

Donna Coleman

pianist

“Concord, Mass., 1840-60”

The Second Pianoforte Sonata by Charles Edward Ives

Coleman's adaptation of Ives's monumental opus presents each movement of the Sonata with excerpts from the writings of Ives and of the four authors for whom the movements are named

Assisting Artists

John Bibby O'Brien, flautist

Brad Foley, reader

Deborah Chodacki, reader

I Emerson

Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Circles”

Essays Before a Sonata by Charles Ives: “Emerson”

II Hawthorne

“The Celestial Railroad” by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Essays Before a Sonata by Charles Ives: “Hawthorne”

III The Alcotts

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott

Essays Before a Sonata by Charles Ives: “The Alcotts”

IV Thoreau

Walden, or Life in the Woods by Henry David Thoreau

Essays Before a Sonata by Charles Ives: “Thoreau”

Epilogue

Essays Before a Sonata by Charles Ives: “Epilogue”

Charles Ives's *Second Pianoforte Sonata (Concord, Mass., 1840-60)* in the composer's own words, “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 a half-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 four movements are united by a single motivic idea, the four-note “Fate” motive, as the opening pitches of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony #5* opus 67 (1808) came to be known; hymn tunes that prominently employ this motive or variants of it (in particular, Charles Zeuner's *Missionary Chant* (1832) and Simon Marsh's *Martyn* (1834); and by Ives's own “Human Faith Melody,” a re-ordering of fragments of other quoted hymns including Robert Lowry's *Need* (1872), George Whelpton's “Hear Our Prayer, O Lord” (1897), and Lowell Mason's *Bethany* (“Nearer, My God, to Thee,” 1856), the tune that went down with the *Titanic* in 1912, smack in the middle of the years in which Ives was composing the *Concord Sonata* (from c. 1907 (and no doubt, imagining it earlier) to c. 1915, with many subsequent revisions. “This is the only piece which every time I play it, or turn to it, seems unfinished” [*Memos*, 79].

“The idea of the *Second Piano Sonata* came originally from working on some overtures representing literary men—for instance, Walt Whitman, Browning, Matthew Arnold, Emerson— . . . Whittier and . . . Henry Ward Beecher” [*Memos* 76]. “The *Emerson* . . . started (I think, not sure) with the first five measures later put into the song, *Duty* . . . — (and was before that a male chorus with orchestra. This shows how one idea or set of ideas goes through so many transitions . . . starting (as this) as a male chorus, then overture or concerto for piano and orchestra, and finally a piano sonata)” [*Memos* 77]. The sonata was “recomposed” from the *Emerson* [piano] *Concerto* of 1907, possible sketches toward a *Hawthorne Concerto* of September 1910, the *Orchard House Overture* of 1904, and whatever orchestral sketches toward *Thoreau* are meant by the memo on the ink copy: “finished May 30, 1915, from some ideas—Walden Sounds—Ch[urch] Bells, flute, Harp (Aeolian) to go with Harmony's *Mist* . . . Elk Lake 1910” [*Memos* 163].

Initially trained and profoundly influenced by his father George, Danbury's town bandmaster and jack-of-all-trades local musician, who drilled him on Bach's contrapuntal perfection while inspiring him with a sense of outrageous musical experimentalism, Ives later spent four years at Yale University where (in the midst of his "major" in business) he studied composition with Horatio Parker, completed his *First Symphony*, was principal organist at Centre Church in New Haven, sat in for the regular pianist at Poli's, a popular student hangout where the incipient jazz styles creeping into the New York scene were being tried out, attended concerts and opera productions, and was an active member of two fraternities and a staunch supporter of athletics (Charlie was an enthusiastic baseball player in his youth). No wonder his music is saturated with syncopations, with quotations of tunes sacred, secular, even profane. And with harmonies enriched by dissonances, formal structures sometimes apparent patchworks of borrowed melodic fragments joined together or piled on top of each other, his compositions often rock on deliberately shocking contrasts of sound and mood. So, it is not surprising that we also hear references to minstrel tunes (A.F. Winnemore's *Who Dat Knocking at My Door* and Stephen Foster's *Massa's in de Cold, Cold, Ground*), patriotic songs ("O Columbia, Gem of the Ocean"), and recognizable themes from two operas by Richard Wagner (the "Desire" and "Longing" motives from *Tristan und Isolde*; the Bridal Chorus from *Lohengrin*).

Donna Coleman is recognised worldwide as one of the premiere interpreters of the music of Charles Ives, which she has studied, contemplated, recorded, and performed in concert on three continents for more than half a century. Her compact disc recordings for Et'Cetera Records (Amsterdam) received rave reviews from the international press upon release and were hailed as "the best." A long-time friendship with John Kirkpatrick, who gave the first complete performance of the *Concord Sonata* in 1938, and who was Curator of the Ives Collection at Yale until his death in 1991, profoundly enriched her understanding of this monumental composition and of Ives's life and music. Dr Coleman is also a published author, exhibited photographer, amateur astronomer and archaeologist, and a textile artist and weaver— "music I can see." A dual citizen of the USA and Australia, when asked where is "home," she will tell you, "the *Concord Sonata*."

"Spirit, Passion, and the Right Hands"

"The formidable dimensions and the equally high technical and psychic demands experienced throughout the course of the "*Concord*" *Sonata* are not only overcome by the interpreter, rather, she far surpasses a mere ordering of the interrelated, stylistically colorful material and uses her manual and didactic possibilities for a strongly moved, impulsive interpretation. Donna Coleman takes the aura of inaccessibility from what is in the truest sense of the word an unwieldy, complex composition. A work for both specialists and aficionados becomes unexpectedly familiar, without having its edges or its stylistic autonomy appear tempered."

Peter Cossè, Fono Forum (Berlin 1990)

Diapason d'Or and Editor's Choice

"This *Second Pianoforte Sonata* . . . finds here its most convincing recorded version, due to its assertion, the assurance in its manner of effectively carrying out each detail, its analytical finesse."

Christian Tarting, Diapason (Paris, February 1990)

"Donna Coleman offers a marvelously modulated reading of the composition [Ives's "*Concord*" *Sonata*] and extracts its true essence. The American pianist does a mirror playing of the work, full of nuances, and with a diversity of approach. She interprets this gigantic painting with complete technical mastery, and with malleable intonations, all fully at her command; she therefore has an infinite variety of ambiances at her disposal. The playing is rigorous and regular and constantly at ease. Never seeming to force things, Donna Coleman presents a magnificent album of poetic and colorful images . . . A very beautiful twentieth-century piano recording, an important piece of the 'Ivesian' puzzle."

Bruno Serrou, Compact (Paris, 1990)



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Sunday afternoon at 4:00 p.m. 20th October 2024
Charles Ives's 150th birthday
The Music House, Greenville NC