

MUS 735

Discussion - Hitchcock, Chapter 7

Jim Novak

2.28.21

What strikes you as different about Charles Ives? How is he different from other composers we have looked at to date? List pieces you find different, strange, or unique. Post links to at least three selections.

Charles Ives was born into a musical family, his father being a U.S. Army bandleader in the Civil War. He first learned music theory from his father before being formally trained at the Hopkins School, then at Yale. He served as church organist even after graduating, but the interesting thing about Charles Ives, professionally, is that his entire career was spent outside the field of music. He started his career as an insurance salesman, eventually starting his own firm while still managing to be a prolific composer.

The first piece I found interesting was *Two Little Flowers*. This piece has a beautiful, hymn-like melody in D major, but the accompaniment is built on a 7/8 figure, so the parts don't seem to fit together. The strange thing about this is that I almost couldn't hear this when listening to the piece, and it wasn't until I examined the part that I noticed this "misalignment."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQkxODXqsDI>

I found *The Unanswered Question* unique before even hearing it, due to the unusual instrumentation. It is written for trumpet, strings, and four flutes (oboe and clarinet can be subbed for flute 3 and 4, respectively). Upon listening to this piece the first time, I wasn't sure what to think. I felt so much conflict between the strings and winds. There were moments of consonant, beautiful chord progressions in the strings, interrupted constantly and very dissonantly by the flutes, each entrance more agitated than the last. It made me very uncomfortable. After doing some research, I learned that the string instruments represent silence, as they lack a dominant harmony. The solo trumpet represents the question: perhaps "What is the meaning of life?" Its dominant and diminished melody represents the idea that the question sounds loud within the silence. The atonal flutes represent the experts trying to answer the question, becoming more and more frustrated as they descend into chaos. It really is brilliant.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkaOz48cq2g>

I expected dissonance in *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces*, as it involves two pianos that are tuned a quarter-step apart. And of course, there was a good deal of dissonance throughout the entire

movement. There are moments, such as at the very beginning of movement 1, where the pianos are playing homophonically a quarter-step apart, and it just makes you uncomfortable. But there are moments, such as measure 25 in the first movement, where the right hand in both piano parts work together to create ascending quarter-step passages. My ears just aren't accustomed to this, and it just sounded like a lot of wrong notes and mistakes. I need to listen to this more!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izFgt2tZ0Oc>