

Of the various Twentieth Century works that Lewis Rowell discusses in the final chapter of his book *Thinking About Music, The Unanswered Question* written by Charles Ives is not only an influential composition of the past century, but also an innovative work worthy of much exploration. Although the output of Ives as an American composer was largely ignored until his later years, leading him to pursue a double-life in the insurance business to fund his composition efforts, works such as *The Unanswered Question* have undoubtedly earned him a place within the not only Twentieth Century music, but also alongside the great innovators of the modernist realm. This discussion will attempt to examine the elements of this particular work, and how it fits within the context of the modern period of music.

One of the first noticeable details of interest with *The Unanswered Question* is that although the revised version of this composition was premiered in 1946, the original score was actually written much earlier during 1906. With this said, the piece could be deemed even more groundbreaking than first assumed. Although the piece utilizes traditional instruments with traditional performance techniques employed (although through an unusual combination), it is the compositional techniques that render this piece to be so fascinating. It was one of the first modern compositions to reside within the spatial model of composition, in which the spatial deployment of the performers and their independence from one another constitutes the primary organizational concept of the work.¹ Structurally, *The Unanswered Question* is comprised of three sections executed through a collage-type arrangement with a woodwind quartet, solo trumpet, and an offstage (or distantly placed) string quartet. While these selected elements in themselves do not make the piece unique for its period, the fact that each of these sections employs

its own independent tempo and key greatly set it apart from other works of its time. By demonstrating polytonality and polyrhythm, this piece is definitely most unusual for this period.

The work begins with the string quartet carrying the listener through a haunting, pianississimo diatonic progression almost suggestive of a hymn or chorale, which Ives described in the foreword to the score as “the Silences of the Druids—who Know, See and Hear Nothing”.² The string quartet resides within its own spatial dimensions of tempo and tonality, utilizing proper voice-leading techniques, along with passing and ornamental tones. The movement and harmonic changes of the strings are so slowly paced that they offer very little in terms of metric organization to the listener. It appears to also move towards rather uncertain cadences, creating what one could describe as static phrasing. A repetition, however, is finally reached after thirteen bars. Only one repetition is evident though, despite what first deceptively appears as a type of cyclic pattern. With the solo trumpet positioned behind the audience then interspersing into the strings, the perennial question of existence is carried out through its independent atonal nature. This atonal questioning from the trumpet will occur repeatedly, with only the final notes alternating one semitone between the B and C tones as the woodwind quartet responds through what Ives referred to as “the invisible answer” with increasing intensity until they reach a climatic point of violent frustration that he described as the “fighting answerers, who, for all their sound and fury, get nowhere”.³ The intensity of the woodwinds becomes so erratic that Leonard Bernstein actually described the final answer as “utter gibberish”.⁴ The seventh round of questioning posed by the trumpet is then met by silence, with no tonal response coming from the woodwinds section. With silence as

the only response, and no tangible resolution, the piece then concludes without ever satisfactorily resolving the perennial question that was posed so many times. The G major triad of the strings then seems to continue into the distance for eternity as the piece concludes.

Each section of this work creates a number of interesting contrasts. The stringed section appears to be rhythmically free, yet tonal. The wind section seems measured, yet atonal in sonority, with the solo trumpet acting as a type of intermediary between these two opposing forces. The effects of these processes have also been amplified through their spatial separation. Ives appeared to have success with this function as he also incorporated the concept into *Central Park in the Dark*, as well as his *Fourth Symphony*. This technique is quite possibly the inspiration behind techniques that would later be employed in a similar fashion within the modernist works of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen. In addition to spatial separation, Ives appeared to be an early proponent of a form of randomness or chance in compositions such as this one. While he was insistent upon retaining the integrity of the notation as he expressed it, the instructions written in the foreword of this piece reflect an intended desire for random coordination among the musical lines. Through his own comments, as well as the experiences of his associates, he also appeared to be expressing music as more of a philosophical proposition, with an openness to allow for interpretation of the performer (5); a concept which would not become popularized until a later period of this century. Ives also engaged the concept of active participation from the listener, envisioning that the audience would in some way become involved in the performance by whatever means. He hoped for a transformation from the passive state to that of positive participation (6); another concept that was very

forward-thinking for his time.

The Unanswered Question also evokes a definite sense of transcendental philosophy, seeming to express concepts of the philosophical realm which are equally as powerful as those of the musical ones. Through what Ives described as a “cosmic landscape”, he not only contemplates the notion of sublime creation, but also illustrates in a sense that the question, rather than the answer is the key point to be emphasized. Certain scholars such as Douglas Lee speculate that the inspiration for the title of the work actually came from the 1841 poem titled *The Sphinx* written by the leader of the transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson, which stated “Thou art the unanswered question;/ Couldst see thy proper eye,/ Always it asketh, asketh;/ And each answer is a lie”.⁷ Emerson’s movement essentially held the belief that all things were divine, with a type of universal connectedness between man, nature, and God (8); a concept which Ives appeared to be very connected with. Transcendentalism also addressed issues relating to questions of truth, suggesting that answers are not necessarily revealed through God, but could rather be attained through nature (9), a concept which appears to be a theme central to this work. The trumpet’s question and the agitated winds also reside within the transcendentalist philosophy, expressing that answers cannot be forced, and attempts to do so end in a sense of not only foolishness, but also chaotic failure. Ives also makes rather brilliant use of silence in this piece. Instead of merely using silence as a periodic tool to augment expressiveness, he utilizes it as a canvas of continuity to place sound upon through what Lossoff refers to as a type of “heard silence” by means of sounds.¹⁰

Bernstein once referenced this work as almost a foreshadowing of the century of

music to lie ahead: tonality and syntactic clarity residing on one side, atonality and syntactic confusion residing on the other; two schools of practice to become very much split as time would progress.¹¹ *The Unanswered Question* is indeed a fascinating piece, combining separately, yet at the same time the earlier tonal music concepts such as Classical period harmony with the atonal concepts of the Twentieth Century which would become the fixture of the Second Viennese School.

In context, *The Unanswered Question* by Charles Ives has proven to not only be an influential composition of modernist Twentieth Century Music due to its groundbreaking atonal and polyrhythmic applications, but it has also proved to be an important work through its philosophical concepts and innovative performance elements. Though it was written over a century ago, it has definitely held its reputation as one of the great early innovative works of Twentieth Century music in the United States.

Works Cited

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