I

Introduction

Following Henry Bellamann’s laudatory review in 1921, the Concord Sonata has been increasingly recognized as a significant work, both in Ives’s compositional output and in American music as a whole. Among the last completed large-scale compositions of Ives’s maturity, the Concord Sonata is further distinguished as the only composition for which Ives was motivated to prepare and distribute book-length program notes and as the first work the composer chose to publish at his own expense. This latter decision has considerably skewed the reception history of this unusual composer’s music. As J. Peter Burkholder writes, “Ives is the only major composer whose works have come to light in approximately reverse chronological order, beginning with his latest, most difficult, and most idiosyncratic pieces.”

Nearly twenty years after Bellamann’s review, the Concord Sonata, an important representative of Ives’s late, difficult, and idiosyncratic compositions, acquired additional notoriety when it received its second unequivocally positive critical review in response to its Town Hall performance by John Kirkpatrick (1905–91) in 1939. Although the sonata had been formerly ridiculed almost without exception as unplayable, amateurish, and unreasonably modern, more than one influential critic was now prepared to extol the work as containing “music as beautiful at the very least as any composed by an American” or even as “the greatest music composed by an American.” Eight years later in 1947 the Concord Sonata became Ives’s first multi-movement composition to appear in a revised second edition (unless otherwise noted, all page references in the present handbook will be keyed to this second edition, published by Associated Music Publishers). With the release of Kirkpatrick’s performance on Columbia Records the following year the Concord Sonata earned an additional historical accolade.
when it became the first major Ives composition to be released on a pre-
tigious label.5

Its unmistakable linkage to the Concord Transcendentalists, Emerson and Thoreau, gave the Concord Sonata an aura and a cachet, especially for listeners unable to fully negotiate Ives’s complex musical realization of this familiar and authentically American programmatic subject. Perhaps anticipating this possibility, on the dedication page of the Essays Before a Sonata Ives wrote that his “prefatory essays were written by the composer for those who can’t stand his music.”6 For these dedicatees, the Concord Sonata contains by far the most wide-ranging and occasionally detailed philosophical and programmatic introduction of any work by this (or perhaps any other) composer. Despite the occasion-
ally impenetrable difficulties posed by his prose, Ives’s Essays also offer many quotable and provocative references adding to the mystique of this iconoclastic American composer and his Concord Sonata, for example: “Beauty in music is too often confused with something that lets the ears lie back in an easy chair” and perhaps most famously, “My God! What has sound got to do with music?” (Essays, pp. 97 and 84).

In addition to the work’s intrinsic merits, the relatively accessible programmatic content and literary connections presented in the Essays no doubt helped make the Concord Sonata a frequent and usually honored guest in historical surveys of American music with appearances begin-
ing the year after Ives’s death in Gilbert Chase’s influential America’s Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present (1935).2 Specialized studies on Ives have similarly featured the Concord Sonata. From Sidney and Henry Cowell’s pioneering life and works (published the same year as Chase’s survey) to studies by Stuart Feder and Wolfgang Rathert in the 1990s, Ives scholars generally consider the Concord Sonata a work of central importance in his output and a work of historical and artistic significance in American music.8

The vast attention devoted to the Concord Sonata, including two monographs devoted solely to the work and dozens of chapters and essays in which it figures prominently, makes it fruitless to attempt a comprehensive examination in a volume of this type.9 Instead, the present handbook will focus on a few topics chosen to serve readers who are unfamiliar with either Ives or his Concord Sonata as well as scholars and performers looking for a compendium of information that incorpo-
rates recent findings. Areas to be explored in chapters 2–6 include reception history, compositional genesis, form and design, musical borrowing, and programmaticism. This introduction will conclude with a few preliminary remarks on each.

For the world at large the story of the Concord Sonata begins near the end of Ives’s active life as a composer. Chapter 2 thus begins in January 1921 (Memos, p. 163) when for the first time, Ives sent out into the world a major musical work, along with an accompanying volume of essays, both of which had been printed privately at the composer’s expense several months earlier. During the next two decades Ives would acquire a series of musical champions beginning with Henry Bellmann, E. Robert Schmitz, Henry Cowell, and Nicholas Slonimsky in the 1920s and continuing with Aaron Copland, Lehman Engel, Lou Harrison, and Leonard Bernstein among others in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s. All the members of this illustrious list worked to varying degrees and with varying success on Ives’s behalf to promote the avant-garde and later the somewhat more conventional (and even tonal) music that also incorporated authentic American literary and musical themes. Most crucial for the discovery and dissemination of the Concord Sonata were the efforts of Kirkpatrick, first with his pioneering performances in 1938 and 1939 and later with the exercise of his profound knowledge of the work and its sources and his unfailing generosity to younger Ives scholars. Despite the nearly twenty recordings and considerable attention it has received in academic circles, however, the Concord Sonata remains a “difficult” work, like other comparable modernist compositions more talked about than listened to or performed, but a work nonetheless widely recognized as a twentieth-century masterpiece.

Chapter 3 moves backward in time to the decade of compositional genesis that preceded the work’s completion in 1919 and distribution in 1921. Such a study requires the re-examination of the Concord Sonata chronology offered by the composer (Memos, pp. 79–83, 130, 162–63, and 185–204). Until the late 1980s Ives’s chronology was invariably adopted by scholars, including (despite some reservations) Kirkpatrick. Elliott Carter’s 1939 challenge to the precociousness and priority of Ives’s musical innovations (with its corollary accusation that Ives added dissonance retrospectively) was not taken up again until Maynard Solomon’s 1987 essay in the Journal of the American Musicological...
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Society. Prior to Solomon's revisionist stance, Ives's anticipation of twentieth-century techniques and practices (polytonality, serialism, and aleatory music to name three out of the many attributed to him) was taken as gospel. For some critics and scholars, such precociousness served to justify Ives's artistic as well as historical importance. Following the vigorous challenge posed by Solomon, the work of a new generation of scholars led by Gayle Sherwood has precipitated some revised chronological conclusions based on the examination of paper types and handwriting characteristics.

In applying Sherwood's methodologies to the Concord Sonata, and through an independent examination of manuscript sources, the present handbook offers a genesis that differs in some respects from that offered by the composer. Most importantly, the manuscript evidence suggests that the version of the Concord Sonata Ives performed for his friend Max Smith in 1912 was probably incomplete and that much of the sonata first printed in 1920 was composed between 1915–19 rather than between 1911–15 as earlier supposed. On the other hand, although Ives did in fact add dissonances after 1920, a considerable number of these are more accurately a return to dissonances already present in the incomplete Emerson Overture (abandoned about 1911) or the 1919 ink autograph.

In its adherence to traditional principles of thematic construction, the Concord Sonata, like other Ives works from various periods of his career, can, despite its modernity, be viewed as a composition with strong ties to nineteenth-century predecessors from Beethoven and Schubert to Wagner and Strauss. While motivic analysis has been challenged as the dominant analytical paradigm in recent decades, the fact remains that Ives conceived and executed his sonata as an intricate intertwining mosaic of related motives, combinations of motives, and inexhaustible transformations in both manner and substance. The narrative of the Concord Sonata's motivic content outlined in chapter 4 reflects the importance of Ives's melodic manipulation in this work. An index of the Concord Sonata themes and an encapsulated formal and thematic outline can be found in Appendixes 1 and 2, respectively.

Ives's pervasive practice of musical borrowing has been both criticized for its naiveté and praised for its sophistication. The chapter on borrowing will survey the history of attributions from the certifiable to the hypothetical. One of the biases implicitly underlying chapter 5 is that Ives's use
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of borrowed material, rather than reflecting a poverty of musical invention, reveals a composer rich in sophistication, skill, and imagination.

Even when motivated primarily by musical rather than programmatic concerns, few of Ives's borrowing choices were accidental or capricious. Further, Beethoven, the composer whose Fifth Symphony (Appendix 1, theme 7) and "Hammerklavier" Sonata (theme 9) occupy the musical and spiritual center of the Concord Sonata, was a composer who exerted a strong and acknowledged "anxiety of influence" on Ives. Only in the mature Concord Sonata, however, was Ives able to confront Beethoven, to convert the "sounds that Beethoven didn't have" (Memoirs, p. 44) into his own personal modernist musical language, and to successfully combine eulogy and critique. A symbol of excellence and spirituality in the European classical tradition for the Concord Transcendentalists, Beethoven also served as a fitting patriarch for a family of themes (Ex. 4.1, a–g) and the principal musical subject for a sonata based at least partly on Transcendentalism. The still-popular Stephen Foster, who served as an example of America's musical greatness beginning with the boyhood of Ives's revered father, provided another foundation as a vernacular patriarch who could represent Ives's second family of themes (Ex. 4.2, a–f).

Similarly, Ives's choice of principal hymns and popular music, many of which were doubtless chosen for the musical qualities they share with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and "Hammerklavier," successfully links Ives's world to that of the Concord writers working between 1840–60 and the music of their day. In fact, the hymns, classical references (other than Beethoven), and popular borrowings viewed in this handbook as reasonable attributions, were nearly all composed between 1840 and 1860. In chronological order they include: Simeon B. Marsh's Martyr (1834); Charles Zeuner's Missionary Chant (1834); David T. Shaw's "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" (1843); Anthony F. Winnemore's "Stop That Knocking at My Door" (1843); Richard Wagner's Wedding March from Lohengrin (premiered, 1850); the anonymous Crusader's Hymn (arranged by Richard S. Willis, 1850); and Foster's "Massa's in De Cold Ground" (1852). Wagner's Prelude to Tristan und Isolde (Appendix 1, theme 11), one of several borrowings suggested for the first time in this handbook as arguably genuine, received its premiere in 1865.

After a period of denial, programmaticism is no longer so readily dismissed as irrelevant to our understanding of a composition and is
again being taken seriously in musicological circles. Nevertheless, the dissonance between Kurt Stone's and Gordon Cyr's interpretation of Ives's Fourth Symphony, which might also be applied to the Concord Sonata, has by no means been resolved. For Stone, Ives's tunes exhibit "no apparent musical relevance to the whole of the work," while Cyr finds "a perfectly valid musical justification for the various movements' character." For those who view programmaticism as an oil spill upon pure musical waters, the present handbook preserves a somewhat artificial separation between the program and the music. The middle ground adopted here is that not all the music in the Concord Sonata can be accounted for programatically, even by conflating all of Ives's direct and reported observations on this subject. Conversely, considerable portions of the programmatic content cannot be accounted for in the music itself.

Chapter 6 on Ives's philosophical and narrative program explores his approach to Transcendentalism based on selective reading – Harold Bloom might even say misreading – of the Concord writers. It also attempts to show how some of these views might be manifest in the Concord Sonata. As Burkholder has shown, while writers since the 1930s have tried to force the music into a Transcendentalist mold, much of Ives's interpretation of Transcendentalism, like his musical language, is idiosyncratic and personal. For this reason, the present handbook eschews the customary commentary on the relationship, often forced, between Ives and the nineteenth-century philosophical tradition in favor of an examination of Ives's personal vision of four literary subjects associated with the town of Concord between 1840 and 1860. Significantly, these years correspond to the formative decades in the life of Ives's father, George (1845–94).

Although this handbook will try to make Ives's formidable sonata more accessible, or at least more comprehensible, it would be a fool's errand to attempt to reconcile fully its contradictions and heterogeneities, to simplify its complexities, or to soften its dissonances. In any event, this volume is governed by the premise that the Concord Sonata is one work that definitely does need an introduction. It is also hoped that this handbook will contribute to a greater acceptance and admiration of this remarkable composition and perhaps even pleasure and delight in Ives's craft, intuition, and idealism.
Reception

Critical responses 1920–1938

Remarkably, the Concord Sonata was the first work Ives had offered to the public since five short compositions were published in 1896 and 1897 during his college days at Yale University. Throughout the intervening years, Ives’s most active composing years, few subsequent works were even rehearsed by professional musicians. When Ives’s magnum opus (or at least a strong candidate for this distinction), the Concord Sonata, along with its elaborate philosophical program notes, the Essays Before a Sonata, arrived unannounced and unheralded to Musical Courier subscribers and other musicians in 1921, Ives was virtually unknown.

Within a few months after Ives began to distribute his Essays and sonata in January 1921 the pair of offerings was reviewed briefly and condescendingly in two established music journals, the Musical Courier and Musical America.1 Both reviews commented derisively on Ives’s perspicacity in enclosing a slip that reads “Complimentary: copies are not to be sold.” “At last a composer who realizes the unsalable quality of his music,” wrote A. Walter Kramer in Musical America. The anonymous Musical Courier reviewer similarly remarked with assurance that Ives’s fear of profiting from his work was psychosomatic.

Each reviewer quoted and responded to Ives’s self-deprecatory preface: “These prefatory essays were written by the composer for those who can’t stand his music—and the music for those who can’t stand his essays; to those who can’t stand either, the whole is respectfully dedicated.” The Musical Courier replied that no one will be able to react to the music, “for nobody else [other than perhaps the composer] will ever be able to play it for us, since the musical nomenclature of Charles [sic] is entirely a personal affair.” Still more sarcastically, Musical America...
respectfully accepted Ives’s dedication by stating emphatically, “We can’t stand either.”

Each of the five published responses to the Concord Sonata in 1921 commented on the difficulty of the work, either as a consequence of its dissonant musical language, its unplayability, or its lack of professionalism, criticisms that more than seventy-five years have not entirely vanquished. The “not easily taken aback” Ernest Walker, writing in the then fledgling journal Music & Letters, wrote that the Concord Sonata “may be safely recommended as a tonic to anyone bored with the reactionary conservatism of European extremists.” Walker singles out for dubious originality “the simultaneous pounding of the piano by both clenched fists (an interesting effect best practised on someone else’s instrument),” the infamous strip of board in “Hawthorne,” and the “bewildering notation.” In an early indictment of Ives’s stylistic heterogeneity, Walker also criticizes the “two percent” of the work that presents “the plainest common chords that sound exactly like a beginner’s first attempts at harmony exercises” as well as the normative highly dissonant style familiar “in households where the baby or the cat has access to the piano.”

Musical America considered the work “without any doubt the most startling conglomeration of meaningless notes that we have ever seen engraved on white paper” (even more than Béla Bartók’s Second String Quartet or the songs of Lord Berners). For Edwin J. Stringham, writing in Denver’s Rocky Mountain News, Ives “surpasses” “in cacophony” the “strange music” written by Igor Stravinsky, Arnold Schoenberg, Leo Ornstein, and Alfredo Casella. Stringham, who received a personal response from Ives “concerning his ideals and training,” concluded that the composer “essentially is a humorist,” a composer “having a good time making sport of the ‘cubistic’ type of music.” Why else would a composer who “has had the advantage of exceptional musical training” write such music? “The jump from Bach to the ‘Concord’ is too great in difference to be true – at least serious.”

Unlike the Musical Courier and Musical America reviewers, neither of whom could “stand” the sonata or the Essays, Stringham was more charitable towards the literary component of Ives’s package, conceding that “some of the composer’s statements are witty, informative and make unusually fascinating reading.” In a similar vein Ernest Walker observed
that “some of the few pages that are in any way concerned with music have good sense under their verbiage.”

The most detailed response to Ives’s unsolicited distribution of his Essays and his sonata came from Henry Bellamann, two decades later the author of the enormously successfully novel, King’s Row (1940). Unlike all the other early reviewers, Bellamann, then the Dean of Fine Arts at Chichaqua College for Women in Columbia, South Carolina, found much to praise in both Ives’s literary and musical efforts and published an extended laudatory review in the Double Dealer, a new journal based in New Orleans. Through correspondence with Ives, Bellamann, like Stringham, was able to incorporate into his review additional biographical and other materials related to what Ives was trying to accomplish.

In stark contrast to the reviews in Musical Courier, Musical America, Music & Letters, and the Rocky Mountain News, Bellamann took Ives’s originality seriously and viewed the sonata as “a piece of work sincerely done.” He also made several prescient observations that would be associated with Ives and his sonata for decades to follow. Although later in the review he acknowledges a superficial visual similarity with Richard Strauss, Bellamann does not swerve from his earlier conclusion that the Concord Sonata “reveals music unlike anything one has seen before—a broad, strong and original style with no recognizable derivations from Debussy, Strauss or Strawinsky.” Such statements anticipated and perhaps contributed to the establishment of a mythological Ives, an American uninfluenced by the courtly muses of Europe. Like other Ivesian myths, the image of the isolated composer was aided and abetted by the composer himself, and is still often encountered despite rigorous recent challenges. Bellamann concluded his review in the Double Dealer with a tribute to the Concord Sonata’s abstract “loftiness of purpose” with “moments of achievement elevating and greatly beautiful.”

Ives’s predilection for an assistant pianist implicit in his correspondence with Bellamann (quoted in the review) that the sonata “was not written primarily to be played — certainly not to be played with two hands” gave rise to a body of writing that viewed the work, again following Ives’s lead, as “an experiment which perhaps goes too far.” The infamous wood of wood on page 25 (both editions), the tone clusters on page 40 (first edition) [page 41 in the second] in “Hawthorne,” and the absence of bar lines throughout further contributed to the impression
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that Ives was bypassing “familiar pianistic outlines” in favor of orchestral writing. Perhaps surprisingly, Bellamann considered “Thoreau” “more difficult to understand than the Emerson movement, certainly more difficult to play,” although, paradoxically, at the same time he judged the final movement “more pianistically playable.” In contrast to Ives, who like Thoreau, decidedly preferred to hear the flute over Walden, Bellamann espoused the opinion later steadfastly maintained by John Kirkpatrick that the entrance of the flute on the final pages of the “Thoreau” movement was “an abstraction” which “breaks the mood.”

In addition to Bellamann, Ives’s beloved and perhaps biased former English professor William Lyon Phelps generously wrote in the Yale Alumni Weekly that he “enjoyed every page” of the Essays and that Ives had written “a brilliant and provocative book, full of challenging ideas, and marked by chronic cerebration.” Private sympathetic responses were also received from two distinguished music professors unknown to Ives, Percy Goetschius of Columbia University and Clarence G. Hamilton of Wellesley College, both of whom, in Ives’s view at least, partially eschewed the “persistent fundamental misunderstanding” exhibited by most recipients. More representative are the hostile and condescending letters from the composer Charles Wakefield Cadman and Harmony Ives’s former personal friend, the patroness Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge.

After these initial public and private responses, the Concord Sonata was rarely and incompletely heard in professional concerts or discussed in print until Kirkpatrick’s premiere performance in 1939. In 1921 Clifton Furness presented “The Alcotts” in a lecture-recital and discussed the sonata in his courses at Northwestern University. In 1921 and 1922 Bellamann organized and presented lecture-recitals in Columbia, South Carolina and Atlanta in which portions of the sonata were performed by Lenore Purcell. Other early performances of various movements took place in Salzburg where Oscar Ziegler performed “The Alcotts” in 1928, the same year and the next Keith Corelli played “Emerson” in several Southern and Western states (Memos, pp. 201 and 237, n. 10).

Despite the psychological benefits his early positive recognition offered, Bellamann lacked the musical contacts to ensure professional performances and publications of Ives’s music. The first professional