

CHARLES IVES:

2nd String Quartet

ALAN HOVHANESS:

“Lousadzak”

Concerto No. 1 for

Piano & String Orchestra

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FM 3369

The Walden String Quartet

Maro Ajemian, piano;

Orchestra conducted by

Alan Hovhaness



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Side I
First Movement "Discussions" (8:08)
Second Movement "Arguments" (3:47)
Third Movement "The Call Of The Mountains" (10:00)
Side II
"Lousadzak"

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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FOLKWAYS FM 3369

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Notes by Samuel Charters

SIDE I

CHARLES IVES: 2ND STRING QUARTET

With the Ives "revival" in full bloom, in recent years it has become less difficult to write about the man and his music than it was during his lifetime. When Ives was still largely unknown — and usually dismissed as some kind of American "primitive" — it was necessary to go into his personal life in some detail to clarify the personal influences (largely his father's) that shaped his composition. Now the most important facts of his life are well known: that he went into the insurance business so that he wouldn't have to make his living as a composer; that he had a stroke in 1917 and from then on was unable to do serious work; and that he died in 1954. Ives was originally seen as a mystical figure; but recently he has been recognized as the hardheaded realist that he certainly was. Since Ives was an innovator whose ideas have — still — a revolutionary feel, it was formerly necessary to preface remarks on his music with descriptions of the musical devices he had used earlier than any experimental 20th century composer. But, today, the important thing is that he wrote great music. Now that his work has finally been given its long-overdue hearing, the only thing that needs to be described is the music itself.

As with many of Ives' most important compositions, the 2nd String Quartet, 1907-1913, dates from his early years when he was a partner in the insurance business. He founded the partnership with Julian Myrick at the end of 1907 and then married in the spring of 1908. Because of his commitments, it was difficult for him to find time to complete his compositions. Often years went into their slow and sporadic final shaping. Ives simultaneously worked on his four sonatas for violin and piano, the second piano sonata, two symphonies, and a number of smaller pieces. As a result, his works have complex interrelationships that often express themselves in an involved metaphoric language that draws on literary and musical comment and quotation in a manner uniquely Ives' own. The 2nd String Quartet is musically related to the other work from the period, but it has, also, its own highly developed framework. In essence, Ives conceived the work as a discussion, or, as he wrote on the manuscript, a "String quartet for four men who converse, discuss, argue (politics), fight, shake hands, shut up, then walk up the mountainside to view the firmament." The movements were titled "Discussions" (andante moderato), "Argument" (allegro con spirito), and "The Call of the Mountains" (adagio). In addition to his gnarled texture of quotation and inference, Ives gave each of the four instruments an identifiable personality and an individual set of opinions.

In his notes on the quartet, Dr. William B. Ober has described the role of the second violin in the argument:

"Another aspect of programmatic content in the Ms of the quartet is a series of remarks addressed by Ives to a household character named Rollo, presumably taken from the series of books for properly brought-up and well-mannered New England boys. The role of Rollo, a foil, is assigned to the second violin. Rollo is conservative, genteel, timid, and a bit dismayed by "new" music. He is given pretty little tunes to play, one of which is labeled "Andante emasculata." Rollo makes futile attempts to reconcile his three disputatious friends, but his polite phrases are rudely interrupted by contrapuntal dissonances as each of the others disagrees with him in his own particular way. At one point in the second movement the going becomes rather rough on poor Rollo, and there is a long interval where he is silent except for an occasional "tut, tut!" In the Ms Ives has written such sarcastic remarks as "Cut it out, Rollo!" and "Too hard to play — so it just can't be good music, Rollo." When Rollo re-enters the quartet after a long silence, Ives further jibes with "Beat time, Rollo!" After a few more measures the second violin is assigned a rather florid passage but one which is not too difficult to execute; Ives' comment at this point is, "Join in again, Professor, all in the key of C. You can do that nice and pretty."

But it is also possible to listen to the quartet without becoming involved in the complex levels of meaning Ives was suggesting in the literary and symbolic references. The greatness of Ives' music is that hearing it is a moving and intense experience even when there is no knowledge of his other level of expression. The other level is always there to give a deeper meaning to the music on each new hearing; but the music stands on its own, embodying Ives' toughness and independence.

Although there is a rough humor to moments of the 2nd Quartet its over-all mood is serious and intent. There is almost a Webern- or Berg-like intensity in the opening measures as the first violin hangs over the other instruments in a brooding, disjunct melody line. Already there is the setting for transcendental introspection that will end the quartet. The mood is broken as the "discussion" becomes more heated and there are loud interruptions and snatches of quotation and cliché; but as the first movement ends there is a return to the mood of abstraction where the movement began. Like most of the middle movements of Ives' longer works, the second movement is a hurrying scherzo reminiscent of the "Hawthorne" movement of the second piano sonata. The rhapsodic melodies and sentimental songs in the second violin are part of a complex polyrhythmic structure that swirls like gusts of late-night talk when everyone has had a little too much to drink and there is still a lot that everybody wants to say.

The third movement is just as Ives described it in the movement's title, "The Call of the Mountains." It is quietly lyrical in its slow rhythms. The mood is expressed in massed chords that shift like clouds over the face of the moon. There are emotional moments, some suggestion of the storms of the second movement, but all of them — the bits of popular song and the ragtime syncopations and the quotations from longer symphonic works — drift past as part of the more deeply felt sense of peace. The movement resolves to an extended coda-like passage as the first violin again moves high over the other three instruments and there is — almost unexpectedly, but somehow, also, inevitably — a last tonal ending. Whatever Ives has asked us to consider in the deep brooding of the first movement or the confusion of the second has been resolved in the last quiet breaths of the final movement.

SIDE II

ALAN HOVHANESS: "LOUSADZAK" CONCERTO NO. 1

Alan Hovhaness was born in 1911 in Malden, Massachusetts, of Armenian and Scottish parents. His music has always reflected the color and exoticism of his Armenian background. Lousadzak ("The Coming of Light") was his first piano concerto. Unlike the classical concerto, the music was developed around the instrumental techniques of the Near East, and there was a use of chorale forms of the Byzantine Church. The piece opens with a somber melody low in the cellos. Soon the piano and strings are playing in the parallel melodic structure of the Turkish dance orchestra, with the piano imitating the rapid figures of the kanoon. The following piano solo is built on figures derived from dances played on the tar and the saz, both plucked, stringed instruments of considerable virtuosity. The violin for a time dominates the music as the style changes to the longer chord patterns of the Byzantine hymn; then the violin sections begin a series of imitative figures played with the plucked strings; and the music brightens to a simple spring-like dance melody on which the composition ends.

Both of these performances were transferred from 78-rpm recordings produced by Moses Asch in the late 1940's. The performance of the Ives quartet by the Walden Quartet is one of the landmarks of Ives interpretation. It has a deeply felt commitment to the music even though little of Ives' achievement was known at the time. Alan Hovhaness conducted this first performance of his concerto. The pianist Maro Ajemian was a musician closely associated with many of the important premieres of new music at this time.

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