CHARLES IVES AND HIS FATHERS: A RESPONSE TO MAYNARD SOLOMON *by J. Peter Burkholder*

A meeting on 22 October of the Greater New York chapter of the American Musicological Society (chaired by Dennis Slavin of Baruch College, C.U.N.Y.) was given over to a panel discussion, "Charles Ives: Trying to Answer Some Questions of Veracity," reacting to an article by Maynard Solomon in the Fall 1987 issue of the Journal of the American Musicological Society. *The panel members were J. Peter Burkholder (Indiana University), Paul C. Echols (Mannes College of Music), J. Philip Lambert (Baruch College, C.U.N.Y.), James B. Sinclair (Yale University), and Mr. Solomon; H. Wiley Hitchcock was the moderator. Professor Burkholder's prepared statement invited publication; we are pleased to print it here, with his permission.*

Few articles published in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* have garnered as much attention in the media as Maynard Solomon's article "Charles Ives: Some Questions of Veracity." Most of the ink spilled on it has focused on Solomon's argument that Ives falsified the dates of many of his compositions in order to appear more of an innovator than he actually was. But it seems to me that the central question Solomon raises is not whether Ives "fiddled with the truth," as the headline over Donal Henahan's article in *The New York Times* (21 February 1988) put it, but why Ives sought to present himself as he did.

Solomon's article shows us a composer who is trying to escape influence. In Ives's own later writings, particularly in his *Memos*, written in the 1930s in response to requests for information about him and his music, Ives tries to show that he was not influenced by the major composers of his time. He credits many of his innovations to the influence of his father, an unknown all-around musician but, significantly, not a composer. He characterizes his study with Horatio Parker, one of the major American composers of the time, as something he endured, a temporary drag on his creativity. He asserts that he rarely went to concerts after college, and he denies having heard or seen the music of his most famous European contemporaries. It is clear from this pattern of claims and denials that the Ives of the 1930s wants to avoid being perceived as having been influenced by other composers.

Compare the picture Solomon presents to the traditional view of Ives as a composer who was in fact *not* influenced by other composers, and particularly not by those whom he criticizes. This view takes Ives at his word and makes him into an American original—which is a very naive stance.

It is naive, first of all, because we now know enough about the psychology of influence to realize that artists often deny or overtly reject their most significant influences. Wagner attacked Rossini and Meyerbeer, but completely absorbed their theatricality; Debussy rejected Wagner, but was deeply influenced by his music; and a recent (1985) dissertation by John Jeffrey Gibbens shows that Ives in turn was influenced by Debussy, a composer he castigates.

Second, what composers say about their own music should never be taken as gospel; their statements are often self-serving, and they tend to reinterpret their past works to fit their present image. Richard Taruskin has shown, for instance, that *The Rite of Spring* incorporates many Russian tunes, yet Stravinsky later claimed that it contained only one authentic folk tune. Stravinsky put the tunes into the piece because he was writing a Russian ballet for a Russian company at a time when things Russian were the vogue in Paris; he later lied about them when it was to his advantage to appear a cosmopolitan rather than a nationalist composer.

Finally, much of what Ives says is wrong or misleading. Ives subscribed to regular concert series, and there are enough accounts of Ives attending concerts to make it unlikely that he ever deliberately avoided them. It is clear from the types and quality of pieces that Ives wrote at Yale and just after that his studies with Parker were a major step forward in his development as a composer, without which he could not have achieved what he did. Ives owned and presumably played through music for piano solo or piano and violin by Debussy (*Children's Corner*), Fauré, Glazunov, Percy Grainger, Vincent d'Indy, John Ireland, Fritz Kreisler, Edward MacDowell, Daniel Gregory Mason, Max Reger, Albert Roussel, Florent Schmitt, Cyril Scott, Scriabin (six etudes and sonatas no. 4, 5, 8 and 9), and Stravinsky (Berceuse from *The Firebird*), to include only works that he is likely to have acquired before 1920. Though some of these names may strike us as conservative, together they represent a good sampling of the prevailing tastes of the first two decades of the century. This does not sound like a composer who was out of touch with contemporary developments. (To be fair, it was probably true, as Ives wrote in 1931, that he had "never heard nor seen a note of Schoenberg's music" and had "not seen or heard any of Hindemith's music" [*Memos*, pp. 27 and 29]. There is certainly no evidence that he had.)

The area we know least about is what Ives learned from his father. Did George Ives actually invent a quarter-tone machine, or force his son to sing in one key while being accompanied in another? I have no idea. We do have many sketches and small pieces by Charles Ives, experiments in everything from polytonality and neotonality to atonality, which can be rather securely dated to before George's death in 1894. But what George's role in these would have been is unclear, even from Charles Ives's own recollections; he attributes these ideas less often to his father than to himself, commenting only that his father was willing to tolerate them: "Father was not against a reasonable amount of 'boy's fooling', if it were done with some sense behind it" (*Memos*, p. 46). George Ives's surviving notes on music theory show that he thought for himself about theory and came to his own conclusions. Brewster Ives recalled in 1969 that his father (Charles Ives's younger brother) knew of George Ives's "experiments with music" and that his grandmother (Ives's mother) often told her grandchildren about George and "how he pioneered in music" (Vivian Perlis, *Charles Ives Remembered*, p. 72). So there is evidence from several sources that George Ives was open-minded and had an experimental bent. For the details of what he did, however, we have almost no evidence beyond Charles Ives's testimony. Solomon's article thus provides an important corrective to the received wisdom, by showing that we can't be very certain about something that we thought we understood. I also find very fruitful Solomon's contention that, whatever the truth of George Ives's musical experiments, the relationship between father and son was a good deal more conflicted than Charles Ives's idealized picture of it.

George Edward Ives, ca. 1890

We do know that at least some of the things Ives attributed to his father's influence he actually got someplace else. My favorite example, because it is both so concrete and so revealing, is the idea of alternating measures of 3/4 and 4/4, attributed to George Ives in the *Memos* (p. 140) and used by Charles Ives only once, in the third movement of his cantata *The Celestial Country*, written in 1898–99. But this movement is modeled directly on the third movement of Horatio Parker's *Hora novissima* (1893), in which Parker uses alternating measures of 3/4 and 4/4 in exactly the same place in the movement and in exactly the same way; Ives got the idea from Parker, not from his father.

This example is emblematic. Ives did owe a great deal to Parker and to European composers and was influenced by them very deeply, a fact which has been obscured by his emphasis on the influence of his father and our naive acceptance of Ives's picture of himself. I am not suggesting that Ives was *not* deeply influenced by his father, for of course he was; rather, it is Ives's insistence on this influence to the exclusion of all others that should give us pause. Why did Ives picture himself this way in the *Memos* and in his other published writings from the mid-1920s until the end of his life? Why did so many musicians and critics choose to believe him? And why all the fuss about Solomon's article?

Before addressing these questions, let us contrast the picture Ives paints of himself in the *Memos* with the image he sought to project at least through 1920, the year he published his *Concord Sonata* and *Essays Before a Sonata*. In his music and in the *Essays*, we see a composer who is *not* afraid to be influenced, who indeed insists upon his debt to his precursors, and who seeks to distinguish his work from theirs.

In his First Symphony, completed in 1898, Ives sets out to prove that he can compete with European symphonists on their own turf. He compels us to compare his work to other recent symphonies by alluding directly to them, most notably to two symphonies premiered in late 1893, less than five years earlier, and already among the most popular in the repertoire: his slow movement begins with an English horn solo reminiscent of the English horn tune in the slow movement of Dvořák's *New World Symphony*, and his finale includes a passage that is directly based on a moment in the triumphant third movement of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*. Yet when Ives borrows most directly, he also improves on his models, cutting down the repetition and avoiding the predictable phrasing of their themes, and intensifying their compositional procedures to create a more elaborate, more thematically unified, more contrapuntally complex score than theirs. Through his allusions, Ives challenges us to compare his work with the great symphonies of his time; by improving upon his models, at every level from melody to structure, Ives aims to convince us that his symphony stands up to that comparison and may even be better.

The Second Symphony again alludes directly to European models, but its themes are all paraphrased from American tunes, as Ives simultaneously asserts his American identity in a European form and demonstrates his individuality as a composer through his virtuoso ability to rework existing musical material into new shapes. The Third Symphony does not allude to specific models, but borrows European symphonic procedures to create a new form, in which the theme, an American hymn tune, is stated complete only at the end, after a long Beethovenian development based on motives drawn from it. Here Ives further demonstrates his originality by creating a form that is at once thematic and wholly non-repetitive, dependent on European models and yet also fresh and new. *Three Places in New England* and the *Holidays Symphony* are as Romantic in conception as any tone poem by Smetana or Strauss and frankly invite comparison with them, yet Ives's tone poems are distinctive both in what they seek to depict and in their musical procedures. Perhaps the best emblem for Ives's relationship to his Romantic precursors is in the *Concord Sonata*: the opening motive of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony sounds out boldly on the first page, yet when we hear the same motive at the end of the last movement, it sounds like Ives, as indeed it is—part of a quotation from the theme of the sonata's third movement.

Throughout his career, we see Ives in his music claiming the European tradition as his own while asserting his individuality within the tradition ever more forcefully at each new stage, until he reaches a truly extraordinary music. This pattern is not one of Ives's evolution alone, but of the career of every other

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important composer of his generation, from Mahler and Debussy to Bartók and Webern: starting from the common territory of nineteenth-century Romanticism, each extended past practice in new directions, asserting his individuality against the overwhelming weight of past achievements, until he arrived at something extraordinary and unique.

And this is the picture we get of Ives in his *Essays*: a composer in the European tradition, trying to assert his nationality and his individuality within that tradition. He identifies himself with the spirit of Bach, Brahms, and especially Beethoven; yet he insists that despite the great achievements of the past, there is room for new contributions. He says that "the best product that human beings can boast of is probably Beethoven; but, maybe, even his art is as nothing in comparison with the future product of some coal-miner's soul in the forty-first century" (pp. 88–89). Ives aspires to the status of a composer in Beethoven's image, but he is also eager to clear space for himself by asserting that even Beethoven can be improved upon.

At the same time, he rejects the approaches of many composers of his own generation. This too is an effort to clear space for himself, to distinguish himself from those whose music is most like his and to assert his own superiority. He writes program music, as do Strauss, Debussy, and John Alden Carpenter, but he objects to their subject-matter as decadent or trivial, and insists on a more elevating purpose for music. He rejects the repetitiveness of Ravel and Stravinsky and defends his own practice of constant motivic development without exact repetition. He contrasts his own use of gospel hymns with composers who incorporate black American or American Indian music without understanding the spirit behind the music they borrow or the culture that produced it and thus create only superficially American music, rather than music that captures something authentic about the American spirit and the American experience.

Here, Ives is *not* a composer who claims not to be influenced, but a composer who states his influences boldly, both the ones he seeks to emulate and the ones he rejects, and who asserts his own superiority. Note that he does not claim *priority*—he does not suggest that he invented program music, or was the first to draw on American vernacular tunes, or wrote his symphony before Dvořák wrote his—rather, he seeks to show that he does what others have done, only better.

So what is going on in the *Memos*? Why does Ives try to deny that he was influenced by Parker and by his contemporaries?

Recall that in the early 1930s Ives was still in need of advocates to promote his music, and that his strongest promoters at the time were members of the avant-garde. Ives's greatest advocate during this period was Henry Cowell, who was himself primarily an experimental composer (at least until the mid-1930s) interested in the development of what he called "new musical resources." Cowell saw in Ives an innovator, an experimenter from an earlier generation, a pioneer in new musical techniques. I interpret Ives's *Memos*, written in the early 1930s at the prompting of Cowell and other ultra-modernists for information about Ives's music, in part as an attempt to live up to the image Cowell and others had of Ives as a great innovator. Here Ives emphasizes the experimental aspects of his music, while Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, who earned only praise in the *Essays*, come in for criticism as "too cooped up" (p. 100), with "too much of the sugar-plum for the soft-ears" (p. 135). (That Cowell had a major impact on the image Ives sought to project in the *Memos* can be surmised by comparing Cowell's writings on Ives from the late 1920s and early 1930s with those of Henry Bellamann, an even earlier friend and champion of Ives and his music: while Cowell stresses Ives's independence from the European tradition as an aspect of his American character, Bellamann notes Ives's strong roots in the past.)

There is a striking inversion in Ives's evaluation of his music in these *Memos*, for the very pieces that he tried hardest to get performed before 1918, major concert works from *The Celestial Country* and the first three symphonies through the Third Violin Sonata, *Decoration Day*, and *The Saint-Gaudens in Boston Common*, are hardly discussed (and, in the case of the First Symphony and Third Violin Sonata, are actively insulted), while technical problems in his small and mostly ephemeral musical experiments, which Ives clearly regarded as less important at the time he wrote them, are discussed at disproportionate length.

This inversion is at one with the stunning inversion of influence, attributing to his biological father the role in forming his artistry that belonged, at least in part, to his metaphorical fathers, his artistic precursors. The literary critic Harold Bloom, in his book *The Anxiety of Influence*, has applied the notion of the Oedipal conflict to the way younger poets must wrestle with their precursors "so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (p. 5); in a forthcoming book, Joseph Straus has applied Bloom's ideas to modern composers from Schoenberg to Bartók. In his music, and in his *Essays*, we can see that Ives is engaged in the same struggle, competing with his strong precursors on their own ground. In the *Memos*, however, he achieves their virtual annihilation by denying any important influence from any composer and attributing everything important in his music to his father. Anything important in his music that cannot be credited to his father, he passes over without discussion.

In the *Memos*, Ives set out to disinherit himself from European music, calling all sorts of composers names and attacking most viciously the composers from whom he had learned the most or whose music resembled his (whether through influence or mere accident). He needed someone, some guide, of course: to claim to be a complete original is too unbelievable. So he credited his originality to his father George—not just his use of individual techniques such as polytonality and quarter-tones, but the very stance of open-mindedness that made him so original. Ironically, he used his biological father to obscure his great debt to his artistic fathers. Here is where Maynard Solomon is right on the money. This is what we should be talking about: Ives's successful attempt to have everyone perceive him as a great original, coming out of nowhere, with no one but George at his back.

Why has this view of Ives been so widely accepted? Partly, of course, because it is the view set forth in the first biography of Ives, co-authored by Henry Cowell and his wife Sidney Cowell. Moreover, this view of Ives has been useful for American avant-garde composers from the 1920s through the 1960s and '70s, who see in Ives a model for their own work. It has been useful also for those music historians who continue (against all reason) to see the history of music as a history of innovations, and so find an easy niche for Ives as a pioneer in the wilderness. Finally, it has been useful for nationalistic flag-waving to have a composer whose work apparently owes so little to European sources. The main reason Solomon's article has caused such a stir is that it calls into question this view of Ives as the great American innovator—which is also why I think it is such an important contribution.

The question that remains is this: what did Ives do and when did he do it? Solomon argues that many of the dates Ives assigned to his pieces are questionable, and implies that every jotting needs to be reviewed with a new skepticism. I think this is healthy. Many of Ives's pieces went through several states, and it would be good to reconstruct the evolution of each piece from first sketch to finished copy. However, I do not think that the essential chronology of Ives's life and works is going to change a great deal. Many pieces and manuscripts can be dated fairly accurately without reference to Ives's own annotations. Certainly many pieces went through a long process of revising and reworking. Yet as both Wayne Shirley and James Sinclair have pointed out, based on their research as editors of some of Ives's major orchestral works, the essential conception of a piece is usually its most radical aspect and is almost always present from the first sketch.

What we will see when the air clears, I believe, is not a self-made man, but a self-reliant one, a composer who owed a tremendous debt to Parker and the Brahmsian tradition he represented, but who moved far beyond that to incorporate many influences Parker explicitly rejected, including the programmatic tradition of Wagner and Strauss, the French schools of Franck, d'Indy, Roussel, and Debussy, Russian influences from Glazunov, Scriabin, and the Stravinsky of the *Firebird*, American vernacular music, and the experimental attitude he credits to his father—absorbing some of these influences, reacting against others, until he made himself into one of the great composers of his time, whose lasting reputation will rest not on the priority of his innovations, but on the superiority of his creations.

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