are in themselves an indication of his covering of all fields, of his musically overflowing in every conceivable direction, of the wealth and fertility of his invention.

An analysis of some actual examples will give a clue to the style which he has developed, the materials he uses, and the way he has of fusing into a musical and emotional unity the riff-raff of

cheap, discarded musical materials, the complete gamut of materials in good general standing, and the innumerable materials which he has personally added to the world's palette of possibilities.

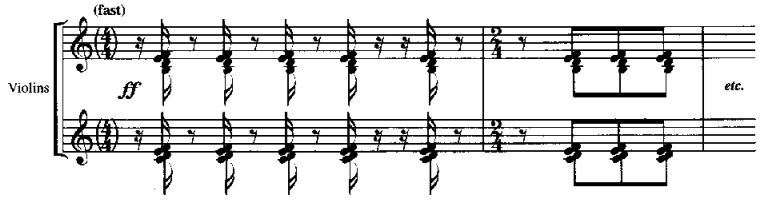
All the developments which will be shown in the examples here are original with Ives, not influenced by other composers. Ives attended practically no concerts whatsoever at the time that he was developing his materials and style, and certainly none in which "modern" usages were shown; also it must be truthfully said that Ives in some of his works came before his more famous European contemporaries, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, in the use of materials which they are credited with having been the first to use. Not that they were influenced by him, of course. They had no more heard of him than he of them. Apparently it was the right time for such things to develop, and they sprang from several sources almost simultaneously. In any case, Schoenberg began writing in the dissonant style that made him famous in 1909, and the first completed works were made public in 1910. It was at the same time that Stravinsky threw off the shackles and branched out independently.

Ives began using experimental materials in his music about 1895. At first they were more or less impressionistically employed—the sound of drums by sounding a number of bass notes together on the piano, or the impression of two bands playing at once through playing chords in differ ent keys together, and by using at least two rhythms at once. But gradually the sounds thus conceived became more and more interesting to Ives as a musical medium in themselves, and he used them to wider advantage. Tone-clusters, polyharmonies, polyrhythms, strong dissonance, atonal passages, rapid metric change, jazz-rhythms, and many other materials supposedly dating from a later period were freely used by Ives between 1895 and 1907, and then were further developed until about 1916 or 1917. Before the twentieth century these materials were utilized by him tentatively and occasionally; from about 1901 onward they became a fundamental part of his style. All his larger works were written before he had ever seen or heard any music by either Stravinsky or Schoenberg.

Sometimes his findings are surprisingly similar to those invented later by others; sometimes they are in directions not yet explored by others but which will unquestionably be further utilized in the

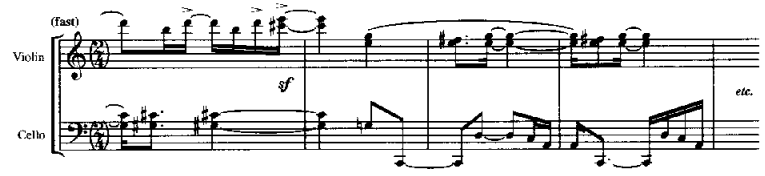
future, as they are inevitable in the line of historical musical development.

The bar below shows the sort of ejaculatory rhythm for which Stravinsky later became famous, a rhythm of off-beats sharply accented, with the same dissonant harmony always continued. These things are shown perfectly in the excerpt from "Putnam's Camp" written long before.



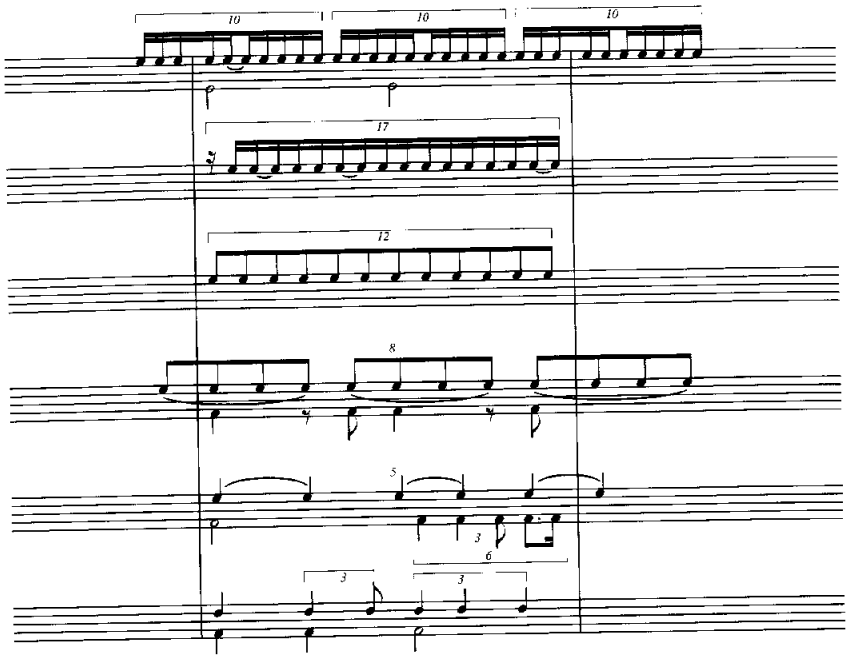
Ex. 1– Charles Ives, "Putnam's Camp" from *Three Places in New England.* © 1935 Merion Music, Inc. Used by permission.

The next example shows a sort of syncopation and accent which is associated with jazz, a type of rhythm which has only very recently been adopted in "serious" music, and which has been considered to be original in jazz. It is a recent mode in the orchestral works of Gershwin, Copland, and Gruenberg. Roy Harris in his article speaks of such rhythms as characteristically American;[1] that he is right is all the more proved by Ives' use of them in his symphonic work, Second Orchestral Set, near the beginning of the century. The jazz part of this set was written about 1902 or 1903.



Ex. 2– Charles Ives, Orchestral Set No. 2. © Copyright 1971 by Peer International Corp. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved.

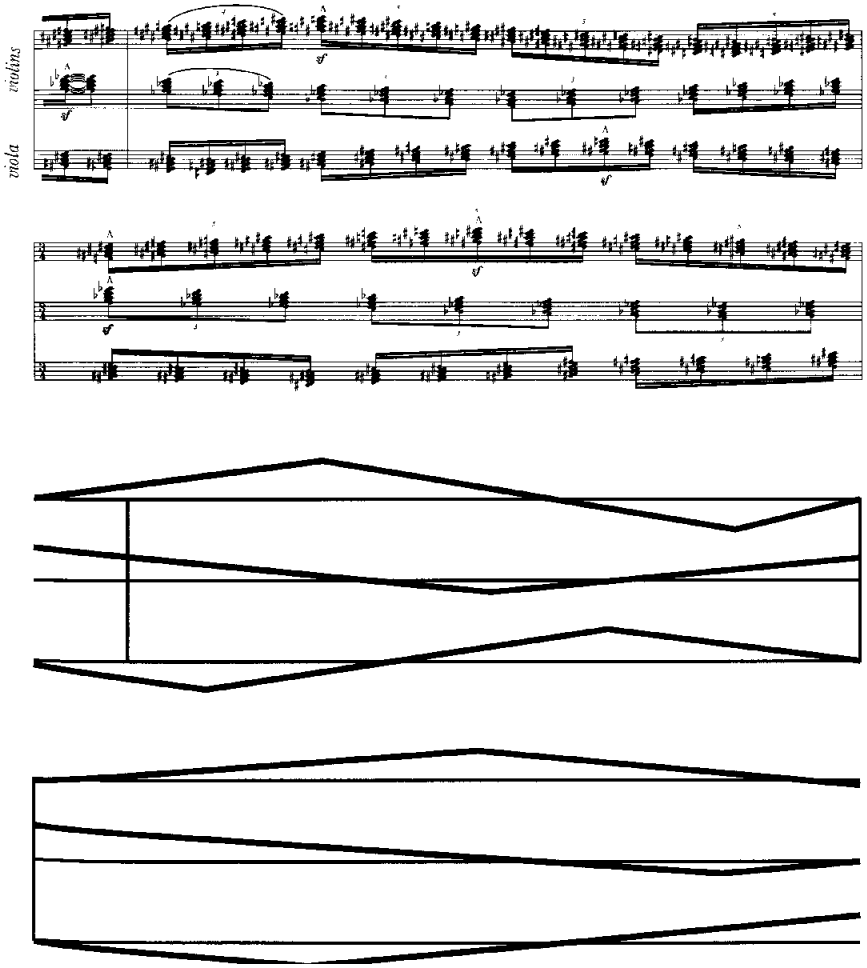
Specially characteristic of Ives is the remarkable rhythm scheme in these bars from "The Housatonic at Stockbridge." Such a rhythmical fabric as is shown here is not an unusual case, but the sort of thing that is to be found throughout Ives' music. It is an interwoven texture of rhythm. Rhythms are used against each other at the



Ex. 3- Charles Ives, "The Housatonic at Stockbridge" from *Three Places in New England.* © 1935 Merion Music, Inc. Used by permission.

same time, forming harmony of rhythms in the same way that tones are used together to make the more familiar harmony of sound. Just why the idea of a harmony of rhythm has remained practically undeveloped with us, or why there has been so much prejudice against the idea of different simultaneous rhythms, is very hard to say. They sound magnificent, and are in current use among all peoples of the world, with the sole exception of the conventional music of Europe. In Ives' works such different rhythmical harmonies are very varied, and it can be said with certainty that nowhere in the world have such rhythms ever been written down before. Ives goes farther in rhythmical development than any other composer either of today or of yesterday. In the measures on the opposite page one finds as a rhythm-harmony different parts moving simultaneously in 20, 17, 8, and 5 notes to the measure, with other parts in figures taken from rhythms of 12, 10, 6, and 4 to the measure. It is specially notable that Ives' use of cross-rhythms is through long experience so free that one seldom finds a simple underlying rhythm mechanically thumped out on every beat. The

rhythms are all or in part varied by means of figures or patterns within the realm of each rhythm-system, and by means of accents and phrasing. With anyone else, a rhythm of 17 against 20, for instance (if one could find anyone else audacious enough to go that far!), would mean 20 against 17 equal and unvaried notes. In the example shown, the 17-rhythm is varied by the second and third note being tied together; the 20-rhythm also has the second and third notes tied, and is divided into groups accented in tens. The accent does not fall on the first beat of the 20 but on the third



Ex. 4 – Charles Ives, "The Fourth of July." Copyright © (Renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission.

note before the measure. The group of ten notes goes through the bar-line, so that the eighth note after the bar is again the accented note; then another ten; then three notes before the end of the measure falls the last accent; and so forth. Such schemes give enormous rhythmical interest and diversity. It will be seen also that the rhythm of eight is divided into fours, and that the first note of the four-group is one eighth-note before the bar-line, so that the fourth and eighth eighth-notes are accented, instead of the first and fourth, as would otherwise be the case. This way of straddling the groups across the bar line is now to be seen in much music; before Ives used it there is hardly an example to be found. I have heard of one or two isolated instances, but no one has ever been able to tell me just where! It will also be seen how the rhythm of five is phrased in two's, again across the bar-line.

Such a rhythm-polyphony makes a polyphonic style absolutely essential in the sound also. It would be hard to find greater polyphonic freedom than in the combination of melodies in Ives's works; yet there is also a harmonic feeling which binds all his melodic parts together and makes them sound almost homophonic. It is evidently necessary in a style so diversified both rhythmically and melodically that there should be a strong harmonic unity. Otherwise the whole structure would fall apart, and chaos would be the result. Ives's style has a powerful harmonic surge, and sounds far less complex than it looks on paper.

The graph (p.61) shows melodic lines in counterpoint against each other for the first violin, second violin, and viola.[2]

Ives has developed "polyharmony" very strongly; one finds chords of contrasting tone-systems placed against each other even in his very early works of the late 1890's. In many cases polychords are used one after the other.

Ives was the first to make any extensive use of tone-clusters, or harmonies built on major and minor seconds instead of thirds as in the conventional system. Example 4 shows an instance of how he has employed such clusters of tones in running chord progressions along scale lines, in such a manner that there is always a different set of actual intervals (that is, a different relationship between the major and minor seconds within the cluster) in each successive cluster. There are three sets of clusters, each in a different key

system, so that one also has an example of polytonality. There are seven tones used in each cluster, making twenty-one different independent parts! Yet they are made quite clear by the simplicity of the outlines. Each of the three cluster-lines has an independent rhythm and melodic curve. The counterpoint of these curves against each other is shown in the graph following the example. Such clusters are used for many measures in "The Fourth of July," as an accompaniment figure, and are considered as lines of sound. Sound itself, as being a musical element no less important than melody, harmony, and rhythm, is an important view of Ives. Musicians often stupidly assume that the same written note must always mean the same thing, forgetting that in our way of writing music the same note is often used to indicate many different sorts of sound.

Melodically, Ives also has something unusual to say. With true courage, he is not afraid to utilize melodies so simple that other modernists shun them; or, on the other hand, to use occasionally some very complex melodic structure. Such a melodic structure is seen in the development of the theme E flat, D flat, C, B flat, B, C in the Second Pianoforte Sonata. The variations are made by widening the distance between the notes into different octaves. In the final form, 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. One can follow the melody perfectly in this instance. Like atonality, this idea of using wide melodic skips, usually credited to Schoenberg, was used first by Ives.

Countless other examples could be given of things which have been developed by Ives, as his fecundity seems never to be exhausted; but perhaps those already given will serve to show the many different directions in which Ives has experimented farther than any other composer, and in directions which he has found either before other composers or at the same time quite independently. I hope I have shown also that an interest in materials as such is not his main interest. His finding so many new musical resources is the result of his powerful musicality, which demands freedom of expression. He is not content, like many superficial radicals, with merely tearing down known standards. If Ives finds it necessary to reject an older standard, he never rests until he has created a new structure 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 technical, but deliciously and fascinatingly human and charming, and with an emotional but not a sentimental basis.

Recently, Ives has had very favorable reviews from some of the world's most famous critics, and is beginning to come into the recognition he so richly deserves. Yet as a whole, particularly formerly, he has been subjected to absurd misunderstanding and stupid criticism. If he wrote four whole notes in 4/4 meter because he wanted each tone held a whole note with the pedal on the piano, musicians would ask whether he knew the difference between a whole note and a quarter-note. He was snickered at because he suggested that a row of tone-clusters should be played on the piano with a board of certain length and properly cushioned, for the reason that there are too many notes in the cluster to play with the fingers. Perhaps because they were not practiced enough to play them, musicians laughed also at his rhythms without making the slightest attempt to examine them earnestly and to find out what was really meant by them. More recent criticisms have also sometimes been equally superficial. It is complained that his texture is too thick. That is, of course, because the style, now, is to have thin music. There is no reason why music should not also develop in richness. Those who believe in rigidly fixing every note, in making 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 develop in freedom as well as in precision. Again, it is complained that in his orchestration certain parts will not "come out." These parts are not meant to come out, but to alter slightly and delicately the color of the tone, an acoustical flavoring!

All these criticisms are due to the fact that some of the aspects of music which Ives has developed are momentarily out of style. Many of these aspects, however, are now growing into general recognition, and one can predict that his work will come more and more into public favor. Public favor comes slowly to those great enough to be independent. Ives is independent, and is truly great; both in invention and in spirit he is one of the leading men America has produced in any field.

II

IVES WROTE OF EMERSON, "As thoughts surge to his mind, he fills the heavens with them, crowds them in, if necessary, but seldom arranges them along the ground first." This statement might apply with equal force to the composer of the *Concord* Sonata. It is a work bursting with overlapping celestial magnificences, tonal and philosophical. Its four movements take more than [three quarters of an hour] to play; they are filled with deeply felt, highly original music, alive with new ideas of form, melody, harmony, counterpoint, rhythm and tone-quality. Yet, characteristically, the work is based on a theme deliberately taken from another composer. Ives says, "There is an 'oracle' at the beginning of the Fifth Symphony—in these four notes lies one of Beethoven's greatest messages." Ives uses this most famous of musical motives without ever quoting it exactly, building about it a thousand musical and philosophical connotations unsuspected by Beethoven.

When Ives distributed copies of the first edition of this sonata (privately printed in 1920) to anyone he thought might be interested, the general reaction among conservative professional musicians was expressed by ribald comment. Only a few intrepid souls, such as the late Henry Bellaman and the famous pianist, E. Robert Schmitz, reacted favorably and Schmitz played at least part of it in Paris in the early 20's. Ives had privately printed, also in 1920, a little book written to accompany this work, entitled *Essays Before a Sonata.* It carried this inscription: "These prefatory essays were written by the composer for those who can't stand his music—and the music for those who can't stand his essays; to those who can't stand either, the whole is respectfully dedicated."

Charles Ives (by now he was seldom using the middle initial on programs) was still more discussed than played. Therefore it was essential that when his music was published, the scores should be reviewed. It would have been bad form for Cowell to review publications for which he was responsible to any extent, but the Second Pianoforte Sonata No. 2 "Concord Mass., 1840-1860" *was reissued with corrections in 1947 (New York: Arrow Press, 1947 [68 p., $4.00]) and Cowell could discuss it and explain why it was an important work. The review appeared in* Notes *V/3 (Jun. 1948) pp. 412-413 (Music Library Association).*