

“Transcending Text: Tradition over Transcendentalism?”

Charles Ives’s *Fourth Symphony* and Musical Depictions of a Pilgrim’s Progress Toward Faith”

ABSTRACT

“In the beginning was the word... and the word was God...”¹ and throughout history, Christian composers have grappled with the possibilities of translating this word into wordless mediums such as music. We find such aspirations in the music of early 20th century American composer Charles Ives. About “religious matters,” Ives struggled to articulate ‘the word’ in his musical idiom saying, “not until I got to work on the *Fourth Symphony* did I feel justified in writing quite as I wanted to.”² However, his fascination with Emersonian Transcendentalism and its critique of organized religion raises the question of what Ives meant in labeling the work as religious. Moreover, Ives’s famous *Essays Before a Sonata* – a collection of writings reflecting the concerns of Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne intended to accompany Charles Ives’s *Piano Sonata No. 2* – has been used as a central lens through which to evaluate and understand Ives’s music.

However, according to J. Peter Burkholder, “most of [Ives’] important ideas...come from sources outside the Transcendentalist tradition.”³ It is these non-Transcendental ideas and their musical counterparts which are the concern of this essay. The result is a surprising form of musical hospitality: Charles Ives, the skilled academic composer, welcoming the aesthetic of the untrained worshiper into his music. Instead of relying on traditional liturgical forms, such as the mass or requiem as a framework for communicating the *sacred* in music, he appropriates the “secular” symphonic form. By using innovative orchestrational techniques, hymn quotation, and choir to bookend the symphony – Ives creates a multi-layered soundscape that musically depicts the journey of the human being toward faith in Christ. Furthermore, his ability to emulate the emotion of 19th century American revival singing – alive today in Pentecostal and Charismatic services – provides this music with resonant authenticity. Understanding Ives’ approach provides artists with a model worth exploring, equips music lovers with tools for better understanding a complex musical language, and invites the faithful to imagine their spiritual journey as a symphony.

¹ Gospel of John 1:1

² Ives, *Memos*, 129

³ Burkholder, *Charles Ives: The Ideas Behind the Music*, 23