

Different Drummers

By Kyle Gann

Ives's "Universe"
Symphony

Musicians who bash Charles Ives completely misunderstand his appeal. It's become commonplace for critics to weep crocodile tears over Ives's alleged tumble from grace at the hands of musicologist Maynard Solomon, who charged him with falsifying his manuscripts to make it appear that he used massive dissonances and complex polyrhythms earlier than he actually did. The implication is that Ives, taken down several pegs, has fallen from the pantheon. In the first place, Ives scholars such as James Tenney and Stuart Fedder have abundantly refuted Solomon's claims without receiving equal notice. Secondly, the relevant truth is one that conservative critics should know best of all: technical innovations are not what makes an artist great.

What makes Ives the greatest composer of all time—pardon my opinion—is the astonishing directness with which he managed to splash his deepest feelings onto the page, without filter, model, or convention. No revisionist can diminish, decades after the fact, the potent melodic persuasiveness of *Thanksgiving* or the Third Symphony simply by casting doubt on a few dissonances. Ives's unprecedented transparency of consciousness demanded new technical means, and it hardly matters where or when he got them. If

tomorrow someone found a letter dated 1900 from Schoenberg to Ives, instructing him how to use tone clusters, polyrhythms, et al., the beauty of Ives's music would remain utterly unaffected. In their attempt to justify disregarding Ives, the haters of his music resort to specious critical reasoning.

Nevertheless, Ives's prophetic innovativeness is much in the air at the moment as a result of recent attempts to complete his visionary "Universe" Symphony. In his *Memos* Ives described the unfinished work: a cosmic plan divided into three parts, "Formation of the waters and mountains," "Earth," and "Heaven, the rise of all to the spiritual." In 1932 he wrote, "I had this fairly well sketched out, but not completed—in fact I... hope to finish it out completely this summer." He added, "In case I don't get to finishing this, somebody might try to work out the idea..." Around the musical and verbal sketches that John Kirkpatrick called "tragically fragmentary" grew a legend of an incomplete framework on which other composers were invited to build. At the core of the Symphony is the "pulse of the universe," or Life Pulse, a layer of percussion activity that divides a basic unit 16 seconds long into anywhere from 2 to 43 equal parts, creating an ordered cacophony of varying beats, the musical analogue to Thoreau's different drummers.

Larry Austin was the first to accept Ives's invitation to collaborate. After basing three of his own works on the "Universe"

sketches, he has now released his recording (with Gerhard Samuel leading the Cincinnati Philharmonia) of his completed 38-minute "Universe." Achieving the Life Pulse required five conductors and 14 "clicktracks," which players listened to over headphones to follow their tempos. And now comes Johnny Reinhard, who premiered a splinter of his own version March 18 at New York University Theater, at the concert of his American Festival of Microtonal Music.

While Austin added his own Ives-inspired notes in the work's final minutes, Reinhard is claiming that Ives actually *finished* the "Universe" during his lifetime, but that because of his impaired handwriting in later life the manuscript is a puzzle to piece together. As proof, Reinhard is preparing for 1996 performance his own version, 64 minutes long and containing, he says, not a note that isn't by Ives, all assembled from materials rented out by the current publisher. Where Austin used 20 percussionists, Reinhard hopes to get by with 11, but 27 minutes of the work, mostly the Life Pulse material, is virtually identical in both scores. From Reinhard's expansion, pianist Joshua Pierce played a 32-second piano solo titled "Heaven and Earth."

A veteran of audacious *Source* magazine, Austin has created the kind of "Universe" you'd expect from a '60s avant-gardist, mesmerizing but dryly literal, with empha-



Johnny Reinhard: taking on the "Universe"

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sis on the clocklike articulation of rhythmic patterns. A chime sounds every eight seconds, a flute repeats a staccato melody, gongs and mallets ring out their disparate time layers. The noise is wonderful, the conception astounding, but the piece isn't lovable in the way *Three Places in New England* or the "Concord" Sonata are; it focuses on the technical tricks that cynics think Ives's reputation hangs on, and misses his crucial spirituality. Was Ives's idea too abstract, or can Reinhard deliver a more soulful score? Though it's too soon to tell, "Heaven and Earth" was craggy and satisfyingly Ivesian, diverging into two streams of which one lumbered down to the earth while the other floated dissonantly into the sky. And Reinhard plans to perform the work without clicktracks, which may impart more humanity to the pulse at the expense of rhythmic accuracy.

What makes the reemergence of Ives's "Universe" topical as well

as historically gratifying is that Ives's conception of time spans divided by a multiplicity of pulses—an American archetype with no European roots—is hot right now. (Stockhausen began experimenting with such tempo structures only after reading Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources*.) Reinhard calls the Life Pulse, with its arithmetically additive buildup, a predecessor to minimalism, and totalist composers like Mikel Rouse, Michael Gordon, Larry Polansky, Ben Neill, and John Luther Adams are all working with similar multitempo structures. In their Downtown works Ives's mystic polytempos pour forth as though released from long suppression in the musical subconscious. And, like Ives, the totalists use the technique in the service of spirituality, asserting the Pythagorean truth that the cosmos is music and music is number made audible. A new generation is completing the "Universe" Symphony without knowing it. ■

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