

Larry Austin

So I heard that you are going to finish the UNIVERSE SYMPHONY of IVES". I think it's a marvelous thing to do.

Well, it was an open invitation in the first place by CHARLES IVES according to HENRY COWELL, who was his biographer and close friend. IVES knew that he wouldn't finish the work, which was an extraordinarily large work in its goal. And so as he grew older, and of course as he became more indigent and couldn't compose actually, he made this open invitation for any composer who wanted to finish the work.

Actually, the phrase that I'm going to finish the work is a bit pretentious. What I'm doing now is composing a set of fantasies on the material that I have thus far transcribed. And that's called FANTASMAGORIA. There happen to be three, the first two of which are for chamber groups. And the third one was for a very large orchestra, chorus, narrator and so forth. These FANTASIES of course were containing materials from THE UNIVERSE SYMPHONY that's extended from his sketches. Now as far as finishing anything is concerned, that's a much larger and formidable project. Obviously though, you can't fantasize on something that doesn't exist.

So what I had to do in the first place was to get the sketches from the Yale collection and get permission to copy them and so forth, and then to transcribe them as much as I could. And I spent six months doing that. And I have completed most of the sketches. THEN I could fantasize on it.

Are there actually sketches in the form of notes, or are there just verbal descriptions?

They're in the form of music, of course. I have them here. But as he did in a lot of his music, he liked to write all over the page.

And was it very hard to read, because he had this hand shaking?

Well, these sketches were done fairly early, before he got Parkinson's disease. But they are like many composers' sketches. You write notes to yourself, memos all over the place. It had to do with the aesthetics, with the techniques that you're using.

I heard that he had the original idea in Keene Valley. Is this true? To put the musicians on all places and heights around the valley?

Well, it's claimed by HENRY COWELL, the biographer, again that IVES planned a work to be played from six to ten orchestras on as many mountain tops in the Adirondacks. And so he went to Keene Valley in upstate New York. He would look out over the horizon and be inspired by the scene and add a few more bars to his UNIVERSE SYMPHONY, plus the whole idea of discretely locating sound sources.

And of course when anyone read his autobiography, that he planned this work for six to ten orchestras, then they said, "Oh, hell, no one can do that." They thought it was a kind of dream, a kind of concept piece, and so forth. I have yet to find anyplace in the sketches or any of the memos that IVES wrote where he actually says that there were six to ten orchestras on as many mountain tops. So, it's hearsay on COWELL's part. It's a nice idea, and I can see where he might have gotten that idea, but I have a feeling though that the concept

certainly is for specially disposed groups, certainly, but not six to ten orchestras. Plus the fact that when you think of an orchestra, you usually think of the conventional with strings, brass, percussion and so forth. What IVES it turns out meant is a percussion orchestra, a wind orchestra, a string orchestra and so forth. So that the piece COULD be played perhaps by the combination in different orchestras made up of a total number of about three orchestras.

And so my idea is to interest three symphony orchestras somewhere in the world to finally do this piece. It will take me a long time to really get it in shape. And so I have to have support for that idea. And so before I dive into it, I want to have all reasonable assurance that the piece will get played. It makes no sense to me to do this sort of scholarly work which is necessary to realize the piece and not have a performance of mine. That's my instinct as a composer.

But meanwhile my work right now has to do with writing these fantasies. I'm becoming more and more identified with the work. And so...

And so actually you're using computer facilities for writing the fantasies.

Yes, because some of his concepts were so advanced that no human performance then or now could have realized them. The percussion orchestra music,

the life pulse,

the life pulse, involves nineteen percussionists and one piccolo. And each one of these percussion parts has its own meter and tempo relationship to the others in prime numbers up to thirty-one. For instance, there might be in a span of eight seconds the usual 8/4 measure, for instance a quarter note every beat and very second. Against those eight beats, imagine seven in that eight, or thirty-one against twenty-nine, against twenty-three, against eleven, against fourteen. Not even the best percussionist could do that. So I've had to devise a system where we could, if I was to hear the music, I would have had to devise a system where I could use percussionists, but have them play accurately in these times.

That is one application of the computer. And the other is simply to coordinate the performance. I would imagine for instance that in a performance of the UNIVERSE SYMPHONY ..if it would happen sometime.... and I believe it will... that we would have to have several conductors, all with headphones, who would be conducting in separate but related times. And that's not an unusual thing musically. But to have twenty different ones I think is pretty extraordinary.

So the life pulse will be taped then?

Yes.

And did IVES conceive of it going throughout the whole piece?

That I'm not sure about, but I think it's twenty-four minutes long. There are ten cycles of it, and so I BELIEVE that is the case. He also had an EARTH chord, which is a drone that Tasted at LEAST through the first section of the piece. There are three sections.

He writes in his MEMOS, "In other words, giving a musical piece in two parts, but played at the same time..... the lower part walking out something representing the earth and listening to that primarily, and then the upper reflecting the skies and the heaven...." And so how are you planning to rewrite that?

Well, the music is in layers, as he says there. And what you discover when you look at the manuscripts is that there's the earth chord, which is a part of what he calls the earth music. And that's a drone, a six-note drone that lasts a long time, at least half the piece. Then there's a rock formation, which is really a kind of very disjunct melodic lines played mainly by brass instruments and some wind instruments. And so with the music and the rock formation music you have part of this horizon he talks about.

Then above that the heaven music, played mainly by strings and flutes and upper woodwinds. And so he sees the whole thing as a kind of landscape. Then, below that to give it its heartbeat, its life pulse, is the percussion, which actually does go through the whole piece of the UNIVERSE SYMPHONY. In my own fantasies of it, it doesn't. I don't include it in the middle section.

Over this life pulse IVES wanted to have realized the whole evolution process in three sections.

In a way, yes. There were three sections. First the past, which is the formation of the waters and the mountains. Second is the present: earth, evolution in nature and humanity. Third is the future: heaven and the rise of all to the spiritual.

Are those three movements, or are they performed together in spatial distribution?

I don't want to say specifically right now, because he contradicts himself in these sketches. He says just as any composer will do, one idea about how it should proceed in time. And then two pages later you'll have exactly the opposite idea. I haven't resolved those things yet in my work on the UNIVERSE SYMPHONY. Right now I tend to think however that the earth music, the drone, comes first and does one complete cycle, there being ten cycles in the piece. The life pulse is heard. And then finally the thematic music, the rock formation, the rock themes, the heaven music and so forth come in, much as in any piece of IVES.

But one of the puzzling things..... and rather interesting things to me..... is I haven't yet figured out..... and may never figure out..... exactly how long the piece is.

I think it's twenty-four minutes, but it MAY be twenty-four hours or twenty-four days or twenty-four years. That's not ever made clear to me. The piece is so huge in scope as far as the forces involved that twenty-four minutes is all you're going to play it? You wonder about that. And so I tend to think that that aspect of the performance, if it ever happens, will be somewhat left up to the performers themselves. If they want to stay out there twenty-four hours, I suppose that would be terrific. I'd have it done that way. On the other hand it could be a concert piece which would last only twenty-four minutes.

So how do you actually realize now getting into the FANTASIES that you're uniting, like the tuning he's doing. didn't he ascribe to every group a different tuning system?

Well, that's mainly in the middle section, the "B" Section where he talks about working with materials with different tunings, mainly quarter tone tunings and so forth. He talks about harmonics, yes. But he mainly does that in the middle section, and it's in quarter tones primarily. And he has a whole matrix of chords for instance that could be used as material for the composition.

I've defined from that also on one of the pages of the sketches that he wanted to make a lot of different kinds of scales with different tunings, say thirteen per octave rather than twelve. And in fact I theorize that in fact he must have thought about dividing the octave up into as many as thirty-one different parts, since the prime numbers up to thirty-one are terribly important to him. In fact if you do that, you get fourteen numbers, fourteen scales, and you could have the whole tone scale as the value ONE and then a semi-tone scale as TWO, and then the eighteen tone scales the value of THREE and so forth, up to thirty-one.

I think we have better performers, and perhaps those problems wouldn't have presented themselves. It's difficult to say. He did experiment with different kinds of timbres for instance, which was such a wonderful resource his idea of tracing the outlines of the mountains in the Adirondacks as being the melodic progression of these scales.

But however, I've never been to the Adirondacks. I've been told though that they're not very spectacular and kind of flat and uninteresting. Last summer when I was in Aspen in the Rocky Mountains for a performance of FIRST FANTASY I was fascinated with the beauty of the place. And there's a place called Maroon Lake, and you're surrounded by mountain range when you're at the lake. And so I was working on the SECOND FANTASY at the time, trying to figure out how I might apply these concepts of scales to the middle section. And so I came up with the idea that I'll use the Rocky Mountains instead of the Adirondacks, because they were very, very dramatic, and much more exciting.

I'm using some composer's license there. And so I did trace the outline as well as I could. Now I've realized that the sound of those mountains in scales with computer generating direct generation of the sounds. That's as far along as a matter of fact that I am now.

That's one side of realizing the concept. I mean the computer is possibly the only corpus at the moment which can do all these kinds of tunings. I can't imagine any orchestra at the moment realizing these complicated tunings.

Either the computer or an instrument called the "scaletron" can be utilized. But of course the string players could learn to do this, I suppose, since the pitches are continually variable. But I don't think I'd want to impose that on most orchestras. I in fact don't think that IVES had in mind to do that at all.

He always seemed to me like a genius who like had to do something with a conventional corpus, but he had too many ideas beyond that.

His problem was the fact that he couldn't perform the music. It was much too difficult for them. So nowadays I think we have better performers, and perhaps those problems wouldn't have presented themselves. It's difficult to say. He did experiment with different kinds of timbres for instance, which was such a wonderful resource in computer music. Not to any great extent though. His main thing was I feel was the concept of layering in the textures meeting against one another as it were, and piled on top of one another, and getting us out of the idea that, or away from the idea, that the sounds always had to come from the same place, that is, right in front of you.

In fact, one of the most important things about the UNIVERSE SYMPHONY is the sound sources HAVE to be separated. In fact it's going to be difficult in the first performance to figure out where in the heck we're going to hold it. Probably outdoors, with one orchestra away, or several orchestras very much separated from one another. And so what the audience would do is wander around in this space, getting different perspectives on the spatial distribution of the sound. And so there's a kind of spatial factor that he has working in it. I suppose we perform much of his music in a wrong way today, because

we usually put it on a stage and just let everything come straight out of us. And so many people don't like his music, because it seems so dense and thick.

So how do you now realize the FANTASIES ?

The FIRST FANTASY is for brass quintet, live brass quintet and recorded brass quintet, with narrator and recorded narrator, and a tape which includes the earth choir and the life pulse as well as some electronic sounds in the middle section.

The SECOND FANTASY is for a smaller ensemble, a quartet of viola, clarinet, piano and percussion, along with tape. And there much of the heaven music will be played. That piece is still in progress. And so I can't be exact on how everything is going to turn out.

The THIRD FANTASY as I mentioned will be for a large orchestra, and probably will provide all of these things.

The FIRST, SECOND and THIRD FANTASIES can be played together or singly or in pairs. And they are coordinated by a click track that the conductors or performers hear.

Handwritten musical score for a string section. The notation includes various dynamics such as *pp*, *mf*, *f*, and *pp*. Performance markings include hairpins for crescendos and decrescendos, and accents. There are also some handwritten notes like "L. (W. F. Long)" and "O. PP".

to the spiritual eternity from the great
 unknown to the great unknown. We know
 but little here below and of that little..

Handwritten musical score for a string section, featuring a large crescendo. The notation includes dynamics like *pp*, *mp*, and *f*. There are also performance markings such as hairpins and accents. The score is densely written with many notes.

Excerpts from
 FIRST FANTASY ON IVES'
 UNIVERSE SYMPHONY by
 Larry Austin
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 New York 10019

Handwritten musical score for a string section, showing dynamics like *pp*, *mp*, and *f*. Performance markings include hairpins and accents. The score is densely written with many notes.

RT2
R.H.
R.T.T.
R.B.T.

N.
...a Symphony...the Earth and the Firmament..

3.45

T.1
T.2
H.
T.T.
B.T.

APE
...a...b...c...d...e...f...g...h.....
Working when all prime factor meters are in exact time position...
...i...j...k...j...i...h...g...f...
Earth...evolution...nature...

3.45

RT.1
RT.2
R.H.
R.T.T.

I may extend it into a larger piece than I had originally intended...But the themes and plan are quite clearly

indicated in the sketch. I want to work this out completely this summer...think advisable staying on

job & refer. I don't

2.03

2.09

make more sense to anybody looking at it with this explanation.

2.41