

Charles Ives: The Great American Composer

Many scholars have debated about what makes a composer specifically American, but it can be argued that Charles Ives (1874-1954) is quite possibly the greatest and most American of all American composers. Ives developed a new genre of American art music through emotional experience and innovative musicianship, concurrently employing Schönberg's and Stravinsky's revolutionary European techniques of the early 20th-century, while encompassing American techniques, traditions, and ideologies.¹ Being a businessman, who gave up professional music at the age of 27, Ives knew that Americans were commercially driven consumers, that public music was still considered a business, and that American classical music supported very little economic security.² Instead of actively selling his work, Ives created his music during the evenings and weekends for the purpose of innovation, invention, and a celebration of American life. This drive and passion, charged with American spirit and ideals, is what makes Charles Ives the epitome of American music. This essay will discuss how Ives earns the title of America's greatest composer, based upon his philosophical perspective, his substantial contributions to the American classical music tradition, and his unique incorporation of American vernacular music.

While much can be said about Ives' "avant-garde use of polytonality, atonality, microtonality, unfinished voice phrases, the twelve-tone row, metrical modulation, tone clusters, parodies, and burlesques," his genius is based upon a specifically American philosophical and religious perspective: transcendentalism.³ Transcendentalism, derived from American philosophers, such as Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Alcott, and Melville, is the belief system

1. Henry Cowell, "Charles Ives," in *Charles Ives and His Music*, ed. Peter J. Burkholder (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 368-369.

2. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 496-497.

³ Alfred F. Rosa, "Charles Ives: Music, Transcendentalism, and Politics," *The New England Quarterly*, 44, no. 3 (1971): 434.

that in order to understand nature and humanity, one must first analyze the reasoning process surrounding the experience.⁴ Ives expounds upon Transcendentalism in his extensive program notes entitled *Essays Before a Sonata* for his performance of the *Piano Sonata No. 2*, “Concord:”

How far is anyone justified, be he an authority or a layman, in expressing or trying to express in terms of music (in sounds, if you like) the value of anything, material, moral, intellectual, or spiritual, which is usually expressed in terms other than music? How far afield can music go and keep honest as well as reasonable or artistic? Is it a matter limited only by the composer’s power of expressing what lies in his subjective or objective consciousness? Or is it limited by any limitations of the composer? [...] Can it be done by anything short of an act of mesmerism on the part of the composer or an act of kindness on the part of the listener?⁵

Ives’ worldview followed that man’s intelligence was the solution to discovering the answer to “nature, history, and finally to the universe itself.”⁶ Transcendentalism allowed Ives to set himself apart as the creator of sounds, not limiting himself to the standards of European art music. This created a marriage of genius: combining the freedom of imagination with reason and logic, upon which Ives based his life’s work.

Ives’ contributions to the American classical repertoire were unconventional, yet absolutely necessary to the future growth of American music. By releasing himself from professional music publication deadlines and patron demands, Ives was able to freely pursue composition, and embrace “European masterworks, American vernacular music making, and

3. Dinja Dujmić, “The Musical Transcendentalism of Charles Ives,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 2, no. 1 (1971): 91.

4. Charles E. Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1920), 3.

5. Dinja Dujmić, “The Musical Transcendentalism,” 92.

acoustical experiments.”⁷ Ives utilized traditional European genres, such as chamber music (i.e. *String Quartet No. 1*, 1900), symphonies (i.e. *Symphony No. 3*, “The Camp Meeting,” 1910), sonatas (i.e. *Piano Sonata No. 2*, “Concord,” 1919), concertos (“Emerson Concerto,” 1919), but transcended to a new level, adding American folk-song melodies and New England hymn tunes.

Ives was considered a serious, classical composer, an imperative distinction.⁸ *The Housatonic at Stockbridge*, the fifteenth song in Ives’ collection of *114 Songs*, is a clear example of Ives’ unique blend of traditionalism and modernism. His interpretation of nature was made alive through solo piano European techniques of mood-setting texture. The poetic lyrics arrive at 0:28, adding a new layer of melodically lyrical texture, initially complementing the already established texture with traditional European harmony. Ives began creating more tension through dissonance at 0:60. At 2:30, the anguish and unrest of the lyrics became more transparent and forceful, with agitated dynamics, unconventional accents, and increased dissonance, finally culminating at 3:00 with a heart-wrenching note emulating the release of life itself.

Another example of classical repertoire includes Ives’ 44th song in the *114 Songs* Collection, *The Watchman*. The text came from a popular Lowell Mason hymn tune from 1830, and while many contemporary musicians considered hymn tunes to be beneath the art of serious music, Ives found them instrumental in establishing the infusion of a spiritual presence.⁹ *The Watchman* took a very different approach from *The Housatonic at Stockbridge* with extremely dissonant piano for the first 20 seconds, then settled into a not unpleasant dissonance with the arrival of the soprano voice and even a momentary appearance of American jazz flair (0:42).

6. Richard Crawford, *America’s Music Life*, 505.

7. Henry Cowell, “Charles Ives,” 369.

8. *Ibid.*, 513.

Ives' most unique contribution to American music, however, was his use of vernacular techniques. In the patriotic song, *The Things Our Fathers Loved*, Ives used a direct quotation, assimilating an 1859 American classic, *Dixie*, as well as the 1757 Christian hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*.¹⁰ By using these familiar popular and sacred tunes in his music, Ives once again bridged the gap between the pushing artistic boundaries and making music accessible to the general public.

Ives' likewise employed a unique layering of familiar sounds, texture, and experimental voices.¹¹ It was not uncommon for Ives to reference both classical European melodies and folk hymn tunes in the same piece. Two of his symphonic instrumental works included a pair entitled: I. *A Contemplation of a Serious Matter, or The Unanswered Question* and II. *A Contemplation of Nothing Serious, or Central Park in the Dark in the Good Old Summertime*.¹² *The Unanswered Question* is composed of three independent groups of sound: background tranquil strings, woodwinds, and a solo trumpet. This piece, one of the most serious 20th-century works, speaks to Ives' conceptualized universal religion as the solo trumpet asks the unanswered question of existence and Ives makes his philosophy clear: "in the immensity of creation, a question speaks louder than an answer."¹³

9. Enoch S. A. Jacobus, "'The Things Our Fathers Loved'- Part the First: In Which We Learn a Little About Charles Ives and Intertextuality," *Old World for the New: Reflections on Music, Faith, The Arts, Creativity, Culture, Teaching, Philosophy, Language, and Video Games* (blog), February 12, 2012, <https://oldworldforthenew.wordpress.com/2012/02/12/the-things-our-fathers-loved-part-the-first-in-which-we-learn-a-little-about-charles-ives-and-intertextuality/>.

10. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life*, 517.

11. Silvia Santinelli, "The Unanswered Question – Charles Ives," *Chamber Orchestra of San Antonio*, accessed July 30, 2016, <http://www.chamberorchestrassa.org/the-unanswered-question-charles-ives/>.

12. Ibid.

Charles Ives' elements of musicality were ahead of their time, not simply because they were unique, but because he created a "musical style based on these typical American usages."¹⁴ Ives was instrumental in the process of integrating spiritual transcendence; the compilation of art music, vernacular folk music, and hymn tunes; and his unprecedented use of dissonance and layered textures. Ives' music had a drastic impact on future American music, as he paved the way for society to open its minds and ears to the interconnected spiritual dimension of humanity only accessible through music.¹⁵ Because of Ives' American philosophy, his innovative musical techniques, his substantial contribution to American music, and his ability to integrate the art music and the vernacular, he will always remain the great American composer.

13. Henry Cowell, "Charles Ives," 370.

14. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life*, 523.

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