

# CHARLES IVES

(1874 - 1954)

## Piano Sonata No. 2

"Concord, Mass., 1840-1860"

(49:45)

- 1** I. Emerson (17:42)
- 2** II. Hawthorne (12:21)
- 3** III. The Alcotts (6:54)
- 4** IV. Thoreau (12:36)

# JOHN HARBISON

(b. 1938)

## Piano Sonata No. 1

"Roger Sessions In Memoriam"

(16:44)

**Robert Shannon, piano**

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Total Time 66:39

## Notes: Ives, *Concord Sonata*

by James Hepokoski

Not only is Charles Ives's Piano Sonata No. 2, subtitled "Concord, Mass., 1840-1860," one of the central works of that composer's career, it is often regarded as the deepest, most durable – and probably also the most original – piano sonata ever penned by an American composer. Ostensibly a set of four "modern" portraits of some of the "New England Transcendentalists" of the nineteenth century (Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcott family, and Thoreau), it is also a work profoundly in dialogue with the established sonata tradition. In it we encounter the inimitable Ivesian style at its most characteristic: the juxtapositions of radically differing musical idioms and moods; the extraordinarily high level of complex counterpoint and strong, often thick dissonance; the frequent quotation of musical memory traces, mostly fragments of American popular songs and hymns of the nineteenth century; the "anti-formal" merging of familiar gestures with flights of urgent, quasi-improvisatory freedom; the sense of a rugged, uncompromising challenge thrown down before the listener; and so on.

What is most remarkable is that Ives composed it largely before World War I, in relative musical isolation. Although it did not become widely known for decades, it could not have differed more strikingly from the genteel, Germanic romanticism that was dominating the American art composition of its period. Ives had begun to sketch ideas for several separate projects dealing with New England literary figures as early as 1904. It was not until 1911-15, however, that these ideas coalesced and were expanded into the four-movement Concord Sonata. Fully aware of the limited market for such a confrontational

work, Ives had the sonata privately printed in 1920. This rare first edition, with whose readings the composer then tinkered for years, was eventually replaced by a "second edition" published by Arrow Music Press in 1947, a time when interest in Ives's music was finally growing. It is this edition that is the basis for most performances, although, as the composer suggested, certain free elements of individual choices – and even individual mood – can lead to notably different interpretations.

For Ives the Concord Sonata was nothing less than a summary illustration of his world view and aesthetic philosophy, and he elaborated these ideas further in a companion volume of provocative commentary, *Essays before a Sonata*, which he also had printed in 1920. And in fact, the two items – sonata and essays – are complementary, the two main constituents of an inseparable "Concord Sonata complex." Extended excerpts from the essays precede each of the four movements in the musical score, and each of the four related essays (of the six in the entire collection) is preceded by the reproduction of the first page of the relevant musical score. From one perspective, the music exemplifies the verbal concepts; from another, the *Essays* strive to translate into words the aesthetic urge that gave rise to the music.

At the heart of Ives's conception of things at the time of the Concord Sonata lie three central ideas, which co-exist in the piece in a swirling, unpredictable blend. The first was his virtually total identification with the honest, robust self-reliance – and the utopian mysticism of the commonplace – associated with the New England Transcendentalists. This was a spiritual outlook in which all of the seeming contradictions and antagonisms of what Ives called life's "stream-of-change" could be affirmed as fundamentally reconcilable as part of an all-

embracing, fluid (Emersonian) "Over-Soul." The more contradictory, vague, dissonant, or imprecise our experiences, the more they can remind us of that ungraspable higher unity that ultimately embraces and neutralizes them all. In such a conception the function of art – and music – was ethical: it was to lead us away from the snares of a merely comfortable or pleasurable stasis toward that more active, higher unity.

The second central idea was Ives's distress with many of the social and intellectual trends of the everyday world of his own time, an anxiety manifested in his mission to recapture the naiveté and innocence of the sounds and flavors of his Danbury, Connecticut boyhood. Characteristically, these images from the past were retrievable only in fragments: what had once been whole and pure was now shattered and only partially recoverable in a fallen world. The third idea, as many recent commentators have observed, was Ives's personal obsession with the issue of art music's presumed threat to his "masculine" identity. This is an intricate and controversial topic, as might be supposed, but with regard to his music it often surfaces as a combative mix of shock, dissonance, and willfully cantankerous individualism whose aim, it appears, is to furnish a sufficient display of confrontation to escape the feared charges of overrefinement and effeminacy.

Ultimately, Ives's unique music presents us with a provocative contradiction. On the one hand, for its time it is undeniably radical in its sense of musical sound, collage effects, discontinuity, and liberation from closed, architectonic form. On the other hand, these modern techniques are for the most part pressed into the service of an essentially conservative or traditionalist cause, that of longing to reclaim the integrity of a simpler, lost past in the midst of the increasingly

splintered world of the present.

The first movement, "Emerson," provides the grandiloquent gateway to the sonata. This is heaven-storming music that revels in its own disorder: "As thoughts surge to [Emerson's] mind, he fills the heavens with them, crowds them in, if necessary, but seldom arranges them along the ground first. . . . [Emerson] goes out and shouts: 'I'm thinking of the sun's glory today and I'll let his light shine through me. I'll say any damn thing that this inspires me with.'" Here we find, among other prominent ideas, the four-note motive from the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to suggest "the soul of humanity knocking at the door of the divine mysteries, radiant in the faith that it will be opened." The composer suggests the freedom and vastness of Emerson's thought in several ways. In the largely unmeasured outer "prose" sections, for instance, bar-lines are scarce (as they are in most of the sonata as a whole), the utterances unconfined; similarly, Ives shied away from fixing the tempos too precisely, because "a metronome cannot measure Emerson's mind and oversoul, any more than the old Concord Steeple bell could." The music does become more regular, however, in the central "verse" episode, reflecting "some of Emerson's poetry." This is a clear set of variations on a brief, C-tonic melodic idea (recognizable as beginning with the pitches 6-5-4-2-1).

The "Hawthorne" movement, the scherzo of the sonata and the most radical of the four in its capriciousness and occasionally chaotic dissonance, tries to capture the "half-childlike, half-fairylike phantasmal realms" that appear in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, particularly in "The Celestial Railroad" and "Feathertop." For the most part, though, the piece's protagonist is not Hawthorne but Ives remembering himself as a child – as one who would have let these fantastic tales set his

imagination aflame. Thus this movement is actually a "celestial-railroad" journey from Hawthorne at the beginning into the pure subjectivity of Ives's reconstruction of his "lost" Danbury boyhood. It includes solemn hymns heard in a churchyard, a non-Hawthornian small-town parade (quoting Ives's own *Country Band March*), and, at the end – "suddenly at twilight" – the climactic "national" feeling of *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*.

The third movement, "The Alcotts," represents not an individual but a family. In this wistful reflection on domestic integrity and "spiritual sturdiness" – the musical equivalent of a creased and faded tintype photograph found by chance in an old album – Ives conjures up the humble family parlor, where we can hear "the little old spinet piano Sophia Thoreau gave to the Alcott children, on which Beth played the old Scotch airs, and played at the *Fifth Symphony*." We may also hear fragments of Zeuner's "Missionary Chant" at the beginning, and the movement is pervaded by what Ives called the "human-faith-melody" that floats above Concord. It is first heard as the third musical phrase of the movement, on B-flat (but above an immobile A-flat chord), and it rings out as the climactic peroration at the end, now "transcendentally" elevated a whole step higher, onto C.

The sonata's finale, "Thoreau," follows that writer's experiences and meditations through a single autumn day at Walden Pond. The opening, for example, suggests a "shadow-thought" in the morning mist, and this musical idea recurs, slightly varied, at the end – that is, at dusk – surely to suggest the underlying unity of opposites. The goal of the movement is to bring ourselves (with Thoreau) into a passive, personal unity with the "vibrating hum" and "tempo" of nature. To this end, one of the piece's recurring ideas is a slow, circular ostinato

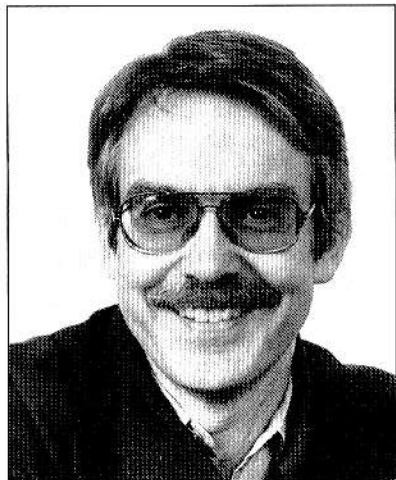
over which is placed a static “swaying” led by a phrase (“Down in the Cornfield”) from Poster’s *Massa’s in De Cold, Cold Ground* – the quiet centering around the spiritual essence of an old American tune, or “homely burden,” as Ives put it. The mist motive at the very end, though, leads not to closure but fades out instead on an eloquent question mark. At the heart of things, in this vision, abides an unresolvable mystery, “the unknowable we know.”

**John Harbison**  
*Piano Sonata No. 1*  
**A Note by the Composer**

The Piano Sonata No. 1 was written for Robert Shannon, Ursula Oppens, and Alan Feinberg on a consortium commission from the National Endowment for the Arts. It bears the inscription “Roger Sessions In Memoriam.”

It was composed at Token Creek, Wisconsin in the summer of 1985. The three performers for whom it was written have each brought their own sense of proportion, contrast and piano sonority to the piece, which was very much my intention. The Sonata invites the performer’s play of personality and fantasy.

There are four main sections, the two faster ones coming in the middle, but the articulations between them are not emphatic, and the piece is conjured up rather than premeditated. Its fifteen minute span contains very little literal repetition: virtuosic passages erupt quite unexpectedly: the music retains the shape of its natural occurrence, unformalized. Much variety of touch and tone is required, most obviously in two passages near the end, first a whirling elaboration of a big chord, which drives the piece for a moment out of its orbit, then later a strange staccato hallucination which seems to drop in from outside, both delaying and necessitating the ending.



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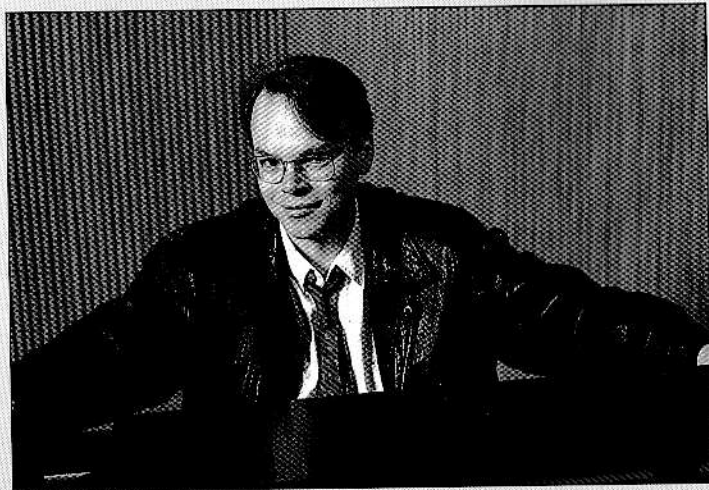
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**Robert Shannon** has performed and taught throughout the United States, Europe and Central America. He is particularly noted for his performances of twentieth century American works, including the sonatas of Ives and the solo piano works of George Crumb. A native of Minnesota, Mr. Shannon studied at the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, where he is now Professor of Pianoforte. His teachers have included Jack Radunsky at Oberlin, and Ania Dorfmann at Juilliard, and he works now with Dorothy Taubman. His widely acclaimed recording of the Ives Violin Sonatas, with violinist Gregory Fulkerson, is available on Bridge BCD9024.



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