Charles Ives (1874-1954)

Three Places in New England

First performance: (in the composer’s own reduced instrumentation for chamber orchestra) January 10, 1931, Town Hall, New York, Chamber Orchestra of Boston, Nicolas Slonimsky cond.; (in the original version for full orchestra as restored by James B. Sinclair): February 9, 1974, New Haven, Yale Symphony Orchestra, John Mauceri cond. First BSO performance: February 1948, Richard Burgin cond. This is the first Tanglewood performance of “Three Places in New England” by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Three Places in New England gave Ives the rare opportunity to hear a professional performance of one of his ca. 40 orchestral works (most of them lay mute in manuscript for decades). He attended the premiere, given on January 10, 1931, in New York City by the Chamber Orchestra of Boston, a new-music group founded by Boston’s resident avant-gardist, Nicolas Slonimsky, who had been introduced to “the unknown composer” by their mutual friend, the like-minded modernist Henry Cowell. “The reviews were mixed,” Slonimsky later wrote. In a stroke of daring, Slonimsky took Three Places abroad, first to Havana in March, and then to Europe, that enterprise being financed by Ives himself. (Ives made his money as an insurance executive on Wall Street.) In program notes for Paris (June 1931), Slonimsky distilled its essence: “géographie transcendentale par un Yankee d’un génie étrange et dense”—“transcendental geography by a Yankee of strange and dense genius.”

“Géographie” signifies how Ives projected a precise location for each place. “Transcendental” implies the legacy of Emerson and Thoreau, Ives’s idols. By making his quotations of American popular music integral to his style, Ives honors their belief in the profundity of ordinary experience. “Étrange et dense” alludes to Ives’s love of dissonance and his cinematic approach to musical texture. Often, Three Places courts chaos, as Ives pans his musical landscapes with a cubist camera, juxtaposing many styles at once.

In Three Places in New England, each movement is accompanied by a poem or program explaining its title and sometimes its internal action. “The St. Gaudens” in Boston Common (Col. Shaw and his Colored Regiment) refers to the bas-relief by the sculptor Augustus St. Gaudens. Unveiled in 1897 across from the State House, it commemorates the Massachusetts 54th—the first African-American corps in the North to fight in the Civil War, led by Col. Robert Gould Shaw. Ives responds to the momentous metamorphosis of former slaves into freedom-fighters into martyrs by depicting this “Black March”—his other name for “St. Gaudens”—as a reverent journey reworking “plantation songs” from blackface minstrelsy, particularly Stephen Foster’s “Old Black Joe,” with drumbeats depicting both the varying paces of the marching men and the “drum-beat of the common-heart.” About six minutes in, a sudden brief military note of triumph surprises us. Is this the regiment doing battle? The trombone quotes from the 19th-century song “The Battle Cry of Freedom,” to say “The Union forever.”

“Putnam’s Camp, Redding, Connecticut” also serves Ives’s sense of patriotism. Welding together material from two earlier pieces—“Country Band” March and an Overture and March, “1776” (ca. 1902-03)—the “plot line” for this piece centers on Israel Putnam’s stoical leadership in the winter campaign of 1778-79. “Putnam’s Camp” opens with a boisterous depiction of a Fourth of July picnic at the local state park named after the war hero. An amateur band messes up and plays out of sync. In the second section of the movement, a mysterious chord in the strings, piano, flute, and harp brings on a dream sequence: a curious child wanders into the woods. He sees a vision of the Goddess of Liberty, who pleads with the movement, a mysterious chord in the strings, piano, flute, and harp.

In contrast to the public environment of the first two places, “The Housatonic at Stockbridge” reveals the composer’s private side. Married on June 9, 1908, to Harmony Twichell, Ives began this intimate tone poem upon returning from their Berkshire honeymoon. “We walked in the meadows along the river, and heard the distant singing from the church across the river. The mist had not entirely left the river bed, and the colors, the running water, the banks and elm trees were something that one would always remember.”

His nature painting recalls the sensuousness of Debussy; the “distant singing” is depicted through borrowings from the Baptist hymn “Dormance,” freely altered for the main theme. In the end, Three Places in New England transcends internal allusions and external borrowings by realizing on its own autonomous terms Ives’s goal of composing music to communicate consciousness—“not something that happens but the way something happens.” Now one of Ives’s most loved pieces, Three Places in New England speaks directly to Aaron Copland’s observation: “In listening to the music of Ives, I have sometimes puzzled over it that makes his work, at its best, so humanly moving.”

—Judith Tick