

From “*The Vocal Music of Charles Ives*,” *Parnassus* [Fall 1975]

“...Nearly all of Ives’ songs are at least slightly “eccentric” in the context of their time. I include in this category even that substantial number of the total output--- say, thirty or forty---which one ought to set aside as juvenilia, or, as vain attempts to compose in a polite idiom. Cowell remarks that Ives wrote songs of this type throughout his creative life, whenever, as a result of criticism from “serious” musicians, his confidence in experiment flagged. However that may be, the “polite” idiom was thoroughly foreign, both to his temperament and to his musical gifts...The post-Brahmsian pitch and rhythmic vocabulary simply would not permit Ives to express what he needed to say; thus, he ran roughshod over it, or tried to bend it to his creative requirements. I do not believe that the eccentricities in Ives’ more traditional songs are the result of “ineptitude” half so much as “frustration.”...

Ives was as much a philosopher as a composer. The basic outline of the Prologue to *Essays Before A Sonata* gives a clear explanation of how his music evolved as it did. One begins with an interconnected, unified, benevolent Cosmos. One defines Civilization as that selfless branch of human aspiration which is concerned with progress toward a greater understanding of the relatedness and goodness of Things. One defines Music as that expressive branch of Civilization which deals exclusively in the registration of intangible emotions. Finally, one sees that the role of the Composer in society should be to foster spiritual insight through the medium of Musical Composition. One further characterizes Music as consisting of two unequal qualities: Substance and Manner.

The former, which is concerned with “Creative Truth,” breadth of Spiritual Consciousness, Sincerity and Goodness, must be present in a musical work if it is to have lasting value. Musical Substance, writes Ives, is not to be discovered through analysis, but through Intuition.

Manner, which is concerned with refinement of craft, logic, and elegance of expression is the lesser part of Music, because it is “pessimistic”: i.e. it does not believe in the Unity or innate Goodness of the Cosmos; or, more properly, it does not care about the nature of Things. Further, since Manner is not interested in the improvement of human beings, it should not be the principal tool of a sincere composer.

His task should be to grow toward ever greater understanding of the relatedness, worthiness, and equality, of everything in this world. He should challenge his audience to follow his insights, to grow with him toward high Spiritual Truths.

Ives compares Emerson (Substance) with Poe (Manner), saying that Emerson is the greater poet because he is “optimistic,” while Poe is a “pessimist.” In other

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words, Emerson possesses more insight into the true nature of Things. How do we know this?, Ives asks. We feel that it is so---we understand it intuitively. We sense that Emerson is greater because he makes us feel that he is a very “good” Man, and further, that he believes that the rest of us are just as good as he is...

In our time, the idea of a “good” composer, who delivers intangible sermons, who leads his flock to the heights, is so *démodé* as to seem laughable. “Meaning” has been so corrupted, our emotions have been so skillfully manipulated, our capacity to feel so deadened, that we are prone to treat the seer in Ives as a quaint cultural artifact, although he asserts that this is his prime attribute.

It is particularly difficult for the writer bred on “Manner” to warm entirely to the “Substance” of certain of Ives’ songs, for songs have texts, and are, therefore, manifestations of a collaborative Artform. All too often, Ives is so interested in the area of speculation suggested by a given collection of words, that he fails to consider whether there might not be a superior set of words---words more equal to his setting---to be found elsewhere.

Whatever Ives may say about the relative unimportance of Manner, he has, in his efforts to grow spiritually, by freeing his imagination to seek new compositional means, created a technical palette of enormous richness and sophistication. Most well-known poets of Substance in Ives’ time were less accomplished than he at realizing Emerson’s vision of Art.

Given Ives’ intent to make his works as sincere, emotive, and emotionally all-inclusive as he could---and let us insert here that he did as impressive a job in this regard as any composer has ever done---we ought, none-the-less, to admit that his Manner is a very important ingredient of his Substance. If we should spend more time in scrutinizing it than Ives might have thought necessary or desirable, then it is simply because he has given those of us who live in this Age of Manner so very much to talk about. Too, one does not set out first to describe the “Sincerity” of a particular cadence without risk of seeing one’s own Substance transmogrified to a plume of mannered smoke...”