GORDON BINKERD
(1916-2003)

Essays for the Piano IV, V, VI (16:56)

1) IV. Lightly, like Music running (6:03)
2) V. She, to Him (5:56)
3) VI. Shut out that Moon (4:57)

CHARLES IVES
(1874-1954)

Second Piano Sonata (46:26)
"Concord, Mass., 1840-1860"
(*John Kirkpatrick, final edition*)

4) I. Emerson (16:13)
5) II. Hawthorne (12:35)
6) III. The Alcotts (6:10)
7) IV. Thoreau (11:28)

MARTIN PERRY, piano

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Notes by Drew Massey

In the middle of the twentieth century, there was a quiet but firm strain of accessible modernism which gained a foothold among American composers and audiences. Some of this music – particularly the "Americana" works of Aaron Copland such as *Appalachian Spring* and *Rodeo* – has remained in the public ear. But many of these works, written by university trained composers at a time when concert composition in America was coming into its own, has been largely forgotten.

Gordon Binkerd (1916-2003) was among those composers who faded from view. Educated at Eastman and Harvard, he worked for over twenty years as a professor of composition at University of Illinois while living on a farm on the outskirts of Champaign-Urbana. Like certain other American composers such as Roy Harris and Hunter Johnson, Binkerd actively cultivated his image as a rugged man writing music in praise of America's wild pastoral beauty. The music critic Dorothy Veinus Hagan wrote that Binkerd *"is a man who delights in making things grow …. He is a strongly built, energetic man who is fond of chopping wood in moments of relaxation. In fact, his nature is the exact opposite of 'Bohemian.'"* At the same time, Binkerd's regionalism was intensely cultivated, and he was a composer who was fully aware of the musical past. The music scholar

Howard Pollack has noted that "Binkerd's classical eloquence had no room for the picturesque or sentimental, and his kind of dark, romantic regionalism probably was matched sooner by the novels of Willa Cather than by the symphonies of Hanson or anyone else. In any event, Binkerd's regionalism was of a particularly subtle and refined order, and, perhaps, was seen best in the light of various classical models." Like Johnson and Harris, Binkerd defined his mature sensibility in terms of a rural aesthetic which sought to provide a sound for the wide open spaces of the American Midwest, while continuing to write in classical forms such as sonata, symphony, and art song.

Binkerd's *Essays* were published in 1976. The three featured here (numbers four through six) are all based on songs that Binkerd wrote. The ethereal and richly chromatic fourth *Essay* resets a song with text by the American poet Jean Garrigue. Its searching, imploring opening, gradually gives way to a shimmering passage in the right hand, which floats above the singing melody in the left. The Fifth and Sixth *Essays* are based on two songs that Binkerd published as part of *Shut out that Moon*, a song cycle which used texts by the Victorian poet Thomas Hardy, in 1968. "She, to Him," begins with a brooding, diffuse texture which is reminiscent of the opening of the "Emerson" movement of Ives's *Concord* Sonata, and the rich handfuls of rolled chords in the middle section (which correspond to Hardy's memorable line "Remember mine the loss is, not the blame") rhyme with the thick chordal smears in the Ives's "Hawthorne" movement. "Shut out that moon," the last *Essay*, is a sprightly, unpredictable show piece which spans the whole range of the keyboard, punctuating an unpredictable metric layout over a polytonal harmony, juxtaposing accented staccato sections with boldly lyrical ones.

Few works show modernism's uneasy debt to romanticism as clearly as Charles Ives's Second Piano Sonata, subtitled "Concord, Mass., 1840-1860," does. This piece sits as one of the central works in the canon of American modernist music, and is a sprawling four movement work featuring musical portraits of the American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Alcott Family, and Henry David Thoreau. Ives described it as follows:

The whole is an attempt to present (one person's) impression of the spirit of transcendentalism that is associated in the minds of many with Concord, Mass., of over a half century ago. This is undertaken in impressionistic pictures of Emerson and Thoreau, a sketch of the Alcotts, and a Scherzo supposed to reflect a lighter quality which is often found in the fantastic side of Hawthorne. The first and last movements do not aim to give any programs of the life or of any particular

work of either Emerson or Thoreau but rather composite pictures or impressions. They are, however, so general in outline that, from some viewpoints, they may be as far from accepted impressions (from true conceptions, for that matter) as the valuation which they purport to be of the influence of the life, thought, and character of Emerson and Thoreau is inadequate.

Despite Ives's insistence that the *Concord* is a modernist, kaleidoscopic homage to transcendentalism – his repeated mention of impressionism in the passage above might make a listener expect a sound similar to Debussy's – the *Concord* also follows the general formal conventions of a large-scale romantic piano sonata, with a fast opening movement ("Emerson"), a scherzo ("Hawthorne"), a slow movement ("The Alcotts"), and a finale, in this case a slow peroration ("Thoreau").

The murky origins and mixed initial reception of the *Concord* Sonata help show why Ives has come to be seen as both a romantic genius and a standoffish modernist. Although the precise compositional history of the *Concord* may never be settled, Ives worked on the piece throughout the 1910s and by 1920 had published the Sonata himself. He then sent copies of both the score and *Essays Before a Sonata* (a book-length program note) to various members of the classical music establishment throughout the United States. The more or less chaotic dissemination of the work contributed to a view of Ives as a composer crying out in the wilderness, and his supporters depicted Ives as a tragically neglected man, bringing America's national music culture into the twentieth century through his own heroic effort.

Most of the initial reviews of the publication of the Sonata were chilly and skeptical, leading to an opposing view of Ives not as a misunderstood genius but rather as a composer out of step with the times, a cranky old Yankee who was not really in control of his compositional faculty and hostile to performers. For example, an anonymous review of the *Concord* that was published in the *Musical Courier* in 1921 commented tartly: *"We are sore [sic] afraid we shall never know whether or not we can stand his music. Unless Charles drops into our sanctum some time and insists upon playing 'Emerson,' 'Hawthorne,' 'The Alcotts,' and 'Thoreau' … we know we shall never know, for nobody else will ever be able to play it for us, since the musical nomenclature of Charles is entirely a personal affair."* Even those receptive to the *Concord* Sonata seemed to view it as an almost celestial music, one meant to be held in the mind rather than the fingers. Henry Bellamann, one of Ives's earliest champions, wrote:

"The first movement is not pianistic— little of the sonata is—probably no effort was made to make any part

of it pianistic. It must have been conceived abstractly. One misses, almost throughout, familiar pianistic outlines. In reading it away from the piano there is almost the feeling of perusing an orchestral score. The hand does not unconsciously grope for the keyboard. Yet many purely pianistic effects are contrived and effectively used. The beauty of this division of the work is severe and difficult. It is a beauty of high and remote things. It is austere. It is informed with the stark and ascetic beauty of lonely and alien reaches of human imagination."

The piece achieved such great heights, Bellamann proposed, because it plumbed the depths of the performer's technical command of the instrument. But it was precisely this uncompromising virtuosity, in Bellamann's mind, which vouchsafed for the purity of Ives's musical conception throughout the work.

Ives himself helped to advance the idea that the difficulty of his works pointed to his own musical idealism—that he would not compromise the integrity of his musical imagination, even if it meant forgoing public performance of his works. Bellamann quoted Ives as saying, "The sonata is an experiment which perhaps goes too far. It was not written primarily to be played—certainly not to be played with two hands." Although a self-effacing tone is suggested in Bellamann's essay, Ives did grow exasperated with the notion that his "difficult" music might remain unperformed. Ives exclaimed near the end of *Essays Before a Sonata*, *"Why must the scarecrow of the keyboard—the tyrant in terms of the mechanism … stare into every measure? Is it the composer's fault that man has only ten fingers?"*

In addition to its considerable demands on the performer, the *Concord* Sonata was, from its initial conception, a work which was constantly evolving. This instability as a text is one of *Concord's* more striking features, and the first movement, in particular, has become a symbol of Ives's seemingly endless appetite for revision and self borrowing. The Sonata is situated among a constellation of related works such as the *Emerson Overture* and the *Celestial Rail-Road*, and Ives marked up at least fifteen different copies of the first edition of the Sonata alone. In Ives's mind, the urge to rework the material had consequences for performances of the *Concord*, too: he advised the man who gave the first full performance of the Sonata to *"do whatever seems natural or best to you, though not necessarily the same way each time. The music, in its playing as well as in its substance, should have some of Emerson's freedom in action and thought—of the explorer 'taking the ultimate of today as the first of tomorrow's new series.'"*

That man was John Kirkpatrick (1905-1991), a pianist and editor of extraordinarily exacting discipline throughout his career, and in many ways the perfect foil to Ives's expansive and rhapsodic view of this ferociously difficult work. Kirkpatrick first happened upon the luxuriant red cloth binding of Ives's self-published *Concord* edition at Katherine Ruth Heyman's apartment while studying in Paris during 1927. At the time, Kirkpatrick was still a young pianist struggling to find his niche as a musician. The *Concord* was an intermittent project for Kirkpatrick during this early period; after Ives sent him a copy of the score in 1927, the two men were not in touch for another six years. Beginning in 1933, Kirkpatrick gradually became more invested in the work, occasionally performing individual movements at recitals. During this gestational period, Kirkpatrick started to correspond with Ives about the *Concord*, writing letters that are remarkable for their candor and restless curiosity. Kirkpatrick tirelessly probed the musical issues involved in

the *Concord* as well as the weighty ideas that undergirded it. For Ives's part, he appreciated Kirkpatrick's interest in the Sonata, while at the same time remaining reclusive: although the men lived less than an hour apart, they did not meet in person until 1937.

Kirkpatrick finally gave the New York premiere of the *Concord* in January of 1939. That concert – and the encore performance which followed the next month – together marked a watershed moment for Ives's public reception, with mention of the concert in *Time*, the *New York Times*, and *The Musical Courier*. Lawrence Gilman's particularly ecstatic review in the *New York Herald Tribune* enthused that the *Concord* was *"exceptionally great music—it is, indeed, the greatest music composed by an American and the most deeply and essentially American in impulse and implication."*

Although the concert was the culmination of an extended period of study for Kirkpatrick, it was only the beginning of his life-long involvement with the *Concord* Sonata as both a performer and an editor. He played it hundreds of times, recorded it twice – first for Columbia, and then for CBS, earning an Edison Award (the Dutch equivalent of a Grammy) for the second performance – and made at least five separate editorial efforts at the work. Kirkpatrick's editions spanned his

entire active career with the Sonata. There is a lost edition from the 1930s; an abandoned effort to help Ives with the second edition in the early 1940s; one he prepared in 1953; a retouched copy of the second edition, and a final edition, carried out in the 1980s, a culmination of a life's contemplation of Ives's labyrinthine sonata.

This recording by Martin Perry marks the first time that Kirkpatrick's final edition has been commercially released. Kirkpatrick's take on the sonata by the 1980s went far beyond what many would expect from an edition: Ives's thick dissonances have been replaced at points with pure octave and fifths, the notation has been clarified throughout, and the meter of the work has been meticulously notated by Kirkpatrick. It was in many ways an act of musical and spiritual purification for Kirkpatrick, and he called this edition his "letter to the world." In a speech he gave on the occasion of his eightieth birthday he gave a valedictory look at his involvement with Ives's music, concluding by saying that he found that Ives's music had arrived at a "strange stopping place" because of Ives's "failure to grant his masterpieces certain rights of their own." Although, strictly speaking, all of the notes in this edition are Ives's, Kirkpatrick drew from such a wide array of sources that his own editorial hand guides the Sonata towards a sound that is decidedly romantic compared to Ives's often harsh modernist sound.

Listening to Ives's *Concord* filtered through Kirkpatrick's edition, with its emphasis on purity and clarity, brings another twist to the convoluted history of America's greatest piano sonata. On the one hand, Kirkpatrick's text delivers a *Concord* which is cleanly delineated, its contours crystal clear, and, in this performance, vividly structural. On the other hand, Kirkpatrick achieved this all at the expense of smoothing some of the rougher edges of Ives's spiky modernism. Who is right? How ought one to play Ives? How ought one to listen to such a demanding work? Luckily we don't have to decide, and Perry and Kirkpatrick join the rich conversation of the almost two dozen commercial recordings of the *Concord* available to listeners today. Perhaps it would have pleased Ives to know that so many have found their own path through this work. As for Kirkpatrick's edition, it seems the perfect embodiment of one idea Ives had about his Sonata: "an apparent confusion, if lived with long enough, may become orderly."

Martin Perry

A proponent of the road less traveled, Martin Perry is a native Californian of Armenian-American heritage who studied piano at the University of Maryland with Thomas Schumacher and the Juilliard School with Adele Marcus. Widely admired as a sui generis interpreter of modernist piano repertoire, he has appeared with orchestras from the Boston Pops to the Moscow Philharmonic. Martin continues to write provocatively on his experience as an iconoclast in the world of classical music at his blog Con Spirito.

Links to this and his other current work
are at www.martinperrypiano.com

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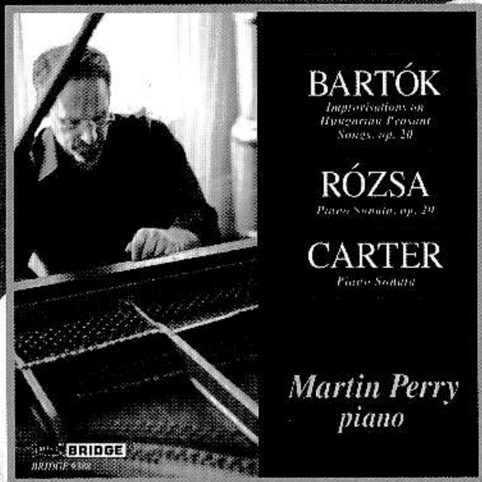

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