

Renaissance Techniques in the Music of Charles Ives

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Abstract: *In this article, the authors argue that a significant number of Ives' techniques share affinities with musical procedures of the Renaissance composers. Ives in his ensemble works often uses flexible instrumentation, which is consistent to the custom of Renaissance composers. Ives always encourages his performer to play the melody as one would sing it. Such performance practice is quite similar to that of the Renaissance period. In addition, Ives' multi-layering and multi-dimensionality techniques share affinities with polyphonic procedures of Renaissance music. When using quotations in his works, Ives, like many Renaissance composers, not merely cites quotations in his music but recomposes the borrowed material with wit.*

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1. Introduction

Charles Ives was born in Danbury, Connecticut in 1874. His father, George Ives, was a musician. He often “conducted sound experiments in the family barn, to the annoyance of his neighbors and the fascination of his son.”^[1] As a young boy, Ives learnt to play the piano and organ. He must have been so talented that at the age of fourteen, Ives was appointed as an organist at a local church. After completing his secondary education, Ives went to Yale to study music. During his study there, Ives learnt composition and music theory with Horatio Parker. As a teacher, Parker taught music that was mostly written in traditional style. For Ives, such music could not satisfy him. He always wanted to experience new sound and new ideas in his own works.^[2] Despite all this, Ives completed a few marches and songs before his graduation.

To one's surprise, after graduating from Yale, Ives did not find jobs in the music field, but instead, he began to work professionally in an insurance business. Eventually, Ives organized an insurance company called Ives & Myrick. His business was so successful and it became one of the most well-known agencies in the United States. Working professionally in another field never ended Ives' love of music. He often used his spare time, including weekday evenings and weekends to compose. Since Ives did not depend on selling his composition to earn a living, it was not necessary for him to write music that satisfies his audience rather than himself. Very often, Ives experienced new compositional possibilities in his works. Such radical attempt created difficulties for Ives to recruit players and attract audience. In the year of 1918, Ives started to suffer from health issues. Thereafter, he composed very little.

In his last years, Ives was able to publish some of his works and revised many of his early compositions. Eventually, his works began to attract more and more young composers. His outputs include four major symphonies and a program symphony, called *Holiday Symphony*, ensemble works *Three Places in New England*, *The Unanswered Question*, two piano sonatas and more than two hundred art songs. Ives died in 1954, at the age of seventy-nine.

Quite a lot of research on the music of Ives has revealed its link with three musical traditions: American vernacular music, Protestant church music, and European classical music. True, giving the fact that Ives' father worked in a band in his hometown, there should be no doubt that young Ives often heard marches, dances and popular songs performed by his father's ensemble as we know that such types of music were closely associated with nineteenth-century American bands. Since Ives worked as an organist starting from a young age, he must be quite familiar with all the traditional hymns and other sacred choral works. During his Yale study with Horatio Parker, who received his professional training at Europe, Ives came into contact with many classical masterworks, including symphonies and sonatas composed by Beethoven, Brahms and others. All these influences affect Ives to compose in a heterogeneous style.

Regarding Ives' compositional techniques, current research has revealed his application of polytonality—each voice has a different key, cumulative form—the development takes place in the beginning while the complete theme appears in the end, collage—putting different tunes in each layer of music. Such compositional techniques were generally regarded as highly advanced procedures during the early twentieth century. Thus, today, Ives is usually seen as a pioneer of American contemporary music. American wind ensemble music authority Frank Battisti praised Ives as “one of America’s most original and unique creators.”^[3]

On the other hand, Ann Besser Scott, in her 1994 article, argues that some of Ives' compositional techniques even share affinities with procedures often found in medieval and Renaissance music.^[4] As enthusiasts of Renaissance music, Scott's article stimulates us to further searching affinities between compositional techniques of Ives and that of Renaissance. Through analyzing several works by Ives, we have found a significant number of Ives' compositional techniques that share affinities with musical procedures of the Renaissance. In this article, we will provide examples of techniques and procedures used by Ives which seem similar to those found in Renaissance music.

2. Flexible Instrumentation

In his ensemble music, Ives often provides his performers a great amount of freedom without insisting on special instruments. One of such examples can be found in the instrumentation of *The Pond*. This work is orchestrated for one flute, two harps, one piano, strings, and a principal melodic part with text. However, Ives in his score notes that the flute can be replaced by a violin, one of the two harps can be replaced by a celesta or high bells, and the voice solo can be played by either a trumpet or basset horn. In addition to the example of *The Pond*, Ives treats the instrumentation of his *Set for Theatre or Chamber Orchestra* in a similar way. In the last page of the score (the New Music edition), Ives states that “The make-up of the average theatre orchestra...depended somewhat on what players and instruments happened to be around.... Its scores were subject to make-shift, and were often written with that in mind.” Regarding Ives' treatment of instrumentation, H. Wiley Hitchcock in his book comments that “Ives stands at the hand of a new view of the relationship between composer and performer, the latter being allowed a considerably greater measure of freedom than had been traditional in Western music.”^[5]

Ives' treatment of instrumentation in his ensemble works is similar to that of Renaissance composers. From general music history books, we know that Renaissance composers were not in the custom to provide special instrumentation for their instrumental ensemble music. When performing ensemble music, Renaissance musicians “freely substituted one instrument for another.”^[6] In other words, the same part could be played by different instruments. In fact, Renaissance musicians often played an astonishing variety of instruments. Unlike modern performers, who typically specialize in a single instrument or two or three closely related ones, professional Renaissance musicians were expected to be adept at several. For example, Silvestro Ganassi was not only a recorder virtuoso, but also a viola da gamba player. He is the author of two important treatises on instrumental technique. His first treatise *Opera intitulata Fontegana* covers recorder playing. His second treatise (in two volumes) *Regola Rubertina* and *Letitione Seconda* are written about the viola da gamba. Both of them cover issues on instrumental techniques, music expression, and ornamentation.

3. Performance Practice

Regarding Renaissance performance practice, Ganassi in his *Opera intitulata Fontegana* points out that the human voice is superior to all instruments and therefore instrumentalists should strive to learn from and imitate the voice. After giving a great amount of virtuosic improvisation examples, Ganassi sums up by explaining to instrumentalists that when you approach a piece for the first time, the most important thing to consider is the words. Instrumentalists reading Ganassi would realize that the best piece of advice he has given them is to make all the sound like all the expression of the human voice with their instruments.

Just like Ganassi, Ives always encourages his performer to play the melodic line as one would sing it. In his *Memos*, Ives addressed: “Father also had a gift of playing....He once gave a concert in Danbury on the basset horn, playing songs of Schubert and Franz. He had the words printed on a sheet and passed them through the audience, who were expected to read the words and sing silently with him. Somebody heard him play the *Erlking* (Schubert) and felt that he sang it and carried him away with it,

without the words....Hearing him play these songs got me, to a certain extent, writing songs for the horn or some instrument, with the words underneath, which should be sung.”^[7] In *The Pond*, Ives provides his soloist three choices to either sing or play the principal melody on a trumpet or basset horn. However, Ives also leaves his soloist a great challenge: if he decides to use a trumpet or basset horn to play the melody, he must let his listener hear the words: “A sound of a distant horn, O’er shadowed lake is borne, My father’s song.”

4. Multi-layering and Multi-dimensionality Techniques

Most Renaissance music is polyphonic and made of many individual voices each telling its own story. It illustrates the ultimate musical democracy in which each individual is free to express his own ideas and all voices are equally important. It is like having several actors present the same role simultaneously but miraculously it all works out. This makes Renaissance music particularly satisfying for the performer since one is never merely the accompaniment. Every voice is the melody.

We have found such procedure of Renaissance music shares affinities with Ives’ multi-layering and multi-dimensionality techniques. For example, *Unanswered Question* as one of Ives’ well-known works is scored for three instrumental groups: a string section, a solo trumpet, and four flutes. The three groups of instruments perform in independent tempi and are placed separately, with the string preferably offstage. Ives in the score provides a short text for performers to interpret the work. From this text, we know that throughout the piece, the strings sustain slow tonal triads, which represent “the Silence of the Druids—who Know, See, and Hear Nothing.” In contrast to the “Silence,” the trumpet poses an atonal phrase seven times, which represents “the perennial Question of Existence,” with the first six times each gets louder than the last. It is the four flutes’ atonal “Fighting Answers” that change in obvious way, growing increasingly agitated and dissonant. After the woodwinds finally give up, the trumpet poses the question quietly one last time.

The *Unanswered Question* presents a work that consists of three layers of music. Simultaneously, there are also tonality, atonality, poly-tempo co-existing throughout the entire piece, and this leads to another Ives’s important technique—multi-dimensionality. In his *Universe Symphony*, Ives separates the orchestra into several groups, and each group has its own music. The lower-pitched instruments represent the earth; the higher-pitched instruments represent the Heaven; in between, a percussion orchestra represents the pulse of the universe’s lift beat. Ives suggests in his *Memos* that this piece should be played at least twice for its listener: when playing the first time, listeners should focus on the lower music; when playing the second time, listeners should focus on the higher music. Listening to Ives, as listening to Renaissance music, is like watching a Cubism painting. There are always multiple choices for the listeners’ ears.

5. Recomposing Borrowed Material

One important aspect of Ives’ music is his use of musical quotations. Denis Marshall, in his essay *Charles Ives’ Quotation, Manner or Substance*, has shown that Ives’ quotation clearly belongs to the “substance,” not merely the “manner,” of his music.^[8] In the following examples, we will illustrate that Ives, like many Renaissance composers, not only cites quotations in his music, but recomposes the borrowed material with wit. The motet *Ave Maria....virgo serena* has been one of Josquin’s most famous works since the early sixteenth century. In its first couplet, the setting of the words is based not only on the text of the original sequence chant, but also on its melody. Instead of being treated as a traditional cantus firmus, the chant’s four phrases are paraphrased and each turned into a point of imitation in all voices. The first phrase is quoted directly from the chant, and subsequent phrases are paraphrased more decoratively. The first three points of imitation begin first in the superius voice and proceed downward through the altus, tenor, and bass. This symbolizes the descent from Heaven to earth to deliver the news to Mary that she would be impregnated by the Holy Spirit.

Just like Josquin, Ives in his music often recomposes the borrowed material. Ives’ *Holiday Symphony* includes four movements: Washington’s Birthday, Decoration Day, The Fourth of July, Thanksgiving and Forefathers’ Day. In the end of Washington’s Birthday, there is a shadow violin playing against the main melody. Ives describes this image as after the barn dance, a fiddle player does not want to leave, and he begins to practice his fiddle on the porch. By analyzing the shadow violin’s melody, we have found that the tune is not a direct quotation from one single source, but is made of “Pigtown Filing” combined with “Turkey in the Straw.” Another example will be the beginning of The

Fourth of July, from mm.8-11, the double basses play a fragmentation of “Columbia the Gem of the Ocean.” By analyzing this excerpt, we have found that the harmonies in these measures are constructed with the intervals of 4th, 5th, and 7th, which co-exist in the quoted fragmentation.

Besides the examples from the *Holiday Symphony*, Scott’s article provides us with another hint. As in many polyphonic genres—organum, isorhythmic motets, and masses, Ives often sets the borrowed material as a structural tenor or cantus firmus. At the beginning of Ives’ *Third Symphony*, the bassoon and two horns begin with the hymn tune *Just as I am* in half and whole notes, which contrast with the fast-moving quarters and eighth notes in other voices. In fact, this hymn tune can be regarded as a structural cantus firmus, which appears without any embellishments and moves slowly in a lower voice. It serves as the foundation of the music. While this hymn tune functions as a structural cantus firmus, the violins refer to another hymn tune *There is a Fountain*. For this hymn tune, Ives paraphrased it and made it coexist with other voices.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this article has shown that a significant number of Ives’ techniques share affinities with musical procedures of the Renaissance composers. Regarding Ives’ instrumentation in his ensemble works, he often provides his performers a great amount of freedom without insisting on special instruments. When encountering a melody, Ives always encourages his performer to play the line as one would sing it. Such performance practice is quite similar to that of the Renaissance period. In addition, Ives’ multi-layering and multi-dimensionality techniques share affinities with polyphonic procedures of Renaissance music. When using quotations in his works, Ives, like many Renaissance composers, not merely cites quotations in his music but recomposes the borrowed material with wit.

In her Article, Scott has hypothesized that Ives’ use of compositional procedures from the Middle Ages and Renaissance might be affected by attending Horatio Parker’s Yale lectures on these two early musical periods. Almost thirty years has passed the publishing date of Scott’s article, there is still no hard record found by researchers to further assure Scott’s hypothesis. However, in this article, we have listed more musical evidence to support Scott’s view. Past research on Ives’ music has been focusing on his use of advanced compositional procedure. Thus, people in the music world often regard Ives as a progressive. We hope our research can provide another notion that Ives, at least under some circumstances, can be regarded as a traditionalist.

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