

1. Charles Ives: *Robert Browning Overture* (1911) (19:45)
2. Jack Beeson: Symphony No. 1 in A (1959) (19:50)
Polish National Radio Orchestra
William Strickland, conductor

Recorded by Polskie Nagrania, Poland.

Together with the Fourth Symphony (1910-16) and the Emerson movement of the *Concord Sonata* for piano (1907.15), the *Robert Browning Overture*—recorded here for the first time—represents most powerfully the monumental aspect of **Charles Ives**'s creative impulse, divorced this time from montage and quotation of patriotic ditties and turn-of-the-century popular song. The point is made here because of a tendency in some circles to label Ives as a primitive or as a composer dependent on outside sources for the melodic substance of his creations. The man who created *Emerson* and *Robert Browning* was nothing of the kind—and the fact that he was able to create these and many of his other biggest conceptions at a time when he was at his busiest and most successful as an insurance executive can make us only wonder at his super-human nervous energy and stamina (cf. Henry and Sidney Cowell: *Charles Ives and his Music*; Oxford University Press, New York, 1955; pp. 63-66).

Beginning in 1907, not long before his marriage to Harmony Twichell, Ives projected a series of *Men of Literature* overtures; but *Robert Browning* was the only one of the planned four that reached a workable degree of completion as originally conceived. What was to be the “Emerson” reached one stage of crystallization in the aforementioned first movement of the *Concord Sonata*'s second movement. Parts also found their way into the materials in the form of what he called *Four Transcriptions from Emerson*. It was in connection with this material that Ives noted: “This is as far as I know the only piece which every time I play it or turn to it seems unfinished . . . Some of the passages now played have not been written out, and I do not know if I shall ever write them out as it may take away the daily pleasure of playing this music and seeing it grow and feeling that it is not finished and the hope that it never will be—I may always have the pleasure of not finishing it.”

The *Hawthorne* piece likewise reached one form of realization as the *Concord Sonata*'s second movement. Parts also found their way into the scherzo of the Fourth Symphony. The orchestral sketches for *Matthew Arnold* appear to have been mostly lost, according to John Kirkpatrick's catalog of Ives manuscripts at the Yale University School of Music Library, though apparently some of its elements were used in Ives's song to the Arnold poem, “West London.”

When it was decided to attempt preparation of the *Robert Browning Overture* manuscript for actual performance, Ives had long since stopped composing and was handicapped too much by chronic illness to take on any further intensive work on his scores, even with the help of such devoted disciples as Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison. As Cowell tells us: “Four pages of his manuscript were missing and had to be ‘recomposed’ by Lou Harrison or HC; many places were nearly indecipherable and decisions had to be worked out with the copyist Carl Pagano by the editors—a major detective enterprise which Ives has never since been well enough to confirm except in a general way.”

Leopold Stokowski and the Symphony of the Air gave the world premiere of *Robert Browning* at New York's Carnegie Hall on October 14, 1956. In his review of the work for *The Musical Quarterly* (January, 1957), Lester Trimble observed that “the complexity of individual elements and their fusion into massive blocks of string or brass make the discerning of details a literal impossibility. And yet, even when the analytical part of one's mind cannot be sure just what is going on, the music possesses such an air of utter authority, and the expressive reactions it evokes are so powerful and unarguable, that one comes away convinced that the Overture is truly a great work of art.

“Whether one need always comprehend music in all its details is a moot point anyway . . . one suspects that sometimes Ives wanted to create only a vast, turbulent, affective mass of sound. From this mass, he might have reasoned, the listener could extract a million details, or none. The subjective reaction would remain similar. The analytical ear, if it so chose, could play over the texture, picking out these ideas or those—most likely different on each listening occasion—and, in short, it could apply to listening the type of free fantasy that the composer had himself employed in the process of composition.”

“It is a monumental work, and built to wear,” was Mr. Trimble’s concluding comment.

There are a few clues to some of Ives’s extra-musical thinking in connection with the *Robert Browning Overture*. One clue lies in the fact that its chief motive, a fanfare-like figure sounded by muted trumpet about halfway through the slow introduction, was also used by Ives together with other material from the succeeding allegro in the brief but equally monumental song, “Paracelsus,” to Browning’s text. The words associated with the motive in question as it appears in the song are: “I gazed on power, I gazed on power till I grew blind.”

In the marginal notes that John Kirkpatrick copied from the original Ives manuscript, we find such comments as: “Browning was too big a man to rest in one nice little key, his inward toughness and strength, he walked on the mountains not down a nice proper little aisle . . . His mind had many roads, not always easy to follow—the ever-flowing changing, growing ways of mind and imagination—over the greet unchanging truths of life and death,”

Then we find a touch of the Ivesian transcendental sense of nature’s grandeur as he notes for a sketch of the turbulence that succeeds the central lyrical interlude, “The Forest joins the Services and Lifts its Voices and marks its choruses of waving limbs by its many rhythms.”

Though Kirkpatrick makes no note of any hymn-tune quotations in the music, there are two highly appropriate ones that enter in immediate succession, sounded *ff* by unison trumpets just before the final climax: *Adeste Fideles* and *Awake my Soul, Stretch Every Nerve*.

The music begins Adagio maestoso–Largo with a softly intoned figure in the violins that presages the more aggressive fanfare motive already mentioned—this over a continuing pedal point by timpani and low strings. A more direct anticipation comes with the entrance of the bassoons, while *divisi* violins give out a descending scale that will play a subsequent role in the music’s course. The fanfare figure is sounded by the muted trumpet; there are rich harmonic progressions in the woodwinds, a slight thinning out of texture with bassoons and low strings dominating, then with a cyclonic rush the low strings followed immediately by the full complement sweep into the Allegro con spirito. Beginning with a vast extension and expansion of the fanfare motive in the brass, the musical texture, growing ever more complex harmonically and rhythmically, moves into a kind of fast march. “Steppin nice, backwoods etc.,” was Ives’s marginal comment in the manuscript, at this point. The musical development calls for bravura work all the way, especially on the part of the brass, and there is a culminating dissonant chord *fff*, succeeded abruptly by an extended lyrical episode beginning *ppp*. *Divisi* strings and solo woodwinds predominate here with a drooping two-note motive, which however has a way of developing into hymn-like episodes.

The lyrical interlude draws to a close, and at this point the music as published proceeds for some twenty-six pages, repeating note-for-note the material heard between the close of the introduction and the interlude in question. However, this was omitted from the Stokowski premiere, and likewise from this recording, with the assent of Henry Cowell.

The cyclonic rush of strings returns and the final section of the Overture consists in essence of a more brilliant and intense elaboration of the materials of the Allegro con spirito with a few further trimmings, including not only the hymn-tune quotes already mentioned, but a stunning trombone recitative heard earlier in the episode. The final climax is shattering—but, as if to imply the cosmic continuity of existence, the true ending takes the form of an abrupt *pp* recollection of the drooping lyrical motive, heard just once, then brought to a full stop by a solitary *ppp* stroke of the bell (or glockenspiel, in the instance of this particular recording).

Jack Beeson (b 1921, Muncie, Indiana) has achieved chief public renown through his operas, *Hello Out There* (1953) to William Saroyan's libretto; *The Sweet Bye and Bye* (1957); and *Lizzie Borden* (1965). There is an earlier opera, *Jonah*, composed to Paul Goodman's play. But as Beeson himself has put it: "I don't want to be type-cast as an exclusively operatic composer, inasmuch as seventy-eight out of my eighty-six works are, after all, non-operatic!"

As a matter of fact, it was as a lad of twelve—having had five years of piano lessons—that young Beeson was seized by a hankering to become not a mere composer, but an operatic composer, and so launched himself on an abortive attempt at setting his own libretto *Beatrice Cenci*. Between that time and his first professional essay in the musical theatrical genre, Beeson had behind him five years of solid training at the Eastman School of Music under Burrill Phillips, Bernard Rogers, and Howard Hanson, plus four years of work with the opera workshop at Columbia University and a year spent under the tutelage of Bela Bartók. "At one time or another," recalls Beeson, "I built and painted scenery, accompanied rehearsals, coached singers and choruses, conducted, ushered, and cajoled or consoled composers who were suffering through first performances of their operas. All the same time I was composing steadily—chiefly chamber and vocal works—and climbing the academic ladder as a member of the teaching staff of the music department at Columbia." It was during his tenure as a Fulbright grantee and Rome Academy Fellow (1948-50) that Mr. Beeson composed *Jonah*, which won an honorable mention out of the 130 scores submitted to the La Scala Milan International Competition of 1951. However, *Hello Out There*—a short chamber opera composed two years later—got the performances, as well as a recording issued initially by Columbia and subsequently on the Desto label (6451/451).

A 1958–59 Guggenheim Fellowship made possible another year in Europe, which resulted in an orchestral suite from the 1957 opera, *The Sweet Bye and Bye* and the *Symphony* recorded here; and since the successful New York City Opera premiere of *Lizzie Borden* in 1965, Mr. Beeson has been in Rome as composer-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome. Meanwhile, he has attained to professorial status at Columbia and has been secretary of the advisory committee to the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University. In addition to *Hello Out There* and the *Symphony in A*, Mr. Beeson's *Calvinistic Evensong* has been recorded by Donald Gramm as part of a two-record anthology of *Songs by American Composers* issued on Desto 6411/2; 411/2.

Mr. Beeson's *Symphony in A* represents a *volte-face* from the serious American symphony with a capital *S*. Like such works in the form as Virgil Thomson's *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* or Shostakovich's Ninth, it embraces in its three movements a fundamental sense of assurance, skillful craft, and sense of humor, as to give it immediate appeal to laymen and fellow-professionals alike.

There is a twenty-five-bar introduction, Andante, based on a hymn-like motive that could easily turn into a passacaglia. However, the tempo is quickly speeded up, and the main body of the movement is devoted to a series of ingenious permutations, elaborations, and expansions of the main tune, with spice being added in the form of subsidiary matter picked up along the way—melodic, rhythmic, and coloristic (bright glockenspiel tone plays a major role toward the end). The coda of the movement is ushered in by a dissonant climax, after which Roman candle-like woodwind scales pave the way for a final assertion of the main theme by the two trumpets in unison.

Dotted and legato elements are placed in juxtaposition throughout much of the slow movement Adagietto, which follows an ABA pattern, with the da capo considerably more elaborate than the opening "aria" that is introduced by English horn with oboe intertwining a subsidiary line. The dotted material comes more to the foreground in the middle section, though chromatic quasi-chorale material in the brasses provides a quiet but sonorous underpinning for the busy passagework in strings and woodwinds.

Just as the opening of the slow movement seems to derive in part from the introductory theme of the *Symphony* as a whole, so the five-bar violin-viola introduction to the finale would seem to guarantee an interlocking of all three movements—since it is a permutation of the Adagietto theme. But, as in the first movement, the composer does the somewhat unexpected, in that he does preserve something of the contour of the introductory theme, but transforms it rhythmically into a marionette-like march, Allegro

buffo, The ensuing developments are brilliant both in their essential conception and in the virtuoso treatment of woodwind, brass, and percussion (notably in the xylophone department).

Notes by D.H.

William Strickland has recorded the music of Charles Ives for CRI in such varied locales as Tokyo, Reykjavik, Helsinki, Stockholm, and Oslo (CRI 163, 180, SD 190/190), and is continuing the series in Poland with the excellent Polish National Radio Orchestra. This first recording of Ives's monumental *Robert Browning Overture* represents a worthy follow-up to Mr. Strickland's first complete recording of the Ives *New England Holidays* (CRI SD 190/190).

Release of this recording, as well as the CRI discs of *The Music of Harry Partch* (CRI 193), Hugo Weisgall's *The Tenor* (CRI 197), and the John Cage *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (CRI 199), has been made possible through the assistance of the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)