

Symphony No. 2

The Unanswered Question

Charles Ives

Charles Ives once told his friends Henry and Sidney Cowell that if his **Second Symphony** was ever performed by the New York Philharmonic in Carnegie Hall, he would attend the concert. The likelihood of that happening seemed slim at the time. Although today he is revered as one of the most essential composers in the history of American music — perhaps *the* most essential — Ives spent most of his career composing music that mostly went unperformed.

Very gradually, however, the possibility of his music being heard in Carnegie Hall became less implausible. In the course of the 1930s a number of

Ives's songs were premiered in American and European music capitals. (The composer Olivier Messiaen served as accompanist when some were premiered in Paris.) A number of the American's major scores were appearing in print; his *Three Places in New England*, for example, was published in 1935, when the composer was 60. Further touchstone pieces were premiered in the 1940s, invariably after languishing in obscurity for decades: audiences were first able to hear his

String Quartet No. 2 and his Symphony No. 3 (*The Camp Meeting*) in 1946, although both pieces had been completed more than 30 years earlier.

While recognition had been a long time in coming, when it finally arrived it did so decisively. In 1945 Ives was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 1947 he was honored with the Pulitzer Prize for his Third Symphony. "Awards and prizes are for school children, and I'm no longer a school boy," he harrumphed, keeping up his image as the Cranky Yankee. However, his friends recounted that, deep down, he seemed pleased and even honored by this turning of the tide. And so the once scarcely imaginable came to pass: the New York Philharmonic performed the World Premiere of Ives's Second Symphony in Carnegie Hall on

In Short

Born: October 20, 1874, in Danbury, Connecticut

Died: May 19, 1954, in New York City

Works composed and premiered: Symphony No. 2: written mostly in 1900–02, though it included fragments that were written earlier; essentially brought to completion ca. 1907–10, but the final eruptive chord was added in 1951; premiered February 22, 1951, at Carnegie Hall, by the New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein, conductor (though the first movement alone seems to have been premiered in 1910 or 1911, Edgar Stowell conducting the Music School Settlement orchestra in New York City)

The Unanswered Question: sketched in 1906, developed into the piece as we now know it in the 1930s; completed by 1941, when it was published (without authorization); premiered May 11, 1946, at Columbia University's McMillan Theater, in New York City, by a chamber orchestra of students from the Juilliard Graduate School, conducted by Edgar Schenkman (onstage) with Theodore Bloomfield (offstage)

New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances: Symphony No. 2: the Orchestra gave the complete work's premiere in 1951 (see above), and most recently performed it on April 14, 1987, Leonard Bernstein, conductor. *The Unanswered Question:* the Philharmonic's first performance was on August 25, 1959, Leonard Bernstein conducting the Orchestra on tour in Moscow; last performed on May 25, 2009, David Robertson, conductor

Estimated durations: Symphony No. 2: ca. 35 minutes; *The Unanswered Question:* ca. 6 minutes

February 22, 1951, with Leonard Bernstein conducting, in a concert that would be broadcast nationally.

Fixing a firm chronology on Ives's music is a daunting and often impossible task. He typically worked on pieces over long stretches of time, sometimes setting them aside for years between touch-ups. Since there was so little demand to perform them, Ives had no compelling reason to sign off on them. His professional success in the insurance business removed any need for him to derive income from performances of his music, so, accordingly, he did little to promote his work. He often moved musical passages from one piece to another, and it was commonplace for him to pillage his back catalogue for useful

themes. He showed little interest in being precise in recalling what he composed when, and a date jotted on an Ives manuscript in no way guarantees accuracy.

So far as the Second Symphony is concerned, it appears that the earliest music in it may go back to 1889, though most of the composition took place from 1900 through 1902, with further intensive work in 1907 and final revisions in 1910. Ives remembered that the first movement was played in 1910 or 1911 in New York City by the Music School Settlement's orchestra. After that, it wasn't heard for 40 years.

As the date of the Second Symphony's belated premiere approached, Ives grew increasingly nervous, and in the end he did not attend the concert at Carnegie Hall that he

The New York Philharmonic Connection

THE PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY SOCIETY	
1842	1878
OF NEW YORK	
CONSOLIDATED 1928	
1950	1951
ONE HUNDRED NINTH SEASON	
Conductor: DIMITRI MITROPOULOS Guest Conductors: BRUNO WALTER, GEORGE SZELL, VICTOR DE SABATA, LEONARD BERNSTEIN Associate Conductor: FRANCO AUTORI For Young People's Concerts: IGOR BUKETOFF	
CARNEGIE HALL	
4917th and 4918th Concerts	
THURSDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 22, 1951, at 8:45	
FRIDAY AFTERNOON, FEBRUARY 23, 1951, at 2:30	
Under the Direction of LEONARD BERNSTEIN	
MOZART	Overture to <i>Don Giovanni</i>
MOZART	Three German Dances
	No. 3, K. 602
	No. 2, K. 605
	No. 3, K. 605
MOZART	Concerto, G major, K. 453, for Piano and Orchestra
	Allegro
	Andante
	Allegretto—Presto
	Mr. Bernstein at the Piano
INTERMISSION	
IVES	Symphony No. 2
	Andante moderato
	Allegro
	Adagio cantabile
	Lento maestoso
	Allegro molto vivace
	(First Performances)
COPLAND	<i>El Salón México</i>
	Mr. Bernstein plays the Baldwin Piano
ARTHUR JUDSON, BRUNO ZIRATO, Managers THE STEINWAY is the Official Piano of The Philharmonic-Symphony Society *COLUMBIA AND VICTOR RECORDS	

According to Henry and Sidney Cowell, as the New York Philharmonic's premiere of the Second Symphony approached "Ives grew more and more upset about hearing it, although Bernstein even offered to set one of the rehearsals at any hour that would suit Mr. Ives, and to arrange for him to be quite alone and invisible in the darkened hall. Still Ives could not make up his mind to go." In the end, he did not attend, but the Cowells did. (The program for that performance is to the left.) Their account continued:

Mrs. Ives went to the *première* without him and sat with her daughter and son-in-law, one of her brothers and his wife, and the writers [i.e., the Cowells] in a box near the stage. At the end of the performance Bernstein applauded the players and then turned toward the Ives box to join in the wild and prolonged applause that rose from the hall. Realizing that Mrs. Ives was not grasping its extent, a guest touched her arm, to suggest she turn away from the stage to see the cheering, clapping audience below her, which rose in the distance to the remote galleries. The warmth and excitement suddenly reached her and she said in a heartbreaking tone of pure surprise: "Why, they *like* it, don't they!"

had dreamed about long ago. His wife went with a small entourage, leaving him to listen to the radio broadcast alone at home. Will and Luemily Ryder, his neighbors in West Redding, Connecticut, reported that Mr. and Mrs. Ives came to their house to hear the concert rebroadcast on March 1. Mrs. Ryder recalled:

After it was over, I'm sure he was very much moved. He stood up, walked over to the fireplace, and spat! ... I think he was pleased, but he was silent.

We now turn to the next work on the program, **The Unanswered Question** (which, along with Variations on "America," is probably Ives's most frequently performed instrumental work). To do so, we travel back in time, to Ives's youth. In 1898, after managing to graduate from Yale, where he held on with a D-plus grade-point average, he sensibly took a position with an insurance firm. He proved exceptionally adept in that field, and in 1906 he began planning the creation of his own company,

the eventual Ives & Myrick, in New York City. In 1905 he had entered into a courtship with Harmony Twitchell, "the most beautiful girl in Hartford," whom he would marry in 1908. Around the same time he also let loose a succession of wildly adventurous compositions, including his *Three-page Sonata, Set for Theatre Orchestra*, and *The Unanswered Question*.

Throughout his career Ives wrote memos to himself to capture thoughts on his music, his intended projects, his experiences, and a plethora of other topics. From time to time he would go through these memos to pluck out items appropriate to some current enterprise — an article in progress, a train of thought — with the result that many became misplaced. After his death, Ives's acolyte, John Kirkpatrick, managed to reassemble a great many of the memos and eventually publish them in 1972. Although that volume can prove frustrating — its very nature is to be fragmentary and desultory — it is packed with flashes of reminiscence and insight for anyone interested in the composer and his

The Composer's Words

In an extensive prose forward to his published score of *The Unanswered Question*, Ives (pictured below, in 1909) provided these insights:

The strings play *ppp* throughout with no change in tempo. They are to represent "The Silences of the Druids — Who Know, See, and Hear Nothing." The trumpet intones "The Perennial Question of Existence," and states it in the same tone of voice each time. But the hunt for "The Invisible Answer," undertaken by the flutes and other human beings, becomes gradually more active, faster, and louder through an *animando* to a *con fuoco*. This part need not be played in the exact time position indicated. It is played in somewhat of an impromptu way; if there be no conductor, one of the flute players may direct their playing. "The Fighting Answers," as the time goes on, and after a "secret conference," seem to realize a futility, and begin to mock "The Question" — the strife is over for the moment. After they disappear, "The Question" is asked for the last time, and "The Silences" are heard beyond in "Undisturbed Solitude."



Name That Tune

A characteristic element of Ives's style is the rampant use of musical quotations. At the very least they can surprise and amuse listeners, but often they serve to enlarge Ives's compositions by reaching out beyond the score at hand to grasp the audible culture that stands without.

Ives was all-embracing in his quotations and borrowings, which, within a single piece, can range from revival hymns and Civil War songs to patriotic anthems, popular tunes, college cheers, famous melodies from the classics, and even other works of his own composition. The musicologist Clayton W. Henderson has catalogued all (or nearly all) the borrowings in Ives's compositions and published them as *The Charles Ives Tunebook* (Indiana University Press), which Ives aficionados will find endlessly useful. Henderson spots allusions to about 30 outside pieces in the *Second Symphony* (with several pieces providing multiple borrowings), ranging from *Pig Town Fling* and "Bringing in the Sheaves" to "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," Brahms's *Vier ernste Gesänge*, and the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. If, as you listen, you fleetingly sense a familiar contour, your ears are probably not deceiving you.

works. With regard to *The Unanswered Question*, at some point Ives jotted down:

Around this time, running from say 1906 ... up to about 1912–14 or so, things like *All the Way Around and Back*, *The Gong on the Hook and Ladder*, *Over the Pavements*, *Tone Roads*, *The Unanswered Question*, etc. were made. Some of them were played — or, better, tried out — usually ending in a fight or hiss I must say that many of those things were started as kinds [of] studies, or rather trying out sounds, beats, etc., usually by what is called politely "improvisations on the keyboard" — what classmates in the flat called "resident disturbances."

In a list of works that he included with the memos, Ives identified the piece in discussion

here as *The Unanswered Question, A Cosmic Landscape*, and he noted that he had written it "some time before June, 1908." However, Ives's sketch for the piece bears an address that was only valid through 1906; this, along with other biographical data, helps date the genesis of the piece more precisely to July 1906. Originally it was paired with a short tone poem, *Central Park in the Dark Some 40 Years Ago*, a work Ives described, in a musical sketch of the piece, as follows: "Runaway smashes into fence ... heard at 65 CPW, July — finit Dec ... 1906" When the pieces eventually appeared in print, the publisher, George F. Robert, wrote in an afterword:

These two pieces were first entitled: I. "A Contemplation of a Serious Matter" or "The Unanswered Perennial Question" II. "A Contemplation of Nothing Serious" or "Central Park in the Dark in the Good Old Summer Time."

In its first incarnation, *The Unanswered Question* took the form of a one-page sketch. Nonetheless, its essential character was already well in place: three distinct sonic levels, each with its own unvarying instrumentation and melodic style, overlapping in a way that is both loosely controlled and fraught with programmatic implications. In the mid 1930s Ives took up his early sketch and fashioned it into completed form, in which guise it was published (without authorization) in the October 1941 edition of the *Boletín Latino-Americano de Música*, under the title *La Pregunta Incontestada*. In 1953 it was finally released in a more broadly available format by Southern Music Publishing Co. The score states that the piece lasts about eight minutes, though performances frequently clock in at just over six. In either case, it's surprising to think that

this work occupies only five far-from-dense pages of full orchestral score.

Instrumentation: Symphony No. 2 calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets,

two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, and strings. *The Unanswered Question* uses four flutes, trumpet, and strings.

Ives on His Contemporaries

Ives used his wealth as a successful insurance agent to support new music incentives in New York; yet, as in all aspects of his life, he maintained a fierce independence. He would be offended by any implication that his music had been influenced by that of other composers; in fact, he was loath to express much enthusiasm at all for other composers' work.

This trait is revealed in a biography of Ives written by the composer Henry Cowell and his wife, Sidney, titled *Charles Ives and His Music* (1954):

In spite of Ives's conscientious contributions to the groups that were presenting new kinds of music, he did not as a rule go to their concerts. In a letter written to E. Robert Schmitz in 1931, Ives declared he had up to that time neither heard nor seen any music of Schoenberg or of Hindemith. Elsewhere he says he first heard a piece by Stravinsky in 1919 or 1920.

The Stravinsky work referred to here was a part of *The Firebird*, which Ives called "morbid and monotonous." Ives had a similar opinion of Ravel's work, saying that the French composer's music "is of a kind I cannot stand: weak, morbid, and monotonous; pleasing enough, if you want to be pleased."



Stravinsky



Ravel