Notes on the Program
by James Bagwell

I am certain that the first printed music I ever saw was written in shaped notes, a peculiar and archaic notational system devised at the end of the 18th century to aid in the reading of music. Sometimes called shaped note music, each pitch is notated with a specific shape, such as a square or a diamond. The *Broadman Hymnal*, widely used in Baptist churches throughout the South, had editions in both conventional notation and in shapes. At some point when I was taking piano lessons as a boy, I asked what the shapes meant and why our church's hymnal was different from hymnals that I had seen in other churches. I was told that some members of our congregation could only read notes in shapes, which only raised more questions for me. Later, at Birmingham-Southern College, where I was an undergraduate, we sang several pieces from both *Southern Harmony* and *The Sacred Harp*, which are the two most famous shape-note tunebooks from the 19th century. Our conductor, Hugh Thomas, who had grown up singing shape-note hymns in Boston (Alabama, that is), explained the system more carefully, put it in a cultural context, and introduced me to what would eventually become a musicology thesis topic at Florida State University.

At FSU I did field work, going from church to church videotaping shape-note hymn sings. What was most striking was that I did all of the research less than five miles from the house where I grew up in rural Walker County, Alabama. Moreover, the singers were people I had known growing up: substitute teachers, friends of my grandparents, and even the man from whom my father bought fertilizer. While at Florida State, with the support of the musicology department, I formed The American Music Ensemble, which, as far as I know, was one of the first university choral and instrumental ensembles dedicated to performing solely American music. It was with that group that I conducted not only shape-note hymns, but also Moravian works from the 18th and 19th centuries, colonial hymns, and even music used in the California missions. My work in American music continued with a dissertation on **Charles Ives** (1874-1954), which seemed like a culmination of the work that I had done earlier. As I was researching Ives and his musical influences, colonial music, shape-note hymns, and propaganda songs from the 19th century began to assemble themselves into an interesting narrative structure, which is how this concert was more or less conceived.

My background is not that unusual for American musicians caught between what musicologist Wiley Hitchcock described as the *vernacular* and the *cultivated* traditions. For Hitchcock, American vernacular music, such as shape-note hymns and much of the music heard outside the concert hall, arose naturally out of the needs of the culture, and was not a self-conscious attempt at art. The cultivated tradition describes music that essentially wants to be seen as art and strives to be placed in the high temples of cultured music: the concert hall and the academy. Many pieces on this concert represent the vernacular music composed and performed in the United States during an intense period of growth and change. The word "performed" is used with some caution because vernacular music, like Gregorian chant, was *not* meant to be heard as concert music. This was music for use: use in the church and home, on the battlefield, at political rallies, and other places and events in private and public life. Charles Ives was deeply influenced by vernacular music, and his music represents some attempt to mix populism and the more rarefied modernist tendencies. Randall Thompson's *The Last Words of David* and Norman Dinerstein's *When David Heard* suggest the kind of American music that came from the university, with Thompson having taught at Harvard, and Dinerstein at the Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati.

This evening's concert is an extension of a concert of American music that The Dessoff Choirs presented in March 2008. Because of my own interest in the music of Charles Ives, I wanted to expand this program's scope by including his great masterpiece, *Psalm 90*, along with *Psalm 67*.

While Psalm 67 is a more experimental piece (the combination of two tonal areas), Psalm 90 is the culmination of earlier choral works, in the same way that Ives's symphonies present a full account of his private experimental tendencies in more public, large-scale statements. While Psalm 90 can certainly stand alone, placing it in context reveals that Ives was a product of a kind of 19th-century musical Romanticism that was taught in this country at the turn of the century. In many respects, Ives can be viewed not only as one of the great composers of the first half of the 20th century, but also as a product of a rapidly changing cultural climate in the United States in the first twenty years of the century. Ives's music struggles with its own modernity: he wants to express an opinion about the past through his use of borrowed material, but he places it in a context of the harmonic and rhythmic complexity seen in modernity. It is that tug-of-war that presents the challenge to the performer and listener. The nostalgia for a late 19th-century bucolic lifestyle is idealistic and even unreliable, which may account for the thorny difficulties in the presentation of the past. As Blanche DuBois says in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*: "I don't tell truth. I tell what *ought* to be truth." This is certainly apt in relationship to Ives's perception of the past.

Several different varieties of American music are represented on this concert, including New England colonial anthems and songs from around the time of the Revolution; hymns from 19th-century shape-note tunebooks; popular songs from the early to mid-19th century; and songs from the Civil War, which, in effect, were propaganda for each of the two opposing sides. Finally, the music of Ives, Horatio Parker, Thompson, and Dinerstein reveals something about the cultivated tradition in the United States: music that might be considered "populist" but which contains highly sophisticated compositional elements.

In the United States, the years from 1770 through the beginning of the first third of the 20th century marked a period charged with revolution, numerous wars (both civil and international), mass religious conversion, accumulation of wealth, and Westward expansion. These years also encompassed a move toward modernism, both artistically and technologically. The century between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War had some parallels with the European Romantic movement, especially in literature. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) urges, among other things, a more simple life and finds a European relative in the back-to-nature goals expressed by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This essential response to the Industrial Revolution, one of the foundations of modernism, was a continual theme throughout the 19th century. During the same century, large numbers of immigrants, including many Germans, came to the United States due to severe crop failure and the 1848 revolutions. These Germans brought with them many of the ideas expressed in European Romanticism. Influences from abroad affected the way in which American vernacular music was perceived, and naturally brought comparisons with European art music, which resulted in Americans beginning to denigrate their own art. Composers began to go to Europe, especially to Germany, to study composition and returned promoting a more cultivated style. The shift into the 20th century saw a movement that would result in modernism, with composers writing more complex music that embodied experimentation and seemed to value "progress."

Music from New England at the time of the Revolution had its origins in the singing schools established in Boston around 1722. During that time there had been great agitation among Puritan ministers regarding the quality of congregational singing, and the singing schools were designed to remedy this malaise. By the 1760s, a group of composers sometimes referred to as the "First New England School of Composers" began publishing tunebooks. **William Billings** (1746-1800), a Boston tanner turned composer, is the most famous of that group, and his tune ***Chester*** became a popular rallying song during the Revolution. By the beginning of the 19th century, a system using shaped notes was introduced, with the publication of the *Easy Instructor*. This combination tunebook and instructional manual outlined a pedagogical method in which music was made easier to read by using four different note shapes, each with a designation *fa, sol, la*, or

mi. Shape-note tunebooks exploded in the South as New England turned to more traditional means of music education during the mid- to early 19th century. The occasions during which this music is sung are called “singings” and are not worship services but events unto themselves, in which church and community members gather and sing for three days, sometimes six hours a day. The music itself is marked by an intense rhythmic quality, and, like many of the anthems from the colonial period, the melody is found in the tenor line. Many of the most famous American hymns, including *Amazing Grace*, had their origins in the most popular tunebooks, *Southern Harmony* and *Sacred Harp*, both from 1844, and *The Social Harp*, published in 1855.

During the mid-19th century there was a noteworthy growth in the sheet music industry, and composers like Stephen Foster (1826-1864) had successful careers as songwriters thanks to this new market expansion. Parlor songs, as this type of music came to be called, were frequently about idealized love and longing—especially a nostalgia for some undefined past. These songs were sung in concert settings and at home around the family piano. The Civil War songs, along with the growth of photography and journalism, are one of the more interesting artistic outbursts toward the end of American Romanticism. Many forgotten composers contributed to this genre, but one piece that stands out, not as propaganda but true insight into the destruction of war, is ***Tenting on the Old Camp Ground***. The imagery of this song suggests the wartime poetry of Walt Whitman, and its realism transcends any morose sentimentality.

By the end of the Civil War, the seeds of American modernism became more visible, especially in the literature of the period. Caught between a certain sentimentality for an unknown past and a marked modernist tendency, Charles Ives embodies the conflict between the progressive leanings felt during the end of the 19th century and the fear of losing contact with one’s beginnings. Ives studied composition with **Horatio Parker** (1863-1919) at Yale. Parker’s most famous oratorio, ***Hora Novissima*** (1893), based on texts by Bernard de Morlaix, won him international acclaim. Ives and Parker were not ideally suited for one another, mainly because Parker was an intensely conservative composer, steeped in a specific kind of Romanticism (he considered Wagner a dangerous radical and Brahms a harsh intellectual). Young Ives had been taught by his father, George (1845-1894), and together they had enjoyed a sense of experimentation that included polytonality and rhythmic complexity. During his first year at Yale, Charles wrote his father a letter describing Parker’s reaction to one of his songs, “At Parting.” George wrote back: “Tell Parker that every dissonance doesn’t need to resolve, if it doesn’t happen to feel like it, any more than every horse should have its tail bobbed just because it is the prevailing fashion."

While Ives’s setting of the 67th Psalm has many of the traits of colonial music, complete with a “fuging tune” in the middle of the piece, it is the harmony that is most often discussed. Ives frames the fugue with what is essentially a new idea about harmony, fitting two chords together to create a distinct kind of tonality. Composed around 1898, ***Psalm 67*** was one of Ives’s first published pieces, although it didn’t come out until 1939. His oratorio ***The Celestial Country*** was premiered in April 1902 at Central Presbyterian Church in New York, where Ives was organist. The piece was modeled on Parker’s oratorio *Hora Novissima*. The reviews of the premiere were polite, with the *New York Times* saying, “It has the elementary merit of being scholarly and well made. But it is also spirited and melodious.” Two weeks after the premiere, Ives resigned his position at Central Presbyterian and never applied for another professional position in music. It would be some twenty years before another one of his works would be heard in public.

Psalm 90, composed sometime between 1923 and 1924, is one of Ives’s greatest works, with Ives himself commenting to his wife that it was one of the few works with which he was satisfied. The piece is a reconstruction, apparently from memory, of an earlier setting; it has been suggested that the impetus for this reworking was the suicide of David Twitchell, who was the brother of Ives’s wife, Harmony. At the beginning of the psalm, Ives musically presents five

ideas: Eternities, Creation, God's Wrath Against Sin, Prayer and Humility, and Rejoicing in Beauty and Work. These musical ideas are heard separately and sometimes together as accompaniment for the verses of the psalm. Perhaps the most famous section of the piece occurs in the ninth verse ("For all our days are passed away in thy wrath; we spend our years as a tale that is told"). The choir begins on a unison C, followed by the upper voice moving up one whole-step. This is mirrored in the lowest voice, which moves down one whole-step at the same time. Ives continues this technique, resulting in a cluster of 21 pitches, which then contracts backwards into a single pitch. The final four verses of the psalm are a combination of the five musical ideas described above, together with the chorus singing in a hymn-like fashion. If ever a composer wanted to musically describe peace and tranquility, here is one of the most sublime examples.

Later into the 20th century, especially after World War II, American composers made a shift from the more public sphere into the academic world. While some composers insisted on writing difficult atonal music, which was the prevailing fashion, some maintained a more populist position. ***When David Heard*** is perhaps the best-known work of American composer **Norman Dinerstein** (1937-1982). Dinerstein taught composition at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, where he served for a time as Dean. *When David Heard* was composed in 1975 for the Hartt Chamber Singers, and was a winner of the 1976 Brown University Choral Competition. Dinerstein wrote: "The text of *When David Heard* is taken from the Second Book of Samuel and deals with King David's grief over the death of his son Absalom. The lines are simultaneously both personal and universal, and the intention of this setting is to incorporate both of these elements; the choral techniques used to achieve this end range from the directness of monodic passages to the complexity of eight-part textures." **Randall Thompson** (1899-1984) was a prominent figure in American choral music in the 20th century. In addition to his choral works, which include the popular *Alleluia*, he composed three symphonies and two string quartets. ***The Last Words of David*** was commissioned in 1949 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in honor of Serge Koussevitzky's 25th anniversary as Music Director. The piece takes its text from II Samuel 23:3-4.

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