Charles Ives Remembered An Oral History by Vivian Perlis1974, Yale University

Much can be said about Ives as a person; however, more often than not people fail to realize who the true Charles Ives was aside from a modern American composer. John Kirkpatrick, a noted performer of Ives talks about how energetic of a man Ives was and that he talked fast and emphatically. (220) Kirkpatrick also discusses Ives point of view toward performance, wanting to make music that would be good for the players’ souls. To Ives music is life. He also contends, “One of the many paradoxes in Ives was the contrast between his radically adventurous self and his churchgoing self. He churchgoing self was conservative almost to the point of what’s call Fundamentalist.” (Remembered219) Louis Untermeyer, a poet-anthologist whom Ives had used text from for *Swimmers,* talks of Ives’ spontaneity in song with no full melodic line. Untermeyer quotes Ives for saying that the tunes are unsingable or shouldn’t be sung. (Remembered 212)

How do we define a composer such as Ives? Taruskin labels Ives as a Maximalist but not a Modernist, while others classify Ives as an Ultra-Modernist. Can a label really ever put on Ives? A man who was capable of producing such an array of music with a style clearly of his own should not be classified with a series of imitative composers of their time. As an American composer, Ives did not expand on Austro-German traditions, nor did he modify compositional practices like that of composers such as Stravinsky and Debussy. His music was his own, progressing to the future he was a modernist far ahead of his time.

Charles Ives A Life With Music by Jan Swafford 1996 New York, NY

Obsessed by the past, he wrote music of the future. As a person he was volatile yet much loved.

“Ultra-Modernist, the Nationalist, the amateur, the primitive, the atavist, the nerutoic, the sly fabricator of his own myth.” - `ix

John Kirkpatrickm, performer of Ives, called him “paradoxical” To be Ivesian means first of all to be yourself, to keep your own counsel. Ives was among his own least forgiving critics. Music is life.

Grew up traditional artist development – Read Burkholder – education, music training, etc. Wasn’t born a Transcedentalist

Filled with quotes of music from Beethoven to Stephen Foster and American hymnodists, Ives's mature work is music about music, or rather music as a symbol of human life and striving and spirituality. For that purpose Ives used the music he grew up with, from the ceremonies and celebrations of Danbury's daily life. His intentions go far beyond nostalgia, however. Memories of his childhood are transcended, his hometown made into an image of the primal human community, where people worship and celebrate, with music a vital part of it all.

-Ives's portrait, say, of a Fourth of July in Danbury paints the event in all its chaotic vitality, yet it is still carefully-shaped music based on a small collection of thematic materials, it develops in a convincing musical shape, and it conveys not only the surface of the event but the emotion behind it--or rather, the many emotions of an uproarious crowd in the streets, listening to the playing of not-entirely-sober bandsmen as they march past. "Bandstuff!" Ives wrote one of his longsuffering copyists. "They didn't always play right & together and it was as good either way."

Two works from the second decade of the century can stand for the method and achievement of Ives's maturity. His *Decoration Day*, the second of the *Holidays*, pictures an event Ives observed throughout his childhood on the holiday now called Memorial Day: his father's band marched to the town cemetery playing a mournful tune; as the crowds stood among the decorated graves of the war dead, George Ives intoned "Taps" on his trumpet; then the band marched back to town to a lively tune designed to lift people's spirits. From that narrative Ives shapes in *Decoration Day* an unprecedented musical stream of consciousness, in which revolutionary musical techniques are marshaled to paint a profound collective memory. When Stravinsky was asked his definition of a musical masterpiece, he answered with *Decoration Day*.

The orchestral piece *From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, the Voice of the People Again Arose*, which concludes the three-movement *Second Orchestral Set*, came directly from a personal experience. On the way home from work Ives saw a crowd of people on a Manhattan train platform break into a hymn, in response to news of the sinking of the Lusitania by a torpedo. The work transforms that moment into a complex musical fabric, in which threads of the hymn gradually coalesce to the climactic proclamation of "In the Sweet By and By." The hymn sounds as rough and untutored as the voices of men and women on the street, but it is filled with overwhelming emotion: the music of the ages.

**the spirit of music**   
Thus Ives's comment, echoing his father's words: "What has sound got to do with music!?" For Ives, music is not mere sound but the underlying spirit, human and divine, which the sounds express even in the inexpert playing and singing of amateurs. Thus the paradox of Ives's music, echoing his paradoxical person: he could be realistic, comic, transcendent, simple, complex, American, and European, all at the same time. If some of his music seems crowded nearly to bursting, it is a vibrant and entirely realistic portrayal of his conception of life, his sense of democracy in action, and of his own all-embracing consciousness. As Ives once said, Music is life.

Yet for all his democratic convictions, this enormous creative effort was carried on largely in private. Between the premiere of *The Celestial Country* in 1902 and performances in the 1920s, Ives had no real public exposure at all. Such isolation was unprecedented for an important artist, a situation unthinkable in Europe. It did allow Ives to follow his most visionary ideas, but it also distanced him from the profession. Still, during his years of obscurity Ives constantly showed his work to musicians, hired groups to play over pieces, revised the music based on what he heard, and had much of his music expertly copied. Yet, for twenty years the nearly unanimous reaction of musicians to his music was somewhere between laughter and outrage. It is no wonder that he required, as Aaron Copland put it, "the courage of a lion."

By 1917 Ives had acquired an adopted child and a new obsession--working to support the American war effort (despite his earlier outspoken objection to the war). With the strains of parenthood and campaigning for war bonds added to the already exhausting demands of his business and creative life, and with the drain of steady rejection from musicians, Ives's health collapsed. In October 1918 he had a serious heart attack just before his 44th birthday. Neither he nor his work ever completely recovered.

**a spirit unrelenting**   
Ignoring lingering weakness from his heart attack, in the first half of the 1920s Ives kept to his usual frenetic pace, now spending a great deal of time promoting his work, cultivating friendships with musicians, joining and supporting organizations that promoted progressive music. By this time, the Modernist movement was gathering steam in the U.S., much of the musical part of it spiraling around the energetic young composer Henry Cowell, who took up Ives's cause and remained one of his champions. Starting with songs and the *Violin Sonatas*, Ives's music began to be played in the 20s, largely in "Ultra-Modernist" forums.

But Ives's infirmities steadily eroded his energy, creative and otherwise. Finally one day around 1927 Ives came downstairs in tears and told his wife, "I can't seem to compose any more. I try and try and nothing comes out right." Three years later he resigned from the insurance agency he had built.

For the rest of his life Ives was an invalid. Yet through decades of physical misery Ives remained the same optimistic, funny, gloriously eccentric, vibrant spirit he had always been. When he was able, he saw to the practical side of being a composer--

writing letters to those interested in his work, editing pieces for publication and overseeing editing by others, and supervising the copying of his pieces. The wealth he had earned in business not only supported his own work, but flowed steadily into the cause of progressive music all over the U.S.

**in misery, creation**   
Periodically during his last decades, Ives would take up and add a few notes to a titanic, transcendent work he had conceived in 1915, at the same time as the end of the *Fourth Symphony*: the *Universe Symphony*, which he described as aspiring "to paint the creation, the mysterious beginnings of all things...the evolution of all life in nature, of humanity from the great roots of life to the spiritual eternities, from the great inknown to the great unknown." The symphony was a gigantic credo, and a conception unfinished and unfinishable in the world. Yet over the decades Ives returned again and again to the idea, finally conceiving it as to be presented outdoors, with orchestras in valleys and choruses on hilltops. Only 39 pages of sketches remain of the Universe; more may have been lost. Several people have made realizations and creative extensions of the material, following up on Ives's suggestion that others take up the piece. The existing sketches reveal a fascinating fragment whose elusive whisperings and giant rhythmic cycles resemble the mystical finale of the *Fourth Symphony*.

It took many years for Ives to gain the reputation that is studied today.

The rise of Ives's reputation was slow, but important musicians admired him and some--Henry Cowell, Nicolas Slonimsky, and Lou Harrison among them--devoted significant parts of their lives to his work. Aaron Copland, Harrison, and pianist John Kirkpatrick gave important performances of his music in the 30s and 40s, earning Ives glowing reviews and a Pulitzer Prize (1947).

Charles Ives died in May 1954, just as Henry and Sidney Cowell completed their pioneering biography of him. It was not until a decade later that the musical mainstream really began to take Ives seriously. For many, the long-posed question of whether Ives is the greatest American composer had been answered in the affirmative.

Ives remains, and perhaps always will, the great maverick among Western classical composers. It is a position he would surely approve of. Yet for all the neglect that lasted to the end of his life, he felt confident that his work would reach the hearts and minds of listeners. After he met Ives in the 1940s, poet Louis Untermeyer recalled, "His presence impressed me. There are a few people who have presence per seÖa kind of self-assurance. He knew what he had done. He knew what he was."