

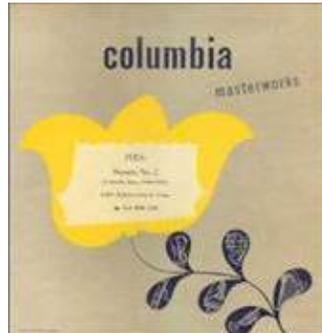
“Ives Piano Sonata No. 2 (Concord Sonata)”--John Kirkpatrick (1948)

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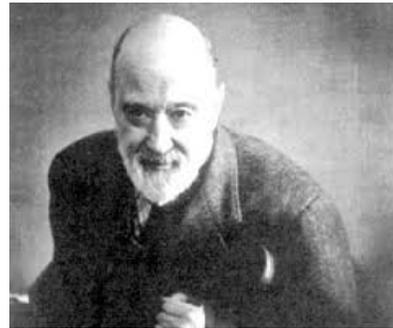
Essay by Drew Massey (guest post)*



John Kirkpatrick



Original album artwork



Charles Ives

The extravagance of the rhetoric that has been heaped upon Charles Ives’s Second Piano Sonata (“Concord, Mass: 1840-1860”) would be hard to replicate even if you tried. Lawrence Gilman, in his review of Kirkpatrick’s performance of the “Concord Sonata” at its 1939 New York premiere, exclaimed that it was “exceptionally great music—it is, indeed, the greatest music composed by an American and the most deeply and essentially American in impulse and implication.” Leonard Bernstein described Ives as America’s “Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson of music,” and the “Concord Sonata” is an integral part of that mythology.

The piece itself is wild and sprawling, lasting around 45 minutes in performance (although existing recordings range from 36 to 52 minutes in length). It was self-published by Ives in 1920, and released in 1921, alongside a book-length accompaniment “Essays Before a Sonata.” Ives explained that, taken together, the music and the essays were “an attempt to present (one person’s) impression of the spirit of transcendentalism that is associated in the minds of many with Concord, Mass., of over half a century ago. This is undertaken in impressionistic pictures of Emerson and Thoreau, a sketch of the Alcotts, and a scherzo supposed to reflect a lighter quality which is often found in the fantastic side of Hawthorne.” The work proudly proclaims its iconoclasm. From the thunderous opening octaves in “Emerson,” to the dizzying passagework in “Hawthorne,” to the mystical bitonality of “The Alcotts,” to the brooding ostinato of “Thoreau,” the work is a thicket of recurring themes and virtuosic finger work, with borrowed tunes bubbling to the top as Ives pouring forth from a free-associative haze.

By 1920, Ives had made a fortune in the insurance industry but, in his mid ‘40s, he was largely unrecognized in the music world. Upon their completion, Ives sent both the score and the “Essays” all over the country. Its four monstrously difficult movements--“Emerson,” “Hawthorne,” “The Alcotts,” and “Thoreau”--baffled the recipients. An anonymous review in the “Musical Courier” dourly wrote, “We are sore afraid we shall never know whether or not we can stand his music. Unless Charles drops into our sanctum some time and insists upon playing [it] ... we know we shall never know, for nobody else will ever be able to play it for us....” Others, though, saw something special in Ives’s broad work. Henry Bellamann, writing of the first

movement, said it “is not pianistic--little of the sonata is--probably no effort was made to make any part of it pianistic.... The beauty of this division of the work is severe and difficult. It is a beauty of high and remote things.... It is informed with the stark and ascetic beauty of lonely and alien reaches of human imagination.”

In the early decades of the sonata’s life, Kirkpatrick was virtually alone in probing its “lonely and alien reaches.” But his love of the sonata grew slowly. Kirkpatrick first became aware of the “Concord Sonata” not among the landscape, philosophy, and people that it celebrated, but during his time as a student in France. In October of 1927, the 22-year-old Kirkpatrick wrote to Ives from Paris: “Would I be troubling you too much to ask you how I could obtain a copy of your ‘Concord, Mass.’ Sonata? I am an amateur musician on the brink of becoming a professional, and very much interested in anything concerning American music.” After receiving the score from Ives, the two men were not in contact for another six years, and, despite eventually living less than an hour apart, did not meet in person until 1937. By that point Kirkpatrick was deep in to his study of the sonata, having already prepared a “working copy” (now lost) of the sonata, to aid his performance.

Following the thunderous success of the 1939 Town Hall concert, Kirkpatrick and Ives even began collaborating on a second edition. But the project stalled in less than a year, as Kirkpatrick found Ives’s changes to the sonata unsatisfactory: “I wanted it more like the first edition. I wanted to fight shy of modernities and go for the logicalities, and I procrastinated.” Yet even if Kirkpatrick did not ultimately see the second edition through, as soon as he had a copy of it, he began including some of its revisions into his own performances, including the thunderous “Beethoven Motive” (from that composer’s fifth symphony), in the opening bars of the sonata--a gesture that is absent in the first edition.

Kirkpatrick’s fascination with the sonata continued throughout his life. Following Columbia’s release of the performance this is being honored here (which was recorded in 1945 but not released until 1948), he prepared an incomplete edition in 1953, recorded the work again in 1968, and in the 1980’s released both a footnoted reprint of Ives’s first edition and a final, “speculative” edition of the sonata in 1987. Kirkpatrick played the “Concord Sonata” hundreds of times in concert, and found it a work that always remained fresh no matter how long he studied it. As he explained in his preface to the incomplete 1953 edition (which he titled “The Player’s Apology”):

This copy is not an “edition.” It is a personal solution to the problem of playing a work which will always be, for its performers, as it has been for its composer, and endless experiment. This particular solution implies no thought that other players should follow it, but simply that it might be useful as an introduction or springboard.

Kirkpatrick’s comments here capture the essence of the “Concord Sonata” as a fluid, ever-changing enterprise for him. Later in life he didn’t say that he was “playing” the “Concord,” he said that he was “playing at” it. In this sense the presence recording is all the more valuable, not a single, once-and-for-all monument of a man who did more than almost anyone to champion the music of Charles Ives, but rather an impression at a particular moment in time of a work who, as Kirkpatrick once put it, never allowed its “rhapsodic fire to cool into a precise formulation.”

Drew Massey is a musicologist whose interests include British and American music since 1900. His book “John Kirkpatrick, American Music, and the Printed Page” was awarded the 2014 ASCAP Deems Taylor / Virgil Thomson award for outstanding music criticism.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.