Musical lives

Each book in this series provides an account of the life of a major composer, considering both the private and public figure. The main thread is biographical, and discussion of the music is integral to the narrative. Each volume thus presents an organic view of the composer, the music, and the circumstances in which the music was written.

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Stuart Feder
For Katie's generation
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"The fabric of existence weaves itself whole," said Charles Ives, composer and businessman. That is the theme of this book. For Ives, there was no boundary between music and life. Music was life, and life was music. He continued, “You cannot set an art off in a corner and hope for it to have vitality, reality and substance. There can be nothing exclusive in a substantial art. It comes directly out of the heart of experience of life and thinking about and living life. My work in music helped my business and work in business helped my music.”

Ives’s life was caught up in the warp and woof of his music and little of the life was excluded. Living in his music are people, places, and times, past and future. The two most important people were his father and his wife and he spoke of many others; the places were those in which he grew up and lived – largely Danbury and New York – and locales dear to him such as Concord in Massachusetts, Boston Common, General Putnam’s Revolutionary War campground near Danbury, the Adirondack Mountains of New York State, and the Berkshires of western Massachusetts. Another “place” was a spiritual one that Ives constantly sought. It was ultimately elusive but in the reach for it, spirituality frequently achieved representation in music.

Finally, times past inhere in the music, informed by the profound nostalgia Ives felt for the nineteenth-century Danbury of his boyhood and earlier. As for the future, a paradox: despite being rooted in the earlier century, Ives’s innovative music looks forward to modernism and even post-modernism. He has influenced generations of new composers. Beyond this was Ives’s seeking for a music of the future which would encompass not only his single life, but all life.

A word about the form of this book: since “the fabric of existence” involved both life and music, the Life of Charles Ives must include
consideration of the composer's works from an autobiographical point of view. Accordingly, in the latter part of each chapter the music that is relevant is briefly discussed. There is no attempt here to be comprehensive. A consideration of the music is primarily intended to illuminate the life. Thus many of Ives's major works occupy relatively little space while some lesser-known pieces, in particular some biographically revealing songs, proportionately more. In addition, while the narrative of the life is chronological, that of the related musical works, which in most instances were written later, is not. Rather, the selection at the end of each chapter is thematic; that is, related to the content therein.

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Mists, Ann Street, The “St. Gaudens” in Boston Common, The Housatonic at Stockbridge
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Charles Ives “My Father’s Song”, Stuart Feder, Yale 1992