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Review of: Charles Ives: The Ideas Behind The Music by J. Peter Burkholder

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Charles Ives: The Ideas Behind the Music

J. Peter Burkholder

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Geoffrey Block

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Within the past three years, in provocative articles that expand upon the underlying assumptions and far-reaching implications of his comprehensive and insightful dissertation on Ives, the musicological world is rapidly discovering the original voice of J. Peter Burkholder.¹ Although a chapter (Chapter 5) excerpted from this important work has already appeared,² readers of *The Ideas Behind the Music* otherwise unfamiliar with the dissertation (unavailable through University Microfilms International) must wait for a complementary second volume, *The Evolution of Charles Ives's Music*, to receive the full impact of what Burkholder has to say about Ives. Despite this perhaps unavoidable obstacle, the incomplete picture presented in the volume under review (Chapters 1–4 of Burkholder's dissertation) should not deter anyone from becoming immersed in "the first detailed history of Charles Ives's aesthetics" (p. x).

Throughout this work Burkholder challenges the prevailing view of Ives as a Transcendental composer, a myth fostered in large part by Ives himself in his *Essays Before a Sonata*. After a detailed investigation into the origins and descent of this over-simplified and usually unquestioned assumption, Burkholder shows that Ives was never exclusively a Transcendentalist (even in "Concord" Sonata, his central Transcendental work, only the "Emerson" and "Thoreau" movements can

¹ See J. Peter Burkholder, "The Evolution of Charles Ives's Music: Aesthetics, Quotation, Technique," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1983); "Museum Pieces: The Historicist Mainstream in Music of the Last Hundred Years," *The Journal of Musicology* II/2 (Spring 1983), 115–34; "Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classical Music," *19th-Century Music* VIII/1 (Summer 1984), 75–83; and "Johannes Martini and the Imitation Mass of the Late Fifteenth Century," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* XXXVIII (Fall 1985), 470–523. The American Musicological Society considered this last essay worthy of its prestigious Alfred Einstein Award for "the musicological article deemed most significant by a young scholar."

² Burkholder, "'Quotation' and Emulation: Charles Ives's Uses of His Models," *The Musical Quarterly* LXXI/1 (1985), 1–26.

rightly stake such a claim), that few of Ives's ideas before he wrote his *Essays* were derived from Transcendentalism, and that Ives's devotion to Emerson and Thoreau most likely came late in his career. According to Burkholder the main idea that Ives credited to the Transcendentalists, "the innate goodness of man," stemmed from his father and his Christian background. At most, this doctrine, central to Ives, was peripheral to Emerson. Burkholder convinces us that Ives used such Transcendental ideas as Emerson's idealism and Thoreau's isolationism selectively, and that he freely interpreted their writings in order to justify and lend support to his own independently developed ideas.

The successful refutation and clarification of the Transcendental Ives is only the most prominent of the myths that Burkholder puts to rest. Nearly every chapter is rich in ideas about Ives that help us to understand the misconceptions surrounding the composer's complex story. For example, in Chapter 6, "Years of Apprenticeship (1894–1902): Yale and New York," Burkholder reassesses the negative role almost invariably assigned to Horatio Parker, Ives's music professor at Yale. Acknowledging Parker's rejection of Ives's experimental music, Burkholder nevertheless persuades us of Parker's positively crucial role in shaping Ives's musical development within the European art tradition. Burkholder reviews the significance of Ives's friend and musical colleague at Center Church in New Haven, John Griggs, who deserves credit (rather than Emerson) for introducing Ives to the important "substance" and "manner" duality that dominates the extended "Epilogue" of the *Essays*. He also examines the heretofore unexplored influence of Ives's English professor, William Lyon Phelps, who introduced numerous poems that Ives would set to music, and who may have inspired Ives's interest in the Concord Transcendentalists, including an essay on Emerson, now lost, that Ives unsuccessfully submitted to the *Yale Literary Magazine*. Finally in this chapter Burkholder traces with characteristic brevity, precision, and clear thinking the evolution, during the four years after he left Yale, of Ives's decision to abandon professional performing and to devote his musical attention almost exclusively to composition, while pursuing a full-time career in the insurance business.

For the years of "Innovation and Synthesis (1902–1908)," Burkholder outlines the changes brought about by Ives's creative isolation, his incorporation of experimental techniques and the vernacular tradition into large classical genres, and the increased dissonance, rhythmic complexity, and performing difficulties of the works Ives composed during these years. In yet another reassessment that forms the core of the "Years of Maturity (1908–1917)," Burkholder offers a view that attributes a vast influence to Harmony, whom Ives married in 1908 after an extended courtship. Burkholder explains convincingly

that Harmony influenced her husband to incorporate his youthful experiences, literature, and uniquely American themes such as “Concord” Transcendentalism in his musical compositions, ideas that gave Ives a new direction and led to some of his greatest works, including “Concord” Sonata and the Fourth Symphony.

After his refutation of the Transcendental Ives, Burkholder returns in the final chapters to examine the Transcendental influences that can be verified. While stating earlier that important influences “may leave the fewest traces” (p. 38), Burkholder never loses an opportunity to cite the lack of evidence upon which a monolithic perception of the Transcendental Ives has been built. His own case is so strong that he might be accused of overkill, but Burkholder’s desire to rectify the errors of the past should excuse his obsession with this issue. Also in these chapters Burkholder summarizes the period of Ives’s “last works” (1918–1926) and the long final years of “tinkering” (1927–1954). Since Ives composed almost nothing in 1917 or during the months before his October heart attack in 1918, Burkholder offers an original hypothesis in which Ives’s decline as a composer should not be attributed primarily to ill health. Instead Burkholder maintains Ives gave up composing because he was simply unable to live up to the ideas of his *Essays* and to grow as a musical artist.

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We expect a trail-blazing new interpretation of Ives’s aesthetics to consider important earlier studies, especially Frank Rossiter’s *Charles Ives and His America* (New York: Liveright, 1975). And Burkholder does cite his predecessor directly four times, including the suggestion that “Ives’s family may never have intended him to pursue music as a career,” (Burkholder, p. 76) and Rossiter’s theory to explain why Ives abandoned composition. Burkholder also tacitly refutes another major idea of Rossiter, that Ives’s creative isolation was both tragic and unnecessary.

But perhaps Burkholder should have acknowledged and responded to Rossiter’s controversial but strongly-argued interpretation of the aesthetic consequences and broader psycho-sexual implications behind what consonance and dissonance meant to Ives and the “masculinity-femininity” duality that appears as an *idée fixe* throughout Ives’s *Memos*. On only one occasion (page 51) and for another purpose—to clarify Ives’s “sound” versus “music” duality—does Burkholder refer to Ives’s distaste for “pretty little sounds” [The footnote to this passage also contains a rare factual error, a misidentification of the second movement of Haydn’s Surprise Symphony as an adagio rather than an andante].

If Burkholder’s companion volume on the evolution of Ives’s music attains the high standards of his dissertation and published articles, Ives enthusiasts will soon have the good fortune to read the most com-

prehensive and perceptive critical account yet published of this mysterious and frequently misunderstood American musical hero. For the time being we can savor *The Ideas Behind the Music*, which on its own terms can stand beside the most impressive accomplishments of Ives scholarship.

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