

The Unanswered Question

Charles Ives (1874–1954)

Written: 1903

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: Four minutes

Even though he was born in the nineteenth century, Charles Ives experimented with most of the new compositional techniques that became a hallmark of the twentieth century. Igor Stravinsky, one of the greatest of the 'modern' composers, claimed that Ives was writing music of the 1960's in the early 1900's! And he used most of those techniques well before his European counterparts. We generally give Arnold Schoenberg the credit for being the first composer to completely abandon a single tonal center for music. Ives abandoned tonality almost a decade sooner. The Europeans got the credit and Ives got the cold shoulder. We see him as a brilliant, eccentric, and little-understood anomaly of American music. "I'm the only one, with the exception of Mrs. Ives and one or two others perhaps . . . who likes any of my music," he said. "Why do I like these things? Are my ears on wrong?"

Ives didn't have to depend on his music for a living; he made a fortune as an insurance executive. He remained coolly aloof from public criticism of his music. Supplying some program notes for one of his more challenging pieces he wrote, "These prefatory essays were written by the composer for those who can't stand his music—and the music for those who can't stand his essays; to those who can't stand either, the whole is respectfully dedicated."

Ives wrote *The Unanswered Question* while still in his twenties and well before he got into the insurance business. It uses Ives' "collage" technique where unrelated bits of music are layered over one another. *The Unanswered Question* has three layers of collage. The strings play a very quiet cushion of chords throughout, representing "The Silences of the Druids—Who Know, See and Hear Nothing." A lone trumpet intones "The Perennial Question of Existence," while a quartet of woodwinds representing the "Fighting Answerers," scurry about looking for the answer. As the trumpet keeps asking the same question, the woodwinds become more and more frantic with their quest. The trumpet asks once more, but this time the only answer is silence.

Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840—1893)

Written: 1876

Movements: Ten

Style: Romantic

Duration: Eighteen minutes

Tchaikovsky is the gold standard for audiences who love lush, romantic orchestral music. In particular, his concertos and last three symphonies (the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth) occupy the top positions of the romantic orchestral repertoire. This is highly emotional music with

tremendous contrasts in dynamics and mood. Of all of the late nineteenth century composers, Tchaikovsky had a knack for writing beautiful and eloquent melodies that would instantly connect with the listener. However, Tchaikovsky, who musically wore his heart on his sleeve, had a deep respect, if not reverence, for the music of the eighteenth century. The music composed by such greats as Haydn and Mozart is more restrained and succinct than any romantic composition. It has a clarity of form and simple elegance that is rarely found in the music of the nineteenth century. It is this sort of music that Tchaikovsky was trying to emulate with his *Variations on a Rococo Theme*. Tchaikovsky the romantic was dressing up as a classical composer.

Tchaikovsky wrote this set of variations for the principal cellist of the Imperial Russian Music Society, Wilhelm Karl Friedrich Fitzenhagen. He asked Fitzenhagen to go through the music and make suggestions. Tchaikovsky got way more than he had asked for. What audiences hear today in this composition is considerably different from what Tchaikovsky had originally intended. Much of the actual cello writing is Fitzenhagen's. He reordered the variations as well, even deleting one of them! However, when Tchaikovsky's publisher gave him the opportunity to restore the piece to its original form, he declined. Incredibly, with all of the reams of academic work on Tchaikovsky's music done in the last century, there are still no published orchestral parts to the original version. The Variations themselves are easy to listen to and understand. After a brief introduction, the cello plays a simple little melody. That theme is probably original to Tchaikovsky—his attempt at writing with the simple elegance of the Rococo. (*Rococo* really refers to paintings from the time of Mozart and Haydn. They are decorative works, frequently of country scenes.) Seven variations follow the theme, each exploiting the cello and challenging the cellist. Although easy to listen to, these variations are tremendously difficult to perform—a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Urban Sprawl

Clint Needham (1981–)

Written: 2011

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: Seven minutes

Clint Needham currently serves as Composer-in-Residence/Assistant Professor of Music at the Baldwin Wallace Conservatory of Music. He has served as an Associate Instructor at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music as well as Assistant Professor of Music at Ohio Wesleyan University. He holds degrees from Indiana University, where he was a four-year Jacobs School of Music doctoral fellow in composition, and from the Baldwin Wallace Conservatory of Music. He was born in Texarkana, Texas.

His music has been recognized with numerous awards including the International Barlow Prize, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra's Project 440 Commission, Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, two ASCAP Morton Gould Awards, among

many others. His music has been described as “wildly entertaining” and “stunning . . . brilliantly orchestrated” by the New York Times, as well as “well-crafted and arresting . . . riveting” by the Herald Times. He provides the following notes on *Urban Sprawl*:

After spending months looking, my wife and I bought a home in the suburbs. While looking, I increasingly became intrigued by the overall “funkyness” of the insides of a number of houses we were shown by our realtor. From the crazy wallpaper, to the downright hideous paint colors, to the do-it-yourself projects gone wrong, to the fresh smells of wacky tobacco, some of these homes were real “standouts.” After seeing so many of these homes, I began to imagine who these current homeowners were. I started picturing them moving about their homes, doing these crazy projects, and dancing a quirky new dance I called the “urban sprawl.” (Think Nixon dancing in “Nixon in China.”)

Urban Sprawl is a seven-minute funky, jazzy, kitschy, and hopefully fun ode to “Suburban Life” (which was the working title). The work was written for and premiered by Alarm Will Sound at the 2011 Mizzou New Music Summer Festival.

Symphony No. 92 in G Major (“Oxford”)

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)

Written: 1789

Movements: Four

Style: Classical

Duration: 27 minutes

Franz Joseph Haydn spent most of his life writing music for one employer. He was essentially a hired servant (although a much-valued and respected one) for the Esterházy estate. Prince Paul Anton Esterházy, one of the richest of the Hungarian nobility, gave Haydn his first full time job in 1761. His contract obliged him to “compose music as required by the Prince” and he was forbidden to compose for anyone else without permission. Prince Paul died a year later. His brother Nikolaus then became Haydn’s employer for the next thirty years! How is it the prince never got bored with Haydn’s style and hired someone else? Haydn explained the trick to his biographer Georg August Griesinger:

The Prince was satisfied with all my works. I was able to experiment . . . cut, take risks. I was cut off from the world. No one could cause me to doubt myself and torment me, and so I had to be original.

In spite of his isolation in the “country,” Haydn’s reputation spread throughout Europe. A new contract with his prince allowed him to write for others. Thus, in 1785, Haydn received a sumptuous commission from Paris for six symphonies. Their success brought a commission for five more, of which the one in G Major, No. 92, is the last.

When Nikolaus died in 1790 his son, Anton, dismissed the court orchestra but kept Haydn on—without any obligations of any kind! This allowed Haydn to travel to London for an extended stay. The *Symphony No. 92* is called the “Oxford” symphony because it was one of

three symphonies that Haydn presented at Oxford University when he was awarded an honorary doctorate. (Back then universities got something in exchange for honorary degrees.)

This symphony follows the typical plan that Haydn settled on for most of his later symphonies. The first movement begins slowly and tenderly and then dissolves into a cheery and brilliant fast tempo. The second movement has a gentle, lyrical theme that is interrupted by a more stern and serious one. The minuetto is more robust than genteel; the charm of its trio is the misplaced accents in the triple meter. The final movement is typical flash-and-dash, but filled with Haydnesque wit and charm.

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