

From “Charles Ives [1874-1954]” in *Music of the 20th c. Avant-garde*, Larry Sitsky, ed. Greenwood Press [2002]

“Between 1895 and 1915, Ives probably examined and used more systems of pitch organization than any other composer. He experimented with polytonality, atonality, forms of serialism, and mixtures of all of these at a time when the expanded tonality of Aleksandr Skryabin was considered the most daring musical language on the planet.

Ives’s earliest avant-garde works were nine choral psalm settings (1894-1901). These works are particularly rich in tonal pitch experiments. *Psalm 24*, for instance, uses chords that diverge from focal pitches by different intervals in each successive phrase. *Psalm 67* is written in two simultaneous keys, while *Psalm 150* pits diatonic and chromatic choirs singing in the same key but proceeding at different rates of harmonic rhythm.

Although initially much of what Ives wrote was “tonal” in that it departed from and returned to a focal pitch, by 1898 Ives was deriving pitch continuity from remembered natural or social events. In the *Yale-Princeton Football Game* (1898), the composer sought to replicate “the old wedge play” by devising a texture that begins with all twelve notes sounding at once, then, as Ives observes, “gradually pushing together down to one note at the end.” Later, in *Halloween* (1906), Ives imitated the effect of a night-time bonfire, where “the four strings play in four different and closely relate keys...canonic, not only in tones, but in phrases, accents and durations.”

By 1901, Ives had written atonal lines and counterpoint that maintained a high degree of variety and dissonance through the avoidance of pitch repetition, tonal intervals, and focal pitches. Among the earliest works in this category is *From the Steeple and the Mountains* (1901-02). *Steeple* also features an unusual retrograde technique in which the individual measures of the first portion of the work are later heard in reverse order.

Ives’s acute hearing predisposed him to an interest in tuning systems. His *Three Quarter-tone Pieces* is one of the first significant modern works to explore the compositional potential of a twenty-four tone subdivision of the octave. In “Some Quarter-tone Impressions (published posthumously in 1970), Ives was the first modern composer to postulate guidelines for a quarter-tone harmonic system.

Ives also freely juxtaposed dissimilar systems of pitch organization to suit his expressive ends. The best illustrations of this kind of pitch exploration are *The Unanswered Question* and *Central Park in the Dark* (both 1906). In the first work, plays slow-moving, consonant, diatonic homophony beneath agitated solo wind instruments that play disjunct, chromatic counterpoint. In *Central Park*, a string chorus plays soft, dense, dissonant counterpoint while wind instruments

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play snatches of tonal melody. In later years, Ives took the further step of combining quarter-tone and tempered ensembles in the *Universe Symphony* (1911-1928).

Ives was perhaps the most avid rhythmic innovator of the first half of the twentieth century. His approach to rhythm excluded nothing and sought to include everything he heard or could imagine. He was the first composer to use polyrhythms and polymeters extensively. In the second movement of the *Fourth Symphony*, he recreates the chaos of a great crowd by means of a dense overlay of winds and percussion playing as many as fifteen or more different bits of popular and abstract material embodying simultaneously a great variety of rhythms and meters. He uses similar techniques in other orchestral works, including the *Fourth of July* and *Three Places in New England*.

As early as 1901, Ives began to work with nontonal rhythms. In *From the Steeples and the Mountains* and in *The Cage* (1906), Ives invents rhythms that proceed according to abstract patterns such as movement from long to short values without repeated durations. *Over the Pavements* (1906-13), by contrast, grew out of his wish to recapture the street sounds outside his new apartment “of people going to and fro...the horses, fast trot, canter, sometimes slowing up to a walk...an occasional trolley throwing all rhythm out.” This work contains so-called irrational rhythms, such as quarter note triplets in the time of five eighth notes. Although many composers, including Elliott Carter, Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio, and others, have since used such rhythmic material, Ives alone worked with these materials before 1915.

Ives was the first to juxtapose nontonal and tonal rhythms. The chief effect in *The Gong On the Hook and Ladder* (1911) derives from the out-of-synch sounds produced during a parade by a marching band (keeping perfect 4/4 time) and the gong on a fire company’s engine (speeding up or slowing down depending on whether the engine was coming up or going down hills.)

Ives was also the first composer to write uncoordinated passages that juxtaposed specifically notated independent streams of material. In *The Unanswered Question*, quick, asymmetric, measured outbursts by wind instruments freely interrupt slow, continuous, measured string writing. The parts of both instrumental groups are written in 4/4 meter, but, in the final pages, following a long silence, the windows suddenly burst forth on their beat one at an indeterminate point in the midst of the strings’ measure...

Ives also composed the earliest substantial body of works employing metrical modulation as a developmental technique. This technique, later much used by Carter, may be seen in *Over the Pavements*, the *Piano Trio* (1904-05), the *Second Piano Sonata*, and other works. Metric modulation aims at a frequent change in the basic pulse through an overlapping of parts proceeding simultaneously at different speeds. For example, a line in continuous 8th note

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quintuplets may begin in a passage proceeding in triple meter, and, if the composer brings this new voice to the fore---by emphasizing it registrally, dynamically, or by assigning quintuplet values to more and more instruments---the listener begins to hear a “modulation” of basic pulse from three quarters to five eighths.

Ives also scored with great imagination. The viola “fiddle” in the “wrong key” and the mouth harp accompaniments in *Washington’s Birthday* (1909) and the four sets of bells with brass in *From the Steeples and the Mountains* are characteristic examples of Ives’s avant-garde orchestral writing. George Crumb and many other mid-century composers have noted their debt to Ives’s inspired eagerness to project special emotional qualities through the employment of unusual timbral resources.

Although he was not the first to distribute instruments spatially in the performance environment, Ives certainly conceived more different effects and used more unusual spatial arrangements than previous composers had done. A fine example of this practice is the distant choir of five violins and harp in the fourth movement of the *Fourth Symphony*. Ives wrote at length about musical space in “Music and Its Future” (1933). In this essay, he recalls “[t]he writer remembers hearing, when a boy, the music of a band in which the players were arranged in two or three groups around the town square. The main group... played the main themes, while the others, from the neighboring roofs and verandahs, played the variations...a man...living nearer the variations insisted that they were the real music and it was more beautiful to hear the hymn come sifting through them.” Similar ideas in Ives’s music became a central component in the works of Henry Brant and were later fashionable for a time with European composers like Stockhausen and Boulez...

It is evident that Ives was an avant-garde composer of the highest type. He never wrote merely to shock, to call attention to himself, or to denigrate the works of others. He sought, rather, to elevate his listeners by celebrating the complexity and interrelatedness of life’s manifold attributes. Paradoxically, he never cultivated the role of “avant-gardist” and could not have imagined himself on the fringes of society. Ives would have been far happier if the public of his day had followed him “onto the mountains.”