

## Charles Ives □ – Universe Symphony - Orchestral Set No. 2 - The Unanswered Question (1994)

Written by bluesever

Saturday, 05 November 2016 16:05 -

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1 *Universe Symphony* 37:52 Orchestral Set No. 2 2 *An Elegy To Our Forefather* 5:15 3  
*The Rockstrewn Hills* 5:21 4 *From Hanover Square North* 7:15 5 *The Unanswered*  
*Question* 5:56 Cincinnati  
Philharmonia Orchestra & Cincinnati College Conservatory Chamber Choir Gerhard Samuel –  
conductor

Several of Ives' compositions have been reconstructed from his complex sketches and notes. The brilliant pianist John Kirkpatrick (largely responsible for Ives' initial fame through his performance of the Concord Sonata in the 1930s) worked on several of the piano works, and composers Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison collated and completed the score of the Symphony No. 4 in the 1950s. Composer Larry Austin spent over twenty years to realize and complete the myriad materials for the Universe Symphony, faithfully and brilliantly performed here by the Cincinnati Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by Gerhard Samuel. Ives left a note inviting other composers to add to the work following his initial ideas. The first fifteen minutes of this almost 40-minute work is given over to the idea of a slowly growing and evolving "life pulse" music in which 20 percussionists play to a headphone "click track" that coordinates the simultaneous 12 different prime number meters. This is the first of three musical macro-layers. The others are: the Heavens, for four orchestras, each in different meters and tempos; and the Earth, with its "Rock formation" and "Earth chord" orchestrations. These orchestral layers appear in different combinations within the three sections or movements: Past -- from Chaos, formation of the Waters and Mountains; Present -- Earth and the Firmament, evolution in Nature and Humanity; Future -- Heaven, the rise of all to the spiritual. The second and third movements are the most similar to the "Ives' sound" of orchestrally dense works like the Fourth Symphony or the Robert Browning Overture, and sweepingly dramatic, with an almost indescribable emotional flow. In the climax of the work, all of the material sounds rush headlong to the heavens, into silence broken only by the sound of one solitary chime. ---"Blue" Gene Tyranny, Rovi

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This is the realization of Ives' unfinished work by composer Larry Austin. As such, this is not strictly speaking a work by Ives--despite Austin's claims to the contrary in the recording's liner notes. I think it's more useful to think of the recording as you might think of Deryck Cooke's realization of Mahler's Tenth Symphony. Unlike Austin, Cooke makes no bones that his work is a realization--and as such is not purely Mahler.

Despite my nit picking, it is interesting to hear Ives' Universe Symphony in whatever guise possible. This sounds radically different than anything else I've ever heard from Ives. Percussion predominates, and rhythm is the primary musical element, rather than melody or harmony. In fact, one might point to this work and declare Ives to be the father of minimalism! I'm not exactly sure what to make of this recording. I think most of my ambivalence stems from my lack of knowledge about how much of this work is Ives' and how much is Austin's.

If I put aside that question for moment, and I try to evaluate the music as music, I'm still not totally convinced. Perhaps this is one Ives' work that was best left unfinished. The idea is fascinating, but--in this world--is it possible to achieve? . . . Still, if you're an Ives' fan, you'll want to hear it. Just don't expect the revelations of the Fourth Symphony or Second Piano Sonata.

One incentive to pick up the disc: The couplings are excellent. Samuel's reading of "The Unanswered Question" is one of my favorites, displaying a tremendous level of inner detail. The Second Orchestral Set is also very fine, woody and idiomatic. ---musicweb-international.com

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