

Program Note: Four Sonatas for Violin and Piano

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Ives composed five sonatas for violin and piano. (In addition to these, there is another sonata sometimes known as “Sonata No. 5” which consists of one movement entitled “Decoration Day”, an arrangement for violin and piano made by the composer of part of the “New England Holidays” symphony, and two movements which are arrangements made later by Kirkpatrick of a selection of other pieces, but none of these are originals and the piece of not included in the Ives Society list of compositions). A sonata dating from Period II is known as the “Pre-First Sonata”. The remaining four sonatas were not written in one outburst of creativity, rather they were composed alongside other works throughout Periods III and IV. Ives wrote and accumulated numerous sketches after his graduation from Yale, but he was in the habit of setting them aside rather than developing them into completed compositions. These four violin sonatas were composed in Ives’s later years using sketches from many years earlier.

Given this compositional process, perhaps it is important to consider these “*Four Sonatas for Violin and Piano*” as one unit. It is thought that Ives had a metalevel concept in mind when he composed the sonatas for violin and piano, and in this sense it is most probably correct to perform them in numerical order. There is nothing wrong with playing the sonatas individually, but if they are played as a unit it would perhaps fulfil the wishes of the composer to play them in numerical order.

These pieces are not necessarily instantly likeable pieces for the first-time listener. I am writing these program notes as a road map so that nobody gets lost in the Charles Ives forest.

All four sonatas for violin and piano have three movements, and all are well-balanced and proportioned. Sonatas No.1 and 4 follow the Classical movement layout of fast-slow-fast with a gentle slow movement inserted in the middle, whereas Sonatas No. 2 and 3 have a rapid tempo ragtime movement in the middle and a relaxed finale. In terms of content, No. 1 is closely related to Symphony No. 4, with extensive quotes, and No. 4 has a similar relationship with Symphony No. 3¹. All three movements of Sonata

No. 2 have titles, whereas Sonata No. 4 has a subheading for the entire work. Sonatas No.1 and No. 3 are lengthy as they both have extensive quotes of hymns, whereas Sonatas No. 2 and No. 4 are relatively short. This means that all four sonatas create a balanced program when they are played in a recital, the first two in the first half and the second two in the second half.

Sonata No. 1

A deeply impressive footsteps motif (perhaps alluding to 'starting out' and 'progress?') in the opening and closing of the first movement bookend a rapid, vivacious central section which consists of a first theme which is a more masculine version of the opening theme and a second theme which is at times lyrical and at times dance-like. These themes are at first stated and then developed, but the route they take is far freer than that of the Classical sonata form.

The relaxed tempo second movement, noted for its polyrhythms which are exceptionally intricate for their time, relives the sadness of the War of Independence. Ives was against the kind of musical Romanticism which strove to evoke the entire spectrum of human emotion from joy, pathos and anger to humor as he saw it as a dead-end in Western music. This was precisely the basis for his criticism of the music of Richard Strauss, and this movement may be Ives's response. The music does not try to evoke the grief of the War of Independence; it is music which objectively relives it, it depicts the people who lived through the historical facts of the settlers who split into two factions, waged war against each other, with the north emerging victorious. A premonition of the next movement suddenly appears, the resemblance of which to Mahler is particularly interesting.

Classically structured and richly woven with quotations in Ives's own unique way, the finale is similar to the second movement in that it has multiple sections and layers of complex hemiola-based rhythms. A tightly developed movement built around a 4/4 main theme, first introduced in a resounding, victorious fashion by the piano and then taken over by the violin (the theme foretold at the end of the second movement) and a gently undulating 6/8 secondary theme taken from the hymn "Watchman, tell us of the night" by Lowell Mason. Almost the entire hymn is quietly quoted in the central section of the movement in a way which is most impressive (the words are printed in the score).

The same hymn plays an important role in Symphony No. 4.

Sonata No. 2

Each movement in Sonata No. 2 has a title. The first movement is 'Autumn'. Unlike the Japanese connotation of Autumn as the season of longer nights and chirping insects, this is an autumn of abundance and preparation for winter, and an autumn of New England open-air Evangelistic meetings. This slow work opens with a solemn unison in the low register of the piano, reminiscent of the Concert for piano, violin, and string quartet by Chausson. This theme (A) is identical to the 'footsteps' motif and the first theme from the first movement of Sonata No. 1. This use of the same elements in multiple compositions written in close succession has something of the style of Mahler to it. This short introduction is immediately followed by a much faster theme (B) which makes impressive use of syncopation. These two contrasting themes and tempi alternate throughout the first half of the movement. From about halfway through until the end they gradually converge into one.

The second movement, 'In the Barn', is an enjoyable piece which creates a humanistic depiction of an intimate human encounter, very distant from open-air religious fervor. It is a humorous, exciting mix of folksongs, including the famous "Sailor's Hornpipe" used in the animation film version of Popeye.

The finale, 'The Revival', is almost entirely based on the American folk-tune "Nettleton", the tune most commonly sung in the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing". The movement opens with an introverted theme interspersed with the opening motif of the hymn, after which the hymn is played in its entirety by the piano and the violin, but the canon and polytonal resonances in the extremely slow first half on the hymn, and the hemiola-like relationship between the melody and the background harmony swinging like a pendulum in the slightly faster second half, create a mysterious atmosphere. The tempo then suddenly increases and the music gradually heightens in intensity over arpeggios in the piano, eventually reaching an overwhelming climax in which the hymn is resoundingly sung over huge pedal point sonorities pealing out like church bells. Finally, the music slows down to a last recollection of a single phrase of the hymn.

Sonata No. 3

Sonata No. 3, completed in the autumn of 1914, is the longest of the four sonatas. As Ives himself noted, perhaps this sonata represents “an attempt to suggest the feeling and fervor - a fervor that was often more vociferous than religious - with which the hymns and revival tunes were sung at the camp meetings held extensively in New England in the 1870s and 1880s.” The first and third movements are derived from an organ prelude written in 1901, which was extensively restructured for this sonata.

The first movement, the longest of the three, is divided into four consecutive verses, all of which begin with the same somber theme over rising quartal harmony arpeggios, with the changes in tempo, beat and rhythm with each appearance being an interesting feature. In Stanza I this theme is in D \flat (C \sharp) Minor and in B \flat Minor in all the subsequent stanzas. A gentle melody which gives a feeling of salvation appears at the end of each stanza as a refrain, in E \flat Major at the end of Stanza II and in B \flat Major after all the other stanzas. Free inspiration develops all the elements of the theme in the sections which come between the opening and the refrain in each verse. This structure makes this movement a set of variations in the widest sense of the term, with the development of the concept more reminiscent of a fantasy. This is a long movement, but the richness of its world makes itself apparent to the devoted listener.

The second movement is a ragtime composed in 1904, earlier than the other movements. It opens with a mysterious, jazzy piano motif reminiscent of later American neo-romantic composers such as Samuel Barber and Walter Piston. A tireless sixteenth note perpetuum mobile in the piano which propels the music forward from the opening right up to the finish, rich in numerous quotes, develops into a powerful, dizzying dance. This music is the very embodiment of the fervor of a camp meeting.

The third movement, which Ives described as a ‘free fantasia’, is a complex, noble yet gentle movement. It opens with an introverted piano solo, into which condensed versions of all five musical elements of the piece are crammed: (1) a descending motif which opens with a repeated note, which is initially presented contrapuntally, (2) a motif of repeated descending scales, (3) fragments of the beautiful melody sung in Stanzas II and IV in the first movement, (4) a much slower version of the ascending perpetuum

mobile motif from the second movement, and (5) a repeated imploring gesture motif which begins with the same repeated note motif as the opening. The piano is then joined by the violin, giving a weightier resonance, and together they tightly develop the abovementioned five motifs before a second piano solo. Then, while repeating ever more exulted music, an introverted clarity is gradually achieved. The highlight is a lengthy crescendo, worthy of Beethoven or Bruckner, over an extended piano pedal point in the dominant, which suddenly modulates to the tonic as the crescendo reaches its climax. The movement comes to a quiet close with a B \flat Major theme full of serene light. Rather than the fervor of the camp meetings, this movement perhaps depicts the puritan undercurrents of their untainted world.

Sonata No. 4

Sonata No. 4 carries the title "Children's Day at the Camp Meeting". Camp meetings were held throughout New England in the summer months to help maintain the religious identity of the widely spread out population. People gathered from far and wide would spend the summer in camps, hear religious lectures and sermons, and participate in friendly and intimate cultural exchange. For children this was an exciting summer activity. Ives himself explains that the aim of this piece is to 'depict, recall and express' the spectacle of children's services at the camp meeting. This is perhaps the most accessible of the four sonatas. It takes pride of place as the last of the cycle, and it is perhaps the least forceful, in the best sense of the expression. With its numerous quotes of hymns, it is very 'Ivesian' music.

It is said that the first movement is linked to charming episodes that actually took place at the camp meetings: youngsters marching, out of tune hymn singing, an organist practicing. The technical simplicity and rather naïve flavour of the work are consistent with the fact that it was composed for a performance to be given by Ives's eleven-year-old nephew Moss White Ives. The opening B \flat Major violin theme, reminiscent of the youngsters' charming march, and the flowing piano secondary theme are the focal points of the movement. Quotations of the Mason Lowell hymn "Work for the Night is Coming", which was often sung at camp meetings, frequently appear. Towards the end, these three melodies intertwine resplendently in the home key of B \flat Major, after which the piano provides a simple accompaniment for the two main themes which seem to disappear into the distance. As musical elements, these two themes

are extremely simple, but Ives employs his considerable technical skills to vary, distort and twist them, holding the listener's attention to the very end.

In a sudden turn of events the second movement *Largo* invites us into the world of a day-dreaming child. The movement opens with meterless, drifting music, but with frequent quotes of one passage from the well-known children's hymn "Yes, Jesus Loves Me". According to Ives, the flowing and informal writing of the piano accompaniment, which makes effective use of quartal harmonies and white-key clusters, reflects the outdoor sounds of nature on those summer days: the west wind in the pines and oaks, the running brook, shepherds and herdsmen calling out from afar. The abrupt appearance of a furious four-note *allegro* motif in the piano may seem like the appearance of a dinosaur or monster in a child's dream, but it apparently depicts the terror a child may feel when the fervor of a pastor's sermon shatters the calm of a prayer meeting. Peace returns, as if nothing had happened – the second half of the hymn is sung three times, during which the music gently modulates from D Major to A Major and then E Major, gradually slowing down and becoming quieter. The movement closes with an "Amen". The spectacle of a child's summer, one which we have all experienced.

In the finale, the full quote of a somewhat jazzy version of Robert Lowry's hymn "Shall we Gather at the River" underpins the entire movement. Ives himself explains that if the first is the boys marching, the third movement is some of the old men joining in and singing the hymn. The brusque ending just after the violin has sung the entire hymn can seem somewhat half-baked, but it can also be seen as a manifestation of Ives's sense of humor. The second movement of this sonata is its center of gravity, with the first and third movements acting as a prolog and epilog respectively. Listeners who would like to follow the lyrics while listening to the hymn as it is quoted in the second half of the finale, would surely appreciate Ives's arrangement of "At the River".

Notes

¹An analysis of very brief quotes shows that they are not self-evident like the quotes on Sonatas 1 and 4, but all four sonatas make extensive use of material from other works, particularly the symphonies. For example, the second movement of Sonata No. 2 frequently cross-references Symphony No. 2.