Charles Ives
A Centennial Discography
by George Harper

Charles Ives was a great composer and one of the most important American composers to emerge during the early 20th century. He was known for his innovative and complex musical style, which often incorporated folk melodies and other non-classical elements. His works include symphonies, chamber music, and songs, among other genres.

Ives composed four symphonies, ranging in style from the orthodox "First Symphony," written during his student days at Yale, through the brash "Second Symphony," dating from 1902, and the introspective "Third," completed in 1904, to the mind-blowing "Fourth," finished in 1916. The First shows its student status; it displays little of the personal quality that we expect of Ives. In fact, Ives toned down his work at the insistance of his teacher at Yale, Horatio Parker. Still, it is not without interest— it has an attractive sort of Brahmsian flavor. The recording to have is with Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra (Columbia MS-7111). Not only is this a fine performance, but it is bracketed with a much more important work, Three Places in New England. The Second Symphony is a dazzling piece, even more so in juxtaposition with the First. Bernstein's performances of the Second with the New York Philharmonic in 1951 were a major milestone in Ives's rise in critical and popular esteem. Ives makes his use of one of the most original, techniques, quoting popular melodies and hymn tunes, everything from Columbia, The Gem of the Ocean to When I Survey the Wondrous Cross of the second movement. The fifth movement ends nowhere near any sort of resolution—in fact, it strongly hints at the conclusion of Mozart's Masonic Lodge. The recording of choice is with Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, bracketed with a performance of The Fourth of July from Ives's Holidays Symphony. The Third Symphony is one of the loveliest things Ives ever wrote. Subtitled The Camp Meeting, its introverted air is quite striking and thoroughly odd with the common and mistaken image of "Ives the equivalent of two discs. An excellent bargain is available from Columbia—fine performances (Ormandy/Beinelli/Beinelli/Stokowski) of all four symphonies on one box (Columbia D15-783) on three discs, priced at the equivalent of two discs. This is really an excellent buy, and I would strongly recommend it to anyone who is starting to listen to Ives.

Ives wrote two symphonic-scale tone poems for orchestra, his Three Places in New England (Orchestral Set No. 1) and Orchestral Set No. 2. Though Ormandy's reading of the first set is good (available with the First Symphony—see above), it is totally outclassed by the recent recording of the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Michael Tilson Thomas (DG 2530048). This is an extremely sensitive performance of a gorgeous piece of music, and as a bonus you get a stunning performance of Carl Ruggles's Son Trea- ter, a piece which, though worlds apart in mood from Three Places, is no less a masterpiece. Though I am not as fond of the Orchesral Set No. 2, it too has its points. The third movement, entitled From Hanover Square North at the end of a Tragic Day (1915) the Voice of the People again Arise, is intended as an evocation of the faces and sentiments of the crowds Ives encountered in New York City on the day of the sinking of the Lusitania. A fine recording is with Leon- pold Stokowski and the London Sym- phony Orchestra (London OSA 21060), bracketed with a performance of Olivier Messiaen's L'Ascension.

Ives was for much of his creative life an organist and choir director at the Central Presbyterian Church in New Haven, Connecticut. During his tenure there he wrote many striking works for chorus. Chief among them are the psalm settings, The Harvest Home Chorale, and one of the most amazing things Ives ever wrote, General William Booth Enters Into Heaven. Foss himself often was heard to remark that all of the works he had authored, only his Psalms 99 really satisfied him. Two recordings by the Gregg Smith Singers under the direction of Gregg Smith (Columbia MS 0921 and MS 7333) cover most of the major works for chorus with fine performances, including a really excellent General William Booth. A major new release (Nonesuch 73025, 2 discs) has Gilbert Kalish and Paul Zukofsky in performances of the four Sonatas for Violin and Piano.

Along with the Columbia box set of the symphonies mentioned above, another good idea for a holiday gift is the new 1994 anniversary Album from Columbia (four discs plus bonus, 44-325904), which includes fine performances of seldom-heard works, along with some interesting recordings of Ives performing some of his own works for solo piano—Ives takes a composer's liberties with his own pieces. Also included is a bonus disc of conversations with people who knew Charles Ives and his father George.

This is intended as a basic Ives discography covering the newer and more significant recordings. Columbia especially deserves our thanks for having contributed so many fine discs of both major and minor works in recent years. For those who find themselves taken with this great American of composers, there are vast fields of less-familiar works for exploration.

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