



CENTAUR

CRC 2285

Charles Ives
Sonata No. 2, "Concord, Mass."

Three Page Sonata
Some South-Paw Pitching
The Anti-Abolitionist Riots
Varied Air and Variations

Richard Trythall, piano

The five works on this record offer a particularly complete panorama of Ives' varied approaches to keyboard composition. The *Three Page Sonata* from 1905, provides clear examples of two of Ives' fundamental technical innovations. The first movement is constructed using his non-metrical "prose style", with its organic motivic construction and dramatic rhetorical style, while the following two movements offer particularly "pure" examples of his use of polyrhythms — to create a static, undulating, misty atmosphere in the second movement and then to create a euphoric, raucous, "dance hall" atmosphere in the third movement. *Some South-Paw Pitching* (Study #21) from ca. 1909, on the other hand, is predominantly of a lyrical nature and would seem to be one of Ives' "songs with or without voices", i.e. a piano transcription of an imaginary song. The song's straight-forward diatonic melody and metrical rhythm is stated clearly throughout, accompanied by an increasingly dense chromatic harmonization. The *Anti-Abolitionist Riots in the 1830's and 1840's* (Study # 9) from 1908-1909, a "tone painting" of a mob rioting, presents another approach. This work provides a strong taste of Ives as the passionate and unrestrained keyboard improviser. The emphasis here is on gesture and sound-color, on effect and uninhibited excitement. The *Varied Air and Variations* (Study #2), of uncertain date (about 1923!), in contrast, provides an example of Ives' academic, "rule-made thing" style with a set of rigorous variations on a particularly complex theme. The chorale of the

fourth variation offers a glimpse of Ives — the church organist — mischievously re-harmonizing the theme as a Chorale Prelude. Finally, the monumental *Piano Sonata No. 2 "Concord, Mass., 1840-1860"* (published in 1920, and revised for a second publication in 1947 — the edition used in this recording), represents the culmination of Ives' development as a composer. This composition contains all of the compositional approaches mentioned above and quite a number of other techniques as well. This is Ives — the consummate contrapuntist and the grand Romantic tone poet — at the peak of his powers. The following notes, then, discuss these five works — with a particular emphasis on the "*Concord Sonata*" — focusing first on Ives' compositional style and methods, then on the interpreter's role in performing them, and concluding with a set of reflections upon Ives' sense of humor and its fundamental influence on this music.

Born at the crossroads of the 19th and 20th centuries, Charles Ives (1874-1954) fashioned his unique compositional style at the point where romanticism, impressionism and modern 20th century *avant-garde* thought converged. Ives' personal mix of what seems to be mutually exclusive esthetic tendencies created a good deal of controversy. The romantics objected to Ives' *avant-garde* technical innovations as being far too dissonant and complex even though, in effect, Ives placed these new devices squarely at the service of the imagery of the Romantic tone poem — maintain-

ing its drama and passion, but cutting what Ives perceived to be romanticism's excessive sweetness and pathos with his dissonances and complex rhythms. The modernists, on the other hand, objected to Ives' insistent subjectivity, his constant use of the long romantic emotional arch pattern, even though Ives achieved these by using extremely original compositional devices which were decades "ahead" of their time.

Beyond this, Ives' solutions with regard to musical continuity went relatively unacknowledged by either musical camp. In his development of the 19th century tone poem, Ives expanded on its traditional use of musical citations by introducing American hymn tunes, marches, rags, musical quotations of all sorts, as well as a set of personally created musical leitmotifs. These musical "found objects" were then woven contrapuntally into an *avant-garde* "stream of consciousness" shape. His esthetic methods, in fact, have a marked similarity with those developed by James Joyce in his novel, *Ulysses*, written during the same period. (Both artists, it would seem, were indebted to the esthetic theories of Richard Wagner — particularly to Wagner's use of motives to represent the substance of thought.) One can, in fact, listen to the "Emerson" or "Hawthorne" movements of the "Concord" Sonata in much the same way as one might follow a reading of Molly Bloom's monologue in the last chapter of *Ulysses* — as if overhearing the character's thought process itself.

Likewise, Ives' love of surprise, of the surreal and the fantastic, his fascination with order and disorder, and his extremely visual musical imagination, predisposed him temperamentally towards the use of a plurality of compositional methods which could create similarly surprising and surreal effects in the musical continuity. These methods were used interchangeably according to the programmatic intent of the music — the method used always being subservient to the extra-musical effect intended. In the "Concord" Sonata, for example, the simplest and most linear continuity solution is reserved for the simplest characters, "The Alcotts", the most complex and convoluted for the most complex character, "Emerson". This too bears comparison with esthetic methods adopted by James Joyce's in *Ulysses* where the formal presentation used in each chapter varies according to the character, place and kind of events presented.

Naturally, Ives' approach proved objectionable to temperaments which believed that a work of art must exclude rather than include, that a perfectly executed artistic object requires a homogeneity of material and unity of method so that each part perfectly reflects the whole. From this point of view, Ives' methods could be viewed as disordered and confused if not downright chaotic and amateurish. Curiously, Joyce's literary achievements — so similar in intent to those of Ives, so inclusive of reality to its smallest detail — also met with a similar misunderstanding ini-

tially, but were soon acknowledged as valid and rich developments by those interested in literary thought.

Certainly, the impetus for Ives' musical thought was almost invariably extra-musical — the music is far more than just an illustration of its compositional processes. In addition, his work methods were highly idiosyncratic. As a composer, for example, he would seem to have viewed the individual works he produced as slices from an on-going “work in progress”, perhaps as part of a life-long dialogue between himself and his material. He frequently revised and altered his compositions. This accounts for the multiple existing versions we find of various pieces (further complicated by various editions thereof), and most likely accounted for his leaving some of his works in an unfinished manuscript state. Moreover, there are certain musical materials which “live on” for years, reused in many different compositions. Various examples of this sort of reuse are heard on this record. The *Anti-Abolitionists Riots*, for example, contains material which is also found in the “Emerson” movement of the “*Concord*” *Sonata*. And a good deal of the organic cohesion of the “*Concord*” *Sonata* itself comes precisely from the fact that these four tone “portraits” — written separately over the period of ca. 1902-1919 — share so much material in common. It is interesting also to note that the incipit of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, the “destiny knocking” motif, occurs in six of the eight compositions

on this record. This does not mean that Ives does not find original and individual formal solutions for each piece — he does — but that the material (and the extra-musical images it represents) easily “spills over” from one piece to another, as part of an on-going process of evolution.

Another innovation unique to Ives was the amount of interpretive discretion he left to the performer, particularly in those of his keyboard works which are heavily based on his quite personal improvisational technique. As an inveterate keyboard improviser, Ives like Chopin, evidently learned a good deal from his own improvisations. While Chopin subsequently refined his improvisations into more traditional forms, Ives characteristically attempted to maintain the irregularity of thought and variety of gesture which free improvisation can produce. In so doing, he developed a notation (proportioned rhythmically, but non-metered and without bar lines) which permitted him to transcribe both the variety of rhythmic scansion and the plasticity of texture which is characteristic of improvisation. The scores of the “Emerson”, “Hawthorne” (and to some degree the “Thoreau”) movements of the “*Concord*” *Sonata*, for example, as well as the shorter score of *The Anti-Abolitionist Riots*, notate a remarkable string of musical events (the musical “stream of consciousness”) and, in essence, leave the performer a wide margin of choice in shaping this material. The performer must find the proper accentuation for each gesture, supply the missing

“punctuation” marks, clarify the internal dialogue, and, above all, find a tempo organization which aligns the details with the large shape of the work as understood by the performer — much as a reader might do in the case of reading aloud the Joyce monologue mentioned earlier. Ives’ footnote to the “Hawthorne” movement underscores this point: “marks of tempo, expression, etc. are used as little as possible. If the score itself, the preface or an interest in Hawthorne suggest nothing, marks may only make things worse.” In fact, the score, in such cases, is a bit like a theatrical script, the words and actions are determined, but the performer determines how they are spoken and acted. It is for this reason that in his lengthy preface published concurrently with the “Concord” Sonata, “Essays before a Sonata”, Ives rarely touches on technical issues related to the performance of the sonata. Rather, as a true Romantic, Ives takes this opportunity to convey his ideas concerning the tone poem’s subject for each movement — the moral grandeur and eloquence of Emerson, the surreal, fantastic (and haunted) imagination of Hawthorne, the homely yet noble faith of the Alcott family, and the tranquillity of Thoreau’s contemplation of nature. Ives is, evidently, convinced that, once the performer understands the programmatic intention, the questions raised by performance details will resolve themselves. In this light, the proper measure for the success of a performance of the “Concord” Sonata is, clearly, the degree to which it suggests the program envisioned by Ives, the

degree to which it approximates the spirit behind the music.

Naturally, this position is anathema to critics looking for the “definitive” performance. What is of more practical concern, the “collaborative effort” which Ives requests from the performer enormously increases the interpretive challenge of a work which already makes considerable technical demands on the pianist. Yet, given Ives’ intention that his keyboard music — at least that part of it which is of a strongly improvisational character — be performed in a spontaneous manner, with that sense of abandon, of “letting oneself go” to the excitement of the performing gesture and to the sensuality of pure sound which characterizes improvisation, it provides a practical and surprisingly effective solution. Ives’ instructions for “Hawthorne”, then, makes his intention clear, using humor — as he often does — to mask a serious intent.

As one example of many cases in which Ives’ humor, in fact, provides the key to his music, this brings attention to a final, less technical but nonetheless important, consideration: the decisive role humor plays in Ives’ music. As a romantic “tone poet”, Ives frequently depicts scenes of high good humor (as in much of the “Hawthorne” movement of the “Concord” Sonata or the last movement of the *Three Page Sonata*, both of which make constant reference to the rhythms of the march and its syncopated descendent —

Ragtime, the “good times” music of Ives’ youth). In this, Ives succeeded in coining musical images for uninhibited exuberance and youthful exhilaration which are without parallel. He also enjoys hiding little musical jokes in his scores (to name just a few: the sly reference to the “Wedding March” for Louisa May Alcott in “*The Alcotts*”, the depiction of the “different drummer” quotation in the “*Thoreau*” movement, the particularly charming and evocative citation of the Westminster Chimes in the slow movement of the *Three Page Sonata*). The titles of his pieces are also frequently humorous. The diminutive title, *Three Page Sonata*, itself is intended humorously for a piece (the original manuscript was on three pages) which Ives describes as a “joke to knock the mollycoddles out of their boxes and to kick out the softy ears!”. Another example is provided by the dry humor of calling his *Study No. 21*, with its demanding left-hand (“south-paw”) passage work, *Some South Paw Pitching*. This humor is further underlined with the “tongue-in-cheek” footnote in the score which affirms that: “This piece was written in fun and excitement, after seeing a good baseball game. Charles Ives used to play on the Yale ball team himself.” He even raises the joke to a formal structure. The *Varied Air and Variations* acts out, in a free variations form, a long, bitter-sweet, theatrical joke, which, in its portrayal of the frustrated pianist (the variations) attempting to endear himself to a protesting audience (the pianissimo refrain), ends with quite an astounding “punch line” in which, following a

rousing C major chord pattern signifying the audience’s approval, the pianist “gets mad and starts to throw things at them again”.

Beyond that, however, Ives’ inclination towards humor also offers us a key to much of what is remarkable about Ives’ **technical** procedures. Like any good humorist, for example, Ives loved putting the accent on the unexpected. Both his compositional work and his prose writings are full of surprising, unexpected turns of thought, of that zig-zag thought pattern which is so much the humorist’s sense of order and timing, where expectation is useful as a foil to the unexpected, the systematic as foil to the non-systematic. (The “*Hawthorne*” movement of the “*Concord*” *Sonata*, with its unquenchable exuberance and zest for adventure, is a masterpiece of this “crazy quilt” construction). Like any good humorist, in fact, Ives loved to shuffle the continuity of his thought so as to catch his audience “off base” (clear examples are provided by the surprise, gag-like endings of *Some South Paw Pitching* and the *Three Page Sonata*) or on the wrong foot (this is, in fact, a great part of the “off-kilter” fun of polymetrical cross-rhythms) to surprise them, disorient them, and ultimately to astonish them. Like any good humorist, Ives also had a fine appreciation for that extremely thin line between order and disorder, between sense and nonsense, and a particular appreciation for the thrill of losing control. He enjoyed allowing his music to approach and occasionally descend into total chaos (the most

extreme example being the overpowering cluster climax about 3/4ths of the way through the “*Hawthorne*” movement). Similarly, like any good humorist, Ives was fascinated with theatrical exaggeration. He imagines in extremes, frequently using the high dramatic relief which can be created by placing musical opposites side by side — extremes of soft and loud, slow and fast, consonant and dissonant, simple and complex, controlled and non-controlled, sacred and profane.

Finally, like any good humorist, Ives was skeptical of appearances, of form and manner which might mask a lack of spiritual substance. In this, perhaps, there is a touch of American frontier thought which believed that the rugged, rough-hewn expression was a guarantee of sincerity, of genuine sentiment, while the finely stated expression risked being weak and “dandy”. Excessive refinement in any form, according to this view, weakened and damaged the spirit. Ultimately, then, like any good humorist, Ives was a stern moralist — concerned with the quality of the human spirit, with its real substance beneath the form. He believed music making to be, above all, an exercise of the spirit; that one should judge music not only on how it is written, but according to its spiritual substance. Ives’ frequent use of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* motif as a musical image, in this sense, was also a reference to the strong moral value which Beethoven had ascribed to music. It is, therefore, not surprising that Ives, a man of firm moral conviction and social con-

science, believed his music reinforced the values of this tradition. Ives’ dissonances were intended not only to “stretch” ears, but souls as well. They were a measure of moral integrity. A typical example of this thought is provided by the subtitle of the *Varied Air and Variations*: “*Study #2 for Ears*” or “*Aural and Mental Exercise!!!*”.

Ives’ sense of humor, then, supplies both a particularly illuminating perspective on his work and a vital ingredient of his style. Humor, of course, depends upon a keen sense of rhythm and timing - something which Ives possessed in abundance. Humor delights in spontaneity, in the unexpected, in the extravagant imagination — as does Ives’ music. And humor posits a familiar intimacy between humorist and audience — this too is true of Ives’ relationship with his performer and with his audience. In the long run, then, it is for these human qualities — more than for the technical methods by which they are manifested — that Ives’ music continues to give pleasure. Even now, at the crossroads of the 20th and the 21st centuries, his music exudes freshness, enthusiasm and vigor while his colorful, unbounded imaginative spirit continues to delight and astonish.

—Richard Trythall

Richard Trythall

Richard Trythall (b. 1939 Knoxville, Tennessee) won the "Kranichsteiner Piano Competition" at the Darmstadt, Germany, Contemporary Music Festival in 1969. Since then his activity as pianist and composer has taken place principally in Italy - his home for the past 31 years — where he is particularly well known for his long-time advocacy of Charles Ives' music. Following a performance of the Concord Sonata in 1973, Massimo Mila, musicologist and critic for the Italian newspaper, "La Stampa", wrote: "we must now immediately rank Trythall along with David Tudor, with Canino, and with Pollini himself, as one of the greatest interpreters of contemporary piano music".

Trythall has recorded the Concord Sonata, as well as many of Ives' songs (Marjorie Wright, soprano), for the Italian national radio (RAI) and was the piano soloist in a performance of Ives' Fourth Symphony by the Rome Radio Orchestra with Seiji Ozawa conducting.

Trythall's repertoire of twentieth century American music also includes works by Gershwin, Carter, Foss, Cage, Feldman, Harbison, Adams, Curran, Jarrett, Corea, Kolb, Lennon as well as his own music for solo piano. He has given the first performance of several of these works and has also premiered works by contemporary Italian composers such as Donatoni, Castiglioni, and Clementi.

As a composer, Trythall has received the Rome Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Naumburg Recording Award, and a Fulbright Fellowship.

In addition to his activities as pianist and composer, Trythall has been in charge of organizing the musical program at the American Academy in Rome since 1974.

Musical editions:

Second Pianoforte Sonata "Concord, Mass., 1840-1860":
2nd Edition, Arrow Music Press, Inc., 1947.

Some South-Paw Pitching: Mercury Music Corporation, 1949, Edited by Henry Cowell.

The Anti-Abolitionist Riots in the 1830's and 1840's:
Mercury Music Corporation, 1949, Edited by Henry Cowell.

Three Page Sonata: Mercury Music Corporation, 1949, Edited by Henry Cowell and Mercury Music Corporation, 1975, Edited by John Kirkpatrick.

Varied Air and Variations: Merion Music, Inc., 1971, Edited by John Kirkpatrick and Garry Clarke.

Charles Ives

Richard Trythall, piano



Second Pianoforte Sonata "Concord, Mass., 1840-1860"

- | | | |
|---|-------------|---------|
| 1 | Emerson | [18:41] |
| 2 | Hawthorne | [14:29] |
| 3 | The Alcotts | [6:51] |
| 4 | Thoreau | [12:31] |

Lauren Weiss, flute

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| 5 | Three Page Sonata | [8:25] |
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Allegro moderato-Andante

Adagio

Allegro (March Time)

- | | | |
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| 6 | Some South-Paw Pitching (Study # 21) | [3:00] |
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| 7 | The Anti-Abolitionist Riots in the 1830s and 1840s (Study # 9) | [2:57] |
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| 8 | Varied Air and Variations
(Study #2 for Ears or Aural and Mental Exercise!!!) | [6:15] |
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Largo (Protest) - Andante con spirito (Theme)

Largo (Protest) - Andante con spirito (Var. 1)

Largo (Protest) - March Time (Var. 2)

Largo (Protest) - March Time (Var. 3)

Largo (Protest) - Moderato (Var.4)

Applause (non-protest) - Presto or so! (Var. 5)

Total Duration: [73:49]

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Recorded December 1992 and September 1995 at Villa Aurelia, American Academy in Rome. Engineered by Piero Schiavoni and Alessandro Cercato. Piano: Steinway D. Executive Producer: Victor E. Sachse. Piano Tuner: Pino Spinozzi. Cover Montage: Nona Hershey.

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