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Kyle Gann, *Charles Ives's Concord: Essays after a Sonata*. 464 pp. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017, £41. ISBN: 978-0-25204-085-6).

IT IS astonishing how the position of Charles Ives has changed over the last generation or so. From being treated rather suspiciously as an amateur who stole most of his musical material from others (I remember a review of the *Robert Browning Overture* which sneeringly stated “unlike his other works, Ives wrote most of this himself”) we have now reached a position where Kyle Gann, in this new authoritative book, is able to enumerate no less than forty-two recordings of the *Concord Sonata* by thirty-eight different pianists. Gann, a composer, musicologist and sometime music critic for *The Village Voice*, takes upon himself the task of bringing together and discussing all the known materials associated with the *Concord Sonata* (its full title is *Piano Sonata No. 2 “Concord, Mass., 1840-1860”*, the place and the dates chosen to unite the subjects of the work – the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, the writer Nathaniel Hawthorn, the Alcott family, whose best known member is Louisa May Alcott, and the essayist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau). These materials consist of the book *Essays before a Sonata* which Ives wrote to accompany the piece, and which gives Gann’s work its title; the music itself, in its two editions of 1920 and 1947; the companion works which use the same or similar material (the Fourth Symphony, the “Emerson” Concerto and so on); and Gann’s own transcriptions of the private recordings of *Concord*-related sketches and excerpts made by Ives himself in the 1930s and ’40s. For good measure we are also given an analysis of Ives’ First Piano Sonata to compare the composition techniques used in *Concord*.

All of this makes for a pretty substantial document (464 pages including index) which, in the way I have just enumerated its contents, could seem daunting to the casual reader. And indeed some musical literacy is needed; certainly enough to be able to grasp basic harmonic relationships and rhythmic and melodic patterns of some complexity. However, Gann eschews the more far-flung outposts of musicological discourse. He writes clearly and persuasively, whether discussing the philosophy of the Transcendentalist writers with whom Ives is concerned or leading us through a virtually note-by-note analysis of the musical text. And he is not afraid to assert strong personal opinions when they seem relevant; but they are voiced with deference and good humour.

Gann proceeds from the assumption, now surely agreed by all, that the *Concord Sonata* is a truly great work which repays multiple listenings and exploration in a variety of ways by any pianist brave enough to tackle its difficulties. Indeed, some of the most valuable parts of the book deal with the inconsistencies between the two editions of the work when seen in light of Ives’ approach to playing the music, which recognize that any given passage can change according to the mood of the performer, “like John Coltrane playing ‘My Favorite Things’ for

the 145th time and still hearing new things he could do with it—but staying within the spirit of the music [p. 370].”

The analysis itself is meticulous and yet easy to follow. Musical examples are generous and clearly printed. It certainly helps to have a copy of the 1947 edition of *Concord* to hand—Gann refers to it constantly—but it is not essential. The *Concord Sonata* is at first glance a quite disparate work. The four movements (none of them in sonata form, one might add) were assembled over many years and Ives continued to tinker with them for over twenty-five years after the first publication. Gann convincingly shows how the music was enriched by this gradual accumulation of changes and second thoughts, and demonstrates the continuity of ideas that brings the movements together. Ives, for all the outer complexity of his musical language (though he could be almost off-puttingly simple and direct when he chose) worked with fairly unchanging blocks when it came to three or four movement pieces. These can be simplistically described as Grumpy, Jokey, Hymnal and Mystic, with Hymnal omitted in the case of a three-movement work. So the three-movement structure can be seen in *Three Places in New England*, the Piano Trio, or the First Theater Set, while *Concord* and the Fourth Symphony conform to the four-movement model. To take these terms a little more seriously, the first movements in each case tend to be dense, serious, often discordant, wiry, and perhaps hard to approach. The second movements are generally allusive “comedies” (as Ives describes the second movement of the fourth Symphony; the second movement of the Piano Trio is labeled “TSIAJ”—This Scherzo is a Joke) usually at the fast tempo one would associate with such moods. The final movements are transcendental, perhaps quoting a mixture of hymn tunes and vernacular songs (the last piece of the Theater Set, “in the Night” has a solo cello play “Bethany” (“Nearer My God to Thee”)—but Ives also quotes Foster’s “Massa’s in de Cold, Cold Ground”, as he does in the “Thoreau” movement of *Concord*; the tunes share some notes and details of melodic shape), while often surrounded by a nebulous quiet amorphous texture (“The Housatonic at Stockbridge” from *Three Places in New England* is perhaps the best-known example).

Obviously Ives wrote many works that do not conform to the pattern I have outlined above, but the fact that he was drawn to it so many times does suggest that he found it a congenial vehicle for his musical thought. And the unity of *Concord*, with the rebarbative, difficult Emerson, the will-o’-the-wisp shifting fairy stories of Hawthorne (interesting that, as Gann points out, Ives ignores the darker side of Hawthorne as manifested in *The Scarlet Letter*), the parlor music of The Alcotts and the visionary Thoreau at Walden Pond is something which I think the listener grasps instinctively. But there is a further, stronger link between the movements; the “Human Faith” theme, as Ives himself called it, a blend of the hymn tunes “Martyn” and “Missionary Chant” and the opening notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, which appears in all four movements and reaches its fullest expression in the closing moments of “The Alcotts”. Gann demonstrates how pervasive this theme is throughout the sonata and through scrupulous analysis shows how in its myriad versions it underlies the entire web and woof of the music.

I should perhaps add a personal note here; like Gann, I was introduced to *Concord* at around the age of 13, in my case via Aloys Kontarsky’s recording for Time records. I bought the score as soon as I could, and then the 1968 Kirkpatrick recording, which was Gann’s introduction to the work. Like Gann, I found my way around “The Alcotts” and “Thoreau” (I prepared the latter to play for my audition for the Royal Academy of Music in 1967). At one time I think I might have been able to tackle “Emerson”, but “Hawthorne” was always way beyond my abilities. Like Gann

I have lived with this music for decades. Unlike Gann, and like everyone else, I never sat down and tried to analyze the piece.

The text of this edition has been meticulously edited and proof-read. The only musical error I could detect was two sharps in Ex. 8.29 which have attached themselves to an E and a B rather than the C and G they should have decorated. Apart from that the composer Alkan is named Charles-Marie rather than the correct Charles-Valentin and for some reason the title of the *Concord Sonata* itself appears in the index (referenced to p.114 as though that was its only mention!). These will no doubt be corrected in the second edition of the book. I have only one more reservation; there is included as an appendix a Keynote Address which Gann gave to the 2009 Ives Vocal Marathon at Wesleyan University. In this he baldly states, "Ives was the greatest composer who ever lived." Stirring stuff for the peroration of a Keynote, but it begs so many questions as to be rather meaningless when seen in the harsh light of cold print. But never mind; if it is that belief which has sustained Gann through the process of writing the book then we should be grateful. This is a book which no Ives scholar or enthusiast can be without. It is quite indispensable, a glowing and lasting monument to the forty years which Gann has spent loving and working on his subject.

Christopher Hobbs
Coventry University