

Notes on the Program

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The Unanswered Question

Charles Ives

Charles Ives went to college at Yale, where he managed to graduate in 1898 after holding on with a D-plus grade-point average. He then sensibly took a position with an insurance firm. He proved exceptionally adept in that field, and in 1906 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. At about this time Ives also let loose a succession of wildly adventurous compositions, including his *Three-Page Sonata* and *Set for Theatre Orchestra*. The most enduring of his pieces from that period is *The Unanswered Question*; along with *Variations on America*, it is probably his most frequently performed instrumental work.

Throughout his career, Ives jotted 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 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 the composer’s death, his acolyte John Kirkpatrick managed to reassemble a great many of the memos, and he published them in 1972. Although that volume can prove frustrating — its very nature is to be fragmentary and desultory — it’s packed with flashes of reminiscence and insight for anyone interested in the composer and his works. Here’s what Ives jotted down at some point about *The Unanswered Question*:

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 included with the memos, Ives identified the piece performed here as *The Unanswered Question*, *A Cosmic Landscape*, and he noted that he had written it

In Short

Born: October 20, 1874, in Danbury, Connecticut

Died: May 19, 1954, in New York City

Work composed: sketched in 1906, developed in the 1930s, completed by 1941, when it was published (without authorization) in the *Boletín Latino-Americano de Música*, under the title *La Pregunta Incontestada*

World premiere: May 11, 1946, at Columbia University in New York City, by a chamber orchestra from The Juilliard School, conducted by Edgar Schenkman (on-stage) and Theodore Bloomfield (off-stage)

New York Philharmonic premiere: August 25, 1959, in Moscow, USSR, Leonard Bernstein, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: June 30, 2012, at Park Avenue Armory, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 6 minutes

“some time before June, 1908.” However, his sketch for the piece bears an address that was only valid through 1906; this, along with other biographical data, helps date it more precisely to July 1906. Originally it was paired with another 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.”

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*, out of Montevideo, Uruguay, under the title *La Pregunta Incontestada*. In 1953 it was finally released in a more broadly available format by Southern Music Publishing Co. In an extensive forward, Ives provided these insights:

The strings play *ppp* throughout with no change in tempo. They are to represent “The Silences of the Druids — Who Know,

At the Time

What was happening in the musical world in 1906, when Charles Ives first sketched *The Unanswered Question*? Music was at a crossroads: 19th-century symphonic grandeur was beginning to cede its place to the various strands of modernism that would rule over ensuing decades. Richard Strauss, having recently completed all but the last of his symphonic poems and (in December 1905) unveiled his opera *Salome*, got to work on his next stage work, *Elektra*. Gustav Mahler conducted the premiere of his tragic Sixth Symphony, completed his Seventh, and started work on his monumental Eighth. Igor Stravinsky, who had begun to take composition lessons from Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in 1905, was hard at work on his first major orchestral piece, the *Symphony in E-flat* (Op. 1). Sergei Rachmaninoff was immersed in his Second Symphony,

Edward Elgar signed off on his oratorio *The Kingdom*, and Béla Bartók busied himself making transcriptions of Hungarian folk songs. Maurice Ravel composed his Introduction and Allegro for Harp and his song cycle *Histoires naturelles*. Arnold Schoenberg produced his Chamber Symphony (Op. 9) and inspired a passel of students, including Alban Berg (who was working on his *Seven Early Songs*) and Anton Webern (who not only composed his Piano Quintet in 1906, but also received his doctorate in musicology from the University of Vienna).

And yet, nothing in that list, not even Bartók’s Hungarian Folk-songs or Schoenberg’s Chamber Symphony, are as startling in their modernity as *The Unanswered Question*, a rather simple and unassuming — but absolutely unforgettable — work by a figure who was then an obscure American insurance agent.



Charles Ives, insurance agent, ca. 1913

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.”

The score states that the piece lasts about eight minutes, though performances frequently clock in at around six. In either case, it’s surprising to think that this work occupies only five far-from-dense pages of full orchestral score.

Instrumentation: four flutes, trumpet, and strings.

The New York Philharmonic Connection

The New York Philharmonic first performed *The Unanswered Question* on August 25, 1959, with Leonard Bernstein conducting the Orchestra for a groundbreaking concert in Moscow during the height of the Cold War; it was repeated as an encore, in response to the enthusiastic ovation received. Bernstein and the Philharmonic went on to perform the work in Leningrad and Belgrade (then part of Yugoslavia, now Serbia) and concerts in Berlin, Venice, the Netherlands, and London.

It was all part of a jaw-dropping two-month, 17-country tour that took the Orchestra behind the Iron Curtain for two rounds of performances in the Soviet Union, as well as Warsaw, Poland and Zagreb (then Yugoslavia, now Croatia), plus stops from Finland, Norway, and Sweden to Turkey and Lebanon. The Orchestra brought *The Unanswered Question* back home for its first performance of the work in New York on October 22 of that year.



Cover of the program for the Philharmonic's August 25, 1959, performance in Moscow