

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Central Park in the Dark

Charles Ives

Following his boyhood in Danbury, Connecticut, Charles Ives went to college at Yale, from which he graduated in 1898. He received barely passing grades in his general studies, and turned in distinguished work only in his music courses. His teachers included such prominent figures as Dudley Buck for organ and Horatio Parker for composition. Ives thrived as an organist; even as a freshman, he was appointed organist at Center Church in New Haven, a post he held through all four of his “bright college years.”

His experience as a student composer at Yale was bumpier. Ives proved capable at imitating the acceptable, Brahmsian style that Parker advocated, but his teacher was not receptive to the imaginative pieces Ives had already been writing on his own for a number of years.

After Yale, Ives moved to New York and sensibly took a position with an insurance firm. He proved 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. During these early years in New York, he also let loose a succession of wildly adventurous compositions, including his *Three-page Sonata* (to which he attached a note explaining that it was “made mostly as a joke to knock the mollycoddles out of their boxes and to kick out the soft ears”) and what he later described (in his brusque prose style) as

Game,” “Gyp the Blood & Hearst! Which is worst!” “The Gen. Slocum Disaster,” “Mike Donlon at the Bat,” “Central Park in the Dark,” etc. Some of these on topics of those days — but why not!

Musical compositions of a descriptive bent were nothing new; Richard Strauss, for example, was just then concluding his series of programmatic symphonic poems. But whereas Strauss and his tone-poem colleagues translated literary, philosophical, or pictorial narratives into an idealized musical form, Ives took an approach that was grounded in

IN SHORT

Born: October 20, 1874, in Danbury, Connecticut

Died: May 19, 1954, in New York City

Work composed: July–December 1906; perhaps revised in 1936

World premiere: according to the composer’s recollection (as communicated to composer Elliott Carter), at an unidentified theater in New York City, ca. 1907–08, in a reduced orchestration; the first firmly documented performance was May 11, 1946, at the McMillin Theatre of Columbia University (later renovated into the Miller Theatre), with Theodore Bloomfield conducting an orchestra of students from The Juilliard Graduate School

New York Philharmonic premiere: May 3, 1962, Seiji Ozawa, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 3, 1997, Leonard Slatkin, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 9 minutes

a set of a half dozen pieces called “Cartoons,” “A 3 minute Yale-Princeton Football

unvarnished realism. The very titles of the “Cartoons” he listed suggest their vernacular spirit.

The most enduring of Ives’s pieces from that period is *The Unanswered Question, A Cosmic Landscape*. Originally, it was paired with another short tone poem, *Central Park in the Dark Some 40 Years Ago*, a work he described, in a musical sketch of the piece, as follows: “Runaway smashes into fence ... heard at 65 CPW, July — finit Dec ... 1906, with JSM ...” Ives was in fact living at 65 Central Park West when he wrote this, and the “JSM” with whom he witnessed the incident described in the piece was Julian Southall Myrick, soon to be his business partner. When the pieces eventually appeared in print, a postface by Ives stated:

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.”

Central Park in the Dark suggests the waxing and waning of nocturnal sounds in Central Park, with various popular songs combining in glorious cacophony — most prominently a piano pounding out the Tin Pan Alley tune “Hello! Ma Baby.”

Instrumentation: flute and piccolo, oboe, clarinet (doubling E-flat clarinet), bassoon, trumpet, trombone, snare drum, bass drum, cymbal, two pianos, and strings.

In the Composer’s Words

Ives included this commentary in a note (apparently penned around 1914) concerning *Central Park in the Dark*:

This piece purports to be a picture-in-sounds of the sounds of nature and of happenings that men would hear some thirty or so years ago (before the combustion engine and radio monopolized the earth and air), when sitting on a bench in Central Park on a hot summer night. The strings represent the night sounds and silent darkness — interrupted by sounds ... from the Casino over the pond — of street singers coming up from the Circle singing, in spots, the tunes of those days — of some “night owls” from Healy’s whistling the latest or the Freshman March — the “occasional elevated,” a street parade, or a “break-down” in the distance — of newsboys crying “uxtries” — of pianolas having a ragtime war in the apartment house “over the garden wall,” a street car and a street band join in the chorus — a fire engine, a cab horse runs away,

lands “over the fence and out,” the wayfarers shout — again the darkness is heard — an echo over the pond — and we walk home.



Central Park bandstand,
ca. 1900