

Charles Ives Remembered

An Oral History

BY VIVIAN PERLIS

with a Foreword by Aaron Copland





JEROME MOROSS discovered the music of Ives when he was about fifteen. He became a composer of orchestral and ballet music and has written extensively for radio and theater. Mr. Moross was interviewed in New York City, on September 19, 1969.

Whenever I hear the music of Charles Ives, it takes me right back to about 1928 when Benny Herrmann and I found a copy of the *Second Piano Sonata* [Concord] in the Half-Price Music Shop, which has since become Patelson's. At that time it was on 57th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. I was going to school at the old DeWitt Clinton High School which was at 59th Street and Tenth Avenue. Coming home every afternoon we always walked by 57th Street and dropped into the old Half-Price Music Shop. And there we found Ives. I was studying piano then and writing. I saved a dollar out of my weekly allowance and went without lunches to buy the sonata. At first it was impossible for me to play it. But then bit by bit I got to the point where I could play some of it.

We found other things. Benny found a copy of the *114 Songs*. We were always trying to play some of the songs. I remember that a big thing was to play *Shall We Gather at the River*, Benny on the violin and I at the piano. Benny and I were at Juilliard, but I had known Benny from high school. We got Arthur Berger interested in Ives, too. I met him because he lived around the corner from me in Brooklyn. And Lehman Engel we met at Juilliard. The Ives fan club was just the four of us, as far as we knew. We avidly collected anything of his we could find—the few things he had published himself and the things that Henry Cowell had published. Among other things, I had learned the movement *In the Inn* from the *First Piano Sonata*. Benny, Lehman, and I gave a concert at the Juilliard in which we played avant-garde music. The Juilliard was not very receptive at that time to anything new. Among the things we played was a piece of mine called *Paeans* which Henry Cowell heard that night. He got very excited and came backstage and introduced himself to me. I was eighteen at the time, and Cowell was an extraordinarily important figure to a young musician.

We had a meeting after that and we talked and got to know each other, and among other things, I played him the *In the Inn* movement from the *First Piano Sonata*. He asked me to play it at one of his symposiums at the New School. Henry Cowell took Benny and me to meet Ives in his house in New York. Henry and Ives were extremely friendly and from all I could

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THIRD CONCERT

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

MAY FIRST

At two-fifteen

SONATA FOR FLUTE AND PIANO

Walter Piston

1. Allegro moderato e grazioso
2. Adagio
3. Allegro vivace

MR. LAURENT and MR. SANROMA

* SEVEN SONGS

Charles Ives

1. The Indians (Charles Sprague)
2. Walking (Ives)
3. Serenity (Whittier)
4. Maple Leaves (Thomas B. Aldrich)
5. The See'r (Ives)
6. Evening (Milton)
7. Charlie Rutlage (Cowboy Ballads)

MR. LINSKOTT and MR. COPLAND

* SUITE FOR FLUTE AND PIANO

Henry Brant

1. Madrigal
2. Minuet
3. Saraband
4. Toccata

MR. LAURENT and MR. SANROMA

INTERMISSION

PIANO VARIATIONS (1930)

Aaron Copland

THE COMPOSER

SUITE FOR FLUTE SOLO

Wallingford Riegger

1. Moderato
2. Vivace
3. Molto con sentimento
4. Allegro ironico

MR. LAURENT

* SECOND STRING QUARTET

Silvestre Revueltas

Allegro giocoso—Lento—Molto vivace—Allegro molto sostenuto

HANS LANGE QUARTET

Program from the Yaddo concert in which Copland presented seven songs by Ives.

gather, it had gone on for quite a while, because Henry had discovered Ives way back. But nobody had listened.

I remember Ives at that first meeting. He was resting on a chaise longue and looked very tired and very old to me. Of course, he was about forty years older than I was. This was somewhere around February or March of 1932. I played *In the Inn* for him. He was very excited that young men were beginning to get interested. He loaded Benny Herrmann and myself with scores, which he either published or had photostated and bound. We took all our copies and we became great Ives evangelists. I kept seeing Ives. In 1932, Aaron Copland had started a group called the Young Composers Group. One of our main points was to get Aaron interested in Ives. That spring Aaron was doing the first of the Yaddo Festivals, and we insisted that he must play Ives. I brought my copy of the songs; we played some of them for Aaron, and I left them with him. Aaron got fascinated with them and did do a set of Ives songs at the festival.

Earlier the first and second movements of the *Fourth Symphony* had been played by Goossens. I was too young to hear that, but Cowell had published the second movement and it was kind of our bible. Everybody in the group had a copy of this and we pored over it. Benny got some money somewhere to give a series of concerts, and he got me into it, and the two of us were busy working on these concerts. We played a number of pieces by Ives; but the most interesting thing was that Ives gave us the first and third movements of the *Fourth Symphony*, which he said would fit our orchestra, because these movements were for a much smaller orchestra than the other two. He gave us this incredible photostat of a manuscript, and we were just appalled at the start. It took us weeks of calling and going back and checking on notes with him. Benny and I worked on it, and we made a clean copy. He'd work on it some; I'd work on it some. We took it up to Ives twice to check notes and phrasing and things like that. We couldn't decipher the terrible manuscript, and Ives had to make the final decision of what he had meant. Then there was one movement [the fourth] that he couldn't find at the time. The manuscripts were just a mad mess in a closet he had. But we did get the third movement [Fugue] in shape, and we played it at the New School, Benny conducting. This was May 17, 1933. And so by that time, three movements of the *Fourth Symphony* had been presented already. It was startling to everybody, because they thought that the *Fourth Symphony* was this impossible mess of sound. The concert was supported by money contributed mostly by Broadway people. Benny and I got a lot of people like composers Hans Spialek and Robert Russell Bennett and others to contribute money.

I would go over to see Ives every four or five months. That went on for about three or four years. But in the fall of 1936 I went to Chicago and then to Los Angeles. I was not in New York much for a long time, and I never saw Ives again. All the time I knew him, Ives seemed to me terribly old and terribly sickly, and yet he was probably only in his fifties. I never knew what his illness was, but the fact that Charles was sick was a very kind of awesome thing to all of us, and something had to be done about this man before it was too late. I called him Mr. Ives at the start and then once he asked me to call him Charles. That was just before the last time I saw him. I found it very difficult to call him Charles and I would kind of alternate between saying Charles and saying Mr. Ives. He didn't care—he just let it go. Suddenly I have a memory of his once coming down to a concert where something of his was being played. I can't remember exactly what it was, but I have a remembrance of Mr. Ives and Mrs. Ives in a concert hall. He had a shawl around his shoulders, very Victorian and old-fashioned—literally with a shawl around his shoulders! I remember all of us flocking to greet him.

I don't think he ever heard any of my music. Henry sent him copies of everything that *New Music* published, and so consequently he had a couple of my things, but his own music involved him terribly at the time. This is just speculation on my part, but I imagine he was afraid that it might die with him, and he was very delighted to have us doing what we could.

In those days if we had a performance of an American composer once a month in the music listings in the *New York Times*, we thought it was marvelous. It was strictly the European tradition then. Every now and then they would play somebody like Daniel Gregory Mason or Rubin Goldmark. We always used to wait for Koussevitzky concerts, because once or twice a year he'd play a piece by Aaron Copland. Then later on, he played one or two things of Roy Harris. But if you wanted to hear people like Ives or Ruggles or Varèse, you had to go to concerts conducted by Nicolas Slonimsky or by Benny Herrmann.

Originally published with assistance from the foundation
established in memory of Philip William McMillan
of the Class of 1894, Yale College.

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Second printing, 1975.

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reproduced, in whole or in part, in any form
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without written permission from the publishers.
International standard book number: 0-300-01758-8
Library of Congress catalog card number: 74-75288

Designed by Sally Sullivan
and set in Times Roman type.

Printed in the United States of America by
Halliday Lithograph Corp., West Hanover, Mass.

Published in Great Britain, Europe, and Africa by
Yale University Press, Ltd., London.

Distributed in Latin America by Kaiman & Polon,
Inc., New York City; in Australasia and Southeast
Asia by John Wiley & Sons Australasia Pty. Ltd.,
Sydney; in India by UBS Publishers' Distributors Pvt.,
Ltd., Delhi; in Japan by John Weatherhill, Inc., Tokyo.