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Charles Ives: a contemporary of Schoenberg

It is the shortcoming of much comment on Ives that it restricts itself to counting by how many years he was 'ahead of his time' in a particular innovation, without first seeking the context of his experiments. This error, which in Ivesian terms amounts to stressing 'manner' at the expense of 'substance', results in the composer being seen in a totally false light, as a mere 'fore-runner', and an eccentric one at that. We might profitably use the occasion of this centenary year to re-examine some of the radical ideas that find expression in Ives' music, their relationship to tradition and to subsequent developments. As a means of focusing the argument I propose to draw upon the views on Ives of another American composer, one who considers himself the heir to some of these ideas - John Cage.

Discussing the relative merits of Ives and jazz (at the expense of jazz) Cage has this to say:

"I could like a great deal of jazz if we had a great deal of it at one time. Say for instance that we had twelve machines here; we could put on twelve records and immediately get a situation reminiscent of Ives."⁽¹⁾

This suggestion that Ives presents the listener with random multi-layered confusion is hardly borne out by the music. In the first place, pieces like Central Park in the Dark and The Housatonic at Stockbridge (the third of the Three Places in New England) are based on a precise and memorable opposition between two conflicting musical characters, the one expressive of the world of humanity (band music, or a hymn), the other representing the non-human, but also non-ephemeral, presence of Nature and the environment. Even in the more extravagant examples of multiple layers traditional continuity and harmonic relationship can usually be detected. Take the following passage from Putnam's Camp (see Ex. 1). Four distinct thematic entities are combined, but the striking thing is that they are carefully 'matched'. As soon as a combination ceases to be tenable harmonically it is abandoned: thus in the fourth bar C joins A, while B joins the regular bass-line.

Ex. 1

Flute *Allegro*
 Oboe
 Violins
 Horns/Trumpets/Tuba
 Basses

- A = The Country Band March; B = Sousa's Semper Fidelis;
C = 'Down in de cornfield' phrase from Stephen Foster's
Massa's in de cold, cold ground;
D = Marching through Georgia

Nor is this example unrepresentative: Ives often writes a conventional texture in which subordinate elements are filled-out and given a degree of independence by compatible quotes. If we add to this the convincing evidence that the quotes tend themselves to be provoked by motivic correspondences, (2) and therefore contribute to wider thematic processes, we are left with a formidable case for the cogency of the music. It is revealing that the composer of HPSCHD sees Ives in this light, but misleading nevertheless.

Another so-called 'prophetic' aspect of Ives is his free approach to form, and the freedom he is prepared to grant the performer. Thus he wrote to John Kirkpatrick, with regard to the performance of the Concord Sonata:

"Do whatever seems natural or best to you, though not necessarily the same way each time."⁽³⁾

We may safely say that this stems from his overriding concern for the vitality of the music. In this respect a 'perfect', neat, predictable form was potentially more of a threat than anything else - because it denied Life. Hence the way Ives frequently courts 'incompleteness', notably in his all-embracing final project of a Universe Symphony.

The important thing was not the degree of attainment (this, indeed, became almost an objection per se), but the epic challenge of the task attempted.

In Cage too one finds a stress on freedom to the performer, also 'incompleteness'. Here, however, the motivation is very different, being a kind of ironic/Oriental devotion to the non-intentional. A characteristic device is the insistence on starting a 'performance' before the audience is allowed in, a form of incompleteness that suggests boundlessness. Given consideration it becomes obvious that the conviction behind Ives' 'freedom' is inimical to the world of Cage: it represents an intensification of the intentional, 'wilful' quality of performance, not a diminishing of it. This may be demonstrated when we examine the one instance in which Ives might be thought to show an interest in the unintended - namely his fascination for the mistakes that crop up in the uninhibited playing of a town band. Why was he prepared to prefer them to the 'real' notes? Because (there is no link with the Portsmouth Sinfonia here) they were more in earnest, more 'vital', than a scrupulously faithful delivery of the letter of the score.

We may summarise these various tendencies in the music of Ives as some sort of blurring of the distinction between Art and Life. That this is the way Cage sees it is illustrated by the importance he clearly attaches to the following passage from Ives' Postface to the 114 Songs:

"The instinctive and progressive interest of every man in art...will go on and on, ever fulfilling hopes, ever building new ones, ever opening new horizons, until the day will come when every man while digging his potatoes will breathe his own epics, his own symphonies...; and as he sits of an evening in his backyard...(he) will hear the transcendental strains of the day's symphony resounding in their many choirs, and in all their perfection, through the west wind and the tree tops!"(4)

Cage identifies this as "to all intents and purposes the goal of music... that art and our involvement in it will somehow introduce us to the very life that we are living...to listen to the sounds which surround us and hear them as music".(5) Our first reaction is that Cage has interpreted Ives both perceptively and memorably. Still, there is a crucial distinction to be drawn. In Ives we are dealing, certainly, with a conviction that Art should take its values from Life, but also that it should be a sort of 'preparation', a process of 'mind-stretching', a raising of awareness which, were it ever to approach completion, would enable Life to override Art. His 'incompleteness' (now understood as an ecstatic preservation of the possibilities for further growth) is closely related to nineteenth-century 'Romantic' aspiration, with its worship of the Future. In Cage, on the other hand, we are offered a way of dealing with the Present: if we listen to the sounds which surround us 'and hear them as music' in Cage's sense we are being asked essentially to feel involved with something into which no human 'meaning' has been allowed to creep (the chance procedures, statistical figures in a telephone directory, the I Ching): the meaning of our involvement hangs on our not finding ourselves reflected in the sounds. The difference is little short

of, on the one hand, an intensification of the Will, on the other, a dissolution of it. Ives may mean something to Cage, but he also meant something to Elliott Carter.

How do we clinch the point? The single composer whom Ives unquestionably held in the highest reverence was Beethoven, the Beethoven who, in Cage's estimation, was 'wrong'. Maybe in this joint centenary year we will come to see Ives as closer even to Schoenberg than to John Cage.

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Notes

- (1) Ed. Richard Kostelanetz, John Cage (London 1971), p. 164.
- (2) See especially Sydney Robinson Charles, 'The use of borrowed material in Ives' Second Symphony', MUSIC REVIEW 1967, and Dennis Marshall, 'Charles Ives' quotations: Manner or Substance?', PERSPECTIVES OF NEW MUSIC 1968.
- (3) Ed. John Kirkpatrick, Charles E. Ives. Memos (London 1973), pp. 200-201.
- (4) Charles Ives, Essays Before a Sonata (London 1969), pp. 128-129.
- (5) John Cage, A Year from Monday (London 1968), p. 42.

(Music example quoted by kind permission of Mercury Music Inc.)