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Charles Ives, Olympic Challenger

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NEW YORK -- It is safe to say that no single musician in New York City has, over the years, devoted more concentrated and probing attention to the music of recent decades than Joel Sachs, co-founder and conductor of the new-music ensemble Continuum and a member of the Juilliard faculty. His annual "Focus!" festival at the school is a six-concert affair exploring contemporary trends or -- as was the case this time -- the work of a single composer.

The year 2004 marks the 50th anniversary of the death of Charles Ives, and Sachs's series, Jan. 23-30, brought together an array of songs, choral compositions, seldom-heard chamber works along with better-known ones, piano pieces, and orchestral works -- some 27 selections in all. In brief remarks from the stage at the final concert (the only one I was able to attend) he remarked, modestly enough, that this festival was the most inclusive and extensive celebration of Ives's music anywhere in the world.

As always, a major factor in any Focus! event is the program book, written by Sachs with a breadth of knowledge and a liveliness of style that make each book a permanent addition to one's reference library. The notes on Ives laid out the composer's dizzying habit of cross-fertilization and quixotic penmanship with unusual clarity -- as Sachs remarks, "...the organizational aptitudes that made [Ives] rich in business did not rub off on his artistic side. Why else would his scores be such a mess?"

Sachs clears the path to a remarkable degree, cutting through the underbrush of endless re-cyclings, additions, and alterations, pointing out, for example, in one succinct sentence: "Ives recycled the ragtime pieces into other compositions including his 'Sets' for theater orchestra, the Quarter-tone Pieces for two pianos, the Third Violin Sonata, the Three-Page Sonata for piano, the 'Concord' Sonata, the Fourth Symphony, and many others." Each Focus! performance was designed to cast light on the cross references and untangle some of the knots.

The highlight, or at least the curiosity, of the final concert was the New York premiere of the "Emerson" Overture for piano and orchestra, a work dating from 1910-14, revised 1920-21, and closely related to the "Emerson" movement of the "Concord" Sonata for piano, which grew out of it. The reconstruction of the Overture score, heard here, was made by David Porter in 1998. It's a work of unyielding granite, representing in Ives's mind the preaching of Emerson (piano) and the response of his congregation (orchestra). One can only imagine that those worshipers left the church pale, shattered and shaking, for there is no quarter given on either side.

The work begins in orchestral pandemonium, leading to thunderous proclamations by the piano and the emergence, very soon, of the Overture's principal motto -- the four-note opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. In the ensuing 24 minutes the storm of Emerson's awesome rhetoric rages, although there are some stretches of comparative serenity for the piano and extended periods when it is heard alone; the Beethoven theme, in typical Ivesian fashion, is sometimes submerged, and sometimes, when delivered full blast by the brass, hits squarely between the eyes.

The keyboard part, an Olympic challenge, was hurled forth with miraculous strength and confident breadth by Lang-Ning Liu, whose delicate appearance, it quickly turned out, could not have been more misleading. She is a currently in Juilliard's master's degree program. The Juilliard Orchestra under Anne Manson gave Ives, as far as one could tell, everything he asked for.

The orchestra continued its heroic work with the Symphony No. 4, preceded in five of the many hymns referred to in the symphony ("Sweet By and By," "Beulah Land," "Nearer, My God, To Thee" among them), performed by the 80-odd members of the Juilliard Choral Union. The opening of the symphony's Prelude got its full measure of resonance and gravity from the orchestra's low strings, and the boisterous outbreaks of the second movement ("Comedy," Ives labeled it) were cheerful and full of vigor, as various recognizable tunes flickered in and out of focus. As is customary, a second conductor was called in to keep the brass on track, playing marches to a different meter from everybody else. "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," an Ives perennial, was much in evidence. The lovely fugal third movement glowed; the delicacy and the triumph of the finale were nicely balanced. If the Fourth Symphony is one of the most difficult to perform in the standard (or almost-standard) repertory, the Juilliard players never let on.

The evening opened with a 1923-24 setting of Psalm 90 ("Lord thou hast been our dwelling place..."), a solemn and generally conservative piece with a few angular outcroppings, smoothly handled by the Choral Union conducted by Judith Clurman. The familiar "Unanswered Question" followed.

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