

The life of Charles Ives

STUART FEDER



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I White City, green hills

One bright afternoon in late August of 1893, Charles Ives of Danbury, Connecticut entered the fabled White City. There, on the shores of Lake Michigan, a group of distinguished American artists in what was optimistically called “the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century” created a thrilling, pennant-filled ceremonial metropolis which was Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition.¹ With few exceptions, the domed, columned, and spired buildings, all grand in conception and some deliberately awesome in dimension, were stunningly white. The notable exceptions included an exotic if tasteless “Midway Pleasance” where color predominated in decoration and persons alike; and a singular, highly decorated maverick structure by the architect Louis Sullivan. The invented style of the shining White City was called Roman Classic, as a vast and mostly European cultural past was invoked to celebrate an occasion that was distinctly American.

Nominally, the Exposition commemorated the coming of Christopher Columbus to American shores – although to be sure, not the landlocked midwest or the lake shores of Chicago. But the advent of the railroad in the nineteenth century had already rendered tidewater less essential to the progress of commerce, and indeed the purpose of the Exposition was to celebrate the glory of American commerce, industry, and art – in that order. In a proud effort to demonstrate the phenomenal half-century growth of the United States,

and in particular regional America, the Exposition gleamed its message that America had come of age. It was a bid to establish the still growing and sometimes rough-edged country among the great civilizations of the world. However, as the nineteen-year-old Charles Ives beheld the shining City, there was little that he could relate to the America he knew.

Rather more impressive to young Charlie had been the concert of Theodore Thomas's orchestra that he attended on August 22. That, in contrast to the classical sights of the Exposition, was something to write home about and he did so excitedly to his father, George Edward Ives, from childhood on his teacher and musical mentor. Charlie was thrilled in anticipation of hearing the organist he thought was "the best in the world" a few days later, Alexandre Guilmant of Paris.² He would play Bach, Handel, César Franck and, of course, Guilmant.³ This was closer to his heart than ceremonial architecture. Charlie himself was an organist and was said from the age of fifteen to be the youngest working organist in the entire state of Connecticut. Indeed, a good deal of the hurried organization for the impromptu trip from Danbury to Chicago had involved finding a replacement to carry on Charlie's usual duties at St. Thomas's Episcopal church in New Haven. Charlie at the time was attending the Hopkins Academy there, a preparatory school well known for its influence on Yale University admissions.

Yale was the school of his uncle, the distinguished Judge Lyman Dennison Brewster of Danbury, and there was considerable pressure on Charlie, who was only a fair academic student, to carry on a family tradition which his own father had avoided in favor of a life in music. Music teacher and village bandleader, his was a life that some Americans would hardly have called a career. Even at the time back in Danbury, George worked as a clerk in one of the prosperous businesses owned by one of his brothers in order to send Charlie and his younger brother Moss to school.

Uncle Lyman was attending the convention of the American Bar Association in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with all expenses paid,

including a small stipend for a secretary. This was deemed a fine opportunity for Charlie, and the family had mobilized rapidly to prepare him while he devoted himself to learning how to type within three weeks. It had been under the Brewsters' influence that Charlie left the more rural schools of Danbury for New Haven and the family was eagerly anticipating his eventual acceptance at Yale. Charlie himself, far from certain as to the outcome, was working anxiously toward the goal. It had been a disappointment to all, not least to himself, that he was not ready for the fall entrance exams, and he welcomed the chance to travel before resuming the grind of yet another year.

Yale was a curious presence in another sense for Lyman and Charlie during the long train ride west as well as the convention and Exposition later in Chicago. For in microcosm and prophetically, Charlie was poised between two worlds – the musical world of his father and the business and professional world of his uncle. Yale promised the exciting prospect of new opportunities for the study of music. For at the same time Charlie was preparing himself for admission, the distinguished American composer and all-round musician Horatio Parker was being considered to head the Yale Music department. Yet the mission of the college was hardly that of producing a generation of American artists, but rather another generation of an élite class of men who would assume leadership roles in society. Eventually, nearly all would acquire status and a degree of power, and many, like their fathers, would acquire considerable wealth or at least add to family wealth. American democracy dictated that the ranks of wealth and influence not be closed to the scions of families so that the Iveses could aspire to such achievements. The more so since the Ives family, while not wealthy by Yale standards, was at least prominent in the small town of Danbury, and some of its members were Yale alumni. Young Charlie was in effect being groomed for such a role in society, a step up from even Lyman and far beyond his father. The trip to Chicago was Charlie's first outside of rural Danbury.

At the Exposition, Charlie and Lyman mounted the stairs to Choral Hall, a circular building with architectural affinities not only with

ancient Greek theatre but with London's Royal Albert Hall. Known also as Festival Hall, it was the site of the Exposition's major organ. Two hundred and fifty feet in diameter with impressive Doric porticos, the concert hall seated 6,500 people on the three sides of its stage. Perhaps of greater significance symbolically were the names of composers inscribed on the building's white façade, one group on each side as the entrance was approached: Mendelssohn occupied the singular place of honor at the head of the first group, followed by the pairs, Wagner and Purcell, Weber and Rossini, Liszt and Berlioz. Beethoven alone grandly occupied the base. The second group poised Palestrina at its head with Meyerbeer at the base. Between them were the similarly odd pairings of Schubert and Spohr, Chopin and Glinka, and Schumann and Gade. In all, a curious Pantheon of American music! Who, the twentieth-century concert-goer will ask, is Gade? Why the primacy of Mendelssohn in the presence of Beethoven, let alone the latter's positioning with Meyerbeer? And where are Haydn and Mozart? Where Bach? Above all, another notable omission: the absence of a composer born in America.

Unlike commerce and industry, national taste and accomplishment in music were more aspiration than fact. While many a season of honorable, even sublime programs could be assembled from Festival Hall's honor roll at the end of the nineteenth century, these names were more acknowledged in stone than in sound. For that matter, the apparent architectural "stone" of the Columbian Exposition enriches the metaphor: an impermanent façade of timber and plaster. Two decades earlier the same site had been occupied by a more modest precursor, the Interstate Industrial Exposition, whose singular long, barren, and barn-like structure served as temporary home for Theodore Thomas's orchestra, the forerunner of the Chicago Symphony. As if inoculating the populace against insurgent culture as a measure of public health, Thomas had only gradually introduced complete symphonies into his classical programs.⁴ Even so, the sale of the excellent local Milwaukee brew throughout the concert may have served to tolerably wash down what some would consider harsh medicine.

In some respects Festival Hall's façade-roster of 1893 appears broadly ecumenical as it included composers who were Italian, French, Russian, and even Scandinavian in the case of the Dane Neils Gade (1817–90). American composition of the time was, as in all aspects of classical music, dominated by German musical orthodoxy. The best of the post-Civil War American-born composers whose work would have constituted the contemporary American musical repertoire of the 1890s had for the most part studied in Germany or Austria. The generation of these composers working between 1865 and 1890 included Horatio Parker (1828–1916), John Knowles Paine (1839–1906), George Whitefield Chadwick (1854–1931), Arthur Foote (1853–1937), and Amy Beach (1867–1954). Of these, only Beach was American trained. Study abroad for these composers brought competence, even mastery, and resulted in well-made works which would have been as worthy of performance then as they are of interest now. What such obligatory study abroad had not brought was what could not be imported: a sense of the potential of a music which could be considered in some way American. Conversely, what was native to America in tone as well as spirit had rarely found expression in art music and tended in general to be consigned to the vernacular. Meanwhile, the gap between the genteel and the vernacular was wide and the competent composers of concert music failed to create a product identifiable as “American.”

The Columbian Exposition revealed a parallel artistic situation in the domain of architecture. Even more formalized than music, it was expected that following training in American institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or the Chicago School of Art, the young architect would acquire appropriate credentials abroad. The traditional, classical style had to be mastered at the favored *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris and most of those who attended that “greatest meeting of artists” to plan the Exposition were graduates. (It was one of them, the sculptor Augustus St. Gaudens, who had proudly alluded to the meeting's rivaling with the fifteenth century.) Others included Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect who designed New

York's Central Park – an appropriate choice for the six-hundred acre site of the Exposition – and Chicago's own Louis Sullivan.⁵ The White City that they collectively created was as much a suburb of the *École des Beaux Arts* as of Chicago, and if the Renaissance was invoked, it was surely not an American one. Even the “bridge on an axle,” the gigantic wheel invented by George Ferris that dominated the Exposition skyline and accommodated forty persons in each of its thirty-six suspended cabins, was a technological response to the Eiffel Tower which marked the comparable European event only three years earlier, the Paris Exposition of 1889.

The only maverick among the American artists was Louis Sullivan; the building he invented for the Exposition was the one exception to the pristine whiteness of the City and its classical stylistic features. The least one could say about the Transportation Building was that, despite its mundane and utilitarian name, it was original and distinctive. Low-lying and sparer in overall design than the other buildings, it was decorated with elaborate bas-relief carvings. Above all, it was not white, rather terra cotta, and its entrance featured a massive single arch clad in gold leaf which was called “The Golden Door.”

If Charles Ives noted this oddly conceived building, he did not make reference to it in the few letters home. Neither Sullivan's non-conformist structure nor the *Beaux Arts* dominance in America were of much interest to him. Uncle Lyman saw him off at the train station and Charlie returned to Danbury and the rolling green hills of southern New England. The next year he took his entrance examinations and was accepted at Yale; by the following September he had already started his duties as church organist at Center Church, New Haven, to help with college expenses. At Yale, Charlie took the opportunity to study composition with the distinguished American composer Horatio Parker who would remain an influence. But except for a brief period of emulation after college, Ives never wrote music like Parker's, although he was capable of doing so – art music of the European Classic-Romantic tradition, the musical parallel to the *Beaux Arts* tradition. This was the music of the so-called “Second New

England School” which dominated the Chicago Exhibition when American music was performed there at all.⁶

Meanwhile, the nineteen-year-old Charlie was already composing an American music of his own which revealed innovative features which would become characteristic. Two years earlier he had written a set of variations on the theme *America*. The United States did not as yet have its official national anthem and this tune served the purpose. Although Charlie probably knew it was the same tune as *God Save the King*, it was unlikely that he knew of Beethoven’s variations on the theme. However, writing keyboard variations on popular themes was a common practice among American composers, such as Connecticut organist Dudley Buck, with whom Charlie would later study, and Louis Moreau Gottschalk in New Orleans. Charlie himself had already written a set of variations on the hymn-tune *Jerusalem the Golden* with the help of his father when he was about fourteen or fifteen years old.

The *Variations on “America”* of 1891 for organ was something unique. Consisting of a theme and five variations, and framed by a lofty introduction and coda, it contains two brief and unusual interludes. These are written simultaneously in two keys – an example of home-grown polytonality born of an attitude Charlie shared with his father both playful and experimental. Another noteworthy feature is the way the introduction reaches for the theme, first by revealing only some of its pattern in a kind of seeking and paraphrase, then, later, following a climactic moment, confidently finding the whole theme. Such musical thematic and rhythmic devices, heard here in relatively naïve form, would eventually be integrated in a mature but ever inventive style. *America* was for Ives where it all began, and, musically, the *Variations on “America”* was only the beginning.

For Ives was destined to write a unique American music of a kind not heard before. He would forge a style in which melodic fragments of American song created an intrinsic fabric of tone which lent it a national and regional authenticity. Song was artistically recruited from common human experience – the music of patriotism and

religion; of history and politics; of family and self. Virtually anything could be caught up and preserved in the fabric of music. Rooted in individual experience, often of a day-to-day kind, it reached for the spiritual as well, sometimes successfully, sometimes impossibly. Its human genuineness, particularly in intoning the past, cultivates an empathy in the prepared listener which may elicit characteristic affects, most notably nostalgia. Its all-inclusiveness permits the creative incorporation of the traditional and the conventional. And finally – perhaps most importantly – his music was the result of a deeply personal and idiosyncratic synthesis, a synthesis of person and art, that led to a uniqueness of style which had all the marks of innovation: music such as Ives's was never heard before because its creative source was one man's experience and thought. That such music and musical devices have been heard subsequently only bespeaks of his profound influence. That its deepest human source is universal permits the distinctive American music Ives created to speak to Everyman. The following chapters seek to define the man and his music and to render both accessible.