

‘Music is Life’ – The influence of transcendentalist philosophy on Ives’s *Concord Sonata*

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Abstract

Although the *Concord Sonata* is traditionally regarded as a sonata, it is atypical of the genre and is often considered as enigmatic. To understand this composition, a transdisciplinary approach is essential by, more specifically, incorporating knowledge of the philosophies of Transcendentalist authors Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcotts and Thoreau. Charles Ives set out the Transcendentalist ideas which influenced his conception of this piano sonata in his *Essays before a sonata*. His view of musical structure is based on the motto ‘Music is Life’, which he derived from their philosophy. The analysis of the first and last movements of this sonata also facilitates access to the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau. By linking the results of a musical analysis to extra-musical knowledge from literary art, this article demonstrates how abstract ideas of the Transcendental writers can be expressed through music. Interpretations arrived at in this manner help to promote a better understanding of the work as a whole. This essay shows how mediating between two different fields of knowledge and between knowledge and understanding as complementary concepts can enhance understanding and therefore appreciation of the music.

Keywords

Charles Ives, knowledge and cognition, transcendentalism, Henry David Thoreau, Walden, ‘Music is life’.

Disciplines

Music Studies, History, Philosophy of Nature, Transdisciplinary Studies.

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The way in which we understand the music of the past has hampered our understanding and therefore appreciation of twentieth-century music. A greater awareness of musical processes instead of an exclusive concern with the musical product as a kind of architectural structure is one way to promote access to more contemporary music.¹ Instead of relying on the experience of music as fixed structures (sonata form, rondo form, ternary form, etc.), understanding how music unfolds dynamically in time offers new strategies for facilitating access to twentieth-century music. This approach focuses on an awareness of the changing physiognomy of melodies and motives as the music unfolds in the course of a work, noticing their changing shapes, contours and patterns of inflection. By focusing on the temporal nature of music, it can be likened to the literary arts instead of the plastic arts – both music and literary art are temporal by nature and are perceived sequentially.

Although many of Charles Ives's compositions were not performed during his life (1874 – 1954), he is now regarded as a pioneer by America's leading composers,² a view probably best motivated by John Cage: 'Now that we have a music that does not depend on European musical history, Ives seems like the beginning of it.'³ Ives experimented with quarter tones, tone clusters, polyrhythm, and combined hymn tunes, ballad and traditional songs with European art music. A new effect, namely polytonality, was the result when, for example, two bands in a parade each play a different melody in a different key.

Generally speaking, musicologists also agree that Ives's music is particularly innovative in numerous ways.⁴ The *Concord Sonata*, for example, is completely atypical of what would traditionally be defined as a sonata and is often considered as somewhat of a mystery.⁵

1 Spies, 2003.

2 Carter, 1944:200; Copland, 1960:33; Cowell & Cowell, 1955:243.

3 Dickinson, 1974:836.

4 Andriessen, 1977:227; Blum, 1977:462-3; Conen, 1981:33; Helm, 1954:356; Hertz, 1996:76.

5 The question whether the *Concord Sonata* successfully expanded the concept of sonata form, whether and how its esotericism influenced pianistic style, or the discussion of other radical attempts to modify sonata form do not fall within the scope of this article. These matters could be addressed in an article written for a music journal.

However, to understand this composition one must venture outside the discipline of music and, more specifically, take into account the philosophies of transcendentalist authors such as Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcotts and Thoreau. The composer himself has set out the transcendentalist ideas which influenced his conception of this piano sonata in his *Essays before a sonata*.⁶ His view of musical structure is based on the motto 'Music is Life', which he derived from their philosophy. Swafford indicates how Ives wanted to communicate his vision of music, i.e. how music figured in life, without being bound by musical categories, stylistic content or traditional conceptions.⁷ In line with his view that 'Music does not represent life, it is life', he also believes that '[m]y work in music helped my business and my work in business helped my music.'⁸

1 Transcending the boundaries of music as a discipline

Baggiani⁹ and Brooks¹⁰ both refer to the extreme complexity of contemporary music as one of its main characteristics. In the case of Ives this complexity is more specifically the result of the *multiplicity* of meanings and the resultant ambiguity of the heterogeneous elements that co-exist in apparent conflict. Notwithstanding the high level of sophistication in specialization in the music theory of the twentieth century, there is still a lack of true understanding and thus appreciation of new music. This disadvantage of specialization, however, does not pertain exclusively to music as a discipline.

According to Manfred Max-Neef, the quest for knowledge has been driven mainly by reason, or the desire for rational understanding. The end result is that 'we *know* a lot but *understand* very little'.¹¹

6 From here referred to as *Essays*.

7 1991:1494.

8 Bellamann, 1933:48. Ives, who was the director of an insurance agency, chose not to follow a career in music, because he wanted to be free to follow his own aesthetic principles. He did not want to be bound by the taste of the general public or of the critics.

9 1977:229.

10 1977:212.

11 Van Breda, 2005:113, 107. Prof. Max-Neef is an ecological economist and former rector of the University of Valdivia, Chile.

Basarab Nicolescu refers to the disciplinary 'big bang': 'In the 1950s there were only 54 disciplines, whereas in the year 2000 more than 8 000 disciplines have been registered. ... It is impossible to understand the present world in all its complexities from the vantage point of a specific discipline or sub-discipline alone.'¹²

Real understanding requires a kind of knowledge, or a certain type of cognition, which is transdisciplinary in nature, a kind of knowledge which Nicolescu describes as *in vivo* knowledge.¹³ Where *in vitro* disciplinary knowledge concerns the external world of the object, *in vivo* knowledge relates to the internal world of the subject. However, these two kinds of knowledge are not mutually exclusive and, therefore, do not constitute a binary opposition. In this essay we show how mediating between knowledge and understanding as complementary concepts can enhance understanding.¹⁴

Mediation could be regarded as discovering and recovering 'the broken middle' which results when understanding and knowledge are regarded as rigidly defined opposing agents. Gillian Rose regards the broken middle, 'where opposites fail to transform one another', as the 'most significant point of the triune relationship in dialectical thought' and Isobel Armstrong argues that the broken middle is 'the moment of the aesthetic'.¹⁵ New insights and new knowledge, basic requisites for aesthetic enjoyment, develop when the mind *moves* between opposites. In order to understand Ives's complex *Concord Sonata* it is therefore necessary to move away from an exclusive, one-dimensional musical approach.

12 Van Breda, 2005:113, 107. Prof. Nicolescu is a theoretical physicist at CNRS, University of Paris VI, and also President of the International Centre for Transdisciplinary Research and Studies.

13 Nicolescu, 2005:7-8.

14 Mediation is also proposed as a solution to resolve the conflict which arises when text and context are regarded as categories that are kept rigidly separate. Spies, 2002.

15 Armstrong, 2000:17.

2 The Concord Sonata¹⁶

In a homage to Ives after his death in 1954, Leo Schrade asked this important question with regard to the *Concord Sonata*: ‘What did he mean by placing the most modern and adventurous style directly at the side of the most traditional, old-fashioned idiom?’¹⁷ The *Concord Sonata*, with its wide-ranging application of musical codes, has for long had a bad reputation; it was essentially regarded as a mere improvisation apparently devoid of structure. Ernst Kœnek wrote in 1955 in the *Schweizerische Musikzeitung* that the sonata was a fantastic mixture of styles without any recognizable music structure.¹⁸

Ives is now appreciated for the unorthodox way in which he realized musical structure in his *Concord Sonata*. The influence of abstract philosophical ideas as well as his use of *collage* technique may help to explain the sonata’s complex and multidimensional character. *Emerson* (the first movement) in particular can be described as chaotic and turbid.

According to Crunden, however, the perception that Ives’s music is without structure, which the listener consequently finds disturbing, is misleading.¹⁹ The problem is that an interpretation of the *Concord Sonata* that relies solely on the explanatory power of architectural structures and well-rounded themes would be futile, as such an approach does not facilitate an understanding of this sonata. Ives himself declares that ‘what is unified form to the author or composer may of necessity be formless to his audience’.²⁰ The music therefore

16 The full title is ‘Piano Sonata No. 2, “Concord, Mass., 1840–1860”’. For the sake of brevity, the shorter version *Concord Sonata* is used in this article.

17 Quoted in Burkholder, 1985a:541. Leo Schrade (1903–1964) was a German musicologist and Professor of Music History at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA..

18 Conen, 1981:35. ‘[H]ier begegnet man einem phantastischem Stilgemisch und keiner erkennbaren musikalischen Struktur’. Kœnek (1900–1991) was an Austrian-born composer of Czech ancestry. He moved to the United States of America in 1938, where he taught music at various universities. As composer, he explored atonality and other modern styles.

19 1977:13.

20 1970:22.

does not subscribe to a universal idea of structure and cannot be reduced to a set of clearly perceivable rules. Crunden also explains that Ives meant for structure to be an expression of the content as a whole, even though it might not be clearly defined.

The *Concord Sonata*'s unclear structure can probably be attributed to Ives's use of a fragmentation technique, which incidentally also greatly contributes to the ambiguity of his music. This technique is not only employed in the traditional linear and developmental way, but also takes on a structural function in the sonata. Fragmentation is directed sequentially forward to create progression and a sense of arrival, but in contrast to this traditional strategy, he also uses the technique 'reflexively' and 'reciprocally' - a fragment can simultaneously point backwards as well as anticipate a new idea, which creates a cross-reference between movements. Ives also emphasizes a juxtaposition of styles by simply 'crosscutting' from one idea to another.²¹ This causes a sudden break in linear continuity and, as a result, phrases often do not connect logically; they either overlap or are perceived as being isolated.

By employing this technique of fragmentation Ives does not follow the traditional route of introducing a theme at the opening of a movement. Motivic fragments initially appear randomly, then gradually assemble themselves to create a kind of crystallizing effect from which the theme eventually surfaces as a recognizable entity at the end of a movement or at the end of the work.²² (See ex. 9 below.) It follows that listening to a performance of this sonata requires a different interpretive approach because of its apparent lack of structure and memorable themes in the traditional sense of these words.

Ives addresses this apparent lack of coherence in his *Essays* by saying that 'coherence, to a certain extent, must bear some relation to the listener's subconscious perspective'²³ and in his *Memos* he mentions that our perception of the sonata should be based upon a 'parallel way of listening to music'.²⁴ Stone explains the listening experience

21 Morgan, 1977:150-151.

22 Hertz, 1996:78.

23 1970:98.

24 1972:106.

as follows: '[T]he ear should focus on different features, ... one should listen to the music from different spots, the way one walks around a sculpture to see it from as many angles and distances as possible ...'.²⁵ This description of the listening experience can also be related to Morgan's view in that he describes Ives's music as spatial by nature, i.e. musical continuity is not only bound by the fact that it develops sequentially.²⁶ The use of abrupt fragmentation and a poly-stylistic style of writing in this sonata engage the listener in such a way that the focus is readily shifted from one style to another. It is only at the end of a performance that, in spite of so many diverging musical codes, the effect of coherence is created in the subconscious mind.

Charles Ives's second piano sonata has a little village in Massachusetts to thank for its name: Concord was an important home to several renowned writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Amos and Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne as well as Herman Melville and Walt Whitman. Between 1840 and 1860 they brought about what today can be described as a revolution and renaissance in the history of American literature.²⁷ By adding the subtitle, "Concord, Mass., 1840-1860", Ives pays tribute to these writers and acknowledges their significant contribution to American literature.

Ives visited Concord for the first time in 1904 and again in 1908.²⁸ During this time he was working on a series of overtures, entitled *Men of Literature*, with a particular interest in the writers after whom the four movements of the *Concord Sonata* would eventually be named: *Emerson, Hawthorne, The Alcotts* and *Thoreau*. A third visit to Concord followed in 1916, after he had completed the *Concord Sonata* the previous year. By this time he had already started his work on the *Essays*. The descriptions there of various places in the little town of Concord are often strikingly vivid:

25 1966:11.

26 1977:145-159.

27 Buell, 1988:378.

28 Ives, 1970:xiv.

Concord village itself reminds one of that common virtue lying at the height and root of all the Concord divinities. As one walks down the broad-arched street – passing the white house of Emerson, ascetic guard of a former beauty – he comes presently beneath the old elms overspreading the Alcott house. It seems to stand as a kind of homely but beautiful witness of Concord's common virtue – it seems to bear a consciousness that its past is living, that the 'mosses of the Old Manse' and the hickories of Walden are not far away.²⁹

The texts and ideas of the four writers aside, Ives also intended to present their outlook on life and their personal characteristics as a programme for the four respective movements of the sonata: 'For Charles Ives, the Concord Sonata ... reflects programmatically, and also in deeper less obvious ways, the influence of the Concord Transcendentalists.³⁰ He also states quite clearly that the first and last movements are not musical depictions of the life and works of Emerson and Thoreau; they are rather an attempt to give a personal impression of the spirit of Transcendentalism.³¹ On account of resemblances between Ives and the Concord writers, the *Concord Sonata* can also be viewed as autobiographical.

3 Essays before a Sonata

The idea of writing the *Essays before a sonata* occurred to Ives only after he had completed the *Concord Sonata* in 1915. The *Essays* were written 'primarily as a preface or reason for the second pianoforte sonata' and were published in 1920 together with the musical score.³² This is therefore a primary source, in addition to the score itself, that can help the performer to better understand the musical realization of these writers' ideas.³³ Not only has Ives explained the programme of the *Concord Sonata* in the utmost detail, but the statement of his aesthetic views has elucidated his composition techniques in the sonata as well. The *Concord Sonata* must therefore be interpreted with

29 Ives, 1970:47.

30 Boatwright, 1970:xiii.

31 Ives, 1970:xxv.

32 Ives, 1970:xxvi.

33 Ives, 1970:x-xiii.

reference to the *Essays* in order to also penetrate the underlying meaning of the philosophical programme.

Ives dedicated his *Essays* to the music world in humorous fashion. The inscription reads as follows: '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.' His final remark, on the other hand, reveals a much more serious undertone:

No true composer will take his substance from another finite being – but there are times when he feels that his self-expression needs some liberation from at least a part of his own soul. At such times, shall he not better turn to those greater souls ... ?³⁴

These words capture a duality of considerable import. On the one hand, they underline Ives's transdisciplinary approach to composing the sonata; the extra-musical ideas of this work are rooted in the manner of life and thought of 'those greater souls': Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcotts and Thoreau. On the other hand, terms such as 'true', 'self-expression' and 'liberation' indicate that Ives too embraced the convictions of the American Transcendentalists. The *Essays* make it increasingly clear that their philosophy also shaped Ives' outlook on life and that he was greatly influenced by this inspiring force.

Ives discusses the four Concord writers in separate chapters dedicated to each one individually. However, the characteristics of the respective writers, as Ives describes them, can easily be attributed to Ives himself and, moreover, find expression in the sonata as well. The concluding paragraphs of the four chapters on the writers are especially significant. Here Ives has expounded the artistic ideas and his impressions of the writers with reference to the musical codes employed in the sonata more explicitly.

Ives has often quoted the Concord writers in his *Essays*, particularly Emerson, to emphasize a personal point of view. Robinson indicates that the use of quotations is in itself symbolic as a musical representation of, above all, Emerson's style of writing. Ives

34 1970:102.

acknowledges Emerson's relatively unknown essay, *Quotation and Originality*, in which the latter states that '... [a]ll of us are quoters in one province of life or another.'³⁵ Emerson is therefore the authority for Ives's conscious use of quotations in the sonata and, according to Burkholder, this technique is firmly established in the transcendental philosophy of the Concord writers.³⁶ Ives was furthermore convinced that the honesty of their expressions brought a certain truthfulness to his own thoughts and were therefore of benefit to his own art.³⁷ Indeed, the *Essays before a Sonata* is evidence that Ives himself can be regarded as a transcendentalist.

4 Transcendentalist authors and ideas

In Ives's view, American Transcendentalism was not only a literary tradition, but a way of life that was based upon the philosophical convictions of these transcendental writers.³⁸ The decade 1836–1846 roughly represents the culmination of Transcendentalism – 'it exerted a fascination over most of the active literary minds of the country, whether in sympathy or repulsion'.³⁹ Its philosophical principles represented the self-reliant man⁴⁰ who follows his conscience, so much so that 'the divinely inspired democratic individual' helped to create an American type and helped to shape the American psyche.⁴¹ Although democratic ideas of liberty and equality were already established in the American spirit by then, 'the inmost meaning of democracy – its new conception of the nature of man, his place in the world, and his relation to the divine – had hardly

35 1977:570.

36 1985b:21.

37 Sterne, 1971:40.

38 Burkholder, 1985a:26.

39 Hochfield, 2004:ix.

40 The masculine form, as it is used in the texts of the time, is understood also to include the feminine.

41 Hochfield, 2004:ix.

been thought about as yet and never adequately expressed.⁴² The Transcendentalists were more interested in the implications of democracy and freedom for human dignity than in concrete political systems. Although the ideals of the Transcendentalist authors may be regarded as naïve, George Hochfield concludes that

they wrote an irreplaceable chapter of American history. They were among the first of a breed which has played a decisive role in our culture: the unattached, committed intellectual who confronts the problems of society as a literary free agent. ... Both their example and their dreams continue to haunt us.⁴³

The group of intellectuals and writers whose aim it was to promote the ideals and projects of Transcendentalism included Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864), Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). They emphasized the need for change in social structures, but also proclaimed that change in itself is essential.⁴⁴ Ives could easily identify with the liberating views of these four prominent figures in the history of American literature. They had a similar commitment to effective expression in their art which arose, according to Buell, partly out of principle and partly because of individual temperament.⁴⁵

Robinson shows how this movement had been associated from 1830 until 1860 with everything novel and unusual.⁴⁶ Their views also reflected a strong theological stance in which a liberal rationalism combined with a visionary mysticism.⁴⁷ Ives interprets the fundamental ideals of the transcendental philosophy accordingly;

42 Hochfield, 2004:x. According to Hochfield the revolution in the world of thought originated in a dissatisfaction with the poor condition of religion, in 'an impatience with the sterility and complacency of the churches, their failure to make religion a vital part of the lives of their communicants. ... The churches had lost their power to inspire an active faith; they were absorbed in arid theological wrangling and hair-splitting' (2004:xi-xii).

43 2004:xxviii.

44 Buell, 1988:371.

45 1988:374.

46 1977:566.

47 Buell, 1988:368.

firstly, a belief in the 'innate Goodness' of man and, secondly, a mystic belief in the 'Over-Soul', which is exalted in the universe above all mankind and matter, and at the same time also unified with every individual mind and soul.⁴⁸ Ives describes this mystic belief in the Over-Soul as 'an overflow of spiritual imagination'.⁴⁹

Emerson's views on spontaneity or instinct as 'the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life' can also be linked to his belief in the 'innate Goodness' of man. He notes:

We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. For, the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due.⁵⁰

His preoccupation with the soul has clear theological overtones, resonating his original career as a minister.

The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure, that it is profane to seek to interpose helps. It must be that when God speaketh he should communicate, not one thing, but all things; should fill the world with his voice; should scatter forth light, nature, time, souls, from the centre of the present thought; and new date and new create the whole. Whenever a mind is simple, and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away, — means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour. The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul. Time and space are but physiological colours which the eye makes, but the soul is light; where it is, is day; where it was, is night; and history is an impertinence and an injury, if it be anything more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming.⁵¹

48 Cf. Ives, 1970:29.

49 Ives, 1970:32.

50 Emerson, n.d.:15.

51 Emerson, n.d.:15.

As these two examples demonstrate, the transcendentalists' style of prose can be distinguished by the following characteristics. Their writings were extraordinarily didactic, aphoristic and rhetorical, with regular references to moral and spiritual truths. Furthermore, they preferred the use of examples and analogies rather than sequential reasoning and their style of writing was both concise and vague; it often bordered the mysterious, with many reiterations and a preference for the paradoxical.⁵²

Bellamann regards the *Concord Sonata* as 'a musical equivalent of the spiritual values of transcendental philosophy and human experience'.⁵³ The question arises whether it is at all possible to translate abstract ideas (such as those held by the transcendentalists) into music. Ives has also addressed this problem in his *Essays*.

5 Can music express philosophical ideas?

This question was crucial for Ives because he begins the 'Prologue' to his *Essays* as follows:

How far is anyone justified ... in expressing or trying to express in terms of music (in sounds, if you like) the value of anything, material, moral, intellectual, or spiritual, which is usually expressed in terms other than music? How far afield can music go and remain honest as well as reasonable or artistic?⁵⁴

Ives believes that '[p]erhaps music is the art of speaking extravagantly' because 'in its nature music is predominantly subjective and tends to subjective expression, and poetry more objective, tending to objective expression'. Because words 'tend to reveal the nakedness of his (the poet's) soul, rather than its warmth', music is, according to Ives, a medium even more suitable to capture the Transcendentalist

52 Buell, 1988:374.

53 1933:50.

54 1970:3.

philosophy.⁵⁵ He was convinced that natural music possesses a greater potential to suggest images and atmospheres, particularly those of an abstract nature such as *thoughts* and *beauty*.

The obvious means by which a composer can express abstract ideas is musical themes and motives.⁵⁶ The most important theme in the *Concord Sonata* to convey the main musical message is the 'human-faith-melody'. It slowly emerges from a set of motives over the course of the four movements only to present itself fully at the end of the sonata.⁵⁷ Referring to the commonplace beauty of the 'Orchard House' at the end of the chapter on the Allcotts, Ives explains the pervasiveness of this melody as follows:

All around you, under the Concord sky, there still floats the influence of the human-faith-melody – transcendent and sentimental enough for the enthusiast or the cynic, respectively – reflecting an innate hope, a common interest in common things and common men – a tune the Concord bards are ever playing while they pound away at the immensities with a Beethoven-like sublimity, and with, may we say, a vehemence and perseverance, for that part of greatness is not so difficult to emulate.⁵⁸

As will be shown below, Ives uses fragments from simple hymns to represent 'common things and common men' in the *Concord Sonata*.⁵⁹ According to Nelson, Ives felt compelled to incorporate hymns, marches, popular songs and folk music in his compositions, because these genres had the potential to recall human experiences and emotions.⁶⁰ He explains his use of these quotations in the 'Epilogue' of his *Essays*, where he concludes as follows: 'if local color, national color, any color, is a true pigment of the universal color, it is a divine quality, it is a part of substance in art – not of manner.'⁶¹ He links 'godliness of spiritual courage and hopefulness' to Beethoven's music.

55 1970:52.

56 A motive consists of a few notes arranged rhythmically whereas a theme is normally made up of a number of motives.

57 See example 9.

58 1970:47-48.

59 According to Kirkpatrick, Ives 'drew far more heavily on hymns than on any other source' and lists fifty-four hymn-tunes quoted by Ives (see Ives, 1970: 80, footnote u).

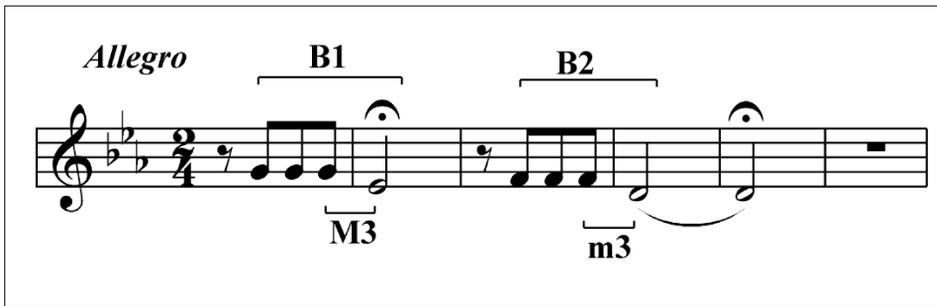
60 1983:354-5.

61 Compare Ives, 1970:80-81.

It is furthermore significant that Ives made this association with Beethoven at the end of the chapter on Emerson:

There is an “oracle” at the beginning of the *Fifth Symphony*; in those four notes lies one of Beethoven’s greatest messages. We would place its translation above the relentlessness of fate knocking at the door, above the greater human message of destiny, and strive to bring it towards the spiritual message of Emerson’s revelations, even to the “common heart” of Concord – the soul of humanity knocking at the door of the divine mysteries, radiant in the faith that it *will* be opened – and the human become the divine!⁶²

What is important here is that Ives’s view of Beethoven’s four-note motive transcends the popular interpretation of it as signifying ‘fate knocking at the door’.⁶³ Moreover, the last sentence in the quotation also reveals his trust in humankind’s ability to transcend its humanness.



EXAMPLE 1 Beethoven, opening of *Symphony No. 5*, op. 67 in C minor⁶⁴

62 1970:36.

63 The Beethoven motive is a quotation from his *Fifth Symphony* in C minor.

64 Beethoven (n.d.).

During the course of the sonata the two four-note motives that make up the Beethoven idea⁶⁵ are transformed rhythmically through diminution or augmentation. They are also varied by means of inversion, retrograde movement (notes of the motive in reverse order), by filling the interval of a third and by attributing different forms of articulation to it (e.g. accents, tenutos, staccatos, legato). Ives's fragmentation of quotations causes that only part of the whole idea is heard as if to imply the quotation itself. The two motives (B1 and B2) or their distinguishable features, the major third (M3) and the minor third (m3), often appear as traces of the quotation during the course of the sonata.

The other prominent four-note motive, the Concord motive, is introduced at the beginning of the sonata (C, D, E, A marked with a 'pointed bracket' in ex. 2).⁶⁶ Its first three notes are a kind of mirror image of the Beethoven motive in that its outline, the interval of a major third, is reversed and the inserted note creates a stepwise movement. In the course of the sonata the direction of the falling fifth interval is sometimes reversed to form an ascending interval.

B1

FINE

D.C.

D.C.

EXAMPLE 2 Concord motive at the beginning⁶⁷

65 The Beethoven idea consists of two four-note motives which, for purposes of clarity, will be labelled B1 (three repeated notes followed by a falling major third) and B2 (three repeated notes followed by a falling minor third). See example 1

66 The fact that the Beethoven idea is epic and the Concord motive lyrical in nature reflects a dualism which is typical of the thematic make-up of traditional sonata form (Cowell & Cowell, 1955:191).

67 No movement has an initial time signature. All the *Concord* music examples are taken from Ives (1947).

As can be seen in example 2, the Concord motive is concealed at its introduction⁶⁸ because its first three notes form part of an ascending scale and the falling fifth is part of the accompaniment. At the beginning of the sonata the Concord motive is marked *slowly* or *slightly slower* to contrast with the Beethoven idea or its traces, B1 and B2, which are accentuated and marked *faster*.⁶⁹ Since the Beethoven idea is widely known, it could be regarded as signifying the universality of Emerson's ideas and his striving for the absolute and the abstract. Both interpretations correspond with Ives's view of Emerson: 'He was too much "absorbed by the absolute," too much of the universal[ist] to be either – though he could be both at once.'⁷⁰ The Beethoven idea or its two representative motives act as a kind of guiding signal in the rich signification of the *Concord Sonata*, just as the Over-Soul acts as a focal point in the philosophy of Emerson.⁷¹

All the hymns quoted in the *Concord Sonata*, with the exception of *Consolator* (1792), date from 1830–1860, the period during which American Transcendentalism flourished (cf. *Martyn*, 1834; *Missionary Chant*, 1832; *The Red, White and Blue*, 1843; *Stop that knocking at my door*, 1843; and *Massa's in de Cold Ground*, 1852). However, Ives does not employ musical quotations for the sake of a naive eclecticism or for literary suggestion; the strategy rather aims to draw attention to the psychological associations with the memories, experiences and nostalgia that these quotations arouse.⁷² He hereby manages to establish, in the unconscious mind, the abstract philosophical message of the Transcendentalists.

68 See point 6.2 below.

69 Contrasting musical material is also basic to traditional sonata form. The difference is, however, that in the traditional structure contrast is usually created by contrasting themes and not contrasting motives and that in the exposition of sonata form, the rhythmical and lyrical themes are separated in the course of the movement. Meyer (1991:140-187) is of the opinion that the traditional motivic-thematic constellation can no longer be used as criteria when analysing this sonata.

70 1970:13.

71 Meyer, 1991:209. Meyer does not agree with Ballantine (1979:172) and Wooldridge (1975:305) who believe that the Beethoven motive symbolizes the clenched fist of the *Abolitionists* who campaigned for the abolition of slave trade. Meyer grounds his opinion on Ives' view that, for him, the motive's signification transcends 'fate knocking at the door' (1991:208).

72 Hertz, 1996:79.

The traces of borrowed material also suggest episodes from daily life and therefore represent Ives's 'Music is Life' approach to composition. These references substantiate a certain truth in his musical depictions because they symbolize mankind's sociality: a serious and pious participation in church (e.g. the *Martyn* hymn) or exuberant celebrations on festive holidays (e.g. *Country Band March*). Ives compares 'musical reality' to 'the truth', and since the *Martyn* hymn primarily represents man's innate goodness, it also translates into concrete terms the ideals held by the Transcendentalists. Their belief in the innate goodness of man and subsequent commitment to, and maintenance of, moral values is thus woven into the music. The quotations from sacred music furthermore create a direct link to Emerson's vocation as church minister.

Examples 3 and 4⁷³ indicate how the B1 motive is embedded in both the opening bars of the *Martyn* hymn and the *Missionary Chant*. Although the *Missionary Chant* starts with four, instead of three, repeated notes, the original form of the B1 motive can also be found at the beginning of the second phrase.

The image shows a musical score for the *Martyn* Hymn. It consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The first staff is labeled 'B1' and 'FINE'. The lyrics for the first staff are: 'Je - sus, Lov - er of my soul, Let me to Thy bo - som fly, — While the nea - rer wa - ters roll, While the tem - pest still is high; Safe in - to the ha - ven guide, Oh, re - ceive my soul at last.' The second staff is labeled 'D.C.' and contains the lyrics: 'Hide me, O my Sav - iour, hide, Till the storm of life is past;'. The B1 motive is indicated by a bracket over the first four notes of the first staff.

Example 3 *Martyn* Hymn

Ye Christian her-alds, go, pro-claim. Sal-va-tion in Em-ma-nuel's name:

To dis-tant climes the ti-dings bear, And plant the rose of Sha-ron there. A-men.

Example 4 *Missionary Chant*

It is particularly significant that the Beethoven idea is found within the two hymns. This enabled Ives to combine the belief in the Over-Soul (the Beethoven idea) with a belief in the innate goodness of man (the *Martyn* hymn). He could therefore introduce the two primary and fundamental truths of the philosophy as one and the same unit in his music. Both Block⁷⁴ and Hitchcock⁷⁵ explain in detail how Ives specifically considered his quotations also for their musico-technical possibilities.

Seeing that the Beethoven motives (B1 and B2) and the Concord motive all consist of four notes, one could argue that they symbolize the four writers of Concord. In addition, the fourth note in all the motives is rich in signification. It stands apart from the first three notes as it forms a descending interval (or ascending in its inversion, when the direction of the intervals change) and is sometimes even omitted. Therefore, the isolated fourth note can represent Thoreau, the individualist. His natural asceticism, high-mindedness and often different outlook on life come to the fore. The appearance of both motives in all four movements also creates a strong sense of unity.⁷⁶

74 1996:32-37.

75 1977:55-6.

76 The notion of unity could also suggest the *united* front of the Transcendentalists against moral decline. The promotion of the arts and excellence in education were also important ideals of the New England Transcendentalists.

The involvement of extra instruments in the outer movements (viola in the first and flute in the final movement) enhances the unity of the apparent incoherent structure.

In the process of systematically crystallising the ‘human-faith-melody’ *en route* to the last movement, Ives always uses these motives in close proximity to one another; sometimes they are even superimposed (e.g. in the *Emerson* movement). Since a more detailed discussion of the first and final movements follows below, single examples from the remaining movements are included for their interest.⁷⁷ In *Hawthorne*, the second movement, there is not yet a definite coherence with regard to a theme as such. The important motives and fragments that will eventually become the ‘human-faith-melody’ are presented in an expansive form over the course of more than three pages. The third movement, *The Alcotts*, is very simple in its outline and for this reason Ives adheres to a more cohesive presentation of the intended thematic material. The following example clarifies the combination of motives in this movement.

The image shows a musical score for two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system is marked *pp* and features a melodic line in the right hand with a dynamic marking of *pp* and a motive labeled *F2* (see ex. 9). The second system is marked *p* and features a melodic line in the right hand with a dynamic marking of *p* and motives labeled *B1* and *B1 / B2?*. The bass line in both systems consists of a steady accompaniment of chords.

Example 5 *The Alcotts*, p. 53, systems 2 and 3

77 The influence of Hawthorne and the Alcotts on the second and third movements of the sonata is discussed in Weyer, 2004.

78 1972:79-80.

6 Emerson – the first movement of the *Concord Sonata*

6.1 The author and his philosophy

Apart from the fact that Ives had a sound knowledge of Emerson's writings, the following comment shows why he admired Emerson: 'It may have something to do with the feeling I have about Emerson, for every time I read him I seem to get a new angle of thought and feeling and experience from him.'⁷⁸ As if osmotic, Ives himself writes in an Emerson style, with an ambiguity rich in meaning. Other similarities with Emerson include quick changes of mood, a style of writing that is at times articulate and at times incoherent, with nostalgic moments and an American humour that shine through. Sometimes astonishing contrasting ideas figure in the same paragraph.⁷⁹

The chapter on Emerson in the *Essays* is the most comprehensive of the four chapters about the respective Concord writers. This could suggest that Ives regarded Emerson as a leading figure in the history of American literature. Even though Ives never paid close attention to Emerson's own aesthetical views, his philosophy and style of writing did present solutions to the problems Ives encountered in his own aesthetics.⁸⁰ It was the stature of the writer's personality and his philosophical thinking that fascinated Ives.⁸¹ 'Though a great poet and prophet, he is greater, possibly, as an invader of the unknown – America's deepest explorer of the spiritual immensities.'⁸² Emerson's idea that 'the ultimate of a conception is its vastness'⁸³ liberated Ives in that it enabled him to reach a higher sensitivity (therefore transcendence) and subsequently stimulated his creativity. Not only did Ives recognize in Emerson an 'unshackled search for the infinite' and the rebel who felt that there are rules which should not be too well obeyed, but he also identified with these attributes.⁸⁴

Furthermore, both Emerson and Ives were committed to find a truth of expression in their respective art forms. Ives writes in his *Essays*: 'It must be remembered that truth was what Emerson was after – not

79 Cf. Ives, 1970:97.

80 Burkholder, 1985a:109.

81 Robinson, 1977:566.

82 1970:11.

83 Ives, 1970:14.

84 1970:18,24,27. Cf. also Robinson, 1977:566, and Cyr, 1971:303.

strength of outline or even beauty, except insofar as they might reveal themselves naturally in his explorations towards the infinite'. Ives preferred the way Emerson *interpreted* life's 'reflexes' rather than life's 'facts', as this could arouse the deeper spiritual and moral emotions without causing his listeners to distort the physical ones.

Ives would write extensively on structure in the *Essays* and the following remark about Emerson is specifically significant : 'His habit, often, in lecturing was to compile his ideas as they came to him on a general subject in *scattered notes*, and, when on the platform, to trust to the mood of the occasion *to assemble* them' (our emphasis). The essence of his argument or solution to a problem would only be fully understood upon the *conclusion* of his lectures, sermons or essays, of which Ives reports as follows: 'Of a truth, his codas often seem to crystallize in a dramatic though serene and sustained way the truths of his subject – they become more active and intense, but quieter and deeper.'⁸⁵ Sentences and phrases would not appear very logically during the course of his reasoning and a continuity in expression was not always clear. Ives endorsed Emerson's approach in this process of creating and it is probably the origin of his own resistance to 'easy unity'.⁸⁶

6.2 Emerson, the music

The first movement, probably the one most difficult to understand,⁸⁷ is complex and multidimensional and can therefore be compared to Ives's layered description of Emerson in his *Essays*. Ives's belief that 'vagueness is at times an indication of nearness to the truth',⁸⁸ and the resultant discrepancy between a philosophy and a clearly defined structure complicate the understanding of the first movement.

In accordance with Emerson's essays, lectures and sermons, where ideas and arguments only reach congruency towards the end, Ives places the development section of the sonata, which traditionally comes in the middle of the movement, at the beginning of the work. He only hints at the final theme by isolating motives from it and

85 Ives, 1970:25.

86 Ives, 1970:21-23.

87 Helm, 1954:358-9.

88 Ives, 1970:22; Rossiter, 1977:18; Crunden, 1977:12.

introducing them in an already developed form, as if Emerson is still gathering his thoughts for a sermon. A provisional conception of the theme appears only at the end of the movement in the coda. This construct emerges from the gathered material and a mass of sound which prompted Hertz to describe the form as a cumulative structure.⁸⁹ The actual theme presents itself fully crystallized only in the third movement, after which it reaches its full potential to express transcendentalist ideas in the fourth. Ives, the rebel, therefore does not follow the traditional architectural structure of the sonata, but rather allows a temporal unfolding of musical ideas according to a specific individual expression. Meyer thus chooses to explain *Emerson*⁹⁰ by describing the course it follows, because ‘the way something happens’⁹¹, i.e. the musical unfolding as a process, will allow for the elements that organize the structure to be clarified.

Ives anticipates the Beethoven idea by starting the movement with fragments from it.

89 Hertz, 1996:81.

90 1991:140-187.

91 Ives, 1970:42.

EXAMPLE 6 Emerson, p. 1, systems 1 - 3⁹²

The systematic diminution of the descending interval (starting with the interval of a fifth) in the upper register is combined with a systematic descending band of sound. The descending fifth⁹³ (C-F at *faster* in ex. 6) leads directly to the descending fourth (F-C, accentuated) to finally arrive at the descending C-G#, sounding as the major third of the B1 motive.⁹⁴ The B2 motive itself appears at the

92 Because of the absence of bars and bar lines later, reference to relevant examples is done according to pages and systems.

93 Unless specified otherwise, the intervals are of the perfect type.

94 G# is the enharmonic equivalent of A \flat to create the major third, C-A \flat .

end of the first system; the repeated notes and falling minor third (E-E-C#) are directly imitated by accented octaves in the left hand (D#-D#-D#-C)⁹⁵ later followed by (C#-C#-C#-A#). The B1-motive, with the falling major third, appears fully for the first time in system 3 (C-C-C-G#, all four notes accentuated).

Ives initially isolates the jump of a third and also has the B2 motive appear before the B1 motive. This causes a fragmented effect as these elements are experienced as traces of the Beethoven idea. These traces represent a *vague* idea that will gain real significance at a much later stage; it is intended as a musical representation of Emerson's working process. In the course of the work the complex, rhythmical treatment of the B1 and B2 motive in the opening bars is simplified to support the crystallising process of the main theme.

The Concord motive is also transformed when the descending interval of a fifth is replaced by an ascending augmented fourth (D-G# on page 2, system 2). Another way in which this motive is developed occurs on page 3, systems 2 to 5, where the first three stepwise tones are played together to create dissonant tone clusters. The isolated descending fifth at *fff* on page 6, system 2, is part of the first big climax. The interval now appears in a very high register, which causes the tonal range to reach 6½ octaves. Ives hereby suggests Emerson's stature, which he also emphasized in the *Essays* as follows: 'Emerson is greater – ... We see him – standing on the summit at the door of the infinite, where many men do not dare to climb. ... We see him – a mountain-guide so intensely on the lookout for the trail of his star ...'.⁹⁶

It is only in the coda of the first movement that Ives hints at the eventual theme. However, the Concord motive does not feature in this melodic construct. This absence is significant, because the motive features more prominently in the final movement as the opening notes of the 'human-faith-melody' (discussed below). It is indeed clear that 'what is unified form for the author or composer may of necessity be formless to his audience'.⁹⁷ The *necessity* referred to here can be rel-

95 D# is the enharmonic equivalent of E♭ to create the minor third, E♭-C .

96 Ives, 1970:11-12.

97 Ives, 1970:22.