

January/February 2005



Ives 'The Unknown Ives, Volume 2'. Varied Air and Variations. Waltz-Rondo. Invention in D. Study No. 1 – Allegro. Study No.2. Storm and Distress (piano cadenza from 'Scherzo: Over The Pavements'). Study No.11 – Andante. Impression of the St Gaudens in Boston Common. The Celestial Railroad. Minuetto. Study No.4 – Allegro moderato. Study No.5 – Moderato con anima. Three Quarter-Tone Pieces for Two Pianos². March No.1 – Year of Jubilee. March No.2 – Son of a Gambolier. March No.3 – Omega Lambda Chi. March in G and C – See The Conquering Hero Comes. March – The Circus Band. March No.5 – Annie Lisle. March No.6 – Here's To Good Old Yale.

George Ives Fourth Fugue. ¹

Donald Berman (pf). ²**Steven Drury** (pf).
New World Records 80618-2 Full Price
(74 minutes: DDD).

It has to be said – some of this material isn't as 'unknown' as all that. *Varied Air and Variations* and *Waltz-Rondo* are fairly standard pieces (both were included on Philip Mead's recording of the complete Ives piano music on Metier, for example) and the *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces* for two pianos have also been documented elsewhere. But that's the only criticism I can make of this wonderfully red-blooded and deftly researched set.

Donald Berman is a wild man. His playing is infused with the essence of Ives's transcendent spirit and his mischievous sense of humour. Berman manages to make the oblique chromatic twists and bitonal theme of *Waltz-Rondo* sound sardonic and warm at the same time, and his performance of the intensely complex counterpoint of *Study No.4* makes you draw breath. The atmosphere Berman projects is of boiling hot improvisation and his tone at the piano is terrifically 'unclassical'. All extremely Ivesian.

Moderato con anima is certainly the most radical of the Studies, especially when you consider it was written in 1913, the year of the first performance of *The Rite of Spring*. But perhaps more consistent as a set are the marches that Ives composed between 1895 and 97, under the tutelage of arch-Conservative composer Horatio Parker. Ives might only have been in his late teens but already his fingerprints – a revolutionary ear for the keyboard and his transformation of vernacular sources – are in place, and the pieces register as a triumphant two-fingered salute to Parker's hidebound pedantry.

As Berman notes, Parker's academism must have seemed especially acute to the young Charles after growing up in the household of his maverick father George. Berman's inclusion of a Fugue by George Ives is a touching testament to arguably one of the most potent influences in American music, whose own music has become a footnote. Charles's pieces for two pianos tuned a quarter-tone apart were written as late as 1924, but grew directly out of his father's experiments with tunings. 'Nothing but fools and taxes are absolute,' George apparently claimed and Berman, joined by Stephen Drury, gleefully explore a curious microtonal soundworld where absolutes slide away. *The Celestial Road* was a dry run for the *Concord Sonata* and, although also recorded previously, gets the full Berman treatment. Ives heaven.

Philip Clark