

Ragtime and the Music of Charles Ives

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If ragtime were called tempo di raga . . . it might win honors more speedily. . . . But neither the reproach of “reminiscence” nor the equal odium of “innovation” has ever succeeded against a vital musical idea. I feel safe in predicting that ragtime has come to stay. . . . It will find its way gradually into the works of some great genius and will thereafter be canonized.

Rupert Hughes
Musical Record, 1 April 1899

That great borrower from American vernacular culture, Charles Ives, utilized all kinds of music in his own compositions—minstrel tunes, revival hymns, and popular songs. One vernacular style that he particularly exploited was ragtime, a music popular from 1895 to 1920. Indeed, rag rhythms, along with hymn tunes and marches, are among the most commonly quoted material in his music.

The hallmark of Ives’s ragtime style is his use of off-beat accents and complex syncopation. According to Cowell this “category of rhythm . . . [was] of especial fascination to Ives His humorous movements, which occur in almost all the larger works, are full of such irregular off-beat stresses.”¹ “Humorous works” no doubt refers to the scherzos in the Piano Sonata No. 1 or to “In the Inn” from the *Set of Pieces for Theater or Chamber Orchestra*. These works are directly related to Ives’s ragtime style.

Despite its sustained presence in Ives’s music, ragtime has received little critical attention as a discrete factor in the development of his rhythmic vocabulary. Most often writers attribute his use of syncopation to the influence of jazz,² which postdates ragtime and much of Ives’s music. Others tie it to his boyhood memories of minstrel songs rather than to his later exposure to ragtime. There is, to be sure, documentary evidence for this view. In the *Memos* Ives wrote:

I had even heard the same thing [Black-faced comedians ragging their songs] at the Danbury Fair before coming to New Haven, which must have been before 1892 [Ragging was] throwing the accent on the off-beat and holding over—a thing people nowadays think was not done until jazz came along.³

Nevertheless, he distinguished between ragging and ragtime, a style that he described as a “natural dogma of shifted accents or a mixture of shifted and minus accents.”⁴

At Yale Ives played rag piano with the Hyperion Orchestra and was a

frequent customer at a tavern named Poli's, where he occasionally substituted for the regular pianist. In New York, where he moved after graduation, he continued to frequent music halls.

Ives's undergraduate years and early residence in New York coincided with ragtime's first wave of national popularity. Until the mid 1890s it was a regional phenomenon centered in the Southwest. But the performing team of Bert Williams and George Walker and the pianist Ben Harney seem to have stimulated a genuine ragtime craze on the East Coast.⁵

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The strongest evidence of ragtime's impact on Ives is the music he wrote between 1902 and 1904. During this time he composed about a dozen ragtime dances for theater orchestra: a *Ragtime Dance*, 1902-03; a *Set of Nine Ragtime Pieces*, 1902; and a *Set of Four Ragtime Pieces*, 1902-04.

Ives took this music "more seriously" than other pieces written during this period and therefore had them copied and arranged for both public performances and private readings.⁶ The Keith Theater Orchestra played some of them at an afternoon performance sometime between 1903 and 1906, while the Globe Theater Orchestra performed the *Ragtime Dance* in 1905.⁷ Even as late as 1920 these pieces commanded Ives's interest to the extent that he attempted to reconstruct the original scoring of some of the dances from second-hand piano arrangements made by the pianist at Keith's Theater.

Ives respected this music because it was less conservative than some of his works in more conventional forms, the hymn-tune sonatas for violin, for example. It could "get going good and free" partially because of its secular connotations. As Ives stated in the *Memos*:

Anyway, in considering my music, the secular things—that is, those whose subject matter has to do with the activities of general life around one—seem to be freer and more experimental in technical ways.⁸

It is thus not surprising that he drew upon the ragtime pieces as a well-spring for some of his most interesting and rhythmically experimental works. His constant rewriting of this material may account for the dates of 1902-11 assigned to them in the *Memos*. During those years the dances were rewritten as scherzos for various combinations of instruments, as sonata movements, or as separate orchestral pieces. Their descendants are the scherzos in the Piano Sonata No. 1; the second movements in the Violin Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3; the scherzos "The See'r," "Over the Pavements," and "Tone Roads"; and the second movement of the *Orchestral Set No. 2*.⁹ Ives also composed a "Study in Rag" for the opening of the fourth movement in the Piano Sonata No. 1. It has an ostinato pattern in common with "Over the Pavements" that establishes the link between the latter piece and the ragtime music (Ex. 1).

EXAMPLE 1: "Study in Rag," m. 36 and "Over the Pavements," m. 32



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The ragtime pieces were similar in some ways to their popular counterparts. They were written in $\frac{2}{4}$, the common rag meter, for small instrumental groups. The *Set of Nine Ragtime Pieces*, for example, was scored for piano, violin (?), clarinet, cornet, trombone, and drums—an ensemble similar to the one that recorded "Cakewalk in Coon Town" in 1903, in which piano, two clarinets, cornet, and trombone were used.¹⁰ Furthermore, the pieces were arrangements of familiar melodies, in this case hymn tunes.

In ragging well-known melodies, Ives was adopting the conventions of popular ragtime. Although the combination of a secular style with a religious melody may have appealed to him philosophically, we need not look to Transcendentalism for a musical rationale. A rag arrangement of the hymn tune *Nettleton* appeared in Ben Harney's *Ragtime Instructor* in 1897.¹¹ Ives's practice of combining more than one melody in a single piece also had its vernacular parallel. The *Entertainer's Rag* by Jay Roberts (1910) used *Dixie* and *Yankee Doodle* in counterpoint.¹²

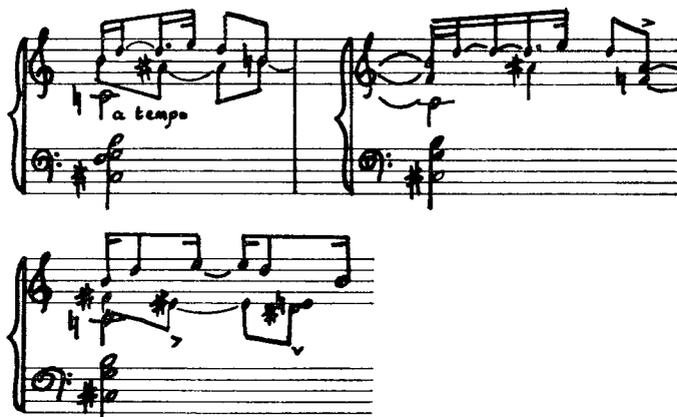
Given Ives's practice of liberal quotation, one attraction of ragtime was that it was a style through which preexistent melodies from multiple sources could be assimilated and recomposed. The two scherzo movements in the Piano Sonata No. 1 illustrate this point. For convenience we shall refer to them by using the divisions indicated by Ives in the manuscript: IIA—mm. 1–57; IIB—"In the Inn"; IVA—"Study in Rag"; IVB—mm. 52–158. In IIA and IIB the hymn tune *Bringing in the Sheaves* is dissected motivically, while in IVB the emphasis is on climactic rag arrangements of the melody. With respect to motivic transformations, rag rhythms are used to vary the successive presentations of the opening figure (Ex. 2).

EXAMPLE 2: Opening figure from "Bringing in the Sheaves"



It is never literally repeated, and the rhythmic differences between IIA—m. 15, m. 19, and m. 21 (Ex. 3)—are important though small.

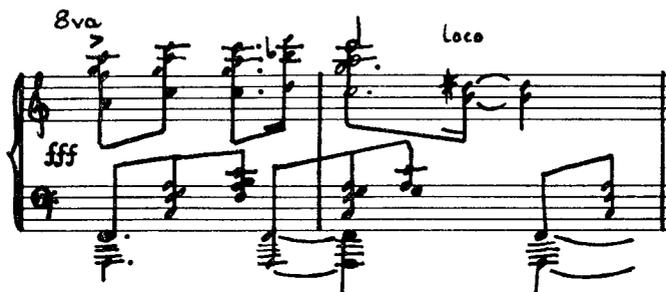
EXAMPLE 3: Piano Sonata No. 1, mm. 15, 19, 21



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If we compare those measures with later variants—for example, mm. 32 and 34 of IIA and m. 42 of IIB—it is clear that Ives controls the detail by moving toward complexity. Similarly in IVB the arrangements of the hymn tune become increasingly elaborate. In the final chorus section the texture is an exciting interplay of cross-rhythms and syncopation (Ex. 4).

EXAMPLE 4: Piano Sonata No. 1, IVB, mm. 128–29



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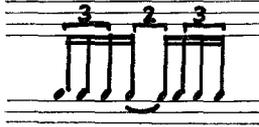
Despite the comparative textural simplicity of popular ragtime, it was nevertheless the inspiration for complex rhythmic textures. As Ives’s own comments indicate, he viewed it as a style from which new rhythmic ideas could be abstracted:

If one gets the feeling . . . of these shifts and lilting accents, it seems to offer other basic things not used now (or used very little) in music of even beats and accents . . . at least so it seems to me.¹³

The “basic things” were most likely the polymetric implications suggested through continual syncopation. According to Gunther Schuller, rag patterns

“can definitely be traced to African cross-rhythms . . .” and should be heard additively. He interprets the pattern in Example 5 as 3 plus 2 plus 3: “This pattern is unmistakably African in origin and approach, splitting the bar metrically rather than accentually.”¹⁴

EXAMPLE 5: Standard ragtime rhythm



In his instruction book *The School of Ragtime*, Scott Joplin recommends the same phrasing for Schuller’s figure (Ex. 6).¹⁵ Similarly, Ives interprets the same figure cross-metrically as 3 plus 3 plus 2 in the second movement of the Violin Sonata No. 3. In mm. 38–39 the accents in the left hand support this division (Ex. 7).

EXAMPLE 6: Scott Joplin, *School of Ragtime*, exercise No. 4, mm. 1–2



EXAMPLE 7: Violin Sonata No. 3, 2nd mvt., piano part, m. 38



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Ives’s desire to exploit cross rhythms may also explain the peculiar notation characteristic of this movement. In mm. 66–67, for example, the odd sixteenth-note occurs on the beat, but the notation emphasizes the accompaniment’s off-beat accents (Ex. 8):

EXAMPLE 8: Violin Sonata No. 3, 2nd mvt., piano part, m. 66



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It is possible that this notation relates to a practice described by Ben Harney:

. . . real ragtime on the piano played in such a manner that it cannot be put into notes is the contribution of the graduated Negro banjo-player who cannot read music. On the banjo there is a short string that is not fretted and that is consequently played with the thumb. . . . The colored performer, strumming in his own cajoling way, likes to throw in a note at random, and his thumb ranges over for this effect. When he takes up the piano, the desire for the same effect dominates him . . . and he reaches for the open banjo string with his little finger. Meanwhile he is keeping mechanically perfect time with the left hand. The hurdle with the right hand finger throws the tune off its stride, resulting in syncopation. He is playing two times at once.¹⁶

The “shifts” by which Ives characterized ragtime was another effect he abstracted and exaggerated in the scherzos. The term “shifts” appears not only in the *Memos* but also in the music itself. It occurs in a footnote at the end of IIB in the Piano Sonata No. 1:

The Chorus is an impromptu affair (as is also the rest to some extent)—and may be varied according to the tempo taken. The 2nd and 4th measures of the Chorus may be changed each time, as suggested below, and also in the other measures the L.H. may change ten. [uto] “shifts” ad lib¹⁷

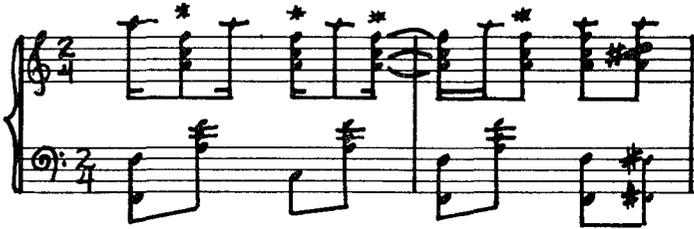
The music illustrates that “shifts” were the placement of accents on a succession of different beats. To achieve the improvisatory effect the pianist could readjust the rhythmic relationships between notes, relocate the *tenuto* accents and add extra beats to the measure, thereby altering the meter. The instruction “ad lib.,” an integral part of the whole effect, occurs also in the second movement of Violin Sonata No. 3, a rag-derived movement.

Why did Ives describe ragtime as a “series of shifts and tilting accents”? Another example from Joplin’s *School of Ragtime* suggests a possible explanation (Ex. 9). According to Joplin, the first ragtime effect was the second note,

right hand.¹⁸ The syncopation was emphasized by the chord that was repeated on a different beat or subdivision:

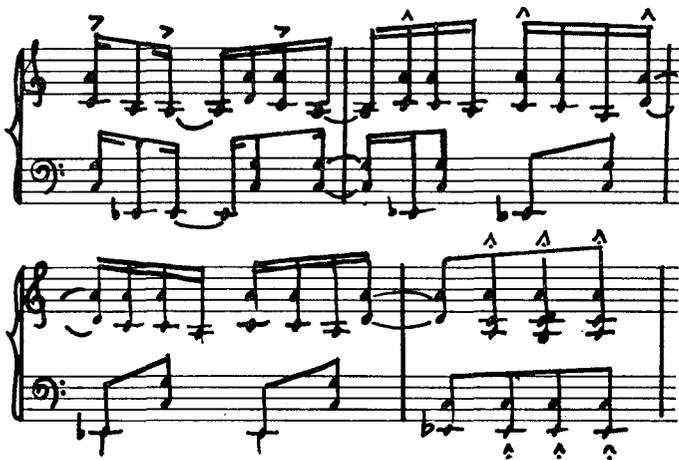
1 * - + - 2 - + - 1 - + - (* = repeated chord)

EXAMPLE 9: Scott Joplin, *School of Ragtime*, exercise No. 5, mm. 1-2



Two examples from the Piano Sonata No. 1 illustrate this interpretation of “shifts and lilting accents.” In the first (Ex. 10) the repeated interval C–A culminates in a series of chords that function as the climax of the phrase. If the Joplin example is played rapidly and the right-hand chord accented, it suggests the rhythmic quality Ives was producing. Another more complicated version of this effect is illustrated in Example 11. Here the left hand has its own counterline, while the right is repeating one chord on different subdivisions of the beat.

EXAMPLE 10: Piano Sonata No. 1, 4th mvt., mm. 105-08



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EXAMPLE 11: Piano Sonata No. 1, "In the Inn," mm. 70-71.



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Thus Ives's ragtime carried certain tendencies in popular ragtime to great extremes. Passages in his rag idiom could include a multiplicity of syncopated figures in one hand accompanied by cross-metric ostinatos in the other. In addition, repeated chord clusters on a variety of off-beats suggested the improvisatory quality of unpredictable "shifts."

If this kind of texture is what Ives heard in ragtime, small wonder that he associated it with music deceptively remote from its popular prototype. He called *The New River* a "rag" in the *Memos*. Similarly, the fourth movement in the Piano Sonata No. 1 begins with a "Study in Rag" in which "ragging combinations of fives, twos and sevens are tried out."¹⁹ Although the "Study" opens with changing accents, its relation to popular ragtime is much more tenuous. There are few recognizable rag figures in this experiment in cross-rhythms.

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From a historical point of view, Ives's use of ragtime illustrates the continuing influence that vernacular music had upon his music as late as 1910. He appropriated a variety of conventions, not just the most obvious novelties. Perhaps there are other aspects of Ives's style that have been attributed to his Transcendentalist disposition or regarded as compositional idiosyncracies which are in fact transplanted, though highly developed, elements from vernacular culture. Thus ragtime stimulated Ives's own creative impulses toward rhythmic experimentation because he was sensitive to its potential. His music thereby refutes Copland's contention that "serious composers became aware of the polyrhythmic nature of Afro-American music only in its jazz phases. . . ."²⁰ Long after his own ragtime dances had been composed, Ives wrote in tribute that "ragtime may be nature's way of giving art raw material. Time will throw its vices away and weld its virtues into the fabric of our music."²¹

NOTES

¹ Henry and Sidney Cowell, *Charles Ives and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 167.

² Henry Cowell, "Charles Ives," *Modern Music* 10 (1932): 30.

- ³ Charles Ives, *Memos*, ed. John Kirkpatrick (New York: Norton, 1972): 56.
- ⁴ Charles Ives, *Essays before a Sonata and Other Writings*, ed. Howard Boatwright (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 94.
- ⁵ Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak Publications, 1966), pp. 128ff.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 328.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 129, 130.
- ⁹ Ives, *Memos*, pp. 59, 60, 75, 119.
- ¹⁰ Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt, *Jazz: A History of the New York Scene* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 14.
- ¹¹ Blesh and Janis, *They All Played*, p. 129.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- ¹³ Ives, *Memos*, p. 57.
- ¹⁴ Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 24.
- ¹⁵ Blesh and Janis, *They All Played*, p. 143.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- ¹⁷ Charles Ives, *Piano Sonata No. 1* (New York: Peer International Corp., 1954), p. 19.
- ¹⁸ Blesh and Janis, *They All Played*, pp. 143-44.
- ¹⁹ Ives, *Memos*, pp. 60, 57.
- ²⁰ Aaron Copland, *The New Music, 1900-1960*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 66.
- ²¹ Cowell, *Charles Ives*, p. 94.