A Concord Symphony

(Charles Ives's Sonata No. 2 for Piano: Concord, Mass., 1840-60, orchestrated by Henry Brant)

Charles Edward Ives *was born October 20, 1874, in Danbury, Connecticut, and died May 19, 1954, in New York City. He composed his Sonata No. 2 for Piano, subtitled* "Concord, Mass., 1840-60,"*— widely known as the* Concord *Sonata—principally from 1916 to 1919, though drawing on works sketched as early as 1904. Ives published the piece in 1920 but then effected further revisions in preparation for a second edition, which appeared in 1947. This sonata, in its original piano version, was doled out to the public piecemeal. "The Alcotts" was first programmed on August 3, 1921, in an unidentified location, in a lecture-recital by Clifton Furness; "Emerson" on March 5, 1928, in Paris, by Katherine Heyman, in a broadcast from the Sorbonne station of the Radio Institute of Paris (the first documented United States performance of this movement occurring on September 19, 1928, in a recital by Arthur Hardcastle at the Rudolph Schaeffer Studios in San Francisco, sponsored by the New Music Society of California); and "Thoreau" on December 12, 1928, in Hartford, Connecticut, again in a lecture/recital by Mr. Furness. The work was first given in its entirety in a public concert on November 28, 1938, at The Old House in Cos Cob, Connecticut, played (from memory!) by John Kirkpatrick; he had previously presented the piece in a private lecture/recital in Stamford, Connecticut, on June 21, 1938. Ives's often conflicting and sometimes misleading* Memos *make reference to an earlier, private performance of the sonata he gave in 1912 in Hartsdale, New York, and to the fact that "at an impromptu church concert in New York in the spring of 1914, I played the Emerson and part of the Hawthorne movements."*

Henry Brant *was born September 15, 1913, in Montréal, Québec, Canada, and died April 26, 2008, in Santa Barbara, California. He created his orchestration of Ives's* Concord *Sonata from 1958 through 1994, and it was premiered June 16, 1995, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, with Brant conducting the National Arts Centre Orchestra. The United States premiere took place February 25, 1996, at Carnegie Hall in New York City, with Brant conducting the American Composers Orchestra. The first San Francisco Symphony performances were conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas in February 2010. Brant's score calls for an orchestra of three flutes (second and third doubling piccolos), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, glockenspiel, chimes, vibraphone, cymbals, bass drum, jazz drum-set, piano (doubling celesta), harp, and strings.*

> The following pages were written primarily as a preface or reason for the [writer's] second pianoforte sonata—"Concord, Mass., 1845,"—a group of four pieces, called a sonata for

> want of a more exact name, as the form, perhaps substance, does not justify it. The music and prefaces were intended to be printed together, but as it was found that this would make a cumbersome volume, they are separate. The whole is an attempt to present [one person's] impression of the spirit of transcendentalism that is associated in the minds of many with Concord, Mass., of over a half century ago. This is undertaken in impressionistic pictures of Emerson and Thoreau, a sketch of the Alcotts, and a scherzo supposed to reflect a lighter quality which is often found in the fantastic side of Hawthorne.

Thus did Charles Ives begin the preface that would stretch to 124 pages and, published independently in 1920 under the title *Essays Before a Sonata,* take on a life of its own as an erratic classic of American aesthetics. Great expanses of it have no apparent connection to the *Concord* Sonata, and even parts of it that do can seem paradoxical and self-indulgent. It is annoyingly long-winded and convoluted, far more so than the straightforward opening paragraph would suggest, although even there we may view as premonitions the writer's idiosyncratic use of brackets and the fact that the title he gives at the outset—"Concord, Mass., 1845"—simply doesn't agree with the name *Second Pianoforte Sonata: Concord, Mass., 1840-60* that was attached when the work appeared in print, immediately after the *Essays* did.

Anyone who enters the universe of Charles Ives must be prepared for frustrations and contradictions, but those inconveniences do not go unrewarded. A piece by Ives always promises payback, most reliably a sense of the extraordinary, an unexpected juxtaposition of ideas, a compelling momentum, a deeply-rooted Americanism, and often an abundance of fun.

Ives was strictly *sui generis.* He had the advantage of growing up surrounded by musical open-mindedness. His father, George Ives, was a Connecticut bandmaster who for unexplained reasons took enormous pleasure from musical coincidences that most people found revolting—playing the melody of a tune in one key and its harmony in another, for example, or savoring the overlapping sounds of separate bands playing simultaneously on a parade ground. Charlie grew up with the resultant polytonality sounding logical to his ears. He went to college at Yale where he held on with a D-plus grade point average and managed to graduate in 1898, after which he sensibly took a position with an insurance firm. He proved exceptionally adept in that field and in 1906 began planning the creation of his own company—the eventual Ives & Myrick—in New York City. He would enter the annals of insurance for his groundbreaking ideas about the recruitment and training of insurance agents and his pioneering concept of estate planning.

His success as a millionaire businessman, combined with chronic but not entirely debilitating health concerns, led him to spend much of his adulthood pursuing his passion for composition in private. He was not particularly pleased that most of his pieces went unperformed, but at least his finances were such that he could go on composing whether people were interested in his work or not. One of the downsides to this is that he was not strongly compelled to finish many of his pieces; since they weren't likely to be performed (and in many cases not even published), he could go on adjusting them *ad infinitum*. The annals of Ives are accordingly packed with entries that exist in incomplete form or in conflicting states that compete with one another, with sketches that lead to no completed piece or to several completed pieces, and with compositions that are conceived one way but recycled into something quite different. Of the major composers, there is surely none whose scores so often exist a state of flux.

True to form, the *Concord* Sonata traces its ancestry to numerous earlier projects. The opening movement derived from Ives's incomplete *Emerson* Overture for Piano and Orchestra as well as to five of his Studies for Piano; the second movement from a lost *Hawthorne* Concerto for Piano and Orchestra and some lost works for piano solo; the third from a lost *Alcott* Overture and/or something he identified as his *Orchard House* Overture; and the fourth from a lost piece seemingly called *Walden Sounds*. This being Ives, the score is also riddled with references to pre-existent music from the broader sonic environment, ranging from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (very prominent) and *Hammerklavier* Sonata to such icons of Americana as "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" and Stephen Foster's song "Massa's in de Cold Ground."

As Ives proclaimed at the outset, he intended that his *Concord* Sonata should have a great deal to do with the American Transcendentalists, the mid-nineteenth-century thinkers who aspired to a spiritual state that entirely "transcended" the constraints of the physical world and that might be achieved not through the graces of any established religion but rather through the insights of an individual's intuitions. Scholars have tried to determine just how deep Ives's commitment to Transcendentalism was and some have decided it was shallow, notwithstanding his lip service in *Essays Before a Sonata.* In the end, the question seems not overwhelmingly important; this is a work of music rather than a tract of theology or metaphysics. From a musical standpoint it is extraordinary by any standard and unimaginably eccentric in the context of its time. Much of it is written without bar lines, so free is its rhythmic behavior; and the parts that are barred include such odd metric signatures as 4 ½ / 4 **[TONY—PLEASE SET AS NUMERALS four-and-a half OVER four]**, encountered in the third movement. In the second movement the pianist brings a wooden plank down on the keys to produce tone clusters. Brief but surprising visits are (or can be) paid by a solo viola in the first movement of this piano sonata and by a flute in the last movement.

Henry Brant was three years old when Ives got down to serious work on the *Concord* Sonata, and he was on the verge of displaying Ivesian inclinations of his own. As a child he created homemade instruments and composed works for them. He received a thorough musical education at the Montreal Conservatory, the Institute of Musical Arts in New York, and the Juilliard Graduate School, all the while continuing his experiments with unusual or "found-object" instruments and with deploying multiple members of the same instrumental family in a single piece. He found himself drawn increasingly to the role that space can play in composition and performance. In 1953 he unveiled *Antiphony I*, in which the music was divided among five instrumental groups separated from one another by considerable distance. Although he also continued working in a conventionally "non-spatial" idiom, he became famous as the kingpin of spatial music, creating about 115 works in which space was an essential part of the musical idea. Among his inspirations in this endeavor was none other than Charles Ives. "My most far-reaching encounter with Ives's music came in 1941," recalled Brant in 1995. "*The Unanswered Question* revealed to me three revolutionary musical procedures of which I had no previous conception. In this work I was amazed to discover spatial separation, un-coordinated rhythm, and a polyphony of simultaneous, contrasted styles! These ideas have become the premises on which all my music from the 1950s to the present is based, and they continue to define my work."

He was already acquainted with Ives's music before that, having encountered the score of the scherzo of Ives's Fourth Symphony in 1929, when it was published in Henry Cowell's *New Music* journal, and having later received from Cowell himself one of the five hundred copies of the collection *114 Songs* that Ives had published at his own expense in 1922. "However," Brant reported, "it was some time before I saw a copy of the *Concord* Sonata, and I did not hear Kirkpatrick's New York premiere in 1939." Not until the late 1950s did he acquire a copy of the score and begin to practice it himself. He picks up the tale:

> As I began to know the work better, I sensed that here, potentially, was a tremendous orchestral piece. It seemed to me that the complete Sonata, in a symphonic orchestration, might well become the "Great American Symphony" that we had been seeking for years. Why not undertake the task myself? What better way to honor Ives and express my gratitude to him for showing me a new direction for my own music?
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> In choosing the *Concord* Sonata for orchestral treatment I felt, above all, that here Ives had achieved his most complete and comprehensive expression, and that of all his works, this was the one with the most immediate audience appeal. Henry Cowell agreed, and encouraged me to go ahead with the project. From 1958 until 1994 I worked on *A*

Concord Symphony in odds and ends of spare time in between teaching, commercial orchestration and my own experimental composing. I decided to tackle the movements of the Sonata in order of increasing difficulty, beginning with the third movement (The Alcotts), then proceeding to the fourth (Thoreau). Only then did I feel ready to face the formidable challenges of the first movement (Emerson), and the mystery of how to convert the second movement (Hawthorne) from its essentially pianistic idiom to an authentically orchestral style. My task throughout was illuminated by Ives' own *Essays Before a Sonata* and his collected *Memos*, and in some cases Ives' words helped me decipher what at first seemed baffling in his printed music.

In undertaking this project, my intention was not to achieve a characteristically complex Ives orchestral texture (which in any case, only he could produce), but rather to create a symphonic idiom which would ride in the orchestra with athletic surefootedness and present Ives' astounding music in clear, vivid and intense sonorities.

Exploring the possibilities of an orchestral setting appropriate to the *Concord* Sonata, and devising workable solutions to the many technical problems involved—these things have been exhilarating experiences for me.

—James M. Keller

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