

Charles Ives/Maurice Wright

Marc André Hamelin, piano

This is not a nice sonata for a nice piano player, “ wrote Charles Ives about his most famous work, “but something the writer had long been thinking about.”

Long indeed: Ives, the backbone of the Ives and Myrick Insurance Co. (which later became Mutual of New York), began what became the *Concord* Sonata in 1904, wrote most of it in 1911 and 1912, and finished it in 1915. Then in 1919 he extended the work still further by writing *Essays Before a Sonata*, intended to be published along with it; the book is one of the most provocative and illuminating aesthetic documents ever written by a composer. The world waited even longer for an audition: Lenore Purcell performed isolated movements between 1920 and 1929, but not until 1939 did John Kirkpatrick give the entire Sonata its New York premiere. In 1948, Kirkpatrick recorded the work for Columbia, and the disc was a best seller for months.

All four movements were programmatically conceived around figures in the Transcendentalist movement (c.1836-1860) in Concord, Massachusetts. The “Emerson” movement had begun as a piano concerto, the soloist representing Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the orchestra, the masses listen to him; “Hawthorne” was conceived for “a piano or a dozen pianos;” “The Alcotts” for organ or piano with voice or violin; and “Thoreau” for strings colored by flute or horn.

Much of the *Concord* Sonata’s radicalness stems from its reversal of the usual European-based pattern, which moves from unity to multiplicity, stating a theme simply at first and adding complexities later. Ives instead starts with complexity, then gradually strips his textures down to their essential strands. The logical basis for his music is not the prepared dissertation, but the spontaneous argument, in which issues that are at first muddy gradually come into focus. Along with the Second String Quartet and the Fourth Symphony, the *Concord* is a quintessential example of this form-its maximum density lies in the opening pages, while by the “Alcotts” movement that texture has thinned to passages of disarmingly naïve lyricism. To end with a matter-of-fact statement, though, would be a contradiction of Ives’ evolutionary epistemology, and “Thoreau’s” touching tonal ambiguity (is the last page in D-flat or C?) ultimately leaves everything in doubt.

It’s true that in “Emerson” the “paragraphs don’t cohere,” as Ives said of the writer’s prose: “Each sentence points not to the next, but to the undercurrent.” The “phantasmal” side of Nathaniel Hawthorne (depicted with large, quite tone clusters played with a 14-inch board) inspired Ives to utilize a stream-of-consciousness technique that anticipated James Joyce’s similar methods of construction for *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake*. The idea that linear thought falsifies reality was a major premise of Ives’ philosophy, and he justified his polythematicism by asserting that “being close to Truth precludes being close to a truth.” Nevertheless, the *Concord*’s alleged lack of unity is something Ives himself overstated in his own defense; the charge obscures the technical mastery in the music, the incredible profusion of invention, development, and variation.

Most of the myriad themes can be traced back to two motives stated before the first bar line; the falling, almost pentatonic octave series with which the left hand opens, and the famous four-note motive from Beethoven’s Fifth, a motive that Ives said characterized “the soul of humanity knocking at the door of the divine mysteries, radiant in the faith that it *will* be opened.” The former motive plunges into the bass to create tension in “Emerson,” and then in “Thoreau” wafts down from the heights to dissipate it. This pentatonic fragment becomes a beautiful octave-displaced song in the middle of “Emerson” (a movement divided into passages of “prose” and “poetry”), is disguised as “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean’ in “Hawthorne,” and later, with the first three notes inverted, becomes the introverted flute melody in “Thoreau.” Meanwhile, the Beethoven theme is transformed from a propulsive contrapuntal device in “Emerson” to a hymn like melody in “The Alcotts.”

One of the most wide-ranging piano works ever written, the *Concord* is also one of the most intuitively unified. Despite his use of such avant-garde devices as polytonality, sound clusters, and un-metered rhythm, Ives remained a true Hegelian romantic, as is apparent from his idealist exclamation, “My God! What has sound got to do with music!” And as a work at once supremely romantic and technically innovative, the *Concord* Sonata exists at, and helps define, that exquisite moment when romanticism, in feverish pursuit of its ideals, erupted into modernism.

Few recent piano works can stand next to the *Concord* so well as Maurice Wright's Sonata of 1982. Like Ives, Wright draws complexity from the simplest materials—in this case, a falling, four-note scale figure and a series of (usually five) repeated notes, both present in the opening chords. In the first movement both figures make up a slow, simple (if dissonant) introductory melody, leading to a lightning-quick rhapsody fueled by the scale motive turned upwards. The second movement begins with that same rising motive built up haltingly, and marked “as if asleep....” The powerful third movement alternates between quintuply repeated chords and the scale motive, now marching up and down in military gait. In between there are lyrical movements: The first movement is graced by a lilting second theme in triple meter, the second by a quite, minor-key chorale enlivened by chromatic inner voices.

These contrasts, however take place within a consistent idiom; in Wright's music, even the softest passages are tinged with dissonances that never quite resolve, while underneath the most frantic arabesques lies an undisturbed sense of clear, linear counterpoint. Wright's use of pianistic sonority is similar to that of Ives, but Wright is as much a classicist as Ives is a romantic.

Wright's ideas – thoughtful, gritty, and quick to break into fantasy – develop within a well-calculated symmetry, audible here in the separation and recombination of motives, the second movement's quasi-palindromic form, and the finale's literal repeat of its opening three pages. To follow this interplay of textures as they shift, dart away, and return, is to hear the qualities that make Wright one of the most subtle and eloquent of recent composers.

- Kyle Gann

Kyle Gann, a composer and critic, is new-music columnist for The Village Voice

MARC-ANDRE HAMELIN was born in Montreal, Quebec, in 1961. He attended Temple University, where he studied with Harvey Wedeen; currently a doctoral fellow at Temple, he studies with Russell Sherman. Hamelin made his U.S. orchestral debut in performances of Ell Taaffe Zwilich's piano Concerto with the Detroit Symphony under Gunther Hergbig. He toured with the Montreal symphony under Charles Dutoit in November 1987. Hamelin was winner of the 1985 Carnegie Hall International American Music Competition, and as such recorded a previous album for New World Records, which includes William Bolcom's Twelve New Études and Stefan Wolpe's Battle Piece (NW 354).

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Charles Ives

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Maurice Wright

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Charles Ives

Piano Music, Herbert Henck, piano. Wergo WER 60112.

Sonata No. 1. Herbert Henck, piano. Wergo WER 60-10150.

Sonata No. 2 John Kirkpatrick, piano. Columbia MS 7192.

Songs. Jan DeGaetani, mezzo soprano; Gilbert Kalish, piano. Elektra/Nonesuch H-71325.

Songs. William Parker, baritone; Dalton Baldwin, piano. New World NW 300.

String Quartets Nos. 1 and 2. Julliard Quartet. CBS MP-39752

Symphony No. 4. Jahn Alldis Choir; London Philharmonic Orchestra. Jose Serebrier conducting. Chandos ABR-118.

Three Places in New England. Boston Symphony Orchestra, Michael Tilson Thomas conducting. Deutsche Grammophon 410933-1.

Maurice Wright

Cantata for Tenor, Percussion, and Electronic Sound. David Gordon, tenor; Tom Jones, percussion. Smithsonian Collection N-027.

Chamber Symphony for Piano and Electronic Sound. Lambert Orkis, piano. Smithsonian Collection N.022.

Electronic Composition: Odyssey Y-34319.

Like an Autumn sky. The New Calliope Singers; Micael Skelly, piano; Peter Schubert conducting. Finnadar 90850-1.

MARC-ANDRE HAMELIN, piano

Maurice Wright: Sonata

(©Maurice Wright)

1. I. (4:47)
2. II. (5:51)
3. III (4:27)

Charles Ives: Piano Sonata No. 2

“Concord, Mass., 1840-1860”

(publ. Associated Music Publishers, Inc.)

4. I. *Emerson* (16:17)
5. II. *Hawthorne* (10:32)
6. III. *The Alcotts* (5:36)
7. IV. *Thoreau* (11:24)

Producer: Elizabeth Ostrow

Recording engineers:

Timothy Martyn (Wright);

Henk Kooistra, paul Goodman (Ives)

Recorded on Sony PCM 1630

Wright recorded January 22, 1987, at Richardson Auditorium in Alexander Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. Ives recorded July 18 and 19, 1988, at RCA Studio A, New York.

Editing: James Ric, Timothy Martyn, paul Zinman

Cover design: Bob Defrin

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