

Analysis Of Ives's "The Unanswered Question"

Charles Ives was an American composer who lived from 1874 to 1954 and worked and lived mostly in Connecticut. Ives was an extremely original, and thus came to be known as a distinctly "American," composer for reasons pertaining to practically every facet of his music. He was extremely experimental and innovative; uniquely musically trained at Yale by Horatio Parker (instead of receiving a de rigueur European training); Ives developed a highly original musical personality. He blended popular American music, European art music and religious music, and was one of the first composers to really delve into polytonality, polyrhythm, aleatoric music, tone clusters and quartertones. As an insurance agent relatively unknown musically throughout his life, Ives was able to completely liberate himself from attempting to please people and press or to follow trends, and thus he focused on developing his own distinct musical fingerprint.

Ives composed "The Unanswered Question" in 1908. It was not performed however until 1946 in New York. The piece is around eight minutes and is scored for a string ensemble, a solo trumpet (who poses "The Question") and a woodwind quartet. An aleatoric element can be seen in Ives' written in possible substitutions for the third and fourth flutes (oboe instead of flute III and clarinet instead of flute IV). These are somewhat dramatic substitutions to make considering the already relatively lean orchestration and the difference in sound between a flute and an oboe or clarinet versus say, a piccolo or recorder. Further, the trumpet can be replaced by an English horn, oboe, or clarinet. Considering the trumpet's extreme importance and spotlight, it seems a little strange for Ives to grant the instrumentation so much liberty that the trumpet's "question"

line as well as one to two of the opposing “answer” harmonies could share the same exact instrumentation.

“The Unanswered Question” is very clearly program music; each of the instruments has a role clearly related to the idea of “The Unanswered Question” and further, their respective musical language clearly embodies the feeling of a question as well as an answer. For example, the “Question” is so isolated and distinct in its instrumentation as a single trumpet that really sticks out of the texture, sharply opposed to the many “Answers” that never really satisfy anyone, realized by the comparatively large and unified woodwind and string sections. This sharp purposeful contrast is exemplified in measure 16 when the trumpet comes in with half and quarter notes after the very slow preceding harmonic rhythm. The trumpet sticks out of the texture due to it being the only solo instrument, its fast (relative to the woodwinds and strings) rhythm and its repeated motive. Furthermore, the piece grows louder and louder, from measure one’s triple piano to measure 49’s quadruple forte, but the trumpet’s question motive is usually slightly louder than the rest of the sections (e.g. in measure 16 marked mezzo piano, measure 37 marked piano, etc). Interestingly, the articulations of the “question” motive (measures 16, 22, 30, 37, 44, 52, 60) all begin on different beats of the measure. (Note: it is rather confusing to cite measure numbers as they are spaced irregularly between instrument sections, another arguably hindering Ives-ian development). For example, measure 16’s motive starts on beat 1, measure 22’s on beat 3 (of triplet), measure 30’s on beat 2, measure 37’s on beat 3 (of triplet), measure 44’s on beat 2 (of triplet), measure 52’s on beat 1 (like the first occurrence) and lastly, beat 3 (of triplet) in measure 60’s (fourth to last measure). This subtle yet effective rhythmic displacement of

the central motive lends a forward and driving sense of motion to what could otherwise have been a very stagnant piece owing to the repetition and extremely slow moving string section. Also, the use of triplets and the hemiola of three equal beats over 4/4 time lends further conspicuity and presence to the trumpet or “Question,” implying its eternal distance from any real “answer” from the ever so steady 4/4 presence of the strings.

The rhythmic displacement given to the trumpet can also be seen in the harmonic rhythm of the strings however, imbuing the piece with increasing rhythmic ambiguity (as the questioner grows increasingly restless) in partnership with the increasing dynamic levels as well as the increase in speed (from Largo Molto Sempre to Adagio to Andante to Allegretto to Allegro to Allegro Molto to Presto to a Molto Agitando Presto tempo) in addition to the slowly increasing thickness of texture (the trumpet and strings texture is mostly stagnant but the woodwinds scored above increase in rhythmic speed and overall density of notes steadily throughout the piece). For example, the strings all begin on beat 1 of measure 1 and change notes always on the downbeat (or beats 1-4 of quarter notes in the lower parts) up until measure 18 (no doubt in relation to the entrance of the first “Question” motive two measures before) and from there increase in rhythmic entropy, with hemiolas galore. That is, until the conclusion, in which the strings are responsible for ending with a rather circular motion via replicating the harmonic rhythm and dynamic level of the opening. The pedal G note in the cello beginning in measure 53 to the end helps reign in the harmonic rhythm and overall settling down of the piece.

I believe the overall melancholia at least felt by me in listening to “The Unanswered Question” is accomplished by the wistfulness and sad quality of the strings’ harmonies (notwithstanding their ending and beginning in G Major), their unrelenting

consistency and their unresolved nature – all qualities further brought out by the utter contrast of the trumpet's line. The “question” and the “answer” never connect or respond to each other musically, creating a sense of isolation and hopelessness within the listener. Lastly, the loud and brought out dissonances of the trumpet and woodwinds against the relatively non-dissonant static strings intensifies the eternal, huge, unbridgeable gap between living as an inescapably clueless human being and the ultimate resolution or “answer” of the immortal questions no one can live without.