

The Divine Dissonances of a Yankee Maverick: Charles Ives and His Symphony No.4

Charles Ives can be seen as an example of a kind of musical punctuated equilibrium, the compositions springing from his unregulated creativity fast forwarding five decades from the late Romantic lyricism of the nineteenth-century right to the radical New Music of the twentieth, music that would not see a full flowering until after the composer's death in 1954. As Igor Stravinsky put it, "This fascinating composer . . . was exploring the 1960s during the heyday of Strauss and Debussy" (qtd in Wade-Matthews 453). Experimenting with tonalities and temporalities that were deemed unplayable when he wrote much of his mature work in the first two decades of the twentieth century (Swafford), Ives, while retaining the traditional European architecture of symphony, sonata, string quartet, and the like, created a new musical language with which he could synthesize the myriad musical influences of his reality. The result is a highly sophisticated and experimental music that may at first repel with its clashes and dissonances, its discontinuities and variously eerie and boisterous musical quotations from the past, but which with very little exposure draws the listener in to a sound landscape swelling with evocative associations. It is a music "as American as apple pie" and "as free from subservience to the European tradition as Walt Whitman" (Machlis 467). And like America, it is both raucous and sentimental, spiritual and brash, equally expressive of the frenetic energy of turn-of-the-century New York and the dappled quiet of a small New England town.

Charles Ives's imaginative genius becomes all the more striking when one considers the musical conventions that bound composers at the end of the nineteenth century, in particular in terms of tonality and temporality. As Rowell observes, tonality had been the "chief agent of coherence" in music from ancient times to the dawn of the twentieth century, whether the scalar modality predominant until ca.1600, the harmonic/triadic tonality of the major European traditions, or the retaining of a central pitch or tonic up to the twentieth-century. This long adherence to tonality in music only gave way in the twentieth century as composers realized that unity could be achieved without a tonal center or the relationships of traditional harmonic tonality (234-336).

If for Ives the direction towards atonality was impeded by his formal schooling at Yale under the conservative German-trained Horatio Parker, it was given fuel by the living music of his New England childhood. The sources of tonal imagery found in Ives's compositions span the full range of early twentieth-century American experience; clearly identifiable in his music are quotations from hymn tunes and popular songs, the town band at holiday parades, the fiddlers at Saturday night dances, patriotic songs and sentimental parlor ballads, the melodies of Stephen Foster, the medleys heard at country fairs and in small theaters. With such a musical heritage, for Ives, atonality, polytonality, and polyrhythm were not departures but rather the norm of popular American musical speech. They were also elements deeply ingrained in him from memories of the sound of untutored voices singing a hymn out of pitch, some ahead of the beat and others behind; of the clash of dissonance when two bands in a parade, playing a different tune in a different key, overlapped; of the wheezy harmonium at church accompanying hymns slightly off key (Machlis 467, 468). Such a music as Ives conjured out of such influences defied all the old constructs and required the conceptualization of new models, among

them what Rowell cites as the “collage,” a “kaleidoscope assembly of diverse material” which reflects the influence not only of new approaches in the visual arts, such as the use of “found” objects, but of film montage, and the stream-of-consciousness novel as well. It also evokes the associative imagery of the dream state or the artistic subconscious (237).

This use of highly diverse material does not lend itself well to the teleological, continuous, and hierarchical temporality of music that had predominated up and into the twentieth century, nor does it accommodate what Rowell identifies as the prevailing philosophical stance of the twentieth century, existentialism. A whole new aesthetic, one that severs the moment of perception from both its past and its future, reveals itself in Ives’s music and can be characterized either as Rochberg’s “particularist” aesthetic or as Stockhausen and Kramer’s “moment time” (Rowell 243, 246); the absence of clear beginnings and endings, the minimal connection between sections, the arbitrariness of the order in which the sections follow one another, and the structure of the work which is defined by the number and order of the individual musical events or moments - all place Ives’s music in this new and unfamiliar but captivating temporal realm.

These atonal and temporal novelties can be heard distinctly in the Symphony No. 4 from between 1909 and 1916, as can what music critic Jan Swafford identifies as Ives’s passion for experiment and his interest in realistic and chance musical effects. In particular in the “riotous multiphony” of the second movement, which Ives referred to as “not a scherzo . . . but a comedy,” (qtd by Eric Salzman) one is treated to a superb display of Ives’s use of musical quotations, quotations that run the range from delightfully humorous to profoundly moving and prophetic. More than a dozen well-known American tunes are quoted in this piece, identifiable among them the dominant phrase from *Columbia the Gem of the Ocean* and the line “Be it ever so humble” from *There’s No Place Like Home*. These vie with hints of Broadway and Gershwin, patriotic tunes, band marches, hymns, Edwardian parlor music, all emerging briefly out of the cacophonous clash of blaring horns, banging piano chords in the lower register, the ominous build-up of strings, and the indecipherable sounds of families of instruments playing at different tempos and in different pitches. The effect is that of a multiplicity of bands or entire orchestras warming up within earshot of one another, or of being caught up in the eye of an early twentieth-century tornado which has just swept up a large swath of New York City. The music is also a time machine of sorts, and one feels a profound connection to the eras and places evoked by the snippets of tunes and even by the dissonance which is such an integral part of American life. The Fourth evokes the tensions, the excitements, the energy and the complexity of modern reality. As Swafford notes, “If some of his music seems crowded to bursting, it is a vibrant and entirely realistic portrayal of his conception of life, his sense of democracy in action, and of his own all-embracing consciousness.”

Most significantly, as Richard Whitehouse asserts in the programme note to this piece on the BBC Proms page, the Fourth is different from the three symphonies which preceded it, works that are reflective of an American composer still tied to the European tradition. According to Whitehouse, the Fourth is “the most radical span of music that Ives ever wrote” with its “wide-ranging harmonies, dense textures and intricate cross-rhythms . . . galvanized by dozens of hymn tunes and popular tunes.” While Ives had employed such material in the past, in this piece the way they are “superimposed according to the moment at hand . . . generates vast complexity,” opening up the

expressive range and “unleashing an anarchic energy.” By the time this piece ends in a sudden collapse into silence, the listener feels he has been propelled not only through the flux and confusion and rhapsody of life but out on a spiritual and cosmic journey through time and space.

If Charles Ives “threw down the creative gauntlet for future generations” as Whitehouse claims, it is one that has been readily picked up and carried forward. Yet there is no real successor to Ives (Whitehouse). He remains at once a singular and unprecedented visionary and a democratic man of the people able to unify the American vernacular with European classical music. It is a pity that many will ignore him or suppose him to be overly sophisticated. While his music has the complexity to please those steeped in musical theory, it is also as accessible as the proverbial town square or steepled church. Indeed, anyone who has absorbed the common American culture through television, the movies, and national celebrations will resonate with Ives’s witty, comic, profound, nostalgic and transcendent music for it captures not only the underlying spirit of the land and people out of which he emerged but the cosmic and visionary sense of possibility that Americans still embrace. Like the best of all art music, Ives’s is a music for the ages.

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