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Charles Ives's Associations with Kaiser Wilhelm II, Compositional Effects, and Present-day Listening Strategies

ABSTRACT

Background

This paper lies at the intersection of music analysis, historical musicology, and hermeneutics. Most Ives scholarship is not analytical in nature; those studies that are tend to be heavily formalist (non-hermeneutic). Drawing on archival research and primary documents, I study how one might reconstruct American modernist Charles Ives's thoughts on connections between Kaiser Wilhelm II, aspects of autocracy, weakness, and features of tonal, consonant music; and likewise, how one might reconstruct his written connections between aspects of democracy, freedom, strength, and features of non-tonal, dissonant music ('Associations'). I theorize that, for Ives, consonance and dissonance were evocative expressively and extra-musically, and that the compositional makeup of his works during and after the Great War reflects this aesthetic orientation.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

Ives associated aspects of consonance with non-constructive thoughts regarding autocracy, slavery, and 'German rules' during and after the Great War. Ives's writings that discussed features of dissonance — especially extra-musical or expressive associations — are ubiquitous, and his writings support the main theoretical ideas of this study. I study the musical effects of these associations on Ives's works including the song 'Sneak Thief' (1914) and the Orchestral Set No. 2 (1917). These compositions relate to World War I; the former reacts to the German 'rape' of Belgium, while the latter to the sinking of the Lusitania.

Methods

I examine passages of music that feature tonal musical borrowings, which can be compared to consonant, tonal harmonic progressions and melodic lines, as shown through sketch study and my own recompositions. Ives may have marked or camouflaged such passages by the 'addition' of dissonant musical structures for their political and ethical affect. Dissonant notes interact with and alter these underlying consonant, tonal harmonic progressions and melodies, and different kinds of alterations musically shape the affective qualities and compositional design of Ives's music. My work is based on a long scholarly history of recomposition, the concept of 'Markedness' (Hatten 1994), and groundwork on Ives's borrowings (Burkholder 1995), though my specific methodological combination and its application is unique.

Implications

Many of Ives's references to dissonant musical structures fall into a web of associations that I describe as 'Democratic'. In writings that discussed 'Democratic' dissonances, Ives associated aspects of dissonance with strength, freedom, and/or democratic principles. By contrast, he regarded music whose dissonant potential was underutilized as lacking the capacity to evoke strength and freedom. Ives also associated aspects of consonance and/or late nineteenth-century musical theories regarding tonal music with autocracy, slavery, and/or 'German rules' during and after the Great War. In addition to reconstructing Ives's associations of dissonance, I explore the ways in which Ives treated 'Democratic' dissonances musically, and describe how modern listeners might constructively utilize these dissonance treatments for analysis and experience. 'Democratic' dissonances manifest in Ives's music that was written or revised during and after World War I, in the guise of tonal passages that Ives may have marked or camouflaged by the 'addition' of dissonant musical structures for their political and ethical affect. My unique methodological combination results in different hearings of the same passage that may be productive for present-day listeners in five ways: for understanding a work's short-term structure, for understanding a work's long-term structure, to increase one's enjoyment of a work, to guide a performance, and — the most productive in my opinion — for forming nuanced interpretations of meaning.

In my work, I specifically examine passages that feature tonal musical borrowings, which can be compared to the consonant, tonal harmonic progressions and melodic lines, as shown through sketch study and my own recompositions. Listeners compare Ives's dissonant settings with the original tonal borrowed melody (and original setting). This type of dialogic listening has many advantages. It closely engages with difficult surfaces, allowing a listener to hear in a new — yet familiar — way. It is historically contextualized and presents a mode of hearing that Ives himself may have employed. Additionally, this mode of listening can allow for interpretive gains, potentially altering the analytical narratives we tell and teach about Ives's music.

Keywords

Music Hermeneutics, National/Regional Character, Musical Modelling, Non-European Music, Music Analysis and Historical Musicology, Music Analysis and Listening Approaches, Music Analysis and Composition.

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