Charles Ives

Prototypical Philosophy in the First Piano Sonata

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Introduction

Much scholarly work has been done on Ives' Second Piano Sonata and expectedly so. The sonata's explicit Transcendentalist themes and in particular its preceding essays depict a clear philosophical project upon which Ives' work can be assessed. In this paper, I will focus instead on Ives' First Piano Sonata. A work in five movements, none of them named, the piece presents itself superficially as more abstract. Ives uses generally conventional score instructions with the usual Italian jargon and composes the work entirely for the piano; unlike the Second Piano Sonata, no external instrument lines appear, actual or otherwise. Frequent and often divergent ossia suggest a more exploratory and less cohesive philosophical ground for the work. In fact, like the Second Piano Sonata, the many movements of the First could comprise a patchwork from several different musical ideas developed disjointly and edited together to form a single work.

With this in mind, I will investigate the First Piano Sonata, and in particular the bisected fourth movement, as an intellectual precursor to Ives' later more overtly philosophical works. In particular, I will demonstrate how Ives implies an essentially Trancendentalist conception of the Natural through two distinct definitions of the term: Nature as embodied by the mathematical properties of the Universe, mechanical Nature, and Nature as the primitive, subrational behavior of 'Man', human Nature, in particular the embodiment of human Nature in the Black man and his beastiality as constructed by early Twentieth Century White American society. To do this, I will show how Ives uses proto-quarter-tone and polyrhythmic devices to signify a mechanical Nature. Then, I will demonstrate how Ives' borrowing of Rag elements relies on contemporary stereotypes of Blackness as primitive and evolutionarily backward to suggest to a White

audience a human Nature lost to a ‘civilized’ society. Finally I will show how these seemingly disparate constructions of the Natural make unite to perform Ives’ distinctly White American identity. But first, I will investigate the Natural, its philosophical importance to early Twentieth Century composers, particularly Ives, and its two-fold construction in American Transcendentalist philosophy.

Nature as a Value

Ives and his contemporaries in Europe faced a post-Romantic crisis of values, something Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin referred to as an “early twentieth-century malaise” (WT p. 358). What Robert Yamasato describes as the increasing investigation of symmetrical divisions of the twelve equal-tempered notes at this time, particularly their manifestation as “synthetic scales”, as well as the increasing awareness in Europe of "Eastern scales" and sounds following the Worlds Fair of 1889 in Paris, lead to the incorporation of new musical devices in the Western Art music practice that did not fit neatly into the Brahmsian harmonic tradition. Consequently, no longer could the forces of tradition, which wove a harmonic thread from Mozart through Beethoven to Brahms, alone justify the continuation of the Common Practice. Thus, composers devoted increasing efforts to discovering a new philosophical basis for Western Art music; writing about music became almost as important a task as writing music itself.

One place in which this foundation was often grounded was in Nature. In Ferrucio Busoni’s “Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music”, the author rejects the tradition of the Tonal System and the twelve tone equal-tempered division of the octave. He instead demonstrates a

Modernist notion of progress by advocating for “a next step toward that “eternal harmony”” of the infinity of tones present in Nature. To achieve this he suggests the incorporation of tripartite tones (WT p359). While it may seem like equal-tempered third-tones are no more grounded in Nature than semi-tones or quarter-tones, Busoni’s deference to the Natural for philosophical justification is in no way unique among writers on this subject at this time.

Charles Ives makes essentially the same argument as Busoni in his essay “Some Quarter-Tone Impressions”: “It will be centuries, at least generations, before man will discover all or even most of the value in a quarter-tone extension. And when he does, nature has plenty of other things up her sleeve” (WT p 360). Ives treats Nature as an obvious philosophical end and the enumeration of Nature’s infinities as logical musical progress. This type of thinking resembles Science in that it treats the Universe as the sole authoritative text, the reading of which directs thought in one logical progression and from which a singular proper set of values can be derived. With this departure from tradition as a source of value, like Busoni’s argument, we can read this selection as squarely Modern in sentiment.

But Ives further complicates his position. While a move away from diatonicism to quarter-tones aids in the project of “dehumanizing” art, Ives oftentimes included explicitly human elements in his work. Soon after the above advocacy for quarter-tones, in the same essay, Ives quotes Henry David Thoreau suggesting that such a project might “perchance make [man] a part with nature”. In this way, Ives offers as solution to the Modernist question not the distancing of music from humanness often advocated for in Europe and particularly by later Stravinsky but rather the Transcendentalist paradox of the human as both perpetually contained within Nature and perpetually separated from it.

Ives investigates this paradox in a separate writing, discussing his borrowing of vernacular tunes in his compositions. In his typically gendered language, Ives refers to a "big" performance of such tunes as "a man's experience of men" and coming ""blam" off a real man's chest" (WT p361). Later in the same passage, he quotes his father saying "[y]ou won't get a heroic ride to heaven on pretty little sounds" (ibid.).

Looking past the gendered language for now, we can see that Ives negotiates the paradox by advocating for a particular type of human experience, one that through its raw, unrefinement is able to transcend the limiting forces of Civilization and arbitrary cultural tradition and access a Natural human condition which is as philosophically important as a mechanical Nature. In this way, not all human experience is authentic or natural. In fact, much of it is in opposition to Nature or, as Ives would say, effeminate. Only through the authentic human experience can the truth of Nature be found: the same truth as revealed by mechanical Nature, one upon which music should be grounded.

Unsurprisingly, Ives binary conception of Nature has precedence in American Transcendentalist literature. We have already seen Ives' quote of Thoreau and investigated the consequent paradox of the human being both against and within Nature. It is also helpful that friend of Thoreau and fellow Transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson published a treatise titled "Nature" in 1839 with which Ives certainly would have been familiar. In its introduction, Emerson anticipates Ives' later philosophical writings about music, advocating for a new system of values, dependent not upon tradition but upon "action proportioned to nature" (Emerson). For Emerson, Nature represents an infinite body of answerable questions, questions asked, of course, by 'Man'. These questions are answerable because their answers are written in the Universe: "nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design" (ibid.). This language

also anticipates the Modernist confidence in Science and more generally suggests a singular path for the future, predetermined in Nature's design.

As for 'Man's' role in Nature, "Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth" (Emerson). In this way, as a part of Nature, humanity also has within it the answers to every question. However, as with Ives, only through a particular human experience, in this case intuitive action, not rational apprehension, does this truth reveal itself; this is authentic human Nature.

It should be noted that in closing his introduction, Emerson discusses two uses of the term "nature", the "common sense" definition which "refers to essences unchanged by man" and the "philosophical" one that encompasses all but the mind of the speaker including other people. Emerson has no problem conflating the two because human "operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing" that they make not a significant impact on the world so as to impact his philosophical project. This seems to counteract Ives' position as a Transcendentalist. Emerson includes effectively all of human action under Nature, merely privileging instinct over thought, while Ives selects for a particular subset of humanity that he considers sufficiently "manly" or authentic, rejecting the overly cultured individual or the urban. To understand this disparity we must recognize that Emerson and Ives were writing almost a century apart. In Emerson's time, Thoreau could live two miles from Concord, Massachusetts and consider himself amongst Nature and in the woods. By Ives' time that certainly would not be the case. In fact many of the identities Ives' describes as being authentic and worthy of his borrowing may have been much more ubiquitous in Emerson's time: Ives' writing representing a sort of nostalgia for the America of the nineteenth century. Regardless, it should be of little doubt from Ives' numerous writings himself and his ideological similarities that his philosophy of Nature was strongly influenced by American Transcendentalism.

The Sonata

Ives' First Piano Sonata is constructed relatively disjointly. Unlike the Second, the work has no title and little writing exists revealing Ives to have a unified intent in its creation. In fact, like much of Ives' work, the sonata may exist only as compiled scraps (Schiff) never completed to the composer's satisfaction. For this reason, I will not read the sonata like I would the Second, as a statement of a singular idea. Rather its disjoint elements written in a relatively early period for Ives (c. 1909) will serve as a collection of compositional thoughts giving light to intentions and decisions made by Ives in his later works.

One thought prototyped in this first sonata is Ives' idea of Nature. In particular, in the fourth movement, Ives demonstrates a binary idea of Nature that spans the mechanical and the human. The movement is very short, lasting under four minutes. It is divided into two parts: "IVa" and "IVb" marked *Allegro.* I will first demonstrate that in the first part, Ives investigates the mechanical elements of pianism, specifically proto-quarter-tones created by a particular textural implementation of semi-tones and their inversions, major sevenths. Through this he investigates the philosophical position that the musical domain ought to include all of the sounds mechanically available in the Universe, in particular quarter-tones not present in twelve-tone Equal Temperament. Secondly, I will analyze the *Allegro* part of the movement in which Ives employs musical borrowings of Ragtime elements. Through the symbolic meaning of including popular musical devices in the form of a piano sonata, particularly Black music elements, I will show that Ives presents in his music the Early Twentieth Century image of a 'primitive' human, distinct from the 'civilized' men who write sophisticated art music like sonatas. Furthermore,

through this symbology I will demonstrate that Ives communicates an idea of human Nature or human-natural music.

Ives begins the fourth movement with four dense harmonies that present themselves two in the right hand and two in the left in the first two measures. These harmonies together present all twelve of the semitones available in Equal Temperament. In fact, nowhere else in the fourth movement does Ives present pitch information so densely. Thus we can read this conspicuous gesture as intentionally symbolic. One interpretation of such a symbol is as that of the Universal. In his Universe Symphony, Ives created a single chord composed of each of the twelve tones spaced widely apart to symbolize the same thing. Furthermore, Ives' writings on quarter-tones reveal a similar thought. In his essay "Some Quarter-Tone Impressions", Ives suggests that "transcendent things may be felt" through the "myriads of sound waves nature has put around in the air" "even in the limited and awkward way of working with quarter-tones at present" . We need quarter-tones, according to Ives, because they will make available to us more of the uncountable pitches present in the Universe. In other words, by plotting the infinity of the line with more points, we come closer to the Universal. In this way, having all twelve tones present functions as closer to Nature than merely seven diatonic tones, for example. Thus, we can understand that Ives begins the first part of this movement investigating the idea of mechanical Nature.

Advancing his investigation of mechanical Nature, Ives continues to investigate Equal Temperament by pushing the limit of the semi-tone. In comparing the two right hand chords, we notice that two pitches, D and Eb, move upwards by a semitone to Eb and E natural, while the remaining pitches, C# and Bb, are static. In fact, this is the only pitch variance in the right hand

for the first four measures until the static pitches disappear and the major seventh becomes an octave briefly in measure five. Ives certainly would be familiar with the fact that in the Common Practice, parallel octaves behave as a single voice, something that makes them undesirable in fugues and governs their use in piano textures. Because texturally, the major sevenths and the octaves behave the same way: adjacent motion, no more than a semi-tone apart, Ives seems to be suggesting that the parallel major sevenths behave as a single voice too, the same one as the octaves. When we consider Ives affinity for quarter-tones, it makes sense to understand his major sevenths to function as proto-quarter-tone devices. Against the first harmonic of the note below it, the upper note of the seventh interacts to imply the quarter-tone between them. In fact, this exists as a documented phenomenon known as the beat threshold. Two pitches, sufficiently close together, sound not distinctly but at the pitch of their average. When Ives writes a major seventh here, he means to suggest a quarter-tone; when he writes an octave, the exact pitch is what is intended. This technique continues in the right hand until a texture change in measure twenty two. A seventh/octave voice also appears in the left hand, starting with octaves moving by minor seconds in measure seven and continuing also to that same texture shift.

In measure eight, Ives uses a particularly interesting combination of pitches in the left hand: an F# with a C a tritone above and an F a fourth above that. This particular harmony connects to a writing of Ives found in his Memos edited by John Kirkpatrick: “when it comes to using the [11th] partial, F# in C (which has been found to be nearer [to] a quarter-tone than to the written [F#]), they would call you unnatural and violating a fundamental law. How about that, Mama Nature? Professors, Doctors of Music, and some Germans call you somewhat unnatural and a tough man, when you play a few quarter-tones!” (Kirkpatrick). If we trust the earlier analysis of the functioning of major sevenths, we find that the F# and F natural imply that very overtone present within the C which Ives described, after a set of parallel octaves.

Thus, through his understanding of the mechanical properties of sound, Ives manages to insert a semblance of a quarter-tone melody as an idea in this first movement. This makes sense in the context of his later work "Quarter-Tone Impressions" which was also written on the piano. We find in this movement the intellectual precursors of what would become Ives' life long quarter-tone project.

Ives then moves forward in measure twenty two to investigate Tone Clusters and rhythmic proportions of five against two and five against three. Both of these musical devices are discussed by Ives' friend Henry Cowell. In his 1930 book "New Musical Resources", Cowell deals specifically with rhythm stating "a parallel can be drawn between the ratio of rhythmical beats and the ratio of musical tones by virtues of the common mathematical basis of both musical time and musical tone" (WT). Regarding Tone Clusters, Cowell again suggests this same philosophical grounding in Nature: "Tone clusters are chords built from major and minor seconds, which in turn may be derived from the upper reaches of the overtones series and have, therefore a sound harmonic foundation." Thus we can see a similarity in the rhetoric Cowell uses to discuss these new musical resources; mechanical Nature lays the philosophic foundation for the inclusion of new devices in music.

Ives and Cowell were not in conversation at the time of the writing of the First Piano Sonata and so we cannot say that Cowell's ideas influenced Ives' writing. However there are bountiful similarities in the ways both composers treat these ideas. For example, on Tone Clusters, Cowell states of their nature "all movement must be up or down the scale, as in melody" and this is just how the clusters function in the sonata, both the explicit ones in measure twenty two and those implied by the major sevenths before. It is possible, though only speculation, that in conversation with Ives, Cowell was strongly influenced by his musical

philosophy and later included derivatives of these ideas in his writing. All we can note for certain is the similarities of the devices used and the similar philosophical basis under which they function.

In sum, the first half of this fourth movement demonstrates Ives' thoughts on music as inspired by mechanical Nature. Mathematical relationships and the physical properties of the universe that they represent explain the behavior of several musical devices; Tone Clusters, rhythmic ratios, and most interestingly proto-quarter-tones all have a basis in mechanical Nature that govern their function.

I move now to discuss the second part of the fourth movement, *Allegro*. Ives here makes a drastic departure starting in measure thirty six of IVa marking a transition from the mechanical elements that dominate the previous material to a recognizably vernacular sound. In the first two measures, Ives articulates a clear syncopated rhythm and then modifies it using accent markings to emphasize typically non-dominant beats. Unlike in the first part where Ives' mathematical ratios relied on a consistent meter within which different integer subdivisions could intersect, the rhythm in this second part directly challenges that consistent metrical division of the measure. In other words, where two large clear beats aided in Ives' articulation of mathematical rhythm, here Ives subverts those beats in imitation of syncopated rhythm. This rhythmic device continues in the left hand up until measure sixty nine where melodic elements become more dominant forces.

These melodic elements are presented within a very distinct scalar structure that can broadly be viewed as pentatonic. The first of these melodies, in measure sixty nine, operates more specifically with a blues alteration, using both the major and minor third scale degree in they key of G. The following melody is a brief foreshadowing of a later borrowing of the tune

“Bringing in the Sheaves”. When understood to be in the key of B flat, we notice that like the earlier blues melody, the scale degrees four and seven are missing. The third melody in this section does not fit as neatly into these scale structures but does very strongly assert syncopation.

To Ives, both syncopation and blues scaling would be racially marked musical devices. In Kirkpatrick memo fifteen, Ives writes: “The Gospels used the 4th and the 7th sometimes but the negroes were still too close to Africa and the oriental five-tone scale to get these.” To Ives, pentatonic melodies and blues scales signify an evolutionary backwardness. Ives goes on to write that what the ‘negroes’ distilled from Gospel tunes was a “fervor, conviction, and a real human something underneath” (Kirkpatrick 54). This real human something is a signifier of a nature and primitivism contemporary White America considered embedded within Black bodies.

Helpful to understanding these essentialist conceptions of race that solidified in the era of Jim Crow is Ronald Radono’s essay "Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm". In this essay, Radono discusses the socio-political forces that motivated White America to identify a distinctly “black form” of music, loaded with connotations of primitivism and sexual threat. As evidenced in Ives’ writing, Hot Rhythm relies on an idea of “naturalness” and an “illusory folk authenticity” to write Black music as something indicative of a base human nature, something tied not to the mind but the body, “a pre-discursive “spiritual” resonance” (Radono 460-462).

The way in which Blackness functioned for Ives loads his use of Black musical devices with symbolic meaning. Through his use of syncopation and pentatonic and blues scales, Ives constructs the second part of the movement as distinctly Black. Through Blackness’s connotations of an ancestral Africa and also primitive, intuitive, and natural behavior, these

musical devices function to symbolize a human Nature, written as inaccessible to the White man due to his burden of 'civilization' but still latent due to his African evolutionary origin.

We can see that while both parts of the fourth movement are musically very distinct, they both unite in articulating the same philosophical project of music grounded in the natural. However Ives, himself, considered there to be a musical unity between Ragtime rhythm and the integer proportions he displayed in the first part of the movement. In fact, we have a sample of Ives writing in which he discusses these rhythmic devices directly. In Kirkpatrick memo number seventeen, Ives discusses how Ragtime rhythms, among others, inspired the "ragging combination of fives, twos, and sevens" in the first part of the fourth movement. Thus we can see that Ives did not view these parts as musically disjoint and rather composed them with unity in mind.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the fourth movement of the First Piano Sonata demonstrates Ives' early investigation into the post-Romantic question of how to philosophically ground music. In developing the Transcendentalist notion of Nature, one paradoxically containing the human and distinct from it, Ives created a two part work that first investigated mechanical Nature through physical and mathematical properties of sound and, second, investigated human Nature as constructed in America through a racist binary conflating it with African rhythm and melodic progression. As Transcendentalist in origin and through its means, Ives' project is distinctly American, distinguished from contemporary European solutions to the question such as the dehumanization of art.

Interestingly, these musical means also function to communicate a White male identity, one strangely important to Ives as evidenced by his frequent use of gendered language to communicate approval or disdain. Through his scientific approach to sound in the first part of the movement, Ives demonstrates himself to be knowledgeable about something every other educated White male would be expected to know. In relying on American essentializations of race, Ives also imports the idea of the hyper-sexualized Black man whose "rhythm becomes a metonym of Negro semen or blood" (Radono) one which arouses transcendent feelings as music "coming "blam" off a real man's chest" (WT). Thus Ives inherits this extreme masculinity through his appropriation of Black sounds and demonstrates a distinct White male privilege in doing so.

How composers perform the various intersections of their identities is often overlooked in discussions about their music. Typically from dominant racial and sexual categories, this question is most often asked of composers whose national identity is written as marginal. Charles Ives, however, employs such idiosyncratic techniques that his identity always exists as a visible force in his music. Thus in this paper such a question could be asked and answered with ease. But how can we look further to understand how works that attempt to present themselves as autonomous objects or objective philosophical statements really betray an underlying socially defined intention of the composer? How can we look at music written to be the distinguished unmarked product of an absolute artist and recognize its fundamentally identity defining features? In this paper I have employed some primitive techniques but surely more work needs to be done in rewriting this history of Western music to acknowledge its fundamental racial and sexual biases.

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In the second part of his fourth movement, Ives imitates the sound of a Rag.

Cruicial to its symbolic function in the sonata is the racialized nature of such a borrowing, especially to contemporary listeners of the work.

To an early twentieth century American, Ragtime music presented as distinctly Black and this Blackness must be understood in the context of the minstrel history of Black performance in American and in particular the idea of "hotness".

In his essay "Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm", Ronald Radano depicts the connotations of hotness to White Americans at this time and even to this day: a "natural force" one of "folk authenticity" that existed in a "double logic" both "desirable and threatening" (Radano 462).

In other words, Black music and its hotness represents a primoridal force, untainted by civilization.

Racially identified with Africa, Black music allows for White listeners to access their evolutionary roots.

By borrowing Black American music and conflating it with African music, Ives acknowledges the second pillar of Transcendentalist Nature in his sonata. In his essay "Nature", Ralph Waldo Emerson claims about the answerability of every question "Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth."

Ives outline

At the turn of the Twentieth century, many composers in the Western art music tradition confronted a crisis of values. Tradition was no longer suitable to guide the pen of the composer and as a result, writing about music came to be almost as important a task as writing music itself. One of the many proposed ways out of this predicament was an increasing turn towards the Natural. This solution is in some ways a modification of the Romantic notion of music approaching the Universal or the Sublime, altered in that it depended more on rationalized notions of the way things are rather than emotion or sensation alone.

Of the many composers working at this time, Charles Ives also faced this question of what music ought to be. Ives arrived at similar conclusions to his European contemporaries, deferring to a rationalized conception of the Natural, a Modernist sentiment. More specifically, Ives demonstrates a Transcendentalist conception of nature in his work, that of a binary Nature defined by both the mathematical "perfection of the creation" and particularly Man as he "acts as life" the solutions of his inquiries before apprehending with the mind (Emerson Nature).

Ives demonstrates these ideas in his first piano sonata, an early work serving to philosophically ground Ives' intentions as a composer. In particular, in the fourth movement, a climax of the Sonata, Ives clearly lays out his philosophical interpretation of music as a natural force.

In the fourth movement of Ives' Sonata No. 1 for Piano, he demonstrates this two fold view of Nature by first investigating mathematical properties of sound and then borrowing melodic and rhythmic devices from the African American tradition of Ragtime.

In the first part of the fourth movement, Ives demonstrates a mathematical logic of music as its physical sonic properties through his investigation of the infinity of pitches and proportions of rhythms. By performing these properties of sound, Ives claims a physical basis for music as something built into the universe. Music is dependent on the physical phenomenon of sound to function but sound also necessarily implies music as a consequence.

Playing all the notes - schoenberg. Ives' universal chord, that tone cluster guy.

In the second part of the movement, Ives moves into a Ragtime style, appropriated from such Black American composers as Scott Joplin. While Ragtime is very much a Westernized distillation of the african diasporic sound, with its still rigid rhythmic patterns and clear Western harmony, it was received as a distinctly racialized music, its similarities with White music only enough to make it pallatable to white audiences. Like other African Diasporic musics, Ragtime was seen to white listeners as a primitive sound, one played by self taught musicians, and certainly not a medium for any serious white composers. Ives' use of a ragtime reference contains all of these loaded meanings and serves to embody Ives' idea of the primitive. Because Black bodies are closest to Africa, humanities ancestral home, the music of black musicians offers a gateway into a primitive humanity, a natural state of humanness, one whose music offers some essence of what music ought to be.

Also Blackness has strong gendered connotations. Because Blackness in america is hypersexualized, black music would embody a masculine gender performance, one with which Ives was particularly concerned (see string quartet).

Ives communicates a binary conception of the natural in his Sonata No. 1 by utilizing both physical / mathematical devices and those associated with primitive humanity particularly African elements and incorporates each both melodically and rhythmically.

Ives advocates for a physical conception of the natural and its exhaltation in music through the melodic emphasis of secundary harmonies, in particular tone clusters. By emphasising this smallest interval of the piano Ives suggests in his piano sonata a desire to go inbetween. In particular his tone clusters and back and forth secondary motions create the sonic impression of the sounds in between each note. See tone cluster dude, ives on overtones, schoenburrg adam and steven, ives universal chord, italian writer.

In comparison, Ives quotes distinctly black melodies in the form of ragtime esq sounds. These melodies are more singable and avoid seventh and fourth degree scale tones which Ives associated with the negro race and by extension a primitive closer to human essence sound. see Ives writings on black, “real man’s chest”.