

Reconstructing the Universe

BY KYLE GANN

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On stage in 1996

photo: Chris Lee

In his 1954 biography of Charles Ives, Henry Cowell told the world that Ives's largest score, his *Universe* Symphony, was an incomplete and unfinishable torso. In 1986, bassoonist and founder-director of the American Festival of Microtonal Music Johnny Reinhard ran across the sketches for the *Universe* at composer Lou Harrison's house and got a hunch that Cowell was wrong. Poring over them, he discerned a key to the work. It took him eight years to create his own version, two more to get it performed (at a 1996 concert I reviewed in these pages), and another nine to come out with a recording, which has just appeared on the Stereo Society label (stereosociety.com). Like the widow-suppressed third act of Alban Berg's opera *Lulu*, one of the mythical monuments of modern music has materialized before our ears. But how authentic is it?

The story Reinhard confronted held that the diabetic, nervously ill Ives was still adding to the piece in bits as late as 1951—but the sketches were mostly dated 1915, well before Ives's health problems started, when he was at the peak of his creative powers. Parts of the piece were scattered over unrelated-looking pages, but Reinhard noticed a set of curious notations, little circle, dot, and triangle symbols, which, when linked, seemed to draw the fragments into plausible order. He thinks Ives thought the piece too ambitious, possibly even too unmusical, to be performed and thus didn't admit that it was basically finished. Besides, who's Johnny Reinhard? Certainly an outsider in the world of Ives musicology—but then, sometimes outsiders notice things the insiders miss.

It's up to the recording to convince us that the key fits. The signal virtue of Reinhard's *Universe* is its conceptual consistency. Ives created a basic pulsation heard in a low bell every 16 seconds, which other percussion instruments divide up by playing two notes per measure (cymbal), three per measure (gong), four (bass drum), five (timpani), and so on up to 43 (small steel bars). This variously thickening and thinning "Pulse of the Cosmos" underlies the entire work. Over it run thick nets of melody, uniformly craggy and dissonant. To circumvent the difficulties of such daunting rhythmic complexity, Reinhard produced an overdubbed recording, using only 19 musicians to create the 74 parts needed (for instance, Ives calls for nine flutes, five bassoons, five trumpets, and 27 percussionists). As a result, it's not the most musical performance one could imagine, but the notes are all there for the hearing, often in a very dense texture.

The *music* doesn't sound like Ives—it's too abstract, with no quotations or clear melodies—but the *concept* sure does. Think of his *Unanswered Question*, with its strings symbolizing the universe, the woodwinds the frivolous masses, and then multiply those resources by 30 or so. With its relentless dissonance and half-hour buildup of competing pulses, Reinhard's *Universe* seems a crazy cross between Steve Reich and Carl Ruggles. To the extent that this is Ives circa 1915, it is certainly visionary. Can we be convinced it is what Ives was thinking?

The musicological community is not, as yet. Ives scholar Peter Burkholder responds, "I certainly do not subscribe to the idea that Reinhard has achieved a restoration of 'what Ives wrote'; his version is a realization." Given Reinhard's renegade status and roundabout methods, he and the academics haven't seen eye to eye. The latter are sticking for now to previous *Universes*: one by Larry Austin, recorded on Centaur with much new material composed by Austin, and one by David Porter, soon to be recorded, that is only one section of the piece. But Reinhard's is alone among them in its claim to be both complete and 100 percent Ives, and a showdown at the Musicology Corral is inevitable. Stay tuned.

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