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That Grumpy Old Pianist Is Ives

By KYLE GANN

ON four occasions -- in 1933, 1938 and 1943, and at another uncertain date in the mid-30's -- a frail, ailing, wealthy retired insurance company executive named Charles Ives was led into recording studios to play and record the piano music he had been composing on weekends for several decades. The earliest of these recordings were made on soft aluminum Speak-O-Phone discs, the later ones on lacquer-coated discs. Few people suspected at the time what a vast and history-changing body of works those pounded-out snippets of music represented. Who knew that this crusty, eccentric, rapidly aging man banging away at the piano and muttering under his breath would one day be hailed as the greatest American composer?

A few of those recordings became public in 1974, during the Ives centennial, in a Columbia release, ''Charles Ives: The 100th Anniversary,'' long out of print. Now, at last, we have all of them, on a magnificent document from Composers Recordings: ''Ives Plays Ives'' (CRI 810; CD), including all four recording sessions and clocking in at 78 minutes.

Sound quality varies considerably. The soft aluminum discs are in the worst shape. (In places, they sound as if someone were accompanying Ives on maracas.) Digital technology comes partly to the rescue; in the thorough and scrupulously documented booklet notes, Richard Warren Jr., the curator for historical recordings at Yale University, explains that the original discs were transferred to digital using a Packburn Audio Noise Suppressor, and some needle jumps were repaired via computer.

In Ives's day (as some readers will recall) the longest period of uninterrupted music recordable on a 78-r.p.m. disc was four to five minutes, and only one track here (the ''Alcotts'' movement of the ''Concord'' Sonata) approaches that limit. These are mostly partial performances of various of Ives's 20-odd piano studies, along with improvisations on passages from the ''Concord'' Sonata. (Ten of the studies have also just been issued, with better sound quality, on another fine Composers Recordings CD, ''The Unknown Ives,'' by the pianist Donald Berman.)

But Ives does not entirely neglect his early, more conventional music. At one point he breaks into a march on the tune ''Here's to Good Old Yale.'' And elsewhere -- for revenge? in self-justification? -- he plays and hums the original version of the slow movement of his Symphony No. 1, which his teacher Horatio Parker had rejected and made him rewrite back in 1894.

What the recordings show overall is Ives as an amazingly, though not consistently, energetic elderly man with a virtuosic if idiosyncratic piano technique. Aged 58 at the first session, 68 at the last, he had lived through several heart attacks, starting as early as 1918 (if not sooner), and retired from business in 1930. He was diabetic and easily overexcited, and often had to lie down after working himself into a rage about his great bugbears, political stupidity and musical conservatism.

He was obviously frustrated with the recording process as well; several times he pulls up short, saying, ''Oh, no, I can't,'' or ''Oh, I have to stop,'' or ''That's enough.'' But elsewhere he gets carried away and sings along. Touchingly, fragments of Ives's voice dot the recording the way beard hairs dot his death mask at the Scott Fanton Museum in Danbury, Conn.

Equally personal is the glimpse of Ives as improviser. At that time, toward midcentury, improvisation was probably at its lowest ebb in the classical-music world. We think of Mozart and Beethoven improvising but not Bartok and Stravinsky, and the idea of atonal improvisation was virtually unheard of, not to come into its own until the 60's.

But Ives had been playing ragtime and other proto-jazz idioms since entertaining in bars during his college days in the 1890's, and it was natural, if radical, for him to extend jazz practices into his atonal explorations. Though it is uncertain how much new material Ives extemporizes here, we learn a little about his improvising methods, which often center on the complex rhythmic articulation of a few unchanging, dissonant sonorities.

What clearly interested Ives most, however, was getting across his ideas about the 19th-century philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, or rather, about ''Emerson,'' the first movement of his ''Concord'' Sonata, which had itself been developed from an unfinished ''Emerson'' Concerto. No fewer than 18 of the disc's 42 bands are devoted to ''Emerson'' material, most of them to performances of the ''Transcriptions From Emerson'' Nos. 1 and 3.

The First riffs off the opening two pages of the ''Concord'' Sonata, and the Third juxtaposes material from the movement's ethereal ending with the calmer melody from its middle section. In fact, as the Ives scholar David Porter details, 13 of the other bands also feature studies originally derived from the ''Emerson'' Concerto, so the disc could almost be titled ''Ives Plays Ives About Emerson.''

The transcriptions are to the sonata like commentary to a sacred text: Ives quotes a measure or so, adds several seconds of related material, then quotes another measure, and so on. The ''Emerson'' movement of the ''Concord'' Sonata is divided into ''poetry'' and ''prose'' sections, the poetry having a more regular and repetitive phrase structure, the prose open-ended and without frequent bar lines. Perhaps understandably, Ives's improvisations, with one brief exception, all refer to the prose sections.

Yet the biggest chunk of the ''Concord'' Sonata, and perhaps the most important document on the disc from an interpreter's viewpoint, is a complete and surprisingly literal rendition of the ''Alcotts'' movement, depicting both the high-flown ideas of the visionary transcendentalist Bronson Alcott and the domestic scenes couched in his daughter's famous novel ''Little Women.'' It is reassuring to know, for example, that Ives himself could not reach the large interval of a 10th from A flat to C with one hand, and that he had to roll the widely spaced chords on the first page just as I do.

Elsewhere, he gives the impression that the published notation does not quite reflect his actual thoughts; rhythms and even pitches depart from the score (sometimes repeatedly, in recurring sections) in an otherwise faithful and energetic reading. From now on, I, for one, will play those passages the way Ives played them, not the way they are published.

Still, the disc can hardly be called reliable as a pianist's guide to Ives interpretation. There are passages in the ''Emerson'' performances played with a slow hesitancy where the score suggests quick energy; it is not

clear whether Ives meant the music that way or was held back by momentary or intermittent physical limitations. In the booklet notes, the Ives scholar James Sinclair speculates that Ives was probably not playing with scores in front of him, a fact that would render the relation to the printed page even more tangential.

But I wonder about this; could Ives really have memorized so many complex passages that he had written so many years earlier so thoroughly? Would a nonreliance on scores account for his mysterious choice of selections? A few measures from Study No. 20, an arrangement of the old song ''Hello, My Baby'' from Study No. 23: why these and so many versions of the ''Emerson Transcription'' No. 1, and nothing from the Piano Sonata No. 1, the ''Three-Page Sonata'' or the mystical ''Thoreau'' movement of the ''Concord'' Sonata? We'll never know.

For true Ives fans, the indisputable gem of the collection is a 68-year-old, fragile-sounding Ives playing and singing his patriotic song ''They Are There!'' in a hoarse but defiant voice in three takes from 1943. These were probably attempts to convince someone that the song, from 1942, was suitable for widespread patriotic use in wartime.

Indeed, it is a remarkable pastiche of phrases from well-known American tunes: ''Columbia the Gem of the Ocean,'' ''Tenting on the Old Campground,'' ''Rally Round the Flag,'' even a bit of the ''Star-Spangled Banner'': a history of American patriotism rolled into one rousing jingle. The song is a summation of Ives's late, some say hopelessly impractical, political philosophy, advocating a ''people's world nation'' which would leave ''each honest country free to live its own native life.''

No one will ever again sing the song with the irrepressible enthusiasm Ives mustered: ''Most wars are made by small, stupid, selfish bossing groups,/ while the people have no say./ But there'll come a day, you'll hear them say,/ when they'll smash all dictators to the wall!'' -- the word ''smash'' punctuated with huge forearm piano clusters that seem nearly to knock the wind out of him.

The performance is an infallible touchstone of Ives appreciation. Either he sounds like a silly, deluded old man trying to do something he can't (and it is true that his voice won't quite negotiate his own colorful key change at the end), or he sounds like the distilled essence of 19th-century American idealism making its last, fiery stand. The Columbia recording brought tears to my eyes 25 years ago, and I have rarely heard it since without a recurrence of that reaction. For those who sympathize, it is a powerfully moving personal document.

The inevitable questions are, why did Ives make these recordings, and what did they mean to him? Accounts vary. Vivian Perlis, an oral historian, quotes Mary Howard, the sound engineer at Ives's 1943 session: ''The reason he came was that he got letters from conductors and performers who were going to play something, asking how they should interpret the music . . . . 'Interpret! Interpret! If they don't know anything about music, well, I'll tell them.' '' Ms. Howard reported that Ives would play passages over and over, shouting, ''I've got to make them understand!''

Ives himself, in his ''Memos,'' gave a more modest rationale: ''Shortly I think I shall make a record. . . . This will be done for my own satisfaction and study, and also to save the trouble and eyesight of copying it all out.'' He added that his friends the composer Henry Cowell and the conductor Nicolas Slonimsky ''or some other acoustical genius'' could transcribe the recording.

Mr. Sinclair, on the other hand, suggests that after spending his life writing music that went unplayed, Ives merely wanted to be able to listen to his own music. And there is no doubt that Ives was disappointed with the quality of the recordings and did not wish them widely distributed.

He could have played better with one hand tied behind his back, he told Cowell. Ives admitted that the sound quality probably prevented the possibility of transcription. And he complained about the recording sessions in his ''Memos'': ''You get going, going good maybe the first time. . . . Then the nice engineer comes back and says you took over four minutes, and the last part was not recorded. As I remember, the last part was the only part of the 'going good' part.''

BUT who cares? We have so few intimate glimpses of Charles Ives. He was not a public musician, and his musical production ceased many years before his reputation began to spread. He spent the last three decades of his life a recluse and often an invalid. We have from him no recordings made for public consumption, as we do from Stravinsky, Copland, Rachmaninoff and even (via player-piano rolls) Ravel, Gershwin and Mahler.

We have only these 42 tracks of raucous, chaotic, fearless, determined pianism. Thanks to the noble efforts of Composers Recordings and a phalanx of devoted Ives researchers, we can now treasure every one of them.

Photo: Charles Ives played his own works on the piano in four recording sessions; they have been tidied up and released on a single CD. (W. Eugene Smith)

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