

review essay

**american studies
and
american fine-art music**

AMERICAN COMPOSERS ON AMERICAN MUSIC. Edited by Henry Cowell. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company. 1933 and 1962. Paper: \$3.25.

AMERICAN STUDIES AND AMERICAN MUSICOLOGY. By Richard Crawford. New York: Institute for the Study of American Music. 1975. Paper: \$2.00.

IVES. By H. Wiley Hitchcock. New York: Oxford University Press. 1977. Paper: \$7.25.

AN IVES CELEBRATION. Edited by H. Wiley Hitchcock and Vivian Perlis. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1977. \$11.95.

MUSIC IN A NEW FOUND LAND. By Wilfred Mellors. London and New York: Stonehill Publishing Company. 1964 and 1978. Paper: \$5.95.

CHARLES IVES AND HIS AMERICA. By Frank Rossiter. New York and London: Liveright Publishing Company. 1975 and 1976. \$15.00.

In the 1920s and 30s a group of American composers set themselves the task of creating a consciously nationalistic music that would sound American themes rather than imitate traditional European styles. Henry Cowell, in the introduction to *American Composers on American Music*, claimed that such nationalism was not an end in itself, but the means to an end. Since art transcended national boundaries, the development of an "American" music was needed to promote production by culturally and socially secure composers who used their native resources to write music which was ultimately to be universally valued. Despite such Americanist manifestos and compositions, however, little attention has been paid to the place of American fine-art or "serious" music in American cultural history until recently. The links between literature and society, the visual arts and the general culture, even the ties of both jazz and popular music to their environment have been long established. Some of

the reasons for this neglect of fine-art music are explored in Richard Crawford's stimulating monograph, *American Studies and American Musicology*. Crawford's delineation of the methodological problems involved, particularly the lack of musicological training for studying non-European fields, indicates that little has changed since Roy Harris' analysis of the musical education situation in "Problems of American Composers" in *American Composers on American Music*.

Nevertheless, Crawford's belief that the American fine-art music field is information-rich but assimilation-poor is finally being rectified, as he himself points out. Cultural historians have noted a few early works, such as the very interesting approach presented by Wilfred Mellors, an English composer and musicologist, in *Music in a New Found Land*. Mellors related literary themes, fine-art music and jazz in an integration that illuminates and clarifies the work of some twentieth century composers. And the current "Charles Ives explosion" seems destined to continue and refine the work that Mellors helped to spark. While H. Wiley Hitchcock's *Ives* is an important general study of the composer's work, Hitchcock's and Vivian Perlis' *An Ives Celebration* moves away from traditional approaches and poses exciting new questions for the cultural historian. Two sections of this collection of papers and discussions arising out of the "Charles Ives Centennial Festival-Conference," held in New York and New Haven in 1974, have particular interest for American Studies scholars. "Ives and American Culture" presents two papers which attempt to place Ives in his social and cultural context. Robert M. Crunden sees Ives "as 'a progressive' American who seems strange and out of place to us only because other progressives did their innovating in other disciplines . . . compared to Edward MacDowell or Horatio Parker, Ives may well seem rather strange; compared to John Dewey or Woodrow Wilson, he seems strange only in the sense that men of creativity always have their idiosyncracies, and always stand out from the crowd around them." Frank Rossiter rightly challenges both this view and the traditional image of Ives as a lonely, alienated artist in a cultural desert by presenting an analysis which he develops more fully in his *Charles Ives and His America*. Rossiter studies the effects on Ives of selected socio-cultural beliefs predominant in Ives' generation and class—in particular, the feminized conception of fine-art music as opposed to popular music and the genteel musical tradition which sees music as being fine and ennobling, but no profession for the members of the "better classes." Ives, as a socialized member of the "better classes," outwardly conformed to, and inwardly rebelled against, those restrictions. Rossiter presents Ives as a "nineteenth-century man" and a Transcendentalist rather than as a progressive and argues that the very nature of Ives' socialization would have made it impossible for him to accept the "bohemian" culture of his artistic contemporaries such as Isadora Duncan and Alfred Stieglitz. Left with no way to compromise the dichotomies of his life and art, Ives isolated himself, and ultimately broke under the strain of this internal-external con-

flict. Rossiter, who is an American Studies scholar, has been challenged about his musical analysis by music critics, but for the cultural historian his methods break new ground in the study of the formative influence of society on the composer and the relationship of art to culture.

In addition to providing provocative perspectives on the relationship of the artist to his society, *An Ives Celebration* introduces another element in the section entitled "Ives Viewed from Abroad." These observations and statements by foreign scholars provide the cultural historian with new insights and dimensions of understanding of cross-cultural analysis as well as the reception of Ives' music in a non-American setting. The "citizen-composer" may lose his most specific native references abroad, but it is clear from this discussion that the loss is compensated for in the communication of both form and general content. Apparently Ives, whatever his social and artistic traumas, managed to create, as Henry Cowell recommended, a "national" music that transcends its nationalism. Presumably cultural historians, developing methodologies that will enable them to follow up the exciting start made by *An Ives Celebration*, will assimilate the wide range of information available about American fine-art music throughout our history. Undoubtedly they will find, as Gilbert Chase pointed out, quoting William Brooks in *An Ives Celebration*, "There is no reason to believe that American music lies mysteriously outside American culture as a whole."

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