Sun-treader

Carl (Charles) Sprague Ruggles was born in East Marion, Massachusetts, on March 11, 1876, and died in Bennington, Vermont, on October 24, 1971. Sun-treader, begun in 1926 and completed in 1931, was first performed in Paris on 25 February 1932 by an orchestra conducted by Nicolas Slonimsky. It was not heard in America until 1966, when Jean Martinon conducted it during a festival celebrating Ruggles’s 90th birthday; the composer was too weak to attend the performance. Edo de Waart conducted the first San Francisco Symphony performances in April 1979; the most recent performances, in June 2000, were given under Michael Tilson Thomas’s direction. The orchestra consists of five flutes (fourth and fifth doubling piccolo), three oboes and two English horns, four clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, six horns, five trumpets, five trombones, tuba and bass tuba, timpani, large and small cymbals, two harps, and strings. Duration: about sixteen minutes.

Carl Ruggles is often mentioned together with his slightly older friend Charles Ives. The two make about as unconvincing a couple as Bach and Handel or Haydn and Mozart. They share what used to be called, with admiration, Yankee individualism, and both were uncompromising figures, as disdainful of the “mainstream” as it was of them. Ives discovered in himself a genius for life insurance comparable to his genius for music, and it made him a prosperous man who could protect his tender artistic ego by pretending that composing was an eccentric’s hobby. Ruggles scraped together an irregular sort of living from playing the violin, engraving, teaching, conducting, and private patronage.

They were radically different as artists, and Wilfrid Mellers has summed up their difference:

The eclecticism of Ives’s technique—his simultaneous use of modal, diatonic, and chromatic materials from multifarious aspects of the past and present—is part of his immediacy, his awareness of environment. Ruggles, on the other hand, is neither eclectic nor profuse. In a long life he has written—and rewritten, again and again—only a handful of works; and they are in a style as consistent as Ives’s music is protean and inconsistent. This style is comparable with, and related to, one aspect only of Ives’s music: the freely evolving, non-tonal polyphony in which he expressed both his freedom from the past and his desire for identity with Nature. From Ruggles’s music all those tune-filled, rhythm-dominated, harmonically-ordered conventions which approximate to the values of Society are rigorously banished. His is a dedicated art; and it is dedicated to the integrity of his own spirit.

Ruggles has none of Ives’s folksiness and occasional sentimentality, he is not a quoter or collage artist. He left a catalogue so small as to make Webern seem prodigal by comparison, a catalogue of pieces endlessly fussed over and brought as near to perfection as he knew how. He conducted some and, like Schoenberg, he was an able painter. Henry Cowell summed him up: “...irascible, lovable, honest, sturdy, original, slow-thinking, deeply emotional, self-assured, and intelligent.” His music, rarely performed until the last years of his life, was admired by colleagues like Ives and Varèse. More often it met with incomprehension and hostility. Michael Tilson Thomas is the composer’s greatest champion, and he is chief among the artists in the recording, not yet re-released on CD online, of all of Ruggles’s published works.
Ruggles began *Sun-treader* in 1926 for a concert to be conducted in New York that fall by Edgard Varèse for the International Composers’ Guild. It was 1931 by the time he completed the score. The title comes from Robert Browning’s “Pauline”: “Sun-treader, Light and Life be thine forever”—the words are a paean to Shelley. Ruggles was not interested in Shelley. What got to him was the giant-steps imagery that Browning’s grand word at once evokes, and we hear his response to that in the vivid opening gesture of striding brass over pounding kettledrums. *Sun-treader* is a work of potent and dramatic contrasts, sections of uncompromising steadiness setting off long-range accelerations, roaring rhetoric being spelled by pages of serene lyricism.—**Michael Steinberg**

Michael Steinberg, the San Francisco Symphony’s program annotator from 1979 to 1999 and a contributing writer to our program book until his death in 2009, was one of the nation’s pre-eminent writers on music. We are privileged to continue publishing his program notes. His books are available at the Symphony Store in Davies Symphony Hall and online at sfsymphony.org/store.