

Charles Ives's Concept of Music

Charles W. Ward

As if in a fit of anger Charles Ives once exclaimed, "My God! What has sound got to do with music!"¹ This statement has become popular as evidence of Ives's modernism, for it sounds much like what some contemporary composers and theorists have said, i.e.: "Sounds, then, are not part of music, however essential they are to its transmission."² However, Ives's concept of music is rooted in the thought of the New England Transcendentalists and is fundamentally opposed to many 20th-century ideas about music.

The popularity of Ives's statement arises from a misunderstanding of the meaning of this outburst, which was penned while Ives was describing the reactions of a violinist who wanted to alter the composer's music to suit the instrument. Ives continues, "Why can't music go out in the same way it comes in to a man, without having to crawl over a fence of sounds, thoraxes, catguts, wire, wood, and brass? . . . Why can't a musical thought be presented as it is born. . . ."³ Ives was asking that performers not expect his compositions to conform to their own technical limitations.

But, if Ives's exclamation has been misinterpreted, even more crucial is the misunderstanding of what Ives thought to be the nature of music. Benjamin Boretz and other contemporary theorists seem to operate from what Louis Kampf has called a "somewhat naïve version of logical positivism." These theorists believe that music must be viewed as an object of "rational—that is scientific—discourse."⁴ ("To many of us in music, the virtues of a confluence of rational inquiry and art have long been evident, if rarely exhibited," writes Boretz.⁵) That scientific discourse is pursued in terms of "an internally consistent model expressed in the language of mathematics."⁶ Composing a work of art is the defining and creating of "relational 'universes' of elements in whose interrelations are embedded hypothetical properties of relational behavior."⁷

Sounds are thus not part of music, because artworks, "though they are *inferred from* observable characteristics of particular slices of the physical-entity world, *are not* themselves, as art entities, *composed of* those slices." Art entities are, rather, "purely phenomenal things, intersubjective in the sense of thoughts rather than in that of sounds and sights."⁸ The notational score is, I presume, more characteristic of music because of its ability, through the symbols or signs it utilizes, to express the relationships Boretz would want to constitute music.

Ives, however, had no such ideas when he talked about music and sound. It is true that some of his statements imply at least partial agreement with Boretz's ideas on sound as important only as a means of transmitting music; the surface similarity with Boretz's ideas is further suggested in this comment

by Ives: "That music must be heard is not essential—what it *sounds* like may not be what it *is*."⁹

Ives's concept of music was metaphysical in the highest transcendental sense. What he wanted to suggest by "My God! What has sound got to do with music!" is present in the famous anecdote about Old John Bell, with its admonition not to miss the music by paying "too much attention to the sounds."¹⁰ The essence of the story has been recognized by many of Ives's close friends. In a letter dated 24 July 1923, Clifton Joseph Furness, expressing an idea derived from both Ives's *Essays* and correspondence with him, referred to the composer's ideas "about regarding sound as purely a symbol of a mental concept."¹¹ The Cowells note that Ives believed music to be "the idea" and that "in certain sorts of composition Ives makes a distinction between the music, which is the idea, and the sound, which is simply a physical disturbance during a performance."¹² John Kirkpatrick confirms this, noting that "Ives always regarded 'the music' as being the character of the idea or spirit, quite apart from its embodiment in sound."¹³ Music is, as Hegel expressed it, the sensuous incarnation of the Idea.¹⁴ That Idea was not a property of relational behavior but the "substance," a quality which Ives believed to be all important in music.¹⁵

There are further distinctions which can aid our understanding of Ives's concept of music. For Ives there were several different types of music. He distinguished between "composed" and "natural" music¹⁶—music based purely on stylistic considerations and music which tries to reproduce sounds in nature, such as George Ives's attempt to reproduce the sounds of church bells pealing in a rainy, misty afternoon,¹⁷ or Charles's concern with the effect of distance on sound.¹⁸ Ives felt that "natural" music, in this sense, provides many suggestions towards composition—"glimpses into further fields of thought and beauty."¹⁹

However, there is a more fundamental, metaphysical music—'natural' music in its transcendental sense. "Whence comes the wonder of a moment? From sources we know not. But we do know that from obscurity and from this higher Orpheus comes measures of sphere melodies, flowing in wild, native tones, ravaging the souls of men, flowing now with thousand-fold accompaniments and rich symphonies through all our hearts, modulating and divinely leading them."²⁰ Hawthorne sensed the mysteries of these "supernatural sound waves" and tried "to paint them rather than to explain them."²¹ And Thoreau did not have to go to Boston to hear "the Symphony."²²

The roots for this concept of music are found primarily in the ideas of the New England Transcendentalists, particularly those of Thoreau.²³ Although Emerson had some interest in music, it was Thoreau who most extensively developed a metaphysical concept of music. He was intensely interested in perceiving what he thought to be the inherent musical qualities of the sounds and "silences" of nature, but he also believed there to be a transcendental music behind these sounds of nature.

Daniel E. Rider has suggested a number of aspects of Thoreau's theory of music²⁴: (1) Music is discussed not in its technical sense, but in a more comprehensive and general meaning. The word music is often used symbolically and poetically, so that even sounds and silences become forms of music. With his acute sense of hearing Thoreau perceived some of the incredibly complex organizations of the sounds of nature, hearing what most men call nature's silence to be rich in sounds. From this he poeticized the terms Sound and Silence in relation to their effect on man's soul. (2) Certain qualities inherent in sound can be classified as music, such as those found in a child's beating on a tin pot. (However, these qualities are dependent on a sympathetic disposition toward the child's activities. Thoreau imputes the musical qualities to the situation.) (3) Thoreau treated music, as a term, in a very metaphorical sense; his terms thrive in a suggestive sense but are destroyed if asked to undergo rigorous examination. (4) Music is viewed in a symbolic function, as a vehicle to other philosophical and moral truths. (5) Music is also a tool for spiritual development, a means for escaping the materialism and industrialization of the 19th century. Music is both a means of expression and a catalyst for other human experiences.

Thoreau's particular understanding of music comes from an idealistic belief in Nature as a manifestation of Spirit and in music as a realm of the Spirit expressing itself. For an idealist such as Thoreau the sounds of nature would be much more potent for revealing Spirit than the comparatively artificial organization of the sounds and silences that man calls music. In his *Journal* Thoreau described nature's sounds as "the general earth song."²⁵ In his youth Thoreau thought of the earth as "the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains."²⁶ These sounds are the birds, the crickets, the wind, the rivers rushing over the rocks. There is a real music in the earth, infinitesimally complex, that is always open "to the ear that is fitted to hear it."²⁷

Behind the sounds of nature lies the realm of pure music—"sphere music"—which Thoreau describes through the use of a metaphor of music rising into the universe. "Some sounds seem to reverberate along the plain, and then settle to earth again like dust; such are Noise, Discord, Jargon. But such only as spring heavenward, and I may catch from steeples and hilltops in their upward course, which are the more refined parts of the former, are the true sphere music,—pure, unmixed music,—in which no wail mingles." A balloonist will rise from the world of discordant sounds "into the region of pure melody."²⁸ The finest, purest strains of music travel farther than the coarse ones; thus, "those strains of the piano which reach me here in my attic stir me so much more than the sounds which I should hear if I were below in the parlor, because they are so much purer and diviner melody."²⁹ This is the universal music, the realm of "sphere music" in which the earth gyrates.³⁰

Music is also "God's voice, the divine breath audible," and "the sound of the circulation in nature's veins."³¹ It is the voice of God or Spirit which

permeates nature and man, reconciling all into one whole. Therefore "is not all music a hum more or less divine?"³²

Another prominent metaphor which Thoreau used was that of the telegraph harp. He was fascinated by the sounds of the wind blowing through the telegraph wires which were being erected on the railroad right-of-way near Walden Pond. This Aeolian Harp was a man-made invention that had been blessed by the Spirit. At last, "the latent music of the earth had found here a vent. Music Æolian." It is "the travelling paterer for the Universe Insurance Company." The telegraph harp can also rise into the realm of pure melody, if only occasionally. When the right conditions prevail, when "some indistinguishable zephyr blows," the harp "suddenly and unexpectedly rises into melody, as if a god had touched it." Through the harp, the Spirit touches Thoreau's soul: "When the zephyr, or west wind, sweeps the wire, I rise to the height of my being."³³

But ultimately, perhaps, the universal song is the song that rises from within the soul of man, from the Spirit speaking within. "All the world goes by us and is reflected in our deeps. Such clarity! obtained by such pure means! by simple living, by honesty of purpose. We live and rejoice. I awoke into a music which no one about me heard. Whom shall I thank for it?"³⁴ Man is moved to perceive the inaudible music of the universal Over-Soul.

There was a time when the beauty and the music were all within, and I sat and listened to my thoughts, and there was a song in them. I sat for hours on the rocks and wrestled with the melody that possessed me. I sat and listened by the hour to a positive though faint and distant music, not sung by any bird, nor vibrating any earthly harp. When you walked with a joy which knew not its origin. When you were an organ of which the world was but one poor broken pipe. . . . You sat on the earth as on a raft, listening to music that was not of the earth, but which ruled and arranged it. Man *should be* the harp articulate.³⁵

Thus, when Ives exclaimed "What has sound got to do with music!" he was asserting a Transcendentalist's impatience with a musician whose mind was limited by the facility of his fingers, a violinist who lacked a vision of the Divine. It was this impatience which motivated much of Ives's experimentation. In the article "Some 'Quarter-Tone' Impressions," he outlined the relationship between his concept of music and his exploration of new musical ideas:

It will probably be centuries, at least generations, before man will discover all or even most of the value in a quarter-tone extension. And when he does, nature has plenty of other things up her sleeve. And it may be longer than we think before the ear will freely translate what it hears and instinctively arouse and amplify the spiritual consciousness.

But that needn't keep anyone from trying to find out how to use a few more of the myriads of sound waves nature has put around in the

air . . . for man to catch if he can and “perchance make himself a part with nature,” as Thoreau used to say.

Even in the limited and awkward way of working with quarter-tones at present, transcendent things may be felt ahead—glimpses into further fields of thought and beauty.³⁶

For Ives music was a mystical revelation of the Over-Soul, and he saw his role as a composer as one enlarging the means by which man could express, as did Thoreau, “the melody that possessed me.”³⁷

NOTES

¹ Charles Ives, *Essays before a Sonata and Other Writings*, ed. Howard Boatwright (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 84.

² Benjamin Boretz, “Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art* from a Musical Point of View,” *Perspectives on Contemporary Theory*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 34.

³ Ives, *Essays*, p. 84.

⁴ Louis Kampf, *On Modernism: The Prospects for Literature and Freedom* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1967), p. 319.

⁵ Boretz, *Languages*, p. 31.

⁶ Kampf, *On Modernism*, p. 319.

⁷ Boretz, *Languages*, p. 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹ Ives, *Essays*, p. 84.

¹⁰ Charles E. Ives, *Memos*, ed. John Kirkpatrick (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 132. The motto on the title page of this project gives the full text of this anecdote.

¹¹ Ives’s correspondence with Furness is in the Ives Collection, Yale University.

¹² Henry Cowell and Sidney Cowell, *Charles Ives and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 178.

¹³ Ives, *Memos*, p. 242.

¹⁴ Israel Knox, *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), p. 82.

¹⁵ Ives, *Essays*, pp. 75ff.

¹⁶ Bentley Layton, “An Introduction to the 114 *Songs* of Charles Ives” (senior thesis, Harvard University, 1963), pp. 27ff.

¹⁷ Ives, *Essays*, p. 111.

¹⁸ Charles Ives, “Conductor’s Note,” *Symphony No. 4* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1965), pp. 13–14.

¹⁹ Ives, *Essays*, p. 109.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31 and note. This is a paraphrase from Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²³ Obviously the Transcendentalists’ view of music is much too complex to be treated in a short article. Also, Ives draws on a wide variety of sources for his ideas, and sometimes it is difficult to trace the many allusions in the *Essays*. However, in this article I am trying to contrast aspects of Thoreau’s view of music with a 20th-century approach in order to illustrate Ives’s own concept of music.

²⁴ Daniel E. Rider, “The Musical Thought and Activities of the New England Transcendentalists” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1964), pp. 271ff. This dissertation directed me to the importance of Thoreau’s *Journal* in treating his ideas on music.

²⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. 2, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), p. 254.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 306–07.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 379–80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 53, 58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 125.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 251.

³² *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 288.

³³ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 220; vol. 5, p. 293; vol. 3, p. 247; vol. 4, p. 459.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 268–69.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 294.

³⁶ Ives, *Essays*, p. 109.

³⁷ See note 35 above.