

CHARLES IVES

NEW ENGLAND HOLIDAYS (1904-13)

Washington's Birthday (1909)

Imperial Philharmonic Orchestra of Tokyo

Decoration Day (1912)

Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra

The Fourth of July (1913)

Göteborg Symphony Orchestra

Thanksgiving (1904)

Iceland Symphony Orchestra and Iceland State Radio Chorus

WILLIAM STRICKLAND, conductor

AMONG the large-scale works of Charles Ives (1874-1954), the four pieces comprising *New England Holidays* stand as the high point of his effort to communicate as meaningfully organized sound the full impact of the memory images of his boyhood in Danbury. Though the earliest of them dates in its orchestral version from 1904, it would appear that the idea of a multi-movement score did not become crystallized in Ives's mind until he had set *Washington's Birthday* to paper (1909) and begun work (1912) on *Decoration Day*. John Kirkpatrick's monumental catalog of Ives mss. at Yale University indicates a marginal note in the *Decoration Day* ms. score:

SONATA

1. Washington's Birthday (Snow Bound), f fast
2. Decoration Day, p slow, f fast, slow
3. 4th of July, mostly fast . . .
4. Thanksgiving, religious old anthems

By 1913, when *The Fourth of July* had been completed, the four scores were placed together in a brown cardboard folder bearing the notation, "4 N.E. Holidays". Henry and Sidney Cowell in their book on Ives designate the collection in their catalog as: *A Symphony: Holidays*, to which they add Ives's notations, "Recollections of a boy's holidays in a Connecticut country town . . . These movements may be played as separate pieces. . . . These pieces may be lumped together as a symphony."

Stylistically, *Washington's Birthday* with its chamber orchestra scoring for flute, piccolo, horn, a pair of jew's harps, bells, and strings, seems to be an outgrowth of the impressionist-cum-James Joyce montage technique worked out in 1906 in such scores as *Central Park in the Dark* (recorded by William Strickland on CRI 163). While *Decoration Day* and *The Fourth of July* are in effect an expansion of the same concept to a large orchestral canvas. *Thanksgiving* stands apart from the other three Holidays not only in its earlier date, but in its style which is closely related to the monumental dissonant polyphony of Ives's *Psalm 67* (1898) and *Harvest Home Chorales* (1898-1902).

This Ivesian counterpart to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (the titles indicated in Henry Cowell's New Music Series publication in 1936 of *Washington's Birthday* were *Winter—Washington's Birthday*; *Spring—Decoration Day*; *Summer—The Fourth of July*; *Autumn—Thanksgiving and Forefather's Day*) had to wait until April 9, 1954—scarcely a month before the composer's death—for a first integral performance (by Antal Dorati and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra). However, Ives arranged several private tryouts of *Washington's Birthday* between 1910-15, and his description of the musician's reaction—as quoted by the Cowells—gives some idea of how appalled they were at the metrical complexities and dissonant texture of what they were asked to play: "These were supposed to be the best men in the orchestra, and they were good musicians, but the Globe Theatre orchestra did it as well, if not better. They made an awful fuss about playing it, and before I got through, this had to be cut out, and that had to be cut out, and in the end, the score was practically emasculated. After 6 or 8 rehearsals it was approximately well played, but only after some of the parts which seemed to me the strongest and the best were cut out. Harmisch, the viola player, was the only one who was not more or less mad at the trouble the music gave them. He suggested that the piece be played at one of their concerts [of the New York Symphony Orchestra], but Reber Johnson answered: 'No, we must think of the audience.'" However, by 1931-1932 the courageously pioneering conductor-composer-encyclopedist, Nicolas Slonimsky, had performed *Washington's Birthday*, *Decoration Day*, and *The Fourth of July* with great success in Europe. But by that time Ives's deteriorating health had forced him to give up musical composition and to retire from the Ives & Myrick insurance partnership which he and Julian Myrick had built up so brilliantly from scratch over a period of more than twenty years. It was to Myrick, by the way, that Ives dedicated the score of *The Fourth of July*.

That Ives was hopeful of obtaining performances of his more difficult works even under semi-private circumstances is indicated not only by the sizable number of arrangements from instrumental choral works contained in the collection of *114 Songs* printed and distributed at Ives's own expense in 1922, but also by a *Decoration Day* sketch indicating plans for a Fifth Violin Sonata based on the *New England Holidays* music.

In each of the first three *Holidays* pieces, an atmospheric impressionist opening—wintry, warmly springlike, and nocturnal by turns—gives way to a kind of phantasmagoric "action" music such as only Ives could write. The super-imposition of meters and keys is more drastic in the barn dance episode of *Washington's Birthday* and in the parade and fireworks finale of *The Fourth of July* than in *Decoration Day*, where the evocation of specific incidents assumes a more usual episodic progression along the time continuum.

A lengthy cataloging could be made here of the metrical and harmonic devices employed by Ives to achieve some of the startling sound-reflection and off-key village band effects in *New England Holidays*; but it is perhaps more in key with Ives's poetic intent to let the music on this disc be heard on its own terms, free of the apparatus of exhaustive technical analysis. Ives himself did supply postfaces to the scores of the first three movements, which we reproduce here in his own punctuation and spelling, and to this we add a brief commentary on *Thanksgiving*, based as much as possible on the composer's own words:

WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY — "Cold and Solitude", says Thoreau, "are friends of mine. Now is the time before the wing rises to go forth and see the snow on the trees." And there is at time, a bleakness, without stir but penetrating, in a New England midwinter, which settles down grimly when the day closes over the broken hills. In such a scene it is as though nature would but could not easily trace a certain beauty in the sombre landscape! — in the quiet but restless monotony! Would nature reflect the sternness of the Puritan's fibre or the self-sacrificing part of his ideals?

*The old folks sit
“the clean winged hearth about
Shut in from all the world without
Content to let the North-wind roar
In baffled rage at pane and door”
(WHITTIER)*

But to the younger generation, a winter holiday means action! — and down through “Swamp Hollow” and over the hill-road they go, afoot or in sleighs, through the drifting snow, to the barn dance at the Centre. The village band of fiddles, fife and horn keep up an unending “breakdown” medley and the young folks “salute their partners and balance corners” till midnight; — as the party breaks up, the sentimental songs of those days are sung half in fun, half seriously and with the inevitable “adieu to the ladies” the “social” gives way to the grey bleakness of the February night.

DECORATION DAY — *In the early morning the gardens and woods about the village are the meeting places of those who, with tender memories and devoted hands, gather the flowers for the Day’s Memorial. During the forenoon as the people join each other on the Green there is felt at times, a fervency and intensity — a shadow, perhaps, of the fanatical harshness—reflecting old Abolitionist days. It is a day as Thoreau suggests, when there is a pervading consciousness of “Nature’s kinship with the lower order — man.”*

After the Town Hall is filled with the Spring’s harvest of lilacs, daisies and peonies, the parade is slowly formed on Main Street. First come the three Marshals on plough horses (going sideways); then the Warden and the Burgesses in carriages, the Village Cornet Band, the G.A.R., two-by-two, the Militia (Company G.) while the volunteer Fire Brigade, drawing the decorated hose-cart, with its jangling bells, brings up the rear — the inevitable swarm of small boys following. The march to Wooster Cemetery is a thing a boy never forgets. The roll of muffled drums and “Adeste Fideles” answer for the dirge. A little girl on the fence post waves to her father and wonders if he looked like that at Gettysburg.

After the last grave is decorated “Taps” sound out through the pines and hickories, while a last hymn is sung. Then the ranks are formed again and “we all march back to Town” to a Yankee stimulant — Reeves’ inspiring “Second Regiment, Quickstep,” — though to many a soldier, the sombre thoughts of the day underlie the tunes of the band. The march stops — and in the silence, the shadow of the early morning flower-song rises over the Town and the sunset behind West Mountain breathes its benediction upon the Day.

THE FOURTH OF JULY — *It’s a boy’s “4th” — no historical orations — no patriotic grandiloquence by “grown-ups” — no program in his yard! But he knows what he’s celebrating — better than some of the county politicians. And he goes at it in his own way, with a patriotism nearer kin to nature than jingoism. His festivities start in the quiet of the midnight before and grow raucous with the sun. Everybody knows what it’s like. The day ends with the rocket over the Church-steeple, just after the annual explosion sets the Town Hall on fire.*

THANKSGIVING AND/OR FOREFATHERS DAY — *The score bears no explanatory note other than a dedication to his brother-in-law, Edward Carrington Twichell. However, the actual title page in m.s. reads, “Thanksgiving and Forefathers Day — IV movement N.E. Holidays — This is a nice piece of turkey — Eddy! . . . & dedicated to E. C. T. — Center Church New Haven Thanksgiving 1897 — put in this piece Aug. 1904.”*

The nearest that can be offered to Ives’s own description of Thanksgiving are the composer’s observations on the original organ prelude and postlude that formed the basis for the orchestral work — these as paraphrased by Henry and Sidney Cowell in their book, Charles Ives and his Music (Oxford University Press, New York, 1955): “The Postlude starts with C-minor and D-minor together, and later major and minor chords together, a tone apart. This was to represent the sternness and strength and austerity of the Puritan character, and it seemed that any of the major, minor or diminished chords used alone gave a feeling of bodily ease which the Puritan did not give in to. There is also in this some free counterpoint in different keys, and rhythms going together. There is a scythe or reaping

harvest theme which is a kind of off-beat, off-key counterpoint. Six or eight years later (sometimes before we left 65 Central Park West in the fall of 1906), these two pieces were arranged as a single movement for orchestra.” The final pages call for chorus, singing chiefly in octaves and unison, to bring the music to what might be called a congregational apotheosis, with the words of the Thanksgiving/Forefathers Day hymn-tune known to every American Protestant churchgoer:

God! Beneath Thy guiding hand
Our exiled fathers crossed the sea;
And as they trod the wintry strand,
With prayer and praise they worshipped Thee.

The Ives ms. (but not the published score) bears additional verses by an unknown hand (Ives or Mrs. Ives?):

Thou heard'st well pleased the Song of Prayer,
Thy blessing came, and still its Power
Shall onward through all Ages beam
The memory of that Sacred Hour!
Law, Freedom, Truth & Faith in God!
Came to those exiled o'er the waves
& where their Pilgrim feet have trod
The God they trusted guards their graves.

NOTES BY D.H.

THE RECORDED PERFORMANCE of *New England Holidays* has been drawn together for this CRI disc from a variety of locales over a time span of nearly three years - a circumstance that attests to the combined performance and budgetary problems that have made recording of the music by an American orchestra all but impossible without major foundation assistance. Fortunately, the performances of the individual pieces are welded together in spirit and style through the passionate enthusiasm and persistence, the stylistic sensitivity and musicality of WILLIAM STRICKLAND, who since 1956 has been responsible for well over two dozen of the recordings in the CRI catalog. The range of Mr. Strickland's recorded repertoire for CRI covers the ground from Ives, Riegger, and Cowell to Carpenter, Sowerby, Jacobi, Moore, Barber, Ward, Bergsma, Trimble, and Russell Smith.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)