

Local Boy Makes Polyrhythms

By Kyle Gann

Charles Ives's Birthplace

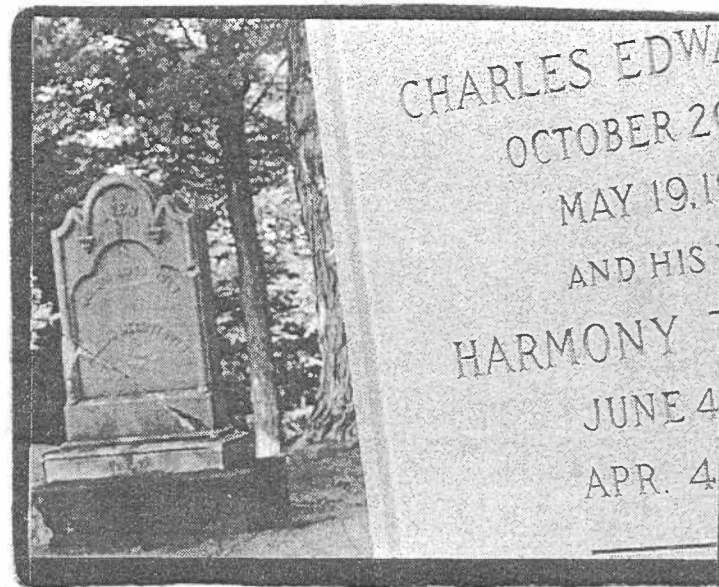
DANBURY, CONNECTICUT—The bank machine offered me a choice between English or Portuguese, and when I visited the Brazilian restaurant for a fried banana sandwich, the newspaper I picked up was in Portuguese, too. It's doubtful Charles Ives would recognize his hometown today; in the 1880s, Connecticut's immigrants were Irish and Italians, who made up the better part of George Ives's brass band. But there, on the corner of the Union Trust Bank, is a proud plaque: "On this site was born Charles Edward Ives, one of America's first great composers. Solitary radical in music, pioneer in polytonal harmonies and rhythm, his roots lay deep in his Danbury boyhood." Catch that? *One* of America's first great composers, tacitly admitting we've had a few. To see the bank that would grant that much, take the Hutchinson River Parkway to I-684 north, turn east on I-84, then, once in Connecticut, take Exit 5 to Main Street. At just under 70 miles from New York, it's an easy day trip to pay homage to America's greatest composer.

Ives's birthplace opened to the public last September. For years I drove to Danbury just to walk around the boarded-up old house and peer in the windows at the dusty chairs, dismantled plumbing, and ancient copies of the *Danbury News*. Now, Wednesday through Sunday between two and

five, you can tour the Ives family homestead, where Ives was born in 1874 and lived until age five. The house/museum, a few blocks from downtown on Mountainville Avenue, is administered by Danbury's Scott-Fanton Museum at 43 Main Street, where you'll find Director Lucye Boland an enthusiastic fount of Ives data.

Built around 1790, the house used to stand on Main Street where the bank is now, but Ives and his brother relocated it in 1929, and it's been moved twice since. Aside from a few chairs and a bed in the room he was born in, most of the furniture is period pieces with no connection to Ives. Present, though, is the six-octave spinet piano on which, as a child, Ives banged clusters with his fists trying to find a sonority that would give the effect of a drum; the instrument had been brought from New York by ox cart in the 1850s. The parlor contains memorabilia from cradle to grave: Ives's baby gown, his baseball cap from Yale, his death mask dotted with beard hairs.

Along the walls hang his Pulitzer prize from 1947, his membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters, his Yale diploma, and a citation from the Campaign Society, signed by musical greats such as Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell, Otto Luening, and Peter Yates. In a case is a 1942 letter in Ives's diabolic scrawl, protesting an article in *Modern Music*: "Music, because it has been enslaved by so-called order systems (by



Family plot: Ives's tombstone

German blackboard rules etc.) has been too much of a weak, soft, emasculated art... Heider says 'Tonality is not a starting point but a goal'—another cissy slaveish German remark—'jail' is right word here—'goal' ain't." Satisfying sentiments, if you can excuse, as some musicians and biographers haven't, Ives's rather homophobic way of expressing himself. (Cage refused to discuss Ives, and I've been told it was because Ives abandoned Henry Cowell after the latter's homosexual arrest.) Your Ives T-shirt will run you \$12.

Once there, you might as well do the Danbury tour. The corner of Main and Chapel Place was the center of Ives's youth. The house

where he spent his late teenage years, a rickety barn long since converted for multiple-family dwelling, stood, until spring, at 10 Chapel Place, a block west of Main. We saw it in January, but when we returned last week, it had been demolished, a vacant lot remaining. The suite of dentists' offices next door bears a plaque reading "1882 The Ives House," but Ives never lived there. Another house he did live in, on Stevens Street, is privately owned. Two churches where Ives worked as an organist (throwing in as many dissonant notes as he dared) still stand, both on West Street a few blocks off of Main: St. James Episcopal and Immanuel Luther-

an, known in Ives's day as the Second Congregational Church.

The pilgrimage's climax is a visit to the Wooster Cemetery on Ellsworth (not the Wooster Street Cemetery), northeast of downtown; get directions from the museum. Ives's grandfather, one of the cemetery's planners, secured his family the best spot, atop the hill in the very back. (Ives's great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather had helped found New Haven in 1638, and the Iveses had been prominent in Danbury since the 1790s.) Ives's tombstone bears an enigmatic verse, Psalm 108:2, chosen by his wife, Harmony: "Awake psaltery and harp: I myself will awake right early." Behind Ives's grave is that of his father, an amateur musical experimenter who died in his son's freshman year at Yale; it took 23 years for Ives to find another musician who understood what he was doing.

Ives's hometown reputation is hard to figure. Boland tells me that when an English orchestra visited and included Ives's *Unanswered Question* on their program, the locals were mystified. But at Ciao, a pleasant, reasonable Italian place with great food, we asked the waitress whether Ives was a big deal: "Yeah," she replied, "my teacher played his music in music appreciation class, but I knew about him anyway." You'll find Ciao in restaurant row, one block east of Main on, gratifyingly, Ives Street, named, certainly, not for the composer, but for one of his ancestors. In Europe you can't swing a cat by the tail without knocking some legend's bust off its pedestal, but there aren't many places in America where music history becomes this real. ■

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