

TEMPS PERDU

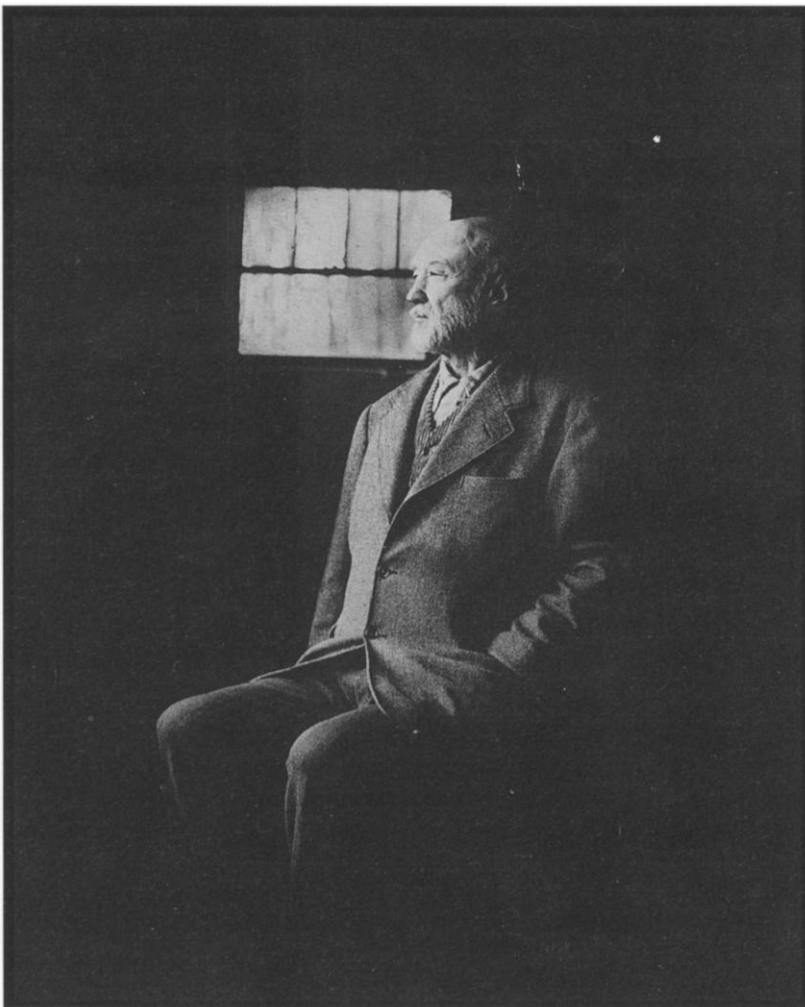
Revolutionary or reactionary? James Hepokoski delves into a fundamental paradox at the heart of Charles Ives' musical style.

My God! What has sound got to do with music!' exclaimed Charles Ives in what would become the most famous remark from *Essays before a sonata* (1920): 'That music must be heard is not essential – what it *sounds* like may not be what it *is*'.¹ Questioning the onto-

logical status of music ('what it *is*'), particularly of music previously grasped in formalist or romantic-traditionalist ways, is hardly a phenomenon peculiar to postmodern critics. The impulse to challenge the concept of absolute music – a concept that invites an aesthetic or structural perception to the exclusion of other perspectives – has been with us for quite some time.²

In Ives' case his many exhortations along this line were both musical and verbal, and their crux was invariably ideological. Here we are urged to pass through the willfully anomalous acoustic surface (the musical sounds) into a sympathetic consideration of the composer's personal and social vision idealised behind the notes. In such a system the acoustic surface may be regarded as an artificial force-field manufactured to direct us (Ives hoped) toward cultural concerns whose passionate advocacy is the 'real music' beyond what we hear.

The key element in Ives' system is the connotationally loaded memory-fragment – the allusion to or paraphrase of a pre-existing musical piece with strong public or private associations (or, more normally, both). The composer experimented with many different 'quotation' techniques, and we cannot hope to do justice to this complex topic here. Still, the most important feature of each memory-fragment is the cultural freight that it bears on the way to the 'real music'. Particularly when the pieces alluded to are public property (American Civil-War tunes, patriotic tunes, camp-meeting hymns, well-worn art-music classics, and so on), we are invited not only to recognise them and savour their connotations, but also to filter all this through an awareness of Ives' personal experience with these sources – an awareness that, in part, his writings seek to provide.



In this multifaceted reappropriation of commonplace reality-fragments lies the heart of the composer's expressive world, and it is significant that most of these sound-images spring not from Ives' contemporary, 20th-century world, but from that of a generation or two past, 'the things our fathers loved'. For Ives these unsophisticated (and, usually, dated) tunes had become truth-bearing icons, sacred and authentic relics of his own childhood. From a psychological perspective, we may wish to interpret this as a symptom of his longing to recover the wholeness of a golden age of parental security no longer available to him in his current, adult life with all of its conflicting demands. On the other hand, from a more aesthetic perspective, his allusions strive vehemently to overcome the characteristic liberal-humanist practice of separating art from the experiences of everyday life.

To be sure, Ives' enterprise was grounded in his embrace of the aspirations of the high-art tradition and in his desire to bring American music to a position of adequacy within it. Still, his attitude toward the tradition was quirkily selective and anything but consistent, and much of his music attempts to deconstruct a narrower, institutionally sanctioned conception of a merely separatist or pleasurable art (or 'manner') in order to throw us back into ordinary experience – into the 'real music' – to seek our transcendence there. This is an idea that, by the 1910s, he would associate with the 19th-century New England Transcendentalists, especially Emerson and Thoreau.

For Ives this line of thought was more than an idea; it was an obsession. As if repeatedly illustrating this quest for transcendence through an embrace of the commonplace, many of his individual pieces or movements follow a similar narrative structure, that of groping through a set of familiar, free-floating memory-fragments toward a climactic or revelatory *telos* at the end. The general concept of form not as architecture but as a process that generates or knits together a single, glowing final idea is unique neither to Ives nor to the 20th century. In a number of past studies centering principally around formal procedures in Sibelius I have called this end-accented musical process 'teleological genesis', while J. Peter Burkholder, in a forthcoming study of Ives' musical style, refers to it as 'cumulative form' and examines its workings and historical antecedents in gratifying detail.³

In Ives the reliance on teleological genesis as a determinative structural principle is particularly characteristic of the more mature work. It may be found, for example, in the outer movements of the Third Symphony, in *The fourth of July*, in the third movement ('The Alcotts') from the *Concord sonata*, in many of the movements of the violin sonatas, in the finale of the Second Quartet, and in several other works. The procedure is by no means reducible to an invariable formula: each instance demands individual study. In a common subtype, though, one threads one's way through a web of dissonant personal reflections that keep returning to shards of a sacred, patriotic, or sentimental tune, one that is ultimately sounded more completely – uncovered as a peak experience – at the end.

As for the peak itself – our main concern here – it may be articulated in a number of ways. Ives may give it a full-throat-

Robert Robinson, 1758

attr. to ASAHIEL NETTLETON
or JOHN WYETH, ca. 1812

Come, Thou Fount of ev'ry bless-ing, Tune my heart to sing Thy
grace; Streams of mer - cy, nev - er ceas - ing, Call for
songs of loud - est praise: Teach me some me - lo - dious
son - net, Sung by flam - ing tongues a - bove; Praise the
mount - I'm fixed up - on it - Mount of Thy re - deem - ing love.

(ABOVE) EX. 1A: 'NETTLETON'

(NEXT PAGE) EX. 1B: SECOND VIOLIN SONATA, CONCLUSION OF THE FINALE
© AMP c/o G. Schirmer (London) and reproduced by permission

ed, *forte* sounding, as with the strenuously distorted unfurling of 'The red, white, and blue' ('Columbia, the gem of the ocean') in *The fourth of July*, or with 'Nettleton' at the end of the Second Violin Sonata (where it is the culmination of a series of paraphrasings and deformations of the hymn-tune). On the other hand, when delivered more gently the peak may provide the sense of having settled into the track of a comforting completeness. Here a memorable paradigm would be the intimate, *pianissimo* double-sounding of the refrain of 'Jesus loves me' at the conclusion of the Fourth Violin Sonata's slow movement. Perhaps most important, however: regardless of how it is produced, the *telos* typically spends its energy in the course of its sounding and dissipates in a diminuendo fade-out.

This concluding dissolution is particularly striking when, as usually happens, the final moments are melodically or harmonically non-closed. The 'Nettleton' paraphrase in the Second Violin Sonata's finale provides a perfect example. In this movement the carefully graduated crescendo throughout the movement crests in a strained concluding cycle through the hymn-tune, sounded *fortissimo*, then triple-*fortissimo*, in G major in the violin, while underneath the piano urgently forces out static, dissonance-enhanced dominant-sevenths and tonic pedals (ex. 1a provides the 'plain' hymn-tune;⁴ ex. 1b, the sonata's conclusion). Here the expressive crux lies in the violin's inability to sound the final, tonic note of the hymn's various phrases: it keeps getting stuck on the penultimate pitch, the supertonic. Thus the hope of a full attainment is frustrated and eventually loses itself in the entropic repetitions, *dim. e rit.*, of the second bar from the end (in which the violin's multiple attempts to ground the melody on the tonic are consistently undermined). After a poignant pause, the last bar re-engages – without upbeat – the first half (only) of the hymn's

ff

v

fff

dim. e rit.

*Repeat 2 or 3 times
decr. & rit. gradually to p very slowly*

pp

ppp

42051

(1909, 1909-1910)

Je - sus loves me! this I know, For the Bi - ble tells me so:

Lit - tle ones to Him be - long; They are weak, but He is strong.

Refrain

Yes, Je - sus loves me, Yes, Je - sus loves me,

Yes, Je - sus loves me, The Bi - ble tells me so.

final phrase (implied text: '[Praise the] mount—I'm fixed upon it...'), now down a step, in F major, *pianissimo*, *diminuendo*, and 'very slowly'. The final sonority is a non-closed dissolution on the dominant of F major, in which the upper-voice, g¹, once again furnishes the withheld tonic pitch of the former, now 'lost', G major. Thus the movement concludes both reflectively – looking backward wistfully at the vanished G major – and in the middle of things, fading out into the framing silence in which, presumably, the listener is expected to provide the conclusion ('Mount of Thy redeeming love') in the 'real music' forever behind the sounding surface.

A similar effect can pervade even those endings that seem more harmonically closed – those that end on a sonority interpretable, however locally, as a tonic. But even in these cases,

(LEFT) EX.2A: 'JESUS LOVES ME' (BELOW)
 EX.2B: FOURTH VIOLIN SONATA, CONCLUSION OF THE SECOND MOVEMENT
 © AMP c/o G. Schirmer (London) and reproduced by permission

rit.

rit.

10

5

5

rit.

ppp

pppp

pppp

pppp

rit.

pppp

pppp

[Oct. 1917]

questions of real closure often persist. The Fourth Violin Sonata's second movement, for example, concludes with an 'Amen' in the piano after the second 'intimate' sounding of the complete refrain of 'Jesus loves me' (Ex.2a; Ex.2b provides the movement's concluding two staves). Here the *telos* hymn-tune in the violin does achieve melodic closure – unlike the earlier, 'Nettleton' example – descending to its final, tonic pitch, sustained by a fermata (implied text: 'Yes, Jesus loves me, The Bible tells me so'). It is important to notice, though, that the refrain-melody's pentatonic E major, clear enough in the violin, is blurred with 'out-of-focus' accompanimental dissonances in the piano; toward the end its vitality also decays through deceleration and diminuendo. Finally, although a plagal cadence is clearly implied in the last moments, the dotted barline added into the last bar indicates that the preceding low E in the piano is no longer to be heard: the movement ends on a local tonic triad with its fifth as the lowest-sounding pitch – a floating instability, marked quadruple-*pianissimo* (!) with diminuendo. From only a slightly different perspective, what we encounter here is a set of normal upper voices whose support, the bass, has been removed. The acoustic surface does not close so much as slip away, evaporating into the framing silence.

In a precisely analogous manner, the culmination of the Third Violin Sonata's *Adagio (Cantabile)* finale is a double-statement of the refrain-cry of 'Need' ('I need Thee, O I need Thee: ev'ry hour I need Thee! O bless me now my Saviour, I come to Thee'), once *fortissimo* and once *pianissimo*, the latter of which fades out, *dim. e rit., morendo*, on a tonic chord with added seventh and without strong bass support. Similar examples of *telos*-peaks and decays are easily multiplied, but the larger question concerns the 'real' music behind the sound. What are the connotations of this often-encountered type of teleological genesis in the mature Ives?

The most straightforward response would be the affirmative one: reading the *telos* positively as a convincing attainment. The logic here is clear: one strives to knit together a single idea from fragments, and, at least in this model, one ultimately succeeds. When the goal is a spiritual or national symbol, as Ives' climactic tunes so often are, it is easy to conclude that the struggle has been 'about' creating this peak experience, which is then to act as a catalyst nudging us toward the 'substance' behind the notes. Ives himself referred to this effect in a variety of ways: 'flashes of transcendent beauty... [bringing] some intimate personal experience'; 'a moment of vivid power'; a 'material nobility'; something 'gleaming with the possibilities of this life'; 'a profound sense of a spiritual truth – a sin within reach of forgiveness... the vastness in humility'; and so on.⁵ The peak's eventual dissolution may also be read affirmatively: once the catalyst has been attained, its ultimate purpose is to bring us to a point of stillness, closer to the 'divine mysteries', or 'the unknowable we know', represented by its merging with the silence over the outside edge of the piece proper.⁶

It seems likely that Ives himself would have readily sanctioned this 'optimistic' reading. But a deeper consideration suggests that there are more complexities and dark corners here than an 'authorised' reading alone encourages. An argument may be made, for example, that these works are also

concerned with loss, unsustainability, and the irretrievability of a cherished past – a past that Ives invariably held up as a social and spiritual model before what he seems to have regarded as a culturally decentered and fallen present. Since the tunes alluded to at the climactic peaks are nearly always melodies harking back to Ives' boyhood – recollections of his wide-eyed experience of fervent camp-meetings, patriotic celebrations, domestic music-making, and the like, the presumed 'wholeness' that is achieved is principally that of something that no longer exists, or that can exist only in imperfect memory. From this perspective what we have is an anxious search for lost time, *temps perdu*.

That the tunes were still in use, still recognised and 'alive', in Ives' 20th century is surely relevant, but it is hardly the crucial point. For Ives, their principal utility lay in their capacity to recapture his own boyhood perception of their power to summon up intense 'common feeling'. His first impulse was to associate the camp-meeting tunes, for instance, not so much with faith 'in general' (although through metaphor we can make them mean that) but with the rock-solid security that they had seemed to proclaim to him in his childhood. As he first encountered these melodies – in presumably heartier, simpler times – they were played wholly and sung without self-consciousness. According to this ideology, such 'healthy' music sprang forth organically – 'like the rocks were grown'.⁷

We may suspect that if such experiences had still been available to the adult Ives – and if the 'real music' was about such epiphanies and not about 'sound' – then there would have been no motivation for him to transplant or 'elevate' their tatters into the realm of 'art'. The indictment of modern times, of course, is a frequently encountered, often disturbing, leitmotif in Ives's writings:

Today apparently even the Camp Meetings are getting easy-bodied and commercialized. There are not many more of them here in the east... But the Camp Meetings aren't the only things that have gone soft. How about some of the seed of 1776? There are probably several contributing factors. Perhaps the most obvious if not the most harmful element is commercialism, with its influence tending towards mechanization and standardized processes of mind and life (making breakfast and death a little too easy). Emasculating America for money! Is the Anglo-Saxon going 'Pussy'?⁸

In short, Ives' music may also be heard as his attempt to recapture or shore up what he believed his own experience of adulthood and the routinised, rapidly decentering modern world were inexorably eroding away. His fragments, distortions, and interfering dissonances can easily be taken to stand for a perception of a current loss of innocence in a changing, more socio-culturally diverse age. When the 'whole' and once-secure past could no longer be confidently grasped in the here and now, only memory-splinters of original meaning remained. Ives' best hope, it would seem, was to reassemble the splinters into larger patterns in the hope of providing 'a sentiment, a leaven, that middle-aged America needs nowadays [1920] more than we care to admit'.⁹ This drives to the

central paradox of Ives' music: the embrace of stylistically radical means in the reactionary, inevitably futile project of recovering traditional securities. 'What it sounds like may not be what it is.'

Such reflections may help us to understand why, as Ives' musical style developed in the first two decades of this century, it became more complex, strained, discontinuous, and 'difficult'. Within the later teleological-genesis pieces, not only did the struggle to produce the sustained flashback become more problematised but Ives also increasingly thematised the incompleteness of the climactic peaks themselves. The melodic *teloi* are rarely sounded in a 'problem-free' way: we are often given only extracts, allusions, refrains, or telling lines from the pieces in question – while melodies or refrains quoted at more length typically stumble or fall away as they approach the moment of completion, the final phrase or cadence. Thus in the Fourth Violin Sonata's last movement it is important to observe that the otherwise complete hymn 'The beautiful river' continually veers toward melodic and tonal wreckage in its final phrase, only to expire with a fragmentary question-mark ('Shall we gather at the river?'). Similarly, although in 'The Alcotts' movement of the *Concord sonata* the C major climactic peak toward the end is impressive indeed – one of the grandest in all of Ives' 'memory-pictures' – the melody is synthetic: a momentary collage of the composer's own short-lived 'human-faith melody' grafted on to brief memory-fragments drawn from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the hymns 'Missionary Chant' and 'Martyn'. At the end the collage-melody falls short of self-completion and drops downward to a poignant fade-out ('if only'?) on a lower-register, though richly resonant, C-major chord.

More broadly, we may wish to recognise throughout all of this Ives' participation in one of the common themes in 19th- and early 20th-century liberal-humanist thought. This is the Motive of Lost Wholeness, which centers on an 'outgrown' childhood vision to be regained, however momentarily, through such things as art, religion, and fantasy – the attempt to overturn the discontents of what Max Weber would identify as 'rationalisation', bureaucratisation, and the ongoing, modern 'disenchantment of the world'. One encounters the theme wherever childhood (usually also reconstructed as 'innocently' pre-sexual) or past simplicities are nostalgically valorised. In literature, one need only recall the many works of the Peter Pan variety. In music, the tradition is also a long one, stretching back to such things as the childhood pieces of Mendelssohn and Schumann, through such composers as Tchaikovsky, Humperdinck, Mahler (the finale of the Fourth Symphony), Elgar (*The starlight express*, *The wand of youth*), Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc, and so on. In each case the central question is the extent to which each composer invites us to realize that in a decentered world lost innocence can never again be re-enchanted.

O alter Duft aus Märchenzeit! However one might historically situate this aspect of Ives, from this perspective both the struggles to produce the peaks and the fade-outs and entropic dissolutions characteristic of many of his endings take on a darker, more unsettling significance – one serving not to replace

the more positive, 'authorised' reading but to co-exist contradictorily with it. This may have been what Ives was suggesting at the otherwise cryptic end of an excited program-note for *The fourth of July*, a work that ends abruptly with the descending ashes of a 'falling rocket': 'All this is not in the music – not now!' That such memory-fragments are to be fleetingly lit up through the medium of music – the art that is as vivid and ephemeral as a skyrocket – could not be more appropriate. But for Ives it may also have been that the 'real music', much feared, lay in the emptiness of the framing silence – after the ashes fall.

Notes

1. Charles Ives: 'Essays before a sonata' [rev. ed.], in *The majority, and Other Writings*, ed. Howard Boatwright (New York, 1961), p.84. 2. Couched in more Germanic-philosophical terms, the contention is also a central axiom, for example, of the influential music historian Carl Dahlhaus: 'Music does not stop at its underlying acoustical substrate [the sound alone]; it is the outgrowth of a process of categorical formation' (*Nineteenth-century music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson [Berkeley, California, 1989], p.41). 3. See especially Hepokoski: *Sibelius: Symphony no.5* (Cambridge, 1992) and 'The essence of Sibelius: creation myths and rotational cycles in *Luonnotar*', in *The Sibelius companion*, ed. Glenda Dawn Goss (New York, forthcoming in 1995). Burkholder's study is *All made of tunes: Charles Ives and the uses of musical borrowing* (New Haven, forthcoming in 1995). I am grateful to Professor Burkholder both for generously sharing portions of this book with me and for undertaking several enlightening conversations regarding the present essay. The term 'cumulative form', along with the general concept, may also be found in his earlier studies, 'Quotation' and emulation: Charles Ives's uses of his models', in *The Musical Quarterly* 71 (1985), pp.1–26; and Burkholder, 'Quotation' and paraphrase in Ives's Second Symphony', in *19th-Century Music* 11 (1987), pp.3–25. 4. The hymn-citations and texts in exx.1a and 2a are given as transmitted in Clayton W. Henderson, *The Charles Ives tunebook* (Warren, Michigan, 1990), pp. 42–43 and 34. 5. The quotations are taken – almost randomly – from p.30 of *Essays before a sonata* (the essay on 'Emerson'); such remarks, of course, pervade the entire set of essays. 6. *Essays*, pp.36 ('divine mysteries'), 7 ('unknowable'). Cf. Ives' citation from Emerson, 'Silence is a solvent... that gives us leave to be universal' (*Essays*, p.84). 7. Ives, *Memos*, ed. John Kirkpatrick (New York, 1972), p.132. Cf. the important context of the quotation, Ives' recollections of camp meetings, pp. 131–33. 8. *Memos*, p.133. For an examination into some of the issues swirling around Ives' persistent sexual references, the now-classic starting-point is Maynard Solomon, 'Charles Ives: some questions of veracity', in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 40 (1987), pp.443–70 (especially pp.466–69). A more recent, expanded discussion may be found in Judith Tick, 'Charles Ives and gender ideology', in *Musicology and difference: gender and sexuality in music scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, California, 1993), pp.83–106. 9. *Essays*, p.47. Although Ives' specific reference here is to the 'healthy New England childhood days' evoked by the 'memory-word-pictures' of the novelist Louisa May Alcott, it is clear from the context that much of his own music – in this case, 'The Alcotts' from the *Concord sonata* – seeks to produce the same effect.