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DELAYED RECOGNITION:
THE AMERICAN ORIGINAL, CHARLES IVES

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
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For the Degree of
Master of Arts in Humanities

By
Bruce Hearey
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In December 2011, New York's Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater revived its solo piece "Journey," set to the music of *The Unanswered Question*, by Charles Ives. The reviewer said that the dissonance and tensions of the sounds were extraordinary.¹ Leonard Bernstein described *The Unanswered Question* as a metaphysical "question of existence" in his famous Harvard lecture of 1973.² *The Unanswered Question*, a remarkable piece of only six minutes in length, was written in 1908.

On October 26, 2012, the American Composers Orchestra performed Ives's *Third Symphony* in one auditorium at Carnegie Hall; the American Symphony Orchestra performed Ives's *Fourth Symphony* upstairs in another auditorium. A director quipped that Ives would have enjoyed the two symphonies being played at Carnegie Hall at the same time and in two different venues, "especially if they had left the doors open."³ The *Third Symphony* of Ives was written between 1909 and 1910; the *Fourth* written between 1910 and sometime in the 1920s.

In April of 2013, the New York Philharmonic also performed Ives's *Fourth Symphony*, at Lincoln Center. The conductor thought the music was so frantic and hysterical that it was funny. To him, it was chaotic, but disciplined. Although written 90 to 100 years earlier, the *Fourth Symphony* still has a modern vibrancy. The conductor said the music was unique, and contemporary. While he was not sure he totally

1. Alistair Macaulay, "Destination Unknown, but a Quest Pushes Gentle Motion to the Fore," *New York Times*, 7 December 2011, nytimes.com, 2.

2. Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question. Six Talks at Harvard by Leonard Bernstein*, DVD. Kultur, 1992.

3. Corinna daFonseca-Wollheim, "Ambitious, with Ives Anchoring," *New York Times*, 29 October 2012, nytimes.com, 1.

understood what Ives was getting at, he felt it was “cosmic and true, and people seem to be moved by it.” He emphasized that a live hearing was a must.⁴

The New York Times reported on June 6, 2013 that a new play had opened off-Broadway called “Charles Ives Take Me Home.” In the play, a long deceased Ives (he died in 1954) was a “master of ceremonies” cum referee in a battle of wits and emotions between a father and his daughter. The father was a violinist who loves music; his daughter wants to be a basketball player. Ives was an apt intermediary in the play as he was not only a musician and composer (and businessman), but he was also a star athlete. The actor portraying Ives gave him an eccentric air, and at times, he even played music with the violin-playing father, sampling parts of Ives’s own pieces. The play was described as “impressionistic,” not unlike much of Ives’s music.⁵

In February 2014, the entire working study of Charles Ives was moved stick by stick, piece by piece, from his home in Redding, Connecticut, to be displayed at New York City’s American Academy of Arts and Letters. The room’s contents were donated by Ives’s grandson, and then reassembled to recreate Ives’s workplace exactly as it was, down to the “pencil shavings, tattered bulletin board postings and a secret stash of alcohol bottles.”⁶ Ives was described in the short article as a hermitic and irascible genius.⁷

4. Vivian Schweitzer, “Chaos Assembled, Beauty Emerges,” *New York Times*, 12 April 2013, nytimes.com, 1.

5. Charles Isherwood, “Father Takes the Stage; Daughter, the Court,” *New York Times*, 13 June 2013, nytimes.com, 3.

6. Eve M. Kahn, “Charles Ives’s Workroom, Pencil Shavings Preserved,” *New York Times*, 27 February 2014, nytimes.com, 1.

7. Ibid.

What makes Charles Ives, at once unknown and also unforgotten, still so fascinating to so many contemporary musicians, dancers, playwrights and audiences of many branches of the arts? Why do current audiences still care about him? Born in 1874, Ives did most of his composing before 1930. I believe he is still of interest because he was a complicated, enigmatic figure. He led a multifaceted life, with success in two contrasting fields. He was an American original, arguably America's best homegrown composer, who was also a remarkably successful insurance executive. Writing music in his spare time, he worked diligently and creatively in business. In the 1920s, his agency was perhaps the biggest in the country.

I will examine Ives as phenomenon, and attempt to answer the above questions by not only describing significant events in Charles Ives's life, but also by more closely examining some of his major works. The events will include his boyhood in Danbury, Connecticut, his relationship with his father, his musical prowess, his education at Yale, his business career, and his composing of truly idiosyncratic but indelible music, ahead of his time and out of the mainstream. The works will include *The Unanswered Question*, *Three Places in New England*, and most significantly, the *Concord Sonata*. While these three pieces are only a small sample of Ives's large portfolio of compositions, they all combine a nostalgia for the past, a spiritual questioning, honesty, and attempts to answer basic but eternal questions, all with a distinctly modern and unique approach to composing. These questions include the meaning of existence, the meaning of art, the innate goodness of man, and whether an artist can survive on just making art. Ives took his father's advice to heart on this latter topic, and only wrote music when he was not working in the insurance business or after he retired. Consequently, he admired figures

like Ralph Waldo Emerson, who supported himself as a lecturer while he published his essays. I will also look at Ives's writings, especially the essays he published contemporaneously with the *Concord Sonata*.

Many have written about Charles Ives. For example, Gayle Sherwood Magee described the cult about Charles Ives, and expressed her view that the conventional view of Ives was not accurate, and merely a myth.⁸ She summarized Ives's myth as the young Yankee from Connecticut, nurtured by his bandleader father, who went to Yale, and then went into business in Manhattan, and while reinventing the life insurance business, also managed in his spare moments to write momentous, radical, new music that was never appreciated in his lifetime. In my view, despite her efforts, Ms. Magee ultimately succeeded in spreading the "myth," and doing nothing to seriously dent or dispel it. Stuart Feder is a practicing psychoanalyst who approached Ives's life story as a practicing therapist, opining and theorizing in a detailed way as to the allegedly psychological reasoning for Ives's action and decisions. His most prominent theory is that Ives spent his entire life influenced by and indebted to his father, a Civil War band leader and part-time businessman. According to Feder, all of Ives's creative output had to be examined in the context of Ives's deep affection for his father.⁹ Although interesting and sometimes provocative, in the end the overall effort is a bit too presumptive and theoretical, as not every opinion of the psychoanalyst seems persuasive. J. Peter Burkholder, another expert on Ives, has focused his detailed approach on the specific underpinnings of Ives's compositions, "the borrowings," the different kinds of

8. Gayle Sherwood Magee, *Charles Ives Reconsidered* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

9. Stuart Feder, *My Father's Song* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

musical “quotations” Ives extracts from history and his own life to use as building blocks to his larger creations.¹⁰ To know and understand the building blocks is to better know and understand the music as a whole. Burkholder also argued that Ives’s music came from four separate traditions. The first was popular songs, including Stephen Foster, and even ragtime. The second was church music and hymns that he learned as an organist. Third was the European classical music, in which he had training and could write comfortably if he desired. Finally, there was experimental music, testing the limits of sounds and rhythms and challenging the norms of the day.¹¹ Stephen Budiansky has endeavored to put Ives’s life and compositions in a larger historical and cultural context, by describing the Ives who was rising to business success and limited artistic appreciation at the same time the United States was coming forth as a predominant world power.¹² David Schiff said Ives’s music was “marvelously and disturbingly abnormal...in its time and today.”¹³

My thoughts here are not so analytic as Feder’s, or as specific as Burkholder’s. I believe the myth that Magee disputes is truer than she submits, and that a cult does exist about Ives. It is warranted and exists because of the intriguing double life Ives led as an inexorably successful businessman and as a fearless, risk-taking composer. Ives’s life story is worth knowing, and quite unexpected, and I hope in this paper to demonstrate

10. J. Peter Burkholder, *All Made of Tunes: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowings* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995).

11. J. Peter Burkholder, “Ives and the Four Musical Traditions,” in *Charles Ives and his World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3.

12. Stephen Budiansky, *Mad Music: Charles Ives, the Nostalgic Rebel* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2014).

13. David Schiff, “The Many Faces of Ives,” *The Atlantic*, January, 1997, 6.

how that is so. I will not delve into all aspects of his life, but will try to illuminate why Ives's life is one worthy of examination.

Charles Ives was born in 1874 in Danbury, Connecticut. Danbury was a huge influence on Ives's life, with its musical and business opportunities, both spurred by the rise of his family as one of the more well-known and established families in the burgeoning city. Ives's father George was a choirmaster and a bandleader, who had been appointed to lead a military band in the Civil War. Danbury was a frequent site of outdoor music in those days, with revivals, camp meetings, and summer concerts. George Ives was a bit of a black sheep in his prominent family, and when he returned home from the war, he was reluctant to immediately follow his brothers into a business career. He preferred music.

George Ives was exposed to a variety of music in New York City, only an hour or so south of Danbury, where he took lessons as a young man. He had studied there in 1860 when he was barely 15, and continued thereafter. He delved into everything musical, from "concert saloons" to the New York Philharmonic.¹⁴ Ultimately, he returned to Danbury in 1869 in his mid-20s, and reluctantly went into business in hardware with his two brothers. Still he didn't give up his music either, leading a "double life" that would preview the life that awaited his soon to be born son, Charles. Charles became deeply attached to his father, but not so much his mother, Molly.¹⁵ His father would remain a major influence on Charles his entire life. George taught Charles from an early age all about music, and took him everywhere he went, exposing the young

14. Magee, *Charles Ives Reconsidered*, 11.

15. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 68, 223-24. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 2. Magee disagrees about Ives's relationship with his mother. Magee, 192, note 47, citing Vivian Perlis, *Charles Ives Remembered: An Oral History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 72.

boy to all kinds of musical experiences. Strangely, in all of Charles's later autobiographical writings and letters, there is little to no mention of his mother. Charles's planet revolved around his father.

According to Feder, upon his birth, Charles Ives "entered the world with a predisposition toward music that affected the nature of his perception of reality."¹⁶ When Ives was five, he would have heard a celebratory concert about the reopening of a local park. Several thousand people were there, and three separate bands played, all directed by Ives's father. At one point, at George's direction, a fourth band came marching in from town, ultimately joining with the other three bands. The music was all over the place, at times here, then over there, an experience that would stay with Ives forever.¹⁷ Even at five, such experimental displays by his father made an impression on young Charles. George's willingness to try new things would inform Charles's music later. As Feder put it, the "raw materials of what would become a highly individual music were being assembled."¹⁸

Marching tunes, popular songs, church hymns – all ultimately were part of Ives's creative arsenal. Danbury presented the young Ives with exposure to all of it, from a very young age. As a bandleader, George Ives was a hero to his young son. In his band outfits, his father looked like a military leader. Charles was proficient by age 11 at several instruments. Moreover, he was already working on sight-reading, harmony, counterpoint and even some orchestration. George was a constant experimenter, both musical and acoustical. Charles Ives would catalogue his father's experiments later in his

16. Feder, *My Father's Song* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 65.

17. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 79.

18. *Ibid.*, 80.

life, in his book *Memos*.¹⁹ The experiments of George Ives included a “slide cornet, musical glasses filled with varying amounts of water, tuning a piano in different intervals, tuning glasses in a scale without octaves, and stretching violin strings over a clothes press and attached to weights.”²⁰ George was both curious and ingenious, and Charles Ives took in all of these traits of his father, filed them away, and would later make use of them. Charles started to compose, and became quite good at an early age with his father’s experiments never far from his mind.

Young Ives got better and better in his musicianship and quickly beginning to overtake his father as a composer. As a result, Feder says, Charles felt guilty, and wound up idealizing his childhood in Danbury and his father’s role in it.²¹ As late as 1930, when he was 66 years old, Charles Ives was still attributing his talent and success to his father, despite several other influences, including teachers and composers. As George Ives had taken a dual path in his adult life, making music as a bandleader, and selling hardware with the family business in Danbury, so did Charles Ives pursue a similar path, albeit on a different, higher arc.

By the time he was 15, Charles Ives was the youngest church organist in Connecticut. Ives surpassed his father musically, and his education would separate them further. Charles was being prepared to attend Yale University, influenced by his uncle, Lyman Brewster, a prominent Yale-educated lawyer, judge and politician. Until he left for New Haven, Charles collaborated with his father, composing music, including sacred

19. The *Memos* was a compilation of Ives’s writings, not published until 1972 and well after Ives’s death, edited by Ives’s champion, John Kirkpatrick. John Kirkpatrick, ed., *Charles E. Ives: Memos* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972). They included Ives’s views on music and critics, his own music, and autobiographical references.

20. John Kirkpatrick, ed., *Charles E. Ives: Memos*, 45-46.

21. Feder, *My Father’s Song*, 94.

and choral music, organ and band, piano and voice, even a nine-part communion piece as part of a choral Mass.²² Ives's father supported his son's creativity, his use of "polytonality" (many different keys at once), and felt his son's efforts were worthwhile if there was "some sense behind it."²³

Ives wasn't devoted exclusively to music as an adolescent. He also threw himself into sports, playing both baseball and football. Playing sports not only provided an outlet for Ives, but it also allowed Charles a more aggressive, masculine outlet and diversion from his music, which many at the time equated with femininity.²⁴ Music was not and could not be the only thing young Ives did. That was ingrained in him by his father from an early age. Charles later wrote of that time in one of his *Memos*:

Father felt that a man could keep his music-interest stronger, cleaner, bigger, and freer, if he didn't try to make a living out of it. Assuming a man lived by himself and with no dependents, no one to feed but himself, and [was] willing to live as simply as Thoreau – [he] might write music that no one would play, publish, listen to, or buy. But – if he has a nice wife and some nice children, how can he let the children starve on his dissonances ... So he has to weaken (and as a man he should weaken for his children), but his music (some of it) more than weakens – it goes ta-ta for money – bad for him, bad for music, but good for his boys!!²⁵

22. Ibid., 113.

23. Ibid., 117.

24. Ibid., 119.

25. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 55.

In this passage, Ives was summing up his father's life and sacrifices for his children. It is more than a little ironic that Ives later "weakened" his music, subjugated his composing and put it on hold, to provide a more than comfortable living for his family. He only wrote music in his spare time and rarely performed it. Still, he turned out to be a prolific if private composer, and for years, no one did "play, publish, listen to, or buy" his music anyway.

At 18, Charles Ives separated from his family and moved from Danbury south to New Haven. He became a church organist there as well, continued his baseball playing, and enrolled at the Hopkins School, a secondary feeder school to Yale.²⁶ At the time, he wrote a song called "At Parting," dealing with love and death, that was likely about the separation from his father.

Two years later, Charles Ives was admitted to, and began studying at Yale. Sadly, his father died the same year at the age of 49. Just before his father passed away, young Ives had met and began composing classes with Yale's famed Horatio Parker, a fairly conservative, European-minded musician.

In the 1890s in America, there was no prominent American composer to speak of. Audiences were largely of the upper class, and the upper class preferred the European masters of the nineteenth century: Brahms, Beethoven, Wagner, Puccini and Mahler. Stephen Foster was the most popular American composer, and he wrote songs, not classical music. Americans preferred the work of the Europeans, as the music was sophisticated and high brow. It was tonal, lyrical, melodic and had rhythms that made

26. Baseball would become a lifelong metaphor and organizing principle for Ives. See, generally, Timothy A. Johnson, *Baseball and the Music of Charles Ives: A Proving Ground* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004). See also, for example, Charles Ives, *Essays Before A Sonata* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1920), 117. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 103.

sense and came easy to the ear. As for American classical composers, Horatio Parker at Yale was one who was composing music, but his music bespoke his traditional European viewpoint that had been his training. Parker was not making “new” music or anything that could be called modern, or quintessentially American. Parker was Ives’s teacher at Yale, and they clashed.²⁷

Parker had different reactions to Ives’s style of composing than did his father, George Ives. Charles wrote:

Parker asked me to bring him whatever manuscript I had written (pieces, etc.). Among them a song, “At Parting” – in it, some unresolved dissonances, one ending on a high E flat in the key of G major, and stops there unresolved. Parker said, “There’s no excuse for that – an E flat way up there and stopping, and the nearest D way down two octaves.” – etc. I told Father what Parker said, and Father said, “Tell Parker that every dissonance doesn’t have to resolve, if it doesn’t happen to feel like it, any more than every horse should have to have its tail bobbed just because it’s the prevailing fashion.”²⁸

Ives would take his father’s words to heart, essentially among the last words young Charles heard from his father. He also committed to his and his father’s appreciation of dissonance, creativity and experimentation that would inform Ives’s music throughout his composing life. The emphasis on these non-traditional aspects of

27. Stephen Budiansky, *Mad Music: Charles Ives, the Nostalgic Rebel* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2014), 76-78.

28. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 54.

composing music was very unusual at the time. Ives was composing innovative if not radical music years before his European contemporaries like Stravinsky, Debussy, and Bartok, who often are mistakenly credited with creative diversions that Ives had earlier put forth. These innovations include polytonality (using one or more keys simultaneously), atonality (lacking both the traditional tonal or triadic elements of octaves divided into threes), dissonance, and multiple rhythms, to name a few.

With his father gone, Ives was influenced at Yale by two imposing but opposite influences. For sure, the traditionalist Parker had a truly impressive background, but he was critical of Ives's composing efforts, decrying them as "not serious." There was, however, an English professor at Yale as well, William Lyons Phelps, who introduced Ives to Transcendentalism. Popularized in the mid 19th century, Transcendentalism was a philosophy that promoted the idea of the sanctity and primacy of the individual. To those who adhered to this nascent philosophy, broader society and long-standing institutions could have an adverse effect on the individual. "Self-reliance" and independence were their watchwords, and the movement was promoted in literature and education. Among its biggest proponents were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.²⁹ The influence of these and other transcendentalists would bear fruit later in Ives's composing life with his *Concord Sonata*, to be examined below.

At Yale, Ives became deeply interested in Thoreau and the naturalist's ability to tolerate solitude. Thoreau's poems were especially comforting to Ives, still grieving his father's death. Also providing solace to Ives was the choirmaster at the New Haven

29. Some scholars say Emerson had actually visited the Ives's home in Danbury when Ives was very young. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 21. Budiansky, *Mad Music*, 25. But others dispute the notion. Leon Botstein, "Innovation and Nostalgia: Ives, Mahler and the Origins of Twentieth Century Modernism," in *Charles Ives and His World*, edited by J. Peter Burkholder, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 57.

church, the Congregationalist Center Church on the Green where Ives was organist, John Cornelius Griggs. According to Ives, Griggs provided support for him to “fill up that awful vacuum I was carrying around.”³⁰ Like Phelps, Griggs was encouraging and supportive to Ives about his music, and saw other American composers of the day as narrow-minded, with no sense of musical history. Griggs felt that American music should not be too harmonious, melodious, and “easy sounding.” He told Ives: “Our forefathers were stronger men than can be represented by ‘triads’ only.”³¹

Ives survived at Yale, developing his own voice and churning out a prolific catalogue of music. Parker was rigid, demanding, and critical of Ives’s composing, and Griggs was more accepting and supportive of Ives’s creativity. Griggs even performed some of Ives’s compositions, including songs and choral works.

During these years in New Haven, Ives wrote his first symphony. It incorporated some of the Germanic tradition (Ives respected Beethoven), and it was in the prevailing Romantic style, with a tinge of the Czech composer, Anton Dvorak. Ives described his *First Symphony* as perhaps too easy to listen to. Later in his life, Ives mused about the symphony, and Dvorak, who had employed “negro spirituals” in his famous *New World Symphony*:

Some nice people whenever they hear the words “Gospel Hymns” or “Stephen Foster,” say “Mercy me!” and a little high-brow smile creeps over their brow – “Can’t you get something better than that in a symphony?” The same nice people, when they go to a

30. Feder, *My Father’s Song*, 143, quoting a letter from Ives to John C. Griggs. Kirkpatrick, *Memos*, 251-58. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 49.

31. Feder, *My Father’s Song*, 144. “Triads” are the basic building blocks of Western tonal octaves, forming chords, for example, such as C major, with a C, E, and G notes. “Atonal” music eschews the triad.

properly dressed symphony concert under proper auspices, led by a name with foreign hair, and hear “New World” Symphony, in which they are told this famous passage was from a negro spiritual, then you think that it must be quite proper, even artistic, and say, “Ain’t it awful!” “You don’t really mean that!” – “Why, only to think!” – “Do tell!” – “I tell you, you don’t ever hear gospel hymns ever mentioned in there to the New England Conservatory.”³²

Ives felt there was a double standard among critics, that he could be criticized for “borrowing” themes and snippets for his compositions, but that Europeans, like Dvorak, and Mahler, and Richard Strauss, and even Puccini, could borrow parts of folk songs, and spirituals, for their works with impunity. Even Mahler in his first symphony utilized “Frere Jacques,” a German college drinking song, to begin its third movement. But no composer borrowed as much, or as creatively, as Ives.

Ives borrowed Stephen Foster songs, other popular songs, gospel music, church hymns, patriotic songs and marches for his compositions throughout his career, making him this country’s most “American,” if not its best, composer. These songs came from Ives’s earliest childhood in Danbury, and the effect of Dvorak’s *New World* borrowing freed Ives to include local music in a symphonic setting.³³ Ives plowed this American field of folk, popular and church music because it was what he was most familiar with, and what he loved. It was the music of his upbringing, the music of his father, the music of his life. It provided an anchoring, if not nostalgic, structure for his experimentation. The occasional recognition of a familiar tune, even a few notes, brought Ives some

32. Kirkpatrick, *Memos*, 49.

33. Feder, *My Father’s Song*, 149.

acceptance and his listeners some comfort while he weaved those few notes into a novel and unique larger whole.

Ives sought acceptance in the highest social echelon at Yale, pledging Delta Kappa Epsilon. Ives knew he was not going to make a living as a composer, so he maximized his options for developing business contacts. His social associations increased his competitiveness, as he played sports and was exposed to future titans of business. He also further developed his composing philosophy. Apropos of his New England upbringing, Ives wasted nothing in his composing technique. He felt that everything was part of everything else, so musical elements could be associated with every other element. Ives later described it as: “the fabric of life weaves itself whole.”³⁴

At 22, in 1896, Ives met Harmony Twichell.* They saw each other sporadically, as friends, for nearly ten years before their relationship deepened and she became Mrs. Charles Ives. Harmony Twichell was the sister of one of Ives’s classmates and later roommates in New York. She was a hard working nurse, educated and well read. She specialized in public nursing made popular by Jane Addams in Chicago, and worked with the indigent in lower Manhattan. Her father, Joseph Twichell, was a respected clergyman from Hartford, Connecticut, where he was a close friend of Mark Twain. Hers was a rarified, very upper class background that intimidated the shy Ives, and no doubt delayed his courting of her. But through sporadic contacts with her and her family over a ten year period, Ives maintained a sufficient presence in her life that ultimately led to marriage.

34. Henry Cowell and Sidney Cowell, *The Music of Charles Ives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 97.

* This fact alone is fascinating. What were the odds that a composer mostly known for his dissonant and discordant music, with atonality so rampant, would meet, fall in love with, and marry the love of his life, who would be named Harmony?

Upon graduation from Yale in 1898, Ives moved to New York, and roomed with other young men from Yale, all trying to make a name for themselves in business in Manhattan. They lived, ironically, in a place called “Poverty Flat,” on 58th Street on the West Side. He became an actuary at the Mutual Life Insurance Company while still holding down a job as a church organist. Significantly, in 1902, when Ives was 28, there was a performance of his piece “Celestial Country,” but the reviews were muted. The sensitive Ives was moved to comment on one review: “damn rot and worse.” The reviews were such that Ives, discouraged, resigned his organist position at Central Presbyterian Church, and “gave up” music.³⁵

After Ives resigned his organist position, it was the last position he held related to music. Moreover, there were no live performances of any of Ives’s music for the next 14 years. However, Ives continued to compose when he was not working, and his composing was liberated in the sense that he no longer worried about his compositions being performed in public. He was managing both the music and his insurance work, when he befriended his co-worker at Mutual Life, Julian Myrick, and they formed a strong personal bond. Over time, they would both leave Mutual Life and create the largest insurance agency in the country.

In those days, the early 1900s, the insurance business was analogous to the “dot.com” businesses of Silicon Valley. There was a lot of corruption in the business, which Ives and Myrick disdained and avoided. There was also a great deal of money to be made. Mutual Life was one of the two oldest insurance companies in America, founded in 1842. When a government investigation cleaned out the industry and created

35. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 66-67. Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007), 41.

the New York Insurance regulatory code of 1906, certain companies washed out, and new opportunities arose for those wanting to get into the business. Ives and Myrick soon became business partners, and struck out on their own.³⁶ Their vision of insurance was that it was benevolent and missionary, in that it benefitted not just the families, but humanity in general.

In 1906, although still working hard to build his insurance agency, Ives composed one of his earliest and most iconic works: *The Unanswered Question*. Foretelling some of the themes of his later *Concord Sonata*, *The Unanswered Question* has a simple structure. It opens with violins playing a quiet, beautiful sustaining chord that creates tension and expectation. The chord then is interrupted by a dissonant inquiring trumpet. The sound is ethereal and eternal.³⁷ It is a “contemplation of a serious matter,” i.e., “the Perennial Question of Existence.”³⁸ After the trumpets blare the question, the flutes answer. Above the background music of the violins, the trumpet and flutes ask and respond seven times, and ever faster. There is no ultimate answer, as there cannot be to the matter of existence. David Michael Hertz called it: “a chorale of harmonies under dissonances.”³⁹ Alex Ross described it as: “...spells of nervous, dissonant activity set against a serene swell of strings, working the querulousness of stranded human voices amid the indifferent vastness of nature.”⁴⁰ The overall effect is deeply spiritual and moving. It is a short piece, six minutes in length, but a harbinger of greater things to

36. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 78.

37. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 196.

38. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 194, 196. J. Peter Burkholder, “Ives and the Four Musical Traditions,” in *Charles Ives and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 19.

39. David Michael Hertz, “Ives's Concord Sonata and the Texture of Music,” in *Charles Ives and His World*, ed. J. Peter Burkholder (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 87.

40. Ross, *Rest is Noise*, 143.

come. It would become Ives's most famous work, even if it was not performed publicly for forty years after it was conceived. The piece demonstrated, at age 32, that Ives had the ability to skillfully forge and form music that was unique with a common appeal.⁴¹

In 1908, when he was 34, after years of sporadic but deepening contact, Ives finally married Harmony. She became his collaborator, an active partner, encouraging him in his music, providing lyrics for songs. She was soon pregnant, but tragically, she lost the baby and had to have an emergency hysterectomy, dashing the couple's dreams of parenthood. Ives was now deeply involved in business with Myrick, and the firm Ives and Myrick was flourishing. Ives was still composing, although nothing was being formally published or performed. Eventually, the Iveses befriended a couple through a New York newspaper's Fresh Air Fund program designed to provide healthy out of doors experiences for needy families. The family visited the Iveses in the country at their home in Redding, Connecticut. The couple had six children, and Ives and his wife quickly bonded with the youngest, Edith, who was a toddler. Soon, the Iveses "adopted" Edith, and very likely, money changed hands. Edith enriched the family, despite her new parents' worry that she would someday return to her natural family.⁴²

Now married and a father, Ives continued to write music at a prodigious pace, always using memories of his past but in a wholly new, complex way. Focusing on the Civil War, he composed *Decoration Day*, and then, "St. Gaudens in Boston Common." The latter piece became the first section of the notable *Three Places in New England*. As in the *Concord Sonata*, which we will examine in depth, *Three Places* is a nostalgic,

41. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 194. Ross, *Rest is Noise*, 143. Eve Kahn described it as merely "a series of drawn-out violin notes interrupted by unpredictable brass and woodwind blasts." Kahn, "Ives's Workroom," 2.

42. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 120-124.

autobiographical piece trying to capture the feeling of events and places from decades earlier. *Three Places in New England* is a large orchestral work that highlights three places or events significant to Ives's life. In order, he touched on a Boston memorial to a Civil War leader, then a Revolutionary War campsite near his boyhood home, and finally a quiet reflective spot on a scenic river in northwestern Massachusetts significant to his marriage to Harmony.

The first piece, the "St. Gaudens in Boston Common," honors Colonel Robert Shaw of Boston and his Civil War regiment of freed slaves. In the Augustus St. Gaudens sculpture, Colonel Shaw and his men were martyrs, who had nobly lost their lives in hopeless challenges in South Carolina. They fought at Fort Wagner, and 74 enlisted men, and Colonel Shaw, were killed. The sculptor took 14 years to complete the commemorative work placed in the Boston Common and put Colonel Shaw on a horse even though he was never on one. Ives used two mid-19th century tunes, the "Battle Cry of Freedom" and "Marching Through Georgia," both related to slavery, along with Stephen Foster's "Old Black Joe," as the bases for the piece. Ives regarded Stephen Foster to be the "father of American music."⁴³ To those who might criticize or over-analyze Ives's uses of songs as parts of his larger works, Feder defended Ives's use of songs in his music:

“...[To] suggest that mere quotation is an end in itself...is to miss the train of music thought. Tunes [for Ives] were like found objects; they had their own private verbal and affective associations woven into new forms. [I]dea and effect were forged

43. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 234.

into highly condensed non-verbal acoustic structures, music endowed with meaning quite different from that of the original tune...The ambiguity involved in nonliteral quotation of popular tunes – that is, in musical allusion – allows more subtle and complex ideas and effects to be encoded in the newly formed musical ideas.⁴⁴

The “St. Gaudens” piece is dirge-like and funereal, and echoing the dynamism in St. Gaudens’ sculpture, the music “sounds” like men walking up a hill step by step. Both of the popular songs utilized in “St. Gaudens” were popular during the Civil War. The borrowed tunes are not obvious to the listener, as they are paraphrased. But there are elements of melody and harmony that convey the memory of the sweet tunes of the mid-nineteenth century Stephen Foster.⁴⁵ The piece is Ives’s unvarnished tribute to the courage of the brave men, a nostalgic return to Ives’s youth when the Civil War was still a recent memory for many in his hometown, and an homage to Ives’s late father, the noted Civil War band leader.⁴⁶

In “Putnam’s Camp,” the second of the *Three Places*, the setting is Redding, Connecticut. Redding is where Ives and his wife had set up a country home in 1913, only nine miles south of Danbury, Ives’s boyhood home. General Israel Putnam had camped at Redding in the winter of 1778-79 during the Revolutionary War. The piece can be considered a “battle piece,” not unlike Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*. Ives merged local

44. Feder, *My Father’s Song*, 234-235. Ross, *Rest is Noise*, 145 (“Out of the mist of sound, a host of songs and hymns emerge.”)

45. J. Peter Burkholder, *All Made of Tunes: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 317.

46. This colonel and his courageous soldiers were immortalized in the 1989 movie “Glory” starring Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman.

and regional history, with his own personal history in Redding, and wrote the dream-like piece from a little boy's viewpoint. Harkening back to his father's experiments with clashing marching bands in Danbury, Ives's piece imagined two separate bands, playing at the same time, and in the same rhythm, but at different speeds. There is still a small memorial park in Redding, Connecticut, very near to Ives's country home, that he visited as a boy. The piece commemorates the true story of a brutal winter, when some desperate soldiers left camp to go complain to authorities, only to return. Ives mythologized the event, and placed it on a Fourth of July in the late 19th century. The dream depicts a search for "ghost" soldiers, with a visionary Goddess of Liberty calling the deserting soldiers back to a great and victorious General Putnam. Written at the time of World War I, Ives deftly weaved into the piece patriotic songs and marches from John Philip Sousa and the Civil War. Gayle Sherwood Magee says the piece celebrates "regional locales often imbedded with military significance and blended with moments from Ives's own familial life." "Putnam" is really an Ives nostalgic reminiscence about growing up in Connecticut, with his father's experimental band-leading in Danbury and those patriotic holiday celebrations.⁴⁷

The third *Place* in New England that Ives included is not military at all, but it is nostalgic. It refers to neither the Revolutionary War nor the Civil War. It is much more personal and romantic. In "The Housatonic at Stockbridge," Ives paid tribute to his wife Harmony, recreating a moment when he walked with her along a river the first summer they were married. The Housatonic River is about 150 miles long, rising in northwestern Massachusetts not far from Stockbridge, and it heads pretty much directly south into and

47. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 125.

then through western Connecticut into the Long Island Sound. As is true of some of Ives's pieces, we have the benefit of Ives's own words to describe this particular piece's meaning. About the Sunday morning walk, he wrote:

We walked in the meadows along the river and heard the distant singing from the church across the river. The mist had not entirely left the river bed, and the colors, the running water, the banks and the elm trees were something that one would always remember.⁴⁸

This then was another sweet memory piece, a preservation of a part of his biography.

Ives worked on the three *Places* for six years, between 1908 and 1914. Like Robert Frost, the poet who is so identified with New England, Ives is identified with that area as well, the earliest and most completely settled area of the United States.

"Housatonic" is very autobiographical, and embodies much of Ives's technique in composing. He experienced an event, and made a mental note of it. His mental, visual and auditory impressions were then expressly reformulated into creative musical forms.⁴⁹

Technically, Ives even uses again the "question and answer form," a technique most obviously used in *The Unanswered Question*. This question and answer form reveals Ives posing thoughtful questions for which he offers no clear answers. The unanswered question is the essence of life, that we always have questions, but that the answers are elusive. Ives understood that life is a journey with much we do not understand, but he believed we still need to ask the questions.

48. Kirkpatrick, *Memos*, 187.

49. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 225.

Ives's marriage to Harmony and adoption of Edith brought him a contentment, with time and space to ponder and create.⁵⁰ His ruminations are reflected in all three parts of the New England *Places*, and reveal Ives's very personal and reflective nature about what mattered to him: his love for family, and love for his country, its heritage and hope.

Ives's marriage also brought him a surge of creativity and energy, not just in music, but also in his business. In the wake of the scandal and new regulations in 1905-06, the insurance business evolved rapidly, and developed new products. Ives and Myrick adeptly fashioned new approaches, and they effectively generated sales. Ives and Myrick complemented each other, and although both wanted to be successful, they did not compete with each other. Ives had a knack for writing advertising and training sales agents; Myrick oversaw the finances. Through both their efforts, Ives's income soon tripled. According to Feder, Ives made just over \$10,000 in 1913, and nearly \$30,000 in 1918.⁵¹ By 1922, probably Ives's high-water mark financially, he grossed more than \$56,000, the equivalent of \$800,000 today. Myrick was a skilled manager, and Ives the idea man. Ives worked with Myrick in business not unlike the way he had worked with his father. As Feder puts it, "It was a felicitous and productive time of life – truly a period of concord."⁵²

Feder's use of the word "concord" is intentional, as it was during this fertile period of his composing life that Ives embarked on a new ambitious work celebrating the philosophy of the New England transcendentalists. It would become one of Ives most

50. Ibid., 226.

51. In 2016 dollars, \$10,000 would be \$242,431.00, and \$30,000 would be over \$724,000.

52. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 258. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 78 (Ives was "professionalizing" the insurance business).

significant compositions.⁵³ Harmony and Charles Ives had visited Concord, Massachusetts, the historic town just a few miles west of Boston, on their honeymoon. Eight years later in 1916, they visited Concord again. It was then that Ives conceived the notion of a piano sonata featuring the four transcendentalists who had all populated Concord in the mid-1840s. Bronson Alcott, the father of Louisa May Alcott, was a teacher and a writer. Nathaniel Hawthorne was a novelist and poet. Ralph Waldo Emerson was an essayist and lecturer, and Henry David Thoreau was a naturalist and writer. Walden Pond was near Concord, and Ives had visited the Alcott house there. Ives likely knew that Emerson had visited his relatives in Danbury, even though it happened years before he was born. All four of these men were living in Concord when Ives's father was born in 1845.⁵⁴

Ives's familiarity with the Transcendentalists came not only from his studies at Yale, and his possible knowledge of an old family connection; credit has to go to his wife Harmony as well. Upon marrying Ives, Harmony had made reading literature paramount in their lives. The reading provided some order and nurturing to Ives's life. Ives was seriously ensconced in two divergent careers, insurance and composing, and literary ideas began to play a more important role in Ives's composing. Moreover, the regular reading encouraged by his wife also increased Ives's interest in writing himself, and he began to do more and more of that as well. His book, *Essays Before A Sonata*, is evidence of this, written as an extended program note for the *Concord Sonata*. The *Concord*, in essence, depicted a fourth *Place in New England*, with the four writers providing the structure.

53. Magee describes the *Concord Sonata* as Ives's "most studied, best known" work. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 132 ("...no single piece has dominated Ives scholarship as much as this extended solo composition, a rare validation of New England regionalism.")

54. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 258.

The *Concord Sonata*,* in Ives's own words, was this:

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 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 half a century ago. This is undertaken in impressionistic pictures of Emerson and Thoreau, a sketch of the Alcotts, and a *scherzo** supposed to reflect lighter quality which is often found in the fantastic side of Hawthorne.⁵⁵

Scholars agree that Emerson was the primary inspiration for the *Sonata*. Ives had not only studied Emerson at Yale; he also wrote a paper about him.⁵⁶ Ives was not necessarily a transcendentalist; rather, Ives used transcendentalism as a jumping off place for his own ideas in organizing his pieces. He worked on the "Emerson" section of the *Sonata* for the better part of ten years. It is more than a coincidence as well that Ives's *Essays Before a Sonata* was written in the same form, the essay, that Emerson made famous. To Ives, Emerson was a prophet, a mountain guide, and explorer.⁵⁷ Emerson

* A "sonata" is a well-recognized classical form, usually comprised of three sections, including an exposition of the theme, the development of the theme, and a recapitulation. Sonata could actually refer to a shorter piece, or be used to describe larger structures, such as a symphony, concerto or string quartet. Here, Ives acknowledged he was using the term very loosely.

* The *scherzo* was usually the second or third movement of a sonata or symphony, with usually a more playful character.

55. Ives, *Essays*, preface page. Also, on the poster that announced John Kirkpatrick's groundbreaking recital of the *Concord Sonata* on January 20, 1939, it described the four movements as follows, using quotations from the composer's *Essays*: Emerson ("a composite picture or impression"); Hawthorne (an "extended fragment reflecting some of his wilder, fantastical adventures into the half-childlike, half-fairy like phantasmal realms"); the Alcotts ("a sketch") and Thoreau ("an autumn day of Indian summer at Walden"). Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 167.

56. Botstein, "Innovation and Nostalgia," 57.

57. Charles Ives, *Essays*, 1920, 11-12.

himself had said that “every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series.”⁵⁸ Ives identified with the Emersonian thirst for knowledge and experience, and it typified his quest for answers to questions about life and human existence. Like Emerson, Ives believed in the transcendental philosophy of the “innate goodness of men,” as he states in his *Essays* section on Emerson.⁵⁹ Emerson himself had written:

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen at mid-noon, and under every deep, a lower deep opens.⁶⁰

This was a philosophy of eternal questioning, always seeking answers, that Ives could and did identify with. His music, in themes known and unknown, in the three works featured in this paper, was always seeking, exploring, wandering, looking for answers. It makes sense that in doing so, he would use some “known” references in his compositions, his nostalgic borrowings. He used some familiar marches and songs as guideposts in his journeys to explore the unaccounted for. Although Ives did not know Emerson personally, Emerson was like a father figure to Ives, and his influence was profound. In his *Essays*, Ives called Emerson “the invader of the unknown,” who was always “peering into the mysteries of life.”⁶¹ So too was Ives.

It is also of note that Emerson was known as a man who was financially astute.

While Ives’s financial success was unrelated to his musical career, Ives saw his own

58. Feder, *My Father’s Song*, 262, quoting from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay, “Circles,” 1841.

59. Ives said of Emerson: “[His] transcendentalism was based on a wider search for the unknowable, unlimited in anyway by anything except the vast bounds of innate goodness, as it might be revealed to him in any phenomena of man, nature, or God,” *Éssays*, 18.

60. Feder, *My Father’s Song*, 265, from *Circles*, Emerson.

61. Ives, *Essays*, 11-12.

career like Emerson's. Emerson embodied the advice Ives's father had given him as a boy, i.e., not to rely solely on his art to make a living. Charles Ives and Emerson both did that, combining comfortable careers with making art.

The *Concord Sonata* is a solo piece for piano, and an extremely difficult work to play.⁶² Only a flute near the very end of the "Emerson" section intrudes, at least for conventional instruments. (Ives included a block of wood to be banged onto the keys in the second section, the "Hawthorne.") The *Sonata*'s main themes borrow from two of Ives's favorite composers, Beethoven and Stephen Foster. Other popular songs and hymns find their way in. The famous first four notes of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, and the Stephen Foster song "Massa's in the Cold Ground" comprise the two main themes, and they are well disguised among the dissonances and multiple simultaneous rhythms.

While the other three sections of the *Sonata* are perhaps secondary in importance to the "Emerson" piece, they are each distinctive. The "Emerson" part is about 16 minutes. It has a theme that sounds like, but obviously cannot be, the first five notes of the jazz standard "Autumn in New York," written years later in 1934 by Vernon Duke. Not unlike jazz, the "Emerson" has shifting rhythms, and difficult notations. It lurches into ragtime in places, and utilizes exaggerated instructions. The familiar 4-note Beethoven *Fifth Symphony* opening theme is well-disguised and inventive and the score requires a virtuoso pianist.

The "Hawthorne" section is more fragmented and distorted. The notes seemed crazed at times, the music sounds manic. Ives himself described it in *Essays* as "dripping

62. Ives himself described his piece as "not the kind that is readily accepted with enthusiasm." Thomas C. Owens, ed. *Selected Correspondence of Charles Ives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 87.

wet with the supernatural” as bespeaks a poet of “greater imaginative impulse than Emerson or Thoreau, who is somewhat more interested in psychology.”⁶³ The music of “Hawthorne” is chopped up and off-kilter, with violent, ripping arpeggios such that the thematic material is barely recognizable. In the middle, seemingly out of nowhere, comes a march, and then later, the quite familiar melody of “Columbia the Gem of the Ocean.” The 13 minute piece is itself an extremely representative example of Ives’s overall technique.

The “Alcotts” section emphasizes Bronson Alcott’s preachiness, his penchant for effusiveness as “Concord’s greatest talker,”⁶⁴ and is the most conventional sounding of the four sections. It is contemplative, and almost pretty. There are chords and triads, all very recognizable. Alcott had tried to revolutionize education by emphasizing conversation. Ives said in his *Essays* that Alcott possessed an “internal grandiloquence (which) made him melodious without; an exuberant, irrepressible, visionary absorbed with philosophy as such ... [A] kind of transcendental business...supported his inner man, rather than his family.”⁶⁵ Since his daughter Louisa May is also part of the title of the movement, as to her Ives said that she, like her father, possessed a “strong didactic streak,” acting as a teacher, moralizing about values. Ives pointed out more than once in his *Essays* that Bronson Alcott (unlike him) had trouble making a living so it must have been of importance to him. This would have been consistent with Ives’s concern for providing for his family first, and creating his art second. Ives admired that ability in Emerson, and was critical of Alcott for not being able to succeed in both business and art.

63. Ives, *Essays*, 46.

64. *Ibid.*, 51.

65. *Ibid.*, 51.

Despite his criticism of Alcott, Ives still had affection for his family because of the central role the Alcott house played in the Concord community. Ives praised Alcott, for his “idealism had substantial virtues.”⁶⁶ The Beethoven four-note theme is cleverly transposed in this section, but it is there nonetheless. The section ends benignly on a C major chord of all things, the epitome of tonality. The six-minute “Alcott” is the shortest and easiest section to listen to in the *Sonata*.

In his *Essays*, Ives went on at length about the Alcotts’ house, the “old Manse,” and expands on its key role in anchoring Concord as a place related to all the transcendentalists. To Ives, the Alcotts’ house kept alive the past. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s grandfather lived there; Nathaniel Hawthorne lived there as well, composing short stories. “This is also the home of the Marches,” the sisters of “Little Women,” and where Thoreau planted a vegetable garden.⁶⁷ The spinet piano in the Alcott house was a gift from Thoreau’s sister, Sophia. Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, whose iconic opening four notes are quoted extensively in the *Concord Sonata*, was also played on that piano by Beth, Louisa May’s younger sister. For Ives, all of this history was connected, the circle went around unbroken at this Alcott house, because of its “spiritual sturdiness,” and for Ives, the house was nearer to a basic truth than a “Gothic cathedral or an Etruscan villa.”⁶⁸ Ives credits the Alcotts and their house with setting forth a “conviction in the power of the common soul,” or the essence of transcendentalism.⁶⁹ Again, this tribute to

66. *Ibid.*, 53.

67. *Ibid.*, 53.

68. *Ibid.*, 54.

69. *Ibid.*, 55.

the artists of Concord reinforces Ives's interest in the goodness of man, and the efforts of these four men over a lifetime to trumpet that goodness.

The fourth and final section of the *Concord Sonata*, is the "Thoreau." In the twelve minute Thoreau section, Ives was in an elegiac mood, depicting an Indian summer day at Walden, on a day that Feder argues Ives's father, George Ives, passed away: There is a "traditional blend of commemoration and eulogy, and the particular touching sadness that characterizes the elegy."⁷⁰ The sound is atonal and mysterious from the outset, the pianist is extended to the highest and lowest keys on the keyboard. Ives has the left hand bass, and the right hand treble, playfully alternating at times. With two minutes to go a flute gently arrives, playing extremely high notes, above the fray. After thirty seconds, the flute disappears. The "Thoreau" section has references to a mist over the pond and smoke. The work has a physical sense while also including the sounds of Walden. Ives said: "Thoreau was a great musician not because he played his flute but because he didn't have to go to Boston to hear the symphony."⁷¹ While Thoreau was not a conventional musician, Ives credited him for his "susceptibility to natural sounds...greater than that of many practical musicians."⁷² He equated him to Beethoven (again, Ives respected Beethoven, one of the few Europeans he did respect), but says Thoreau struggled, unlike Beethoven, to express his emotions through music.⁷³

Beethoven was a revolutionary himself, who in the early 19th century, took the courtly classical works of Haydn and Mozart, and radically expanded what classical

70. Feder, *My Father's Song*, 269.

71. Ives, *Essays*, 56.

72. *Ibid.*, 58.

73. *Ibid.*, 56.

music could be. The orderly and balanced precision of the classical era of the late 1700s became, under Beethoven, in the early 1800s, a jumping off point for elongated forms, punctuated music of dramatic changes in volume and rhythm, and many innovative ideas, including a choral movement in a symphony. This creative courage appealed to Ives, as he too saw himself as expanding the boundaries of what classical music was in his time. Thoreau played the flute, so it is fitting that at the end of the “Thoreau” part of the *Sonata*, the lonely flute is faintly heard interacting with the piano.

The flute in the Thoreau section also hinted at the bells of Concord heard on Sundays through the woods and over Walden Pond. Ives wrote: “At a distance over the woods the sound acquires a certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were strings of a harp which if swept...a vibration of the universal lyre.”⁷⁴ This concluding piece of the *Sonata* was essentially a paean to Thoreau, a rebuttal of any critics Thoreau may have had. Ives suggested his reader may have felt they knew all there is to know about Thoreau, but as Ives put it, “you know him not – unless you love him.”⁷⁵ Ives’s respect for Thoreau, and the other transcendentalists featured in the *Concord Sonata*, echoes his predominant themes of questioning the meaning of life, his appreciation for American history, New England regionalisms, and respect for the goodness of man and what true artists can attain.

The combination of the *Concord Sonata* and the companion explanation, the 124 pages of program notes that is the *Essays Before a Sonata*, are undoubtedly two of Ives’s greatest works. Thereafter, after 1920, his ability to compose was primarily devoted to constant tinkering with his many compositions, adding here, deleting there, and even

74. Ibid., 79.

75. Ibid., 77.

changing notes. Ives mostly retired from active new composing, and business, as of 1918. He had earned over \$1.8 million in 12 years of working, approximately \$20 million dollars today. He told *Time* magazine in 1939 there was nothing unusual about his dual career: “There can be nothing exclusive about a substantial art. It comes directly out of the heart of experience of life.”⁷⁶ Ives had focused his working life on upgrading the image and ways of the insurance business, trying to make it more of a profession, like law or medicine. He created grandiose advertisements, and preached that selling insurance was not a “job.” He reinvented how agents were trained. He inveighed upon his sales people to accept that they were “missionaries,” to improve lives of families, and to promote prudent estate planning, not just sell policies. He called new agents “counselors,” and stressed they were providing a service, and not just trying to get a commission.

The *Essays* that accompanied the *Sonata* are long and detailed, and not always cogent or even comprehensible. Ives introduced his original edition of *Essays* with this provocative dedicatory statement:

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.⁷⁷

This dedication was removed from subsequent commercial editions of his *Essays* after two very uncomplimentary critics blasted the *Concord Sonata* on their first reading

⁷⁶ *Mad Music*, 240. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 117. (quoting Ives: “My work in music helped my business and work in business helped my music”).

⁷⁷ Ives, *Essays*, dedication page.

of the score. They used Ives's self-deprecating statement against him, one of them quipping that as to the music and the essays, he was one who could not stand either.⁷⁸

Ives's *Essays* are remarkable in that rarely does a composer afford a listener such an extensive intimate guidebook as to his thinking. In the opening section, the Prologue, Ives asked a series of rhetorical questions about art and music, yet provided no clear answers. He then proceeded to discuss the "programmatic" material of his *Sonata*, taking each section one by one. Then, in a lengthy epilogue, he provided some answers to the Prologue's rhetorical questions and expounded on many issues and questions about music, and art, and philosophy. Despite its inconsistencies and verbosity, the *Essays* never lacks interest.⁷⁹

The *Essays* reveal how Ives felt at the time. He was a private man whose work was rarely performed during his lifetime. The *Concord Sonata* was not performed in public until 1939, when Ives was 64, when the composition was over 20 years old. Some of his memorable quotes are etched in the music pantheon and come from these essays.

In the "Prologue" to the *Essays*, Ives asked rhetorical questions about the meaning of art. Where does art come from? Can different observers react to the same "art" differently? If so, if the reaction of one is negative, does that then mean that the art is not then art after all? In his "Prologue," Ives disagreed with those who say that music could not communicate as well as words. He challenged such critics, and decried music that was mostly easy to listen to and said nothing; he suggested instead that music would "develop possibilities now, - a language so transcendent that its heights and depths will

78. Geoffrey Block, *Ives: Concord Sonata* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7-8.

79. Ives, *Essays*, "Prologue," 3-10; "Emerson," 11-15; "Hawthorne," 46-50; "The Alcotts," 51-55; "Thoreau," 56-80; "Epilogue," 81-124.

be common to all mankind.”⁸⁰ To Ives, music could be as powerful as the language of transcendentalism.

Ives went on to comment on Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcotts, and Thoreau, and their particular and individual hold on him. To Ives, Emerson, like him, was “always beating down the crust towards the first fire of life, of death and eternity.”⁸¹ Ives identified with Emerson’s spirituality, citing transcendentalism for being a spiritualism whereby the soul and mind coexist in this life, and beyond.⁸² Ives’s music in the “Emerson” section of the *Sonata* mimicked Emerson’s scattershot lecturing style. Ives referenced Emerson’s “muddiness,” a lack of coherence, but argued that Emerson’s obtuseness is intentional. To Ives, the “vagueness” bespoke a clear truthfulness.⁸³ Ives argued that orderly reason and logic were overrated, and that if you could live with confusion long enough, it would eventually become orderly. It is clear Ives was not just describing Emerson, but was also defending himself and his composing. Echoing his own chronic inability to find performers who would attempt to play his music, Ives said of Emerson: “[He] is more interested in what he perceives than in his expression of it. He is a creator whose intensity is consumed more with the substance of his creation than the manner in which he shows it to others.”⁸⁴ Both Ives and Emerson were true artists in that sense. They created what felt honest and true to them. If others failed to respond to it, that then was not the worst thing.

80. Ibid., 10.

81. Ibid., 17.

82. Ibid., 19.

83. Ibid., 26.

84. Ibid., 24-25.

Ives so admired Emerson. He positively gushed about him in his *Essays*. He told an anecdote, quoting a “working woman” who attended an Emerson lecture. She effused: “I love to go hear Emerson, not because I understand him, but because he looks as though he thought everybody was as good as he was.”⁸⁵ Ives had that same optimism, that same hope and near confidence, that his music could have that same kind of effect on his listeners. He sought to express, like the transcendentalists, the “strength and beauty of innate goodness in man, in nature and in God.”⁸⁶ Ives was not particularly religious, but he was spiritual.

As for Hawthorne, Ives’s explanation of what that part of the *Concord Sonata* was about is much briefer.⁸⁷ Although he credited Hawthorne with being a better artist than Emerson or Thoreau, he acknowledged there is a sadness in his work.⁸⁸ He confessed that the “Hawthorne” section of the *Sonata* did not really reach Hawthorne’s essence, but could only suggest his unconventional side. He then cited a number of Hawthorne’s literary works that the music might have concerned, but ultimately teased that it may be instead just “something personal, which tries to be ‘national’ suddenly at twilight, and universal suddenly at midnight; or something about the ghost of a man who never lived, or about something that will never happen, or something else that it is not.”⁸⁹ Ives did have his playful side in his writing, as he did in his music.

As discussed above, the Alcotts anchored the trio of Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau, through the stability of their Concord house. Their house provided a connecting

85. *Ibid.*, 44.

86. *Ibid.*, 44.

87. The Emerson pages number thirty-five. Ives devotes only five pages to Hawthorne.

88. Ives, *Essays*, 49.

89. *Ibid.*, 50.

link to all four of the transcendentalists. Ives devoted only a few pages to the Alcotts, as he seemed anxious to move on to Thoreau.

Ives quickly compared Thoreau to Beethoven, a giant of a composer to Ives. Conflating music and literature, Ives described Thoreau as a “great musician.” Ives saw Thoreau’s prose as music: “the rhythm of his prose, were there nothing else, would determine his value as a composer.”⁹⁰ For Ives, Thoreau displayed courage and honesty, both attributes Ives admired and used as themes in his music. “In music, in poetry, in all art, the truth as one sees it must be given in terms which bear some proportion to the inspiration.”⁹¹ He described Thoreau as having universal appeal such that “he didn’t have to travel around the world to prove it.”⁹² Like Ives, Thoreau explored new experiences. He was unconventional, and like Ives and his music, true to his art.

Linking Thoreau like Emerson to the “innate goodness” of human nature, another current running through Ives’s works, Ives summarized his admiration for him in an understatement:

Every analysis of a criticism or quality of Thoreau invariably leads back and stands us against the great problems of life and eternity. It is a fair indication of the greatness of his problems and ideals.⁹³

After describing in the first eighty pages a glimmer of what his *Concord Sonata* was about, Ives, not yet done, concluded his *Essays* with the 45 page “Epilogue.” There he supplied additional detailed musings about art and composing, his critique of many

90. Ibid., 56.

91. Ibid., 56.

92. Ibid., 58.

93. Ibid., 64.

European composers, and his philosophy about life. He singled out Beethoven for achievements that were unattainable. He saw Beethoven's early 19th century music as innovative, if not radical, music that was more "modern" than Ives's European contemporaries. He commented again obliquely on his own frustrations about getting his own works published and performed:

Maybe music wasn't intended to satisfy the curious definiteness of man. Maybe it is better to hope that music may always be a transcendental language in the most extravagant sense.⁹⁴

Ultimately and fully understanding art and music may never happen, Ives argued, and understanding will "ever be denied (to) man for the same reason that the beginning and end of a circle are to be denied."⁹⁵ But that failure to fully understand never stopped Ives from asking questions.

Ives critiqued many composers in the Epilogue, including Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Debussy, and Strauss, the dominant European influences of his day, even if Bach and Beethoven had long since died. He debated at length the differences between manner, and substance, in art, attributing Emerson to the "substance camp," and relegating Edgar Allan Poe to the "manner" group. Substance to Ives created affection; manner begot prejudice. Substance had value; manner was fluff. Ives argued for a music that borrowed from everywhere and anywhere, defending his own techniques. He believed composers should be seeking truth by including whatever they want, from whatever source has meaning for them, from "Negro melodies," and gospel songs, to

94. Ibid., 82.

95. Ibid., 82.

Scottish tunes, and Apache war dances. Whatever was “nearest to your soul,” as long as it was truly part of one’s spirit, should be tapped:

With this assurance his music will have everything it should of sincerity, nobility, strength, and beauty, no matter how it sounds.⁹⁶

For Ives, music borne of these kinds of sources would be “true to none but the highest American ideals...” and “his music will be true to itself and incidentally American.”⁹⁷ Although Ives borrowed from Beethoven, he typically avoided other Europeans, instead preferring to mine the vast amount of vernacular material that held personal meaning for him. Ives continued that composing such music, as he did, whether it was ever played or not, rejected or accepted, was beside the point. Ives was explaining his own philosophy, defending his own artistry and compositions. He advocated for artists who aimed high, and famously wrote that “beauty in music is too often compared with something that lets the ears lie back in an easy chair.”⁹⁸ Thus he took the overwhelming majority of popular nineteenth century European-influenced classical music, and dropped it in a trash bin. Ives concluded his lengthy *Essays* by paying final tribute to his four transcendentalist subjects:

America is not too young to have its divinities, and its place legends. Many of these “transcendent thoughts” and “visions” which had their birth beneath our Concord elms – messages that have brought salvation to many listening souls throughout the

96. Ibid., 94.

97. Ibid., 94.

98. Ibid., 118.

world – are still growing, day by day, to greater beauty – are still showing clearer and clearer man’s way to God.⁹⁹

The path to God was being innately good, according to Ives. His music celebrated that philosophy, and the virtues of heroism and honesty. Again, through his music, Ives felt he could ask questions and try to provide answers, much like the transcendentalists.

Despite its publication in 1920, and one decent review at the time, the *Concord Sonata* lingered in obscurity for nearly two decades. Henry Bellamann said in 1920 that it “reveals music unlike anything one has seen before – a broad, strong and original style ... with moments of achievement elevating and greatly beautiful.”¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, there were other reviews at the same time that seemed to hold a more universal view. One reviewer called the music of “unsalable quality,” and that “nobody else (other than perhaps the composer) would ever be able to play it.”¹⁰¹ Another reviewer said the music would be familiar to any household “where the baby or cat has access to the piano.”¹⁰² The fact that Ives scored part of the sonata to be played with a wooden block did not help dissuade these critics from their derisive views.

It was not until 1939, some 18 years after the first publication, that the reception of Ives began to thaw. In the intervening years, Ives’s scores were thought too incomprehensible to many, and just too difficult to play. As David Schiff put it, “Except for his wife and a few enthusiasts, most of Ives’s contemporaries, in particular local

99. Ibid., 123-124.

100. Block, *Concord Sonata*, 9.

101. Ibid., 7. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 148 (citing “Musical America” review: “Without doubt the most startling conglomeration of meaningless notes that we have ever seen engraved on white paper.” A. Walter Kramer, “A Pseudo-Literary Sonata,” “Musical America” 33, no. 23 (April 2, 1921)).

102. Block, *Concord Sonata*, 8.

musicians, assumed that his music was either a bad joke or the work of a crank.”¹⁰³ Few conductors, ensembles or performers were willing to take a chance on an idiosyncratic American composer/insurance executive whose music would alienate their conservative audiences. If it was not easy on their ears, like so much of the prevailing popular orchestral repertoire, it was not going to be performed. Ives’s music was not the peppy, spirited Sousa marches, the lyrical Debussy reveries, the melodic Strauss waltzes, or the romantic Cole Porter or Gershwin songs. Despite Ives’s best efforts to publish and circulate his scores, and the efforts of a few dedicated supporters, Ives could not get ensembles or single artists to give his music a try. Ultimately, the few believers he successfully wooed broke down the resistance. By the time John Kirkpatrick performed the *Concord Sonata* at Town Hall in New York City in 1939, the tone had shifted, the audiences were more receptive.¹⁰⁴ The prominent *New York Herald Tribune* critic Laurence Gilman praised the *Concord Sonata*’s “precociousness and thorough modernity.” Gilman went on, in a way that triggered, quietly but assuredly, Ives’s ascendance into acceptance:

This *Sonata* is exceptionally great music – it is, indeed, the greatest music composed by an American, and the most deeply and essentially American in impulse and implication. It is wide-ranging and capacious. It has passion, tenderness, humor, simplicity, homeliness. It has imaginative and spiritual vastness. It

103. Schiff, “The Many Faces of Ives,” 6.

104. Harmony Ives acknowledged it took Kirkpatrick “over ten years of almost daily practice to play [the *Sonata*] as [Ives] thought it should be played.” Owens, *Correspondence*, 337.

has wisdom and beauty and profundity, and a sense of the encompassing terror and splendor of human life.¹⁰⁵

By 1939, George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* was already 15 years old, but the *Sonata* was this prominent critic's "greatest" American music. There is no doubt that Ives's music can look so daunting on the page and that it requires hard work and virtuosic ability to bring out its genius. But his music after all is that of an American composer using American motifs and building blocks, and writing about American places and people. Efforts to perform his music and efforts to listen to his music are rewarding.

The 1939 Kirkpatrick concert opened a door for Ives, and his popularity began to increase. For most of the 1920s and 1930s, Ives still tried to compose, and he wrote lengthy political tracts promoting a democratic progressivism. By 1947, when he was 73, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for music for his *Third Symphony*.¹⁰⁶ From then until his death in 1954, his fame increased significantly, and gradually, overdue acceptance was his. Various champions of his music included Leonard Bernstein and Michael Tilson Thomas. Wilfred Mellers wrote that Ives's "themes are always growing, and change their identities as they are related in wildly opposing rhythms or on separate (polytonal) planes of harmony."¹⁰⁷ Later composers influenced by Ives include John Cage, Elliott Carter, John Adams, and Bernstein.¹⁰⁸ His music remains thoroughly modern, even though its foundations are musical motifs from the nineteenth century.

105. Block, *Concord Sonata*, 13. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 168 (quoting Gilman: "This astonishing artist is one of the pioneers of modern music.")

106. The *Third Symphony* was written between 1908 and 1910, and not performed until 1946. Ives distributed the \$500 prize to the conductor, a composer who helped with the performance, and the publication, "New Music." Owens, *Correspondence*, 334.

107. Block, *Concord Sonata*, 16.

108. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 172, noting Tilson Thomas and Adams collaborated on a 2003 work called *My Father Knew Charles Ives*.

Ives never lived to see the full measure of his acclaim, as the apex of his fame came well after he died.¹⁰⁹ His works have been recorded many times, and are performed now by orchestras all over the world. His music got renewed attention in the mid-1970s with the celebration of America's bicentennial sparking enthusiasm for his very American themes. Ives left his mark on twentieth century America, in both business and the arts, as he lived the life of a true American original.

There is a story told about the famed atonal composer Arnold Schoenberg, who felt Ives's adherence to his artistic instincts despite his challenges was remarkable and noble. When Schoenberg died in 1951, three years before Ives, his wife found a note that he had written seven years earlier, in 1944, when Schoenberg was teaching at UCLA. Schoenberg himself was an experimental modernist composer of considerable stature who, among other innovations, developed the twelve-tone scale. The note said:

There is a great man living in this Country – a composer. He has solved the problem [of] how to preserve one's self-esteem and to learn. He responds to negligence by contempt. He is not forced to accept praise or blame. His name is Ives.¹¹⁰

Alex Ross credits Ives with looking ahead to the future, even to modern jazz greats like Duke Ellington and John Coltrane: "Such resemblances may be nothing more than accidents, but Ives's whole method was to plan accidents. He was incapable of assembling a monolithic point of view; instead he created a kind of open-ended listening

109. Magee, *Ives Reconsidered*, 138 ("Ives had literally lived with no performances of any sort for almost all of his life, in utter loneliness," quoting composer Lehman Engel.) In 2003, the spectacular Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles opened with *The Unanswered Question* on the program. Ross, "Rest is Noise," 561.

110. Ross, *Rest is Noise*, 143.

room, a space of limitless echoes.”¹¹¹ Schiff theorizes that new listeners are always “re-discovering” Ives, and that part of the reason is the ambivalence toward traditional classical music that Ives represents. Ives could write sublime, ethereal, truly beautiful and evocative music, and yet, write humorously as well. In doing so, Schiff claims, Ives defied easy descriptions.¹¹²

Charles Ives never forgot who he was and where he came from. He used every aspect of his boyhood, using snippets of songs, marches and hymns like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. He wrote difficult and ethereal pieces, with haunting eerie effects, coupled with small morsels of the familiar to ground his listeners. He was an optimist who believed in the basic goodness and humanity of every man, and that music and literature could bring a listener or reader closer to universal truths. Although the answers to his questions were not always attainable, that did not stop Ives from trying. Appreciation for Ives’s music is still evolving. Despite all his acclaim, and contemporary uses of his more iconic pieces, Ives’s concert works can challenge the conventional orchestra repertoire. Leonard Bernstein promoted both Gustav Mahler and Ives in the 1950s when both were relatively unknown. More conventional, lyrical, and easy on the ears, Mahler became a mainstay of the regular concert calendar of all symphony orchestras. Meanwhile, Ives’s work labors at times from full popular acceptance because of its complexity and plain uniqueness. Still, for listeners who give Ives a serious try, his music is a rich treasure trove of auditory experience.

Marking his great business success, Ives embodied the American spirit forged in the rocky hills and wooded forests and streams of his beloved New England. He was as

111. Ibid., 146.

112. Schiff, “The Many Faces of Ives,” 7.

indelibly American as any of his transcendental heroes, and his iconoclastic personality and zest for life, art, business and learning never flagged. He was an American icon, still revered today. Although famous to a degree, he still suffers from some obscurity because his music for some is too inaccessible. Yet he is still studied today because he is undoubtedly a fascinating, many-layered figure. He inspires today's musicians, dancers, playwrights and composers, with rich, unique and challenging music that dares anyone to surmise that it was written very nearly at least a century ago.

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