

Ives Reflections

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Remarks read at the März Musik festival in Berlin in March 2004

The importance of the music of Charles Ives is rather clear now, almost 100 years after most of it was written, and I expect that all the participants here will want to make the same basic points. So in order to make my contribution different from the others, I decided to speak only about personal experiences. I will begin with my discovery of *The Unanswered Question* at the age of 16, then summarize what I remember of remarks made by Elliott Carter, who knew Ives personally, and I will close with some remarks about self-publishing, which is an Ives innovation that has been particularly important for me, perhaps more important than any of his music.

Growing up in a non-musical family in Greeley, Colorado in the 1950's did not provide much opportunity to learn about new music, but one day I went to Denver with two friends. The trip was probably primarily to see *La Strada* or some other European movie, but we also stopped off at a large record store – larger at least than any in Greeley. I found an LP with a piece of Charles Ives, whose name sounded vaguely familiar, and asked the clerk if I could listen to it. He kindly led me into a listening booth and put on the record. I was not at all ready for the long slow chorale of the strings, the strange interruptions of the wind textures, and certainly not for the ever returning trumpet melody. I didn't buy the record, probably because I didn't have enough money in my pocket, and perhaps also because I was a little afraid of all this, but I heard the music in my head for days. In fact, I still remember it very clearly. It was one of those key experiences that you never forget.

What struck me most at the time was that this music didn't seem to move. I thought that music was supposed to move, and this didn't. Even today, that is perhaps the most extraordinary thing about that piece, though of course, I have since heard a great many other pieces of music that move even less, and have even written a few myself. Perhaps Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra* were already as good an example of motionless music as *The Unanswered Question*, and of course, by now there are lots of drone pieces and repetitive pieces and silent pieces that are basically motionless in other ways. Still, it was *The Unanswered Question* that was the great stopping point for music in my life.

Some years later I found myself in Elliott Carter's composition seminar at Yale. He taught there only one year, but that happened to be 1960-61, one of the years I was there. Of course, for American composers in Carter's generation, it was important to begin to feel that the United States really was a cultivated country, and it was important to follow in the footsteps of the first American who had written important music in the European classical tradition.

I remember Carter talking about the day that Ives received him and a few other interested young composers in Greenwich Village. Naturally they asked their host to play the piano, and he offered to play some of the *Concord Sonata*. Ives was a good organist and pianist, but he apparently didn't care much about playing this score exactly as it was written. Carter reported that Ives missed lots of notes, believing that the spirit and the energy was the important thing, and perhaps thinking that the messages of transcendental philosophy contained in the music was not just in the notes he had written. This is probably the case. In subsequent years I have heard interpreters who play all the notes with no problem, but never really convey the iconoclastic energy that is so central to the piece.

Carter also told us that he was once asked to examine the manuscript of the *Fourth Symphony*. It seems that they were preparing an edition, and didn't know what Ives intended. If I recall correctly, Carter particularly remembered a curious moment when a passage was suddenly scored for six trombones, despite the fact that there were never more than three trombones in the entire rest of the piece. Ives was long dead at this point, and the editors had to guess quite a bit in order to prepare the score. The point of this for Carter was that music should be written, finished, prepared precisely. When you write only for yourself, as Ives did later in his career, content to leave manuscripts in the closet, you leave too much undefined. He wanted us to be professional and finish our pieces clearly.

The most important thing about Ives for me, though, is that he published the *114 Songs* himself. He was not hanging his songs in a *salon de refusé*, nor was he publishing them privately out of desperation. He was simply practicing self-reliance, taking personal responsibility for the music he had written, and generally expressing those puritan values that were so important to him, and to the entire New England culture from which he came. He did not want to ask for favors, just because he had composed some songs. He did not think that someone else should have to pay for engraving his music. He particularly did not think that someone else should choose which songs to include in the anthology and how they should be edited. This is basically what is meant by the term "rugged individual," a term that has a particularly American ring, and which says much about American culture.

I am not sure whether there is a copyright notice on the original edition of the *114 Songs*, but I do know that in general, later in life, Ives wanted music to be available to all, and even wrote against copyright principles. He earned his living in the insurance business, did not consider music to be private property, and even planned for his own music to fall directly into the public domain after his death. As he might have expected, some years after his death, G. Schirmer came to talk to his widow, explained that she really should "protect" her husband's music by signing it over to them, and convinced her that what her husband wanted was not what he *really* wanted. Everything became private property.

Some years later a friend of mine, Charlie Morrow, asked permission to do a band arrangement of Ives' variations on *American* ("My country 'tis of thee..."), which was originally an organ piece. The publisher refused, much as the French publisher refused to give John Cage the rights to do a two piano arrangement of Satie's *Socrate*.

Such refusals are not made for esthetic reasons, nor to protect the music itself, but only for obscure motives having to do with eventual profits, and this can have very negative results for the music. The situation no doubt became much worse after G. Schirmer became the property of McMillan Books, which became the property of Gulf Western, which gradually disappeared into the anonymous multi-national mesh that we live with today - and that no one really seems to understand. Ives editions, like those of Satie and of so many other dead composers, can go out of print at any moment, errors in the scores can remain perpetually, and musicians have no control over anything.

Nothing really changes, and every year talented young composers enter into traditional contracts with commercial publishers, while it would be much better if they thought a bit about the long-term destiny of their music, and allowed themselves to be influenced by the one idea of Charles Ives which I feel is more important than all the others: Composers should be individually responsible for what happens to their music.