

ALEA III

Contemporary Music Ensemble in residence at
Boston University

Theodore Antoniou, *music director*

Charles Ives: *The Astonishing Pioneer*

Gunther Schuller, *conductor*

Tsai Performance Center, 685 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston
November 16, 2011, 8:00 pm

Mr. Schuller provided the following notes for this evening's concert:

This concert will present seventeen works by Charles Ives, with one exception all single-movement chamber music for variously sized instrumentations — there is one ensemble work in three movements—with durations ranging from one or two minutes to eleven minutes. The program will present these works in two groupings: first, the smaller instrumentations, and after intermission the larger, mostly longer pieces, both groupings presented in the chronological order of their creation.

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From the Steeples and the Mountains, dating from 1901, is a most prophetic, visionary work in that a) it is written for a most unusual instrumentation (of two brass instruments and four tubular bell parts), and b) for twenty-four bell pitches that did not even exist in 1901—and frankly do not exist today. That he was writing for nonexistent instruments is all the more remarkable—and, as I say, visionary—since Ives was only twenty-five years old at the time. Rather than resorting to four keyboard synthesizers to emulate the bell sounds I decided to transpose most of Ives's pitches to the higher pitches that are nowadays available, i.e. parts 1 and 2 played on two chime stands, part 3 on almglocken, and part 4—a very low part—on a piano.

The two duetting brass parts (trumpet and trombone) are not only atonal and at times even twelve-tone (sic) but rhythmically, contrapuntally extraordinarily complex, including lots of quintuplets and septuplets—all of this eight years ahead of Schönberg using such breakthrough musical ideas.

Calcium Light Night, dating from 1907, for six winds, two drums and two pianos, was finalized in 1933 by Henry Cowell (at Ives's request and under his supervision) from an earlier chamber orchestra work. It is palindromic in form. It starts virtually inaudibly at a “slow march time”, accelerates to about twice that tempo at midpoint, simultaneously crescendoing to a maximum dynamic level. From that high point the harmonies and melodies, are retrograded in terms of their sequencing, while retaining their original individual ‘forward’ motion. The piece ends exactly as it started, fading away into silence.

Scherzo (All the Way Around and Back) from 1908 is similarly palindromic - one could also think of it as a ‘pyramid’ form - and is scored for six players: flute, violin, trumpet, bells,

and piano played by two pianists. Over repeated ostinato-like figures on the piano, the violin and first pianist start with slow long rhythms (whole note, half note) and accelerate through quintuplets, septuplets to eleventuplets at the work's climactic midpoint. That whole rhythmic sequence is then literally retrograded, ending ten bars later on the violin's initial whole note. The flute chimes in with four bars of septuplets at the climactic high point, and the bells also chime in with quintuplets. Meanwhile against these rhythmic complexities the trumpet plays a reveille-like figure in C major (G C E) in simple endless near-repetitions. Instead of ending as it started (as *Calcium Light Night* does) *All the Way Around* ends fortissimo, Ives tagging on four bars of the midpoint complexities.

Like a Sick Eagle (1909) is one of the many short Ives pieces that were originally a song (based in this case on a poem by John Keats), that is then turned sometime later into an instrumental. In most cases Ives gave the original vocal part to an English horn. *Sick Eagle* marked *Largo molto*, is a melancholy miniature tone poem, depicting in quiet moaning sounds the state of the wounded bird.

Two compositions from 1910 follow. The one, *Allegretto Sombroso* - another somber piece - is again a song transcription for English horn. Its rolling up-and-down piano accompaniment and odd asymmetrical 13/16 meter are set in a highly chromatic harmonic language at the edge of atonality. Near the end a gigantic fourteen-part piano chord gives way to a very quiet, lingering ending - a solo violin echoing the English horn's oft repeated four-note motif.

The other 1910 composition, *Adagio Sostenuto* - only a minute in duration - is, surprisingly, with its lush sixth and dominant seventh harmonies among the most tonal of tonight's pieces, aptly subtitled "A song without voice". It is almost the kind of "pretty music" that Ives riled against so often in his life.

By way of a major contrast, *Tone Roads No. 3*, composed in 1911, is one of Ives's most complex, radically advanced and technically challenging works. It is also one of his longer, multi-sectional pieces. To begin with, again long before Schönberg developed his twelve-tone concept (between 1914 and 1923) Ives several times explored a similar compositional system—technique or method, chose your own term. "Roads" here stands for Schönberg's 'row' (or in German, *Reihe*). To make this quite clear Ives starts the piece in the first ten measures with two slightly different twelve tone rows/roads in the chimes, totally exposed as a melodic line in a moderately slow tempo. In the twenty-second bar Ives again states two twelve-tone rows/sets, this time vertically, that is harmonically/chordally.¹

In *Tone Roads*' thirteenth bar a dense, rhythmically complex contrapuntal web played by four wind instruments takes over, and then leads via a repetition to Part Two of *Tone Roads No. 3*. Ives calls it a "Trio", as in a classical Menuet movement. Although hardly a light-hearted Haydnesque dance music, this section is clearer in texture. Piano and chimes lay down a three-bar passacaglia-like ostinato, over which woodwinds and violins, ignoring the underlying steady rhythm, play around with triplet cross-rhythms. A clarinet and a trombone complicate matters by competing with totally contrastive, antagonistic rhythmic patterns. A bit later Ives

¹ In contrast to Schönberg, who felt the need to develop the idea of full twelve tone chromaticism into a comprehensive system or technique, Ives used the same idea several times without however developing it into a full-blown system or method.

experiments with rising and falling figures, coordinated with accelerating and decelerating chromatic scales - first in the string quartet, then later in the piano. As in a classical Menuet trio movement, *Tone Roads* recapitulates some of the earlier segments, thus allowing us, thankfully - and helpfully - to hear some of Ives's densest, most complex polyphony three times.

Two very brief works follow, composed eight years apart: *The See'r* is a march-like piece full of ragtime/jazz syncopations, with a "sudden death" ending, while *Ann Street* - a truly sophisticated charmer - offers a more sentimental, lyrical mood. Still, it breaks new ground in its form, in that its miniature one-minute duration contains nine (!) different tempo changes, seven different meters and meter changes, including 7/16 and 3^{1/2}/4 - all this in 1921.

The first half of the program closes with some quarter tone music called *Chorale*, the third movement of Ives's *Three Quarter Tone Piano Pieces*. We know that already in his youth Ives became fascinated with quarter tones, instigated by his father's interest in microtones and in music in several keys or differing tempos simultaneously. In the early 1920s, when Ives met with Hans Barth, the inventor of the quarter tone piano, he promptly followed suit with a three-movement Sonata. The *Chorale*, notated in old *breve* whole-note notation, looks rather tonal at first glance, with lots of 'modal' elements (fourths and fifths and octaves). But when rendered in its quarter tone harmonies by tuning one of the pianos a semitone lower it is transformed into a most hauntingly beautiful, new kind of music - once the ear has adjusted to the closer pitch relationships. (Try to imagine *Tristan's* or *Parsifal's* chromaticism enriched microtonally.) As befits a piece called *Chorale*, except for a few brief livelier interpolations the music is stately in mood and character, especially in the final twelve measures, marked *Maestoso*.

After intermission the longer, more substantial works, with larger orchestrations, take over, presented again in chronological order. *The Pond* (1906) is one of Ives's most ingratiating musical expressions. (Could it be an evocation of Walden Pond?). It was originally a song with a two-line text: "A sound of distant horn. O'er shadowed lake is borne my father's song." We hear undulating wavelets in strings and piano, while overhead a magical panoply of scintillating sounds (celesta, harp, glockenspiel, chimes, vibraphone) glistens, reflecting the sun's light on the lake's surface. Once again a wordless English horn intones the text.

Next, one of Ives's most beloved and most performed works: *The Unanswered Question*. Henry Cowell called it "a cosmic landscape". A trumpet asks the "perennial question of existence" over and over, again, and again, while the answerers - four woodwinds - try to discover the unattainable reply, progressing in ever more mocking discordant tones. The discussion occurs against a backdrop of sustained muted strings: the concordant sounds of silence.

In *Set No. 2* Ives collected three previously composed contrasting pieces into what most composers would have called a Suite. The three movements are *In the Cage* (1904), *In the Inn* (1911), *In the Night* (1906). The inspiration for the *Cage* came to Ives during a visit of New York's Central Park Zoo, watching the endless to and fro pacing of a leopard. The music reproduces the regular padding of the leopard's paws, heard in the timpani. Against this we hear in the strings a progression of rhythms becoming progressively shorter: ♩ ♪ ♫ ♬, repeated several times. *In the Inn* is one of Ives's 'cartoons' or 'take offs', depicting the sounds from inside an inn to the ear of a passer-by. We hear a kaleidoscope of dance musics: the syncopation

of ragtime, of rumba rhythms, as well as the sudden outbursts of loud laughter. *In the Night* features a solo horn, singing an old “minstrel show” tune from the 1890s (in E major), against a shimmering atonal ‘sound web’ of very soft, slow moving lines, heard in the strings and the piano. Brief overlays by a harp, a flute, some bells, and later, near the end, a vibraphone are all heard. All of it reminds me of one of Jackson Pollock’s pointillistic “drip painting” backgrounds.

The Indians (1912), led by an Indian drum, is another one of the songs transcribed as an instrumental piece. It was inspired by a Charles Sprague poem. “*Alas! For them their day is o’er, No more for them the wild dear bounds, The plough is on their hunting grounds, The pale man’s axe rings through their woods, The pale man’s sail skims o’er their floods, Beyond the mountains of the west, Their children go to die...*” An oboe and a trumpet share the simple modal melody reflecting the text. Notice how the music ends like Sprague’s poem - with the musical equivalent of an ellipsis.

Scherzo (Over the Pavements) offers a host of diverse dance rhythms, often syncopated or displaced to the ‘wrong’ part of the measure. In another section, ragtime syncopations (in the piano), clarinet and trumpet triplets and a bumptious leaping bassoon are pitted against the ‘walking’ fives of a trio of trombone, horn and tuba, climaxing ultimately in four measures of seven simultaneously competing different rhythmic layers.

In a much calmer mood, *The Rainbow* is another one of Ives’s ‘songs without a voice’, inspired by a poem by William Wordsworth.

The concert ends with another one of Ives’s twelve tone experiments. It is dated 1913 and is called *Chromâtimelôdtune*. Against a strings and piano background of dense atonal harmonies, the various wind instruments play two differing dodecaphonic eight-bar phrases or themes. One of these is rather simplistic, even primitive; in effect the ‘ultimate’ twelve tone row, namely a chromatic scale, although not set in the usual conjunct motion. The other theme, a bit more sophisticated, offers more leaping intervallic shapes. Both themes occur at times soloistically, at other times in duets. Half way through the piece pizzicato strings and a snare drum enter with a very common march rhythm (dum—dum—dum, dum, dum), but in a speed and tempo one third faster than the underlying half-note infrastructure. It is one of Ives’s several evocations of a parade passing by, coming closer and closer, and then disappearing again into the distance.