

# 1. Charles Ives's *Four Ragtime Dances* and "True American Music"

Someone is quoted as saying that "ragtime is the true American music." Anyone will admit that it is one of the many true, natural, and, nowadays, conventional means of expression. It is an idiom, perhaps a "set or series of colloquialisms," similar to those that have added through centuries and through natural means some beauty to all languages. . . . Ragtime has its possibilities. But it does not "represent the American nation" any more than some fine old senators represent it. Perhaps we know it now as an ore before it has been refined into a product. It may be one of nature's ways of giving art raw material. Time will throw its vices away and weld its virtues into the fabric of our music. It has its uses, as the cruet on the boarding-house table has, but to make a meal of tomato ketchup and horse-radish, to plant a whole farm with sunflowers, even to put a sunflower into every bouquet, would be calling nature something worse than a politician.

CHARLES IVES, *Essays Before a Sonata*

Today, more than a century after its introduction, the music of ragtime is often regarded with nostalgia as a quaint, polite, antiquated music, but when it burst on the national scene in the late 1890s, its catchy melodies and energetic rhythms sparked both delight and controversy. One of the many fruits of African American musical innovation, this style of popular music captivated the nation through the World War I era with its distinctive, syncopated rhythms that enlivened solo piano music, arrangements for bands and orchestras, ballroom numbers, and countless popular songs. Yet the music also drew the attention of critics who attacked it for its rhythmic audacity and of moral guardians who feared the threat that the suggestive, infectious dance music posed to public decency.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary observers entered into a debate about whether ragtime's idiomatic musical language and its widespread appeal embodied "the one true American music."<sup>2</sup> According to Charles Ives (1874–1954), who is hailed by many as the leading art music composer in American history, ragtime did not warrant that lofty standing; however, as we will see, that did not stop him from experimenting

with elements of ragtime in his own compositions over the course of his career.

Perhaps such a musical juxtaposition was inevitable in an era that saw Edward MacDowell, Amy Beach, Arthur Farwell, and other prominent composers follow Antonín Dvořák's lead by turning to African American spirituals, Native American music, and traditional American folk songs as bases on which to construct a national style of composition. Though Ives's investigation of ragtime brings to light a similar set of tensions between Western European musical traditions and the development of art music in America, it is especially notable that he chose to explore the possibilities of a modern, urban, commercial popular music rather than folk music. This encounter is further complicated by the racial and class differences between Ives, a privileged white male who grew up in Connecticut and attended Yale University, and the less advantaged African American musicians in the Midwest who pioneered ragtime. Because Ives's relationship with ragtime involved such a variety of cultural tensions—the American struggle to break away from European models, the friction between art music and popular music, and the negotiation of racial and class divides—his ragtime-influenced pieces exemplify how cultural debate over the subject of national identity takes form in musical expression.

During his collegiate career at Yale (1894–98) and in the many years he spent in New York City after graduation, Charles Ives witnessed the ragtime craze everywhere he turned—the music was plunked out by player pianos, presented on the vaudeville stage, performed by theater orchestras, and even published as sheet music in the newspaper from time to time. In addition to hearing ragtime and writing his impressions of it, Ives incorporated various aspects of the music into his own compositions. During the height of the ragtime era, at the start of the twentieth century, Ives composed a series of works he called variously ragtime pieces and ragtime dances. These compositions were clearly important to Ives, for he made frequent attempts to have them performed, and he recycled material from them to create sections of later works, including the First Piano Sonata, the Set of Pieces for Theatre or Chamber Orchestra, the Three-Page Sonata, Three Quarter-tone Pieces, and the Second Orchestral Set. Elements of ragtime also appear in many of his other major compositions, such as the Second Piano Sonata, the Second Violin Sonata, the Third Violin Sonata, *Central Park in the Dark*, *The Celestial Railroad*, the Third Orchestral Set, and the Fourth Symphony. The music held his attention late into his life: his nephew recalled watching Ives at the piano, when suddenly he would "break into one of these ragtime pieces or a march, and he'd do it with such spirit that it was really thrilling."<sup>3</sup>

Even though Ives acknowledged incorporating ragtime elements into his own compositions, the tone of his written commentary about this venture comes across as hesitant, uncertain; his observations mingle praise with condescension and sometimes denigration. Although he considered ragtime a musical idiom capable of adding beauty, he felt that it did not constitute a "refined" product, but rather an "ore" to be mined for use in "art." Such judgments were not unique to Ives or to ragtime; a similar line of discourse would surface when George Gershwin and his contemporaries began to incorporate elements of jazz in their classical compositions. Often one to take contradictory or ambivalent positions, Ives maintained mixed feelings on the subject as he grew older. In comments written in the early 1930s, he recognized that his "early ragtime pieces and marches, most of the *First Piano Sonata*, most of the *Theater Orchestra Set*, etc., seemed to get going 'good and free'—and the hymn-tune sonatas and symphonies less so."<sup>4</sup> Ives scholars have pointed out the significance of ragtime to his development, including a recent biographer who claims that "only when Ives had absorbed and adapted ragtime could he write a true Ivesian allegro."<sup>5</sup> Instead of entirely welcoming this aspect of his musical identity, Ives compared the "shifts and tilting accents" of ragtime to a "bad habit"; but he suggested that "it will naturally start other rhythmic habits, perhaps leading into something of value."<sup>6</sup> In his published writings Ives never fully embraced ragtime.

Why did he hesitate? How could Ives, who found ragtime compelling enough to integrate into so many of his compositions, have expressed such contradictory statements about its intrinsic value and its contributions to his music? Lawrence Kramer suggests that the principal explanation involves race, that the white composer Ives felt extreme ambivalence about embracing the blackness of ragtime.<sup>7</sup> Kramer goes on to characterize Ives's treatment of ragtime in the two scherzo movements of his *First Piano Sonata* as a musical "continuation of unequal race relations" and a "continuation of blackface minstrelsy."<sup>8</sup> Ives's writings do contain racial assumptions, and I find certain aspects of Kramer's argument to be persuasive, but I do not believe that race or racism alone can account adequately for the complex encounter between Ives and ragtime. Because Ives made use of this music over such a long period and for assorted purposes, understanding this facet of his musical life requires further examination. Indeed, as will become evident, Ives integrated the same ragtime material that he used in the *First Piano Sonata* in other compositions, but he did not always manipulate it in the same fashion.

Ives's interest in ragtime needs to be understood in relation to his systematic practice of musical borrowing. Examples of compositional

borrowing can be traced back for many centuries; what is unusual about Ives, as Peter Burkholder writes, "is not that he borrowed, but the extent to which he borrowed and the innovative ways he found to use existing music."<sup>9</sup> Relying so heavily on this technique that it came to distance him from his compositional forebears, Ives drew not only on European symphonic literature but also on college songs, Protestant hymns, band marches, parlor music, anthems, Stephen Foster tunes, and more. Rather than forever staining his creative reputation, Ives's willingness to incorporate such a wide range of music, especially American vernacular music, and to reimagine it in the context of concert music has helped him such a vital position in the history of American music.

The literature on Ives offers a variety of aesthetic, psychological, and programmatic explanations for this compositional approach, such as Ives's transcendentalist convictions, his antiestablishment stance, his heartfelt embrace of American music, his relationship to his father, and his fondness for the music of his youth. Showing admiration for the expanse of Ives's musical palette, Larry Starr entitled his book on Ives's compositional style *A Union of Diversities*.<sup>10</sup> Taking a similar perspective in the most comprehensive study to date, Peter Burkholder's *All Made of Tunes* demonstrates how Ives incorporated all kinds of music for all sorts of reasons, in varied fashion, and in pursuit of diverse artistic goals. Identifying fourteen separate species of borrowing in Ives's repertoire—including quotation, paraphrase, allusion, collage, and medley—Burkholder systematically documents how borrowing formed the basis for much of Ives's composition. In his otherwise thorough discussion, Burkholder downplays to a certain degree the ethical issues surrounding musical borrowing, the same issues that animate Kramer's work. What was at stake for Ives when he made the choice to investigate ragtime? What do his decisions about borrowing, juxtaposing, and framing this music suggest about his compositional priorities?

I am convinced that a methodological approach that combines elements from Burkholder's analysis and Kramer's cultural critique is ideal for understanding Ives, who often expressed the hope that his music would function as more than an aesthetic object or a display of technical expertise. To investigate these issues, I turn to *Four Ragtime Dances*, Charles Ives's earliest musical exploration of ragtime.<sup>11</sup> Since Ives frequently recycled elements taken from these pieces, tracing their history can help chronicle Ives's changing relationship to ragtime through his career. These dances combine two ostensibly disparate sources: the secular music of ragtime and the sacred hymns of Protestant religious services. Although this pairing may seem

highly implausible, even blasphemous, it made sense to an experimentalist like Ives, especially at that point in his life—at the height of the ragtime era and near the end of his decadelong tenure as a church organist. If we consider Ives's racialized understanding of these two musical traditions, which he made clear in his published writings, this uncommon musical blend appears at first to present a moving statement on cultural diversity, whether a union of sacred and secular music or a reconciliation of white and black musical traditions. The compositional structure of the dances tells another story, however; it suggests that the cultural tensions that informed Ives's writings also filtered into his music; indeed, by structuring *Four Ragtime Dances* according to a set of power relations, Ives produced a music full of contestation that, to use his terms, better "represents the American nation."

#### THE RAGTIME ERA

References to "rag-time" first appeared in sheet music publications in 1896, but the technique of "ragging" a song, or what has been described as infusing music with syncopation to give it a "ragged" feel, was already in circulation. Indeed, Ives himself recalled having seen blackface minstrels employ what he considered to be a ragtime-style technique—"throwing the accent on the off-beat and holding over"—during a visit he took to the Danbury Fair as a teenager around 1892.<sup>12</sup> For a music that emerged in a "separate but equal" era of legalized segregation, ratified by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, racial factors would play a pivotal role in early ragtime reception. The music's ties with African American culture served alternately as a basis for appreciative curiosity and a reason for bigoted dismissal: audiences learned to associate ragtime with black musical practices because of its originators, such as Scott Joplin and James Scott; marketing practices that packaged ragtime as a black exoticism; and parodies of ragtime performed on the blackface minstrel stage. Even after white composers and publishers, such as Joseph Lamb and John Stark, jumped on the ragtime bandwagon at the turn of the century, rag titles and sheet music covers continued to refer to the music's black origins, advertising the newest "Ethiopian" sensation or the latest "coon song," a genre that took its name from a slur for African Americans and featured stereotypical black dialect, derogatory lyrics, and racist imagery. As Tin Pan Alley composers increasingly embraced the flavor of ragtime, racialized practices endured. Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911), the hit that helped him gain fame as the "King of Ragtime," refers not only to ragtime syncopation but also to the plantation melodies

of Stephen Foster and the comic stock character Alexander, a mainstay of blackface minstrel shows. Consequently, even though ragtime shares some structural and harmonic features with European brass-band music, mainstream discourse of the time stressed its blackness and highlighted those qualities that were out of the ordinary, especially the music's novel approach to rhythm. For most white Americans at the turn of the century, ragtime seemed "massively syncopated, positively shocking in its broken rhythms and shifted accents."<sup>13</sup> Although the popular understanding of ragtime gradually shifted from a black musical exoticism to "white American popular music," ragtime and race remained inseparable, especially for those, like Ives, who lived through the transition.<sup>14</sup>

By the time Ives began to compose *Four Ragtime Dances*, ragtime had gained enormous popularity, its sound filling dance halls, nickelodeons, saloons, theaters, and home parlors across America. What proved most attractive to Ives was its rhythmic sensibility; he later explained how the "shifts and lilting accents" of ragtime seemed "to offer other basic things not used now (or used very little) in music of even beats and accents."<sup>15</sup> For a composer who often prided himself on differentiating between his music and established European models, Ives also distinguished between the techniques of ragtime and the classical canon, albeit with faint praise: "To examine ragtime rhythms and the syncopations of Schumann or of Brahms seems to the writer to show how much alike they are not. Ragtime, as we hear it, is, of course, more (but not much more) than a natural dogma of shifted accents, or a mixture of shifted and minus accents."<sup>16</sup> Ives's response to ragtime was shaped by his attraction to its rhythmic innovations as well as its social function as dance music. In addition to incorporating ragtime in *Four Ragtime Dances* and in dance movements of his concert works, he occasionally used the music for programmatic purposes, as in the ragtime passage that materializes in his song "Walking" at the moment when the tune's wanderers notice a dance going on at a roadhouse.

Given his extensive musical borrowing, Ives's investigation of ragtime hardly seems extraordinary, when in truth it should be considered a radical decision for the time. Other turn-of-the-century American composers attempted to incorporate African American and Native American traditional music in their concert works, but ragtime drew relatively little attention from the same quarters. Ives became one of the first classical composers, and possibly *the* first, to incorporate elements of ragtime in his compositions.<sup>17</sup> His use of ragtime was fairly uncommon for him in comparison with his other borrowings. Over the course of his career Ives rarely drew on contemporary popular music, instead taking most of his quotations from music

of earlier eras, especially music that was associated with white American musical traditions.<sup>18</sup> His circumstances help explain Ives's willingness to experiment with ragtime, which was due in large part to his initial exposure to the music at an impressionable age. When he started writing *Four Ragtime Dances*, Ives was in the right place at the right time—living in New York City, a center of the ragtime craze; fresh out of college, away from the watchful eyes of Horatio Parker and his other former professors, who were committed to extending the Western European tradition; and ready to experiment on his own, virtually anonymous, outside the strict confines of the concert music world.

Ives may also have been more willing than some of his contemporaries to experiment with black musical genres as a result of his family history and his personal beliefs. In *Memos*, he writes glowingly of his grandparents' involvement in the abolitionist cause and takes special pride in their virtual adoption of Henry Anderson Brooks, a young ex-slave whom George Ives brought home to Connecticut on his return from serving in the Civil War.<sup>19</sup> With support from the Ives family, Brooks received an education in Danbury and later enrolled at Hampton Institute, a school that Charles Ives's grandmother had helped found.<sup>20</sup> Taking a similar stand in *Essays Before a Sonata*, Ives applauds several examples of brave abolitionist acts, and he also condemns the "evils of race prejudice" in his essay "The Majority."<sup>21</sup> Relatives and coworkers later portrayed Ives as being keenly sensitive to the issue of racial equality. His nephew claimed in 1969 that Ives's "thinking was many years in advance of our own. He was as concerned about the Negro problem twenty-five years ago as we have become about it today."<sup>22</sup> Ives expressed this kind of progressive attitude when he learned that one of his employees had decided to underwrite the company's first insurance policy for an African American client. Ives did not himself initiate this change in company procedure, but the employee who wrote the policy recalled: "When Ives heard about this, he gave me a little tap on the shoulder. 'Good work.'"<sup>23</sup> Although not all commentators would go as far as Ives's biographer Jan Swafford, who states that "making allowances for the language of his time, I do not find Ives making a racist statement anywhere," most depict Ives as a man who was sometimes ahead of his time.<sup>24</sup>

Ives became familiar with popular ragtime songs and piano music, but he did not compose conventional ragtime numbers that could be marketed by Tin Pan Alley publishers. Instead, his first ragtime pieces were intended as compositions for theater orchestra, a type of small ensemble that Ives became involved with during his youth and that powerfully shaped his engagement with ragtime. Supplying the music for variety shows, vaudeville

productions, dance performances, and other types of local entertainment, theater orchestras performed music from a very broad repertory, ranging from opera overtures and light intermezzos to waltzes and ragtime numbers.<sup>25</sup> Ives's exposure to theater orchestras began in Danbury, where his father played in a few such groups, and continued in New Haven, in which there were a number of prominent theaters. When Ives was in college, he carried on the family tradition by occasionally sitting in for George Felsburg, the pianist at Poli's vaudeville theater, and trying out his own "ragging" techniques.<sup>26</sup> In his commentary about a later set of compositions written for theater orchestra, Ives explained how these ensembles were put together and why they varied so much in size:

The make-up of the average theatre orchestra of some years ago, in the towns and smaller cities, in this part of the country was neither arbitrary nor a matter of machinery. It depended somewhat on what players and instruments happened to be around. Its size would run from four to five to fifteen or twenty, and the four or five often had to do the job without getting put out. Sometimes they would give as much support "during the rescue" as the whole town band. Its scores were subject to make-shifts, and were often written with that in mind. There were usually one or two treble Wood-Wind, a Trombone, a Cornet, sometimes a Saxophone, Strings, Piano, and a Drum—often an octave of High Bells or a Xylophone. The pianist usually led—his head or any unemployed limb acting as a kind of Ictusorgan.<sup>27</sup>

The variable size and membership of theater orchestras shaped both the composition and performance history of *Four Ragtime Dances*, and probably explain why Ives later chose to rescore these compositions for many different types of ensembles.

Determining the exact chronology of the composition of *Four Ragtime Dances* is a demanding task; it is just one of the many challenges faced by Ives scholars when dating his works. Ives reworked and repackaged this ragtime material over several decades, and though his commentary appears in numerous sources, these sources offer conflicting testimony.<sup>28</sup> Ives's earliest estimates indicate that he began to write his ragtime pieces in 1899, the year after he graduated from Yale, while he was sketching *Skit for Danbury Fair*. Over the next few years he composed nine brief ragtime pieces, arranged for assorted combinations of instruments, including solo piano.<sup>29</sup> Between 1902 and 1904, according to a passage in *Memos*, he incorporated this material in *Four Ragtime Dances*, for which several fragments and preliminary sketches survive. One sketch suggests that Ives arranged for a run-through of one of his ragtime pieces by New Haven's Hyperion Theater



Orchestra in 1899, whereas a note on a later score mentions a 1902 attempt in New York City, which failed after the conductor pronounced the work "too hard to play."<sup>30</sup> Ives pushed on for several years, revising this material and arranging for additional run-throughs by theater orchestras in New Haven and New York City.

The strength of Ives's commitment to this music can be gauged by his repeated attempts to have these pieces performed as well as his subsequent development of this material. Rather than tossing them aside as youthful indiscretions, Ives continued to rework and expand his ragtime-influenced pieces over the next decade, eventually integrating this material into larger works. He incorporated three of the *Four Ragtime Dances* into the two scherzo movements of the First Piano Sonata, adding to the sonata's fourth movement a newly composed passage packed with particularly intense ragtime-inflected rhythms. He then reorchestrated some of the same material (used in movement IIb of the First Piano Sonata) to produce the second movement ("In the Inn") of *A Set of Pieces for Theatre or Chamber Orchestra*. The third of the *Four Ragtime Dances*, which Ives did not use in the First Piano Sonata, grew into the second movement ("The Rockstrewn Hills Join in the People's Outdoor Meeting") of the Second Orchestral Set.<sup>31</sup> Ives even considered grouping these two orchestral pieces, "Rockstrewn Hills" and "In the Inn," into a new set called *Three Ragtime Dances*, but instead let them stand in the aforementioned orchestral sets.<sup>32</sup> Despite numerous musical transformations over the years, Ives continued to think of his later pieces as growing out of his early ragtime experiments; for example, he characterized "Rockstrewn Hills" as "but a rehash and combinations of some of the ragtime dances for small orchestra which grew up between 1902 and 1910-11, generally speaking."<sup>33</sup> Nearly a decade later, in the early 1920s, Ives began to rescore the dances once more but gave up this project for reasons he did not explain.<sup>34</sup> Despite his perpetual fascination with this material—or perhaps because of it—Ives never completed a final version of *Four Ragtime Dances*.

#### FOUR RAGTIME DANCES

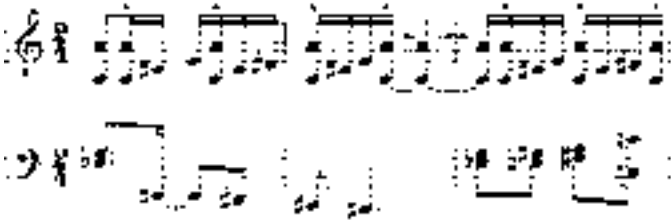
The modern revival of *Four Ragtime Dances* can be attributed to the conductor and Ives scholar James Sinclair, who reconstructed the work, premiered several of the dances in the mid-1970s, and published a full edition in 1990, titled *Ragtime Dances: Set of Four Ragtime Dances for Theater Orchestra*. Since only one page of a full score survives, Sinclair fashioned much of his edition from the remaining sketches, most of which were written for

piano but contain orchestral indications.<sup>35</sup> In his editorial remarks that accompany the score, Sinclair explains in detail the process by which he interpreted Ives's sketches to resolve key issues, such as deciding on the pitches of certain notes as well as the order of the four dances. Though he relied on many of the same materials on which Lou Harrison based his edition of Ives's First Piano Sonata, Sinclair chose to ignore the revisions Ives made for the sonata, to come closer to Ives's earlier conception of the piece. He did, however, consult some later works, such as "In the Inn" and "Rockstrewn Hills," for ideas about orchestration, dynamics, and texture. Sinclair's contributions to the score of *Four Ragtime Dances* serve as a reminder that a number of Ives's works have been edited and published by other hands. Nevertheless, his approximation of Ives's early encounter with this material, which produces a pared-down treatment of it, helps clarify the influence of both theater orchestras and ragtime on Ives.

Designed as a quartet of pieces for theater orchestra, *Four Ragtime Dances* is meant to be performed consecutively; each dance lasts a few minutes and the entire work totals around eleven minutes. As part of the thematic design that links all four dances, Ives adopted a structural approach that demonstrates the powerful influence of gospel hymns on his compositional thinking. This was music with which he became familiar as a child, heard at outdoor revivals, played as a church organist, and continued to use throughout his career. Rather than modeling *Four Ragtime Dances* after the three or four independent strains of most piano rags, he used the verse-chorus form characteristic of many Protestant hymns. Each dance begins with a long "verse" section, its material based primarily on two hymns, "Bringing in the Sheaves" (George Minor) and "Happy Day" (Edward Rimbault), and concludes with a short "chorus," so titled, based on a third hymn, "I Hear Thy Welcome Voice" (Lewis Hartsough).<sup>36</sup> Since he often quoted and paraphrased well-known hymn tunes in his compositions, in that sense these pieces are not exceptional. But as Dennis Marshall explains in his discussion of Ives's First Piano Sonata, which recycles material from the ragtime dances, Ives created a unified work by taking advantage of the musical similarities of these particular hymns, relying on both their verse-chorus structure and the closing cadential figure (2-1-3-2-1) they share.<sup>37</sup> As Burkholder points out, the hymns' "common elements make it difficult to ascertain which of these tunes is being used at several points, and Ives was clearly interested in exploring the ambiguity between them."<sup>38</sup> Simply put, these hymns were chosen carefully.

As for the other key musical resource, the elements of ragtime present in *Four Ragtime Dances* suggest what most attracted Ives to this music. Like

Example 1. Charles Ives, *Ragtime Dances: Set of Four Ragtime Dances*, ed. James Sinclair (New York: Peer International, 1990), "Ragtime Dance No. 2," piano. mm. 21–23.



much ragtime piano music, each dance begins in  $\frac{2}{4}$  meter, but, in typical Ivesian fashion, metrical shifts and tempo changes abound throughout the verses before the dances finally settle on triple meter at the chorus. Fleeting moments evoke the rhythms of ragtime, which Ives accentuates through heavily syncopated patterns in the treble instruments. But his constant use of contrasting motives, irregular phrases, metric changes, shifts in tempo and key, and extended pedal points moves the piece away from the sound of popular ragtime. The opening of "Ragtime Dance No. 2" captures a sense of its frenetic nature: piano drumming (mm. 1–2), a thorny figure played by the clarinet (mm. 3–4), and a characteristic ragtime lick played by the right hand that seems as if it could have been lifted from Scott Joplin (mm. 21–23, example 1). Yet as identifiable as any single motive may appear, when blended together by Ives these dances sound strikingly out-of-joint.

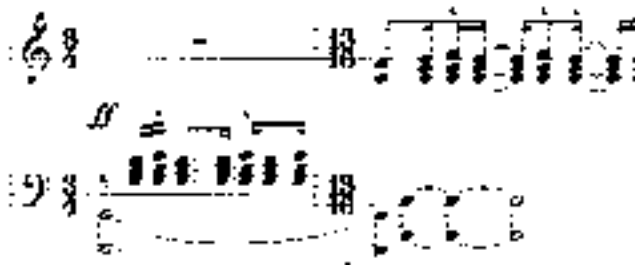
As Judith Tick has shown and these examples illustrate, the most prominent feature of Ives's use of ragtime involves his rhythmic experimentation.<sup>39</sup> Ives confirmed as much in *Memos*, recalling that the ragtime dances "were but working out different combinations or rhythms that these began to suggest. For instance, if, in a few measures in  $\frac{2}{4}$  time, the second beat is not struck and the 16th-note before the second beat is accented, other combinations of after-beats and beats and minus-beats etc. suggest themselves."<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere he describes a section of the First Piano Sonata in which "ragging combinations of fives, twos, and sevens are tried out. There are also measures of twos and threes, grouping or phrasing the various parts in different-length phrases—that is, all threes may be grouped in fours accenting the fourth, and the fours may be grouped in fives accenting the fifth."<sup>41</sup> Ives produced a variety of outlandish rhythmic examples in *Four Ragtime Dances* that demonstrate how he "carried certain tendencies in

Example 2. Charles Ives, "Ragtime Dance No. 2," piano.

mm. 25–26



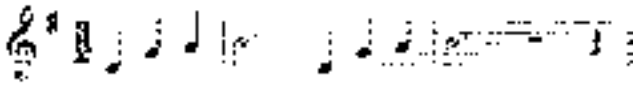
mm. 63–64



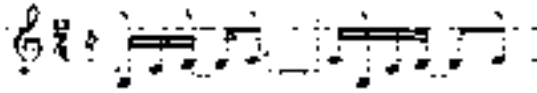
popular ragtime to great extremes" (example 2).<sup>42</sup> Rhythm is the element of ragtime to which Ives refers most often in his written recollections, and it is this aspect of the music that made the greatest impression on his compositional style.

Rather than assembling a musical quilt out of fragments of popular ragtime tunes, Ives drew on the percussive, syncopated qualities of ragtime to develop his own ragtime-influenced style within which he could recompose melodies. To produce *Four Ragtime Dances*, Ives "rags" his source material by extracting short motives from the hymns, making substantial rhythmic and melodic alterations, inserting exaggerated syncopations, adding accent marks to highlight displaced beats, and experimenting with polyrhythms. Adopting ragtime as a style, as a set of techniques, allowed Ives to generate endless variations on the hymn tunes that populate the four dances. He thus found numerous ways in which to adapt a motive from the hymn "Happy Day" (example 3) into the second ragtime dance (example 4).<sup>43</sup> Ragging hymns was not entirely unknown, at least in the popular arena: in fact, one of the earliest primers, *Ben Harney's Rag Time Instructor* (1897), includes

Example 3. Edward Rimbault, "Happy Day" (1854).



Example 4. Charles Ives, "Ragtime Dance No. 2," violin, mm. 5–6.



arrangements of "Old Hundred" and "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing."<sup>44</sup> For that matter, despite having been composed ages earlier, the gospel hymns chosen by Ives do not lend an archaic tone as much as they demonstrate their own brand of popular appeal, as if their sacred messages were accompanied by a familiar secular sound.<sup>45</sup> But it is safe to say that nothing else like this kaleidoscopic piece for theater orchestra existed at the time. In many circles, mingling hymns with ragtime would have been perceived as sacrilegious, an act just as irreverent to the sacred music of the church as experimenting with ragtime would have been to traditionalists in the concert music world. There is a streak of impishness at work in the process of bringing together music from different cultural arenas, but at the same time the creation of a music all made of tunes, a strategy for which Ives is so revered, suggests a more progressive outlook about diversity and the nature of American music. Consequently, it has been suggested that by combining the two types of music, which coexist through the piece, and by ragging the hymns, Ives was "expressing not ridicule, but intense admiration."<sup>46</sup> How we are to interpret this musical encounter—as a product of mischief, an act of musical integration, a symbol of cultural collision—is an issue I raise now but will reserve for discussion later in this chapter, since a full explanation requires a more extended consideration of Ives's writings.

Looking to the orchestration and instrumentation of *Four Ragtime Dances* as a way to understand Ives's compositional thought is more problematic, since many of the individual choices were not spelled out by Ives but instead interpolated by Sinclair. Some of Ives's sketches for *Four Ragtime Dances* as well as his remarks about its performance history mention his experimentation with different instrumental combinations, a reflection of the variable size of theater orchestras. Not having to address that particular

challenge, the instrumentation in Sinclair's critical edition suits a well-equipped theater orchestra of around twenty-five to forty musicians, depending on the flexible size of the string section. Likewise, although Ives's sketches mention most of the instruments that Sinclair employs (including piano, viola, cello, bass, flute, violin, tuba, trombone), in certain cases it was up to Sinclair to choose a specific instrument (e.g., clarinet) to play what Ives indicates in general terms (e.g., woodwind). Nevertheless, a few general observations can be made about the scoring of *Four Ragtime Dances*. In comparison to stock arrangements of orchestral ragtime, which usually assigned specific roles to instruments and stuck with them, at least within each strain, the music of *Four Ragtime Dances* changes texture much more abruptly, exchanging themes and distributing responsibilities more widely among members of the orchestra.<sup>47</sup> Even more noticeable, both here and in Ives's subsequent ragtime works, is the prominent role that Ives gives to the pianist. In addition to reflecting his keyboard proficiency, Ives's choice to incorporate the sound of ragtime piano occurred around the time he left his position as a church organist and turned his attention back to the piano.<sup>48</sup> Ives himself recognized the significance of the piano in "Rockstrewn Hills," an orchestral composition that grew out of the third ragtime dance: "It takes a good pianist to play the piano part, and this movement is almost a piano concerto."<sup>49</sup> Though *Four Ragtime Dances* does not make such high demands on the pianist, it was not composed with amateurs in mind.

Nor does the piece reveal the work of an amateur composer. Despite its seeming haphazardness, the piece is precisely organized. The individual details of the ragtime dances may vary, but each proceeds in the same basic fashion. The verses juxtapose motives from the hymns with their rhythmically ragged variants—interrupted by short, punctuated blasts and dramatic changes in texture and tempo—before the ensemble accelerates and soars into each chorus. More significantly, Ives molded the unusual combination of ragtime and hymnody into a singular shape. In fact, the form of *Four Ragtime Dances* is extraordinarily rare in the Ives repertoire, according to Burkholder's study of his compositional technique, by virtue of coupling verse-refrain form with "cumulative setting."<sup>50</sup> *Cumulative setting* means, roughly speaking, that the development comes first, before the statement of the main theme. Among other precedents, this technique probably derived from Ives's experience playing organ preludes, in which themes are often improvised before they are presented in full. As it applies here, this concept refers to Ives's choice to withhold the hymn "Bringing in the Sheaves" until the end of *Four Ragtime Dances*. Though all the dances contain "ragged" fragments of this

hymn, which help link the four thematically, in the final dance Ives paraphrases it in longer, increasingly recognizable passages. Toward the end of the last verse, he presents it most conclusively, repeating the hymn's verse several times before stating its refrain (mm. 63–85, 86–93).

In addition to the long-range process of unfurling "Bringing in the Sheaves," Ives manipulates the hymn-based material to produce a sense of accomplishment during each dance. He manages this by reserving the hymn "Welcome Voice" for the chorus of each dance, where its melody appears against the backdrop of a relatively unadorned texture. Following each verse, in which fragments of the other two hymns emerge in fits and starts, the arrival of "Welcome Voice" thus comes to be heard as a concluding statement to each dance. The chorus of the first dance exemplifies Ives's use of this method. The upper winds and strings paraphrase the melody of "Welcome Voice" while the brass and piano play rag-derived rhythms (example 5, mm. 96–99). The texture thins out and the tempo slows, as the violins assume responsibility for completing the hymn, but at the last moment Ives chooses to leave the music unresolved, the melodic descent incomplete, the harmony perched on the dominant (example 5, mm. 100–102). Ives repeats a similar procedure in the second and third dances, attaining the same level of anticipation, and it is not until the final measure of *Four Ragtime Dances* that Ives completes his setting of "Welcome Voice." Listeners are thus rewarded doubly in the fourth dance by the cumulative setting of "Bringing in the Sheaves" as well as the final definitive statement of "Welcome Voice."

As the conclusion of *Four Ragtime Dances*, the final dance is significant for several other reasons. Because the primary sketch on which Sinclair based his editing of the final dance is one of only two complete sketches that exist for the entire work, and because this material was not otherwise scored by Ives for orchestra, the fourth dance offers a rare picture of Ives's early experimentation with ragtime. It is particularly interesting to note how Ives attempts to wrap things up. In addition to concluding the cumulative setting, the final dance is the only one to contain a quotation from "Welcome Voice," otherwise confined to the chorus, as part of its verse section (mm. 7–23). More audibly, Ives lifts a phrase from "Bringing in the Sheaves," previously restricted to the verses, and inserts it into the final chorus, where he joins the two main themes in counterpoint (example 6, mm. 104–5). The establishment of these two links between verse and chorus gives further indication of Ives's pursuit of formal unity. Yet in the final chorus, which is much softer and less climactic than the earlier choruses, he leaves a few musical doors open. As the final measures of the fourth dance present the first complete statement of the 2–1–3–2–1 shared cadence, which he withheld from the previous three

Example 5. Charles Ives, "Ragtime Dance No. 1," mm. 96–102.

The image displays a musical score for Charles Ives's "Ragtime Dance No. 1," measures 96–102. The score is arranged in two systems, each with four staves. The notation is dense and complex, featuring a variety of rhythmic patterns, including syncopation and polyrhythms. The first system (measures 96–99) shows a melodic line in the upper staves and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the lower staves. The second system (measures 100–102) continues this complex texture, with the lower staves providing a steady, rhythmic foundation for the more intricate upper parts. The notation includes many beamed notes, rests, and dynamic markings, characteristic of Ives's style.



Example 5. (continued)

The image displays a musical score for Example 5, continuing from the previous page. It consists of four systems of staves. The first system has four staves, with the top two staves containing a vocal line and the bottom two containing a piano accompaniment. The second system has two staves, likely representing a different instrument or voice part. The third system has two staves, continuing the accompaniment. The fourth system has four staves, with the top two staves containing a vocal line and the bottom two containing a piano accompaniment. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

dances, Ives adds chromatic inflections to the harmonic accompaniment that tint and deflect the cadence (example 6, mm. 105–7). Likewise, as he later would in the First Piano Sonata, Ives partially obscures the closing harmony with a chromatic neighbor chord, which avoids a firm conclusion and yields a sense of uncertainty (example 6, m. 108).

Example 6. Charles Ives, "Ragtime Dance No. 4," mm. 100–108.

The image displays a musical score for Charles Ives' "Ragtime Dance No. 4," measures 100–108. The score is arranged in two systems, each containing five staves. The top system includes a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and three additional staves. The bottom system includes a grand staff and three additional staves. The notation is dense, featuring complex rhythmic patterns and polyphonic textures characteristic of Ives' style. The score is presented in a high-contrast, black-and-white format, likely a scan of a printed manuscript.

Example 6. (continued)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	100
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	100

## THE POSSIBILITIES OF RAGTIME

Arranging *Four Ragtime Dances* for theater orchestra indicates a move in the direction of popular entertainment, but the use of unusual techniques, such as delaying the theme over the course of its cumulative setting, suggests the contrary. Because of their unique form, as well as their unexpected swings in tempo, meter, rhythm, and texture, these dances do not fit snugly beside popular ragtime pieces, vaudeville numbers, light classical music, and other standard repertory for theater orchestra. Predictably, Ives's contemporaries were unsure what to make of this music. Of a run-through of several dances by a small orchestra at Keith's Theater in Manhattan "somewhere between 1903 and 1906," Ives recalled that only the pianist liked the music, and "at the second afternoon performance, the manager of the theater came out and stopped them, saying it made too much of a disturbance."<sup>51</sup> Years later, Joseph Reutershan, who helped arrange that run-through, laughingly told Ives, "Well, to tell the truth, I didn't blame him. That was the craziest lot of sounds I ever heard."<sup>52</sup> In his recent biography of Ives, Jan Swafford offers a more sympathetic reaction: "This is music evocative of turn-of-the-century vaudeville and saloons, but it is also an Ivesian rhythmic phantasmagoria full of startling cuts and stumbles and shifts of perspective, eventually gathering into a romping, stomping finish."<sup>53</sup> Despite being composed nearly a century ago, *Four Ragtime Dances* still sounds off-kilter, full of unexpected twists and startling turns.

The experimental nature of these dances indicates that, as much as Ives was drawn to the energy of ragtime, he did not intend to compose conventional rags for mainstream circulation. On the contrary, as Peter Burkholder argues, a composition like *Four Ragtime Dances* intentionally establishes a degree of distance from its source material. Such compositions "are no longer simply vernacular pieces but are concert pieces 'about' vernacular styles and vernacular performance, quoting tunes, using familiar ragtime rhythms, and evoking the spirit and atmosphere of performances by amateur musicians."<sup>54</sup> In other words, Ives did not seek to inspire turn-of-the-century dancers to try out their latest steps at a local dance hall, but instead attempted to recapture the desperate exhilaration of an amateur theater orchestra bent on doing just that. Taking this approach necessarily ended up distancing Ives from his source material as well. Rather than assuming the pose of a budding ragtime composer in *Four Ragtime Dances*, Ives positioned himself as an observer of ragtime, less a musical populist than a witness of popular life. As will become clear presently, his written commentary about ragtime also reflects the same sort of spectator's perspective.

Stepping back from his subject did not diminish his commitment to the music. Ives's sustained attention to *Four Ragtime Dances*—arranging for performances, making revisions, and recycling segments in later works—demonstrates how seriously he took this venture. And yet upon reading what Ives wrote about ragtime and his ragtime pieces, one is left in a bit of a quandary, for his statements appear more dismissive toward the music than his actions would indicate. Lawrence Kramer characterizes the relationship between white art music composers and African American music, evidenced by Ives's experience with ragtime, to be "haunted by ambivalence about the musics on which it drew, with which it mingled on terms compounded of pleasure, envy, condescension, anxiety and celebration."<sup>55</sup> While I am not convinced fully by this argument with respect to Ives's actual use of ragtime in *Four Ragtime Dances*, I find Kramer's statements more compelling when applied to Ives's published reflections on ragtime. Even though Ives catalogs his own musical experience with ragtime, he stops short of unconditional praise and instead expresses the contradictory impulses that were not uncommon in his writings. His comments, discussed earlier in this chapter, exhibit an uneasy mixture of enthusiasm and condescension, of praise and disdain. Rather than applauding specific ragtime songs or admiring individual composers, he suggests that "time will throw its vices away and weld its virtues into the fabric of our music."<sup>56</sup> A generous explanation might propose that a humble Ives recognized that his own music did not take full advantage of ragtime's possibilities, that the music offered more than he was able to unearth. What seems more likely, however, is that his comments represent a case in which the older Ives played down his musical debts, asserted his own primacy as a composer, and in the process revealed his own musical priorities.<sup>57</sup>

One way to reconcile his music and his commentary is to note that Ives wrote *Essays Before a Sonata* more than twenty years after his initial exposure to ragtime, *Memos* a dozen years later, and both long after the peak of the ragtime era. Married and retired to the country, Ives was twice as old, not in the best of health, and living a very different sort of life. By this point he was far removed from the original music that fired his imagination, perhaps removed even further as a consequence of his own achievements in rhythmic experimentation. Looking back on his youth, Ives writes of "the old ragtime stuff" and compares the scherzos of the First Piano Sonata to a "boy away sowing his oats in the ragtimes."<sup>58</sup> Ives scholars have documented his mounting distaste for city life and modern technology, including the radio and the phonograph. Though the younger Ives appears to have had more sympathy for those writers who celebrated ragtime as "the perfect expression of the American city, with its restless bus-

tle and motion,"<sup>59</sup> the older Ives sided with ragtime's critics, who associated the music with "the noise, rush and vulgarity of the street."<sup>60</sup> In fact, Ives expressed a similar perspective in one of his songs from this period, "The See'r," which he dated 1920. To accompany the song's lyrics, which concern an old man sitting down for the day and watching odd things going by, Ives depicts the strange goings-on via a series of increasingly frenzied ragtime syncopations.

At this point in his career, Ives's priorities had changed, as he tried to frame his public image, publish his compositions, and locate himself with respect to the musical establishment. Ironically, in the process of subscribing to what Frank Rossiter describes as the "genteel tradition" in American music, Ives turned to the writings of Daniel Gregory Mason, a Columbia professor and composer whose music epitomized the type of musical conservatism against which Ives typically rebelled.<sup>61</sup> As part of a running debate in the 1910s about how best to cultivate a national style, Mason argued against the integration of vernacular sources like ragtime into American classical music and in favor of maintaining closer ties to European music: "From this point of view it will be seen that the enthusiasts of nationalism, in advising our composer to confine himself to Indian, Negro, or ragtime material, in adjuring him not to listen to the siren voice of Europe, are not merely misleading but cheating him. They are asking him to throw away his birthright of wide cosmopolitan influence for a mess of purely parochial pottage."<sup>62</sup> Weighing in on this issue a few years later in *Essays Before a Sonata*, Ives did not take the opportunity to defend the use of ragtime in classical music or to promote his own compositions as counterexamples. Instead, he seconded many of Mason's views and also drew on a metaphor Mason employed to compare ragtime to ketchup. But there was one crucial difference in Ives's commentary. Unlike Mason, Ives resolutely defended the use of American vernacular music—not ragtime, however, but the white Protestant tradition of gospel hymnody that he held dear.

Leafing through *Essays Before a Sonata* helps identify Ives's racialized views on the subject, since several of his key statements on ragtime are positioned just after those that address the use of Negro spirituals, Native American songs, and white Protestant gospel hymns. In the following passage, Ives offers his views on the creation of an "American" music:

A composer born in America, but who has not been interested in the "cause of the Freedmen," may be so interested in "negro melodies" that he writes a symphony over them. He is conscious (perhaps only subconscious) that he wishes it to be "American music." He tries to forget that

the paternal negro came from Africa. Is his music American or African? That is the great question which keeps him awake! But the sadness of it is that if he had been born in Africa, his music might have been just as American, for there is good authority that an African soul under an X-ray looks identically like an American soul. There is a futility in selecting a certain type to represent a "whole," unless the interest in the spirit of the type coincides with that of the whole. In other words, if this composer isn't as deeply interested in the "cause" as Wendell Phillips was, when he fought his way through that anti-abolitionist crowd at Faneuil Hall, his music is liable to be less American than he wishes.<sup>63</sup>

Both in this excerpt and in his subsequent discussion about using Native American musical material, Ives advises composers to pay closest attention to the "spirit" of a given type of music. Generally speaking, he states that integrating any type of music is permissible as long as the composer "is confident that they have a part in his spiritual consciousness."<sup>64</sup> In other words, as Burkholder writes, "Ives felt strongly that an American music would have to be based not just on American tunes (or even on borrowed American tunes at all) but rather on American experience and American ideals for it to be truly native."<sup>65</sup> Though Ives's commentary implies that a legitimately American music could derive from any of a variety of musical sources, his tone suggests that he personally felt the greatest enthusiasm for Protestant hymns. Drawing on his experience to create music that he hoped would have much greater significance, he goes on to claim that if a composer can capture the spirit of singing hymns at a New England camp meeting, then "he may find there a local color that will do all the world good. If his music can but catch that spirit by being a part with itself, it will come somewhere near his ideal—and it will be American, too—perhaps nearer so than that of the devotee of Indian or Negro melody."<sup>66</sup> His use of "perhaps" leaves some room for debate, but Ives would take an even firmer stance when he revisited these issues a decade later.

In a telling passage from *Memos*, which seems to allude to the kind of personal or critical encounters that led Ives to cement his position, he differentiates between white sacred musical traditions and black spirituals. More closely affiliated with Protestant hymns and the songs of Steven Foster, two types of music that he frequently integrated into his own compositions, Ives places himself in opposition to the foreign-born Dvořák and his *New World* Symphony, a work that was thought to have gained inspiration from African American and Native American music:

Some nice people, whenever they hear the words "Gospel Hymns" or "Stephen Foster," say "Mercy Me!", and a little high-brow smile creeps

over their brow—"Can't you get something better than that in a symphony?" The same nice people, when they go to a properly dressed symphony concert under proper auspices, led by a name with foreign hair, and hear Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, in which they are told this famous passage was from a negro spiritual, then think that it must be quite proper, even artistic, and say "How delightful!" But when someone proves to them that the Gospel Hymns are fundamentally responsible for the negro spirituals, they say, "Ain't it awful!"—"You don't really mean that!"<sup>67</sup>

Along the same lines, though Ives commended the performance tradition of black spirituals, he continued to reserve greater praise for its white antecedents:

But it was not, to my mind, these physical techniques as much as the fervor, conviction, and a real human something underneath, that the negroes heard in these Gospel Hymns. . . . But the darkies used these things in their own native way, and made them somewhat different—"more beautiful and more artistic" says Rollo. Yes, and so did some of the Yankees. I'm not trying to say that many of the spirituals, jubilees, etc. aren't in their own way natural, spontaneous, beautiful, and artistic—but some white Congregationalists or Methodists (drunk or sober) already had somepin' also natural, spontaneous, beautiful, and artistic—and that somepin' was to start the negro spirituals.<sup>68</sup>

Once again, Ives calls for white Protestant gospel hymns to be given the same level of respect as black spirituals. Yet, by employing racialized language and sporadic sarcasm—through the voice of Rollo, who personified for Ives much of what he felt was wrong with the music world—he distinguishes between the two and highlights the significance of white Protestant hymnody, which he felt stood at the core of these traditions. While acknowledging that the black spirituals as well as the music they later inspired could be remarkably beautiful and artistic, Ives argued that such music derived from and constituted an off-shoot of the musical tradition to which he was most committed.

In contrast to hymnody, ragtime now occupied a much lower rung on Ives's ladder of priorities, to the extent that he could compare its value, as we saw in this chapter's epigraph, to dinner-table condiments. By this point, after several decades of massive popularity, ragtime was known less as a novel musical sensation and more for its widespread commercial success. Yet for Ives to have produced such flippant commentary about Protestant hymnody is unimaginable. The temptation thus exists to connect the dots between Ives's promotion of white Protestant hymnody and his faint praise



of ragtime, an African American creation, but I am not prepared to claim that his relationship to ragtime should be reduced entirely to a racial equation, at least not a simple one. My view inclines toward the commonly held perception of Ives as someone fairly sensitive to issues of racial equality. Unlike other critiques of Ives—say, those decrying his gender politics—attempts to expose Ives as a racist have not flourished.<sup>69</sup> Because he was such a voracious borrower, Ives has been accused of demonstrating some degree of racial bias by generally avoiding certain types of music, including African American musical genres like the blues as well as music written by (Jewish) Tin Pan Alley composers.<sup>70</sup> One explanation for these compositional choices comes from Burkholder, who suggests that Ives used "the music of white Americans, rather than that of Indians or blacks, because it was the flavor of his own people and region that he sought to capture."<sup>71</sup> A second way to answer such accusations would be to call attention to an obvious counterexample—Ives's experiments with the music of ragtime.

Had he wanted to steer clear of black-identified genres, surely Ives would have avoided ragtime altogether. It was not as if he understood the music to be racially unmarked. On the contrary, race powerfully shaped Ives's understanding of the genre, just as it influenced members of his entire generation. As mentioned earlier, he associated the techniques of ragtime with blackface minstrelsy, which he once described as "a form of 'theatricals' that unfortunately has almost disappeared."<sup>72</sup> Moreover, some of his writings contain not-too-veiled racial allusions, such as his comparison of ragtime to "something like wearing a derby hat on the back of the head, a shuffling lilt of a happy soul just let out of a Baptist church in old Alabama."<sup>73</sup> Yet, regardless of any racial connotations he linked to ragtime, and despite the patronizing quality of his later remarks, Ives chose to compose *Four Ragtime Dances*, music in which both Protestant hymns and ragtime play crucial roles. How are we to reconcile what Ives composed with what he wrote about it? Discovering an answer requires turning once more to the music, this time keeping in mind the composer's later written comments about hymnody and ragtime.

Put simply, how do ragtime and gospel hymns fare in *Four Ragtime Dances*? How does their treatment by Ives compare with the tone of his written statements? In his analysis of the First Piano Sonata, Kramer argues that the "debunking here is directed at the hymn tunes, which are mocked and distorted by being ragged," and he describes Ives's rhythmic start of the fourth movement to be a "protracted spell of noisy, grinding, motoric rhythms, a kind of sonoric abyss that eventually spews forth a rag."<sup>74</sup> In contrast to the sonata, Ives's earlier treatment of much of the same musical ma-

terial in *Four Ragtime Dances* presents a clear alternative. Echoing Ives's commentary on the gospel hymns, this set of pieces works exactly the other way around, slowly unveiling the final hymn through its cumulative setting. Ives's ragtime techniques do end up distorting the hymns, in the course of producing extreme melodic variations and injecting rhythmic propulsion into the quartet of dances, but mockery hardly seems to be at issue, especially considering how things work out. In his description of the dances, Jan Swafford proposes that Ives mixed hymns and ragtime "not to sully the sacred, but . . . to infuse the secular with spiritual joy."<sup>75</sup> Alternatively, one also might say that this process infuses the spiritual with secular joy.

Not all of Kramer's conclusions about the First Piano Sonata hold true when the same analytical approach is extended to *Four Ragtime Dances*, but I find provocative his contention that "whenever a dominant social group [white America] begins to appropriate the expressive idioms [ragtime] of the group it dominates [African Americans], the process of appropriation bears traces of the social circumstances that ground it."<sup>76</sup> Such traces do appear in *Four Ragtime Dances*, and once hymns are added into the mix, it becomes clear that, from a structural standpoint, ragtime occupies a far less prominent position. After all, Ives draws his primary melodic material from the three gospel hymns, and it is their verse-chorus structure that determines the form of each dance. Furthermore, the cumulative settings of each individual dance, and the set as a whole, do not serve to unveil the latest ragtime hit but instead dramatize the gradual emergence of the hymn material, a process that brings with it a palpable sense of accomplishment. By delivering a truly "welcome voice" in the form of a hymn by the same name, each concluding chorus carries an air of triumph. That Ives would give precedence to the Protestant hymns over ragtime in the structure of these pieces should come as little surprise. This is true not only in light of the views Ives later expressed about hymns, but also because at this point in his career Ives was busy writing numerous hymn-based compositions. Admittedly, the choice to rely on a cumulative setting that brings a hymn to light while incorporating the rhythms of ragtime seems more conventional than, say, to base a composition on a ragtime tune and fill it with hymn-style harmonies. Yet, at the same time, Ives's choice in *Four Ragtime Dances* to give more weight to the white gospel hymns than to the black-identified ragtime resonates with Kramer's larger argument that Ives's music mimics the racial power dynamics, or unequal race relations, that characterized turn-of-the-century America.

Without meaning to brush these observations entirely aside, I question whether a broad structural argument is enough to account fully for either

the cultural or aesthetic significance of the piece. In the end, Ives chose to call this music the *ragtime* dances, and snippets, echoes, and traces of ragtime surface throughout the entire work. Lacking the influence of ragtime to reshape the hymns, this music would lose nearly all its idiosyncratic flavor. For as much as *Four Ragtime Dances* shares some of the priorities that Ives expressed in his writings, its existence also shows that in a fundamental respect Ives was looking ahead. One of the first to experiment with ragtime, Ives exhibited a progressive attitude in comparison with his art music contemporaries. Despite the level of cultural debate surrounding ragtime's questionable reputation—stemming variously from its mass popularity, its secular associations, and its black origins—Ives appreciated the music enough to experiment repeatedly with its possibilities. His incorporation of ragtime therefore stands as a remarkably bold act for its time, a controversial move in its cultural context. Although he chose to downplay ragtime's influence in print, as Ives often did with his musical forebears, he was willing to learn from ragtime and eager to revisit his ragtime-influenced pieces. Consequently, Ives's defenders consider his use of ragtime to reveal an attitude of inclusion and acceptance, his interest in these pieces to signal sincere and sustained experimentalism.

Facing such contradictory perspectives about Ives and *Four Ragtime Dances* makes it difficult to choose an interpretive route. Are we to understand this work as a progressive step toward racial understanding or as a perpetuation of unequal race relations? However paradoxical it might appear, I wish to acknowledge both positions, for music often works in ways too complex to allow for simple answers. In so doing, I am not proposing to integrate Kramer's cultural criticism seamlessly with an uncritical celebration of Ives, for effortless unification is not always possible, whether in cultural debates, musical compositions, or musicological endeavors. In other words, rather than magically resolving this predicament, I wish to keep in the foreground the contradictions and tensions that animate this complicated piece. Serving in part to reinforce the same set of race relations that its existence simultaneously works against, the music of *Four Ragtime Dances* deserves to be lauded for its achievements, just as the constraints of those achievements need to be recognized. Likewise, before entirely condemning the piece, one must ask whether it is reasonable to place on Ives the burden of fulfilling the promise of racial parity, a task that subsequent generations have been unable to accomplish.

Acknowledging the opposing impulses and contradictions enacted by *Four Ragtime Dances* also offers another means by which not necessarily to reconcile but at least to come to terms with the incongruity between

Ives's music and his written commentary. Locating a disjunction between a composer's art and life is hardly uncommon, nor is it rare to discover discrepancies between the way a particular piece of music works and what a composer has to say about it. This becomes evident for a composer like Ives, who often adopted notably forceful, sometimes downright belligerent positions in his various writings. Instead of trying to smooth out the rough edges or to explain away any distracting inconsistencies, it becomes more productive in the case of Ives and ragtime to shine a spotlight directly on them. That Ives's writings about his use of ragtime display deep anxiety and ambivalence, as Kramer would frame it, is not a predicament to be overcome but instead a useful reflection of Ives's experience as an art music composer in the ragtime era. That Ives told a very different story in compositions like *Four Ragtime Dances* from the one he detailed in prose may produce an unavoidable contradiction, but it is a fruitful and significant one that indicates how musical compositions and surrounding discourse can work toward very different ends, perhaps especially in an era of heated cultural debate. Indeed, notwithstanding his eventual claims in print, Ives went ahead and experimented with the music of ragtime for decades. Demonstrating the capacity of music to register an alternative social experience, the act of composing seems to have afforded Ives the opportunity to explore ideas that he might have been unwilling or unable to articulate in words. Moreover, perhaps this explains his choice not to publish final versions of these early compositions. Whether or not he recognized it himself, blending the music of ragtime and Protestant hymns enabled Ives to conduct an experiment in musical diversity that he could articulate much more thoroughly in a sonic realm than in the social realm of his era, a point made all too clear by his own published writings.

We may be attracted to music that attempts to produce a sense of multicultural equality or upset by music that serves to encode racial prejudice, but rarely does there exist music so unambiguous and one-dimensional. On the contrary, individual pieces of music, at times whole genres, hold our attention precisely because their efforts to grapple with musical and cultural tensions do not, sometimes cannot, produce clear-cut solutions. Thus, to best account for music ranging from the relatively sympathetic yet undeniably patronizing portrait of black life in Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home" to the paradoxical merger of nihilism and empowerment present in early punk rock, it may be more productive to view musical compositions not as an end product but instead as part of an ongoing process of answering a question. Such a perspective becomes especially germane for music that strives to cross identifiable boundaries, whether of genre, class, race, or na-

tion. Indeed, as Kramer's argument implies, mixed-genre creations like *Four Ragtime Dances* cannot help bearing traces of the power relations that characterize the meeting of classical composers with various other worlds of music. By paying attention to these traces and observing the cultural tensions that make this music so compelling, musical scholarship can better respond to the dynamic, contested world we live in.

The music of *Four Ragtime Dances* sounds remarkably confusing and disorderly, less a melting pot than a mishmash, a cluttered jumble. Even when the dances are performed exactly as written, they bring to mind the remarks that Ives made after a particularly uneven performance of his *Three Places in New England*: "Just like a town meeting—every man for himself, wonderful how it came out."<sup>77</sup> To make the most of this piece, I look to the work of scholars such as Josh Kun, who suggests: "When we talk about music in America, and music's role in shaping American identities and American meanings, we should be thinking of music in terms of the differences it contains, the differences it makes audible, not the unities or harmonies it can be used to fabricate."<sup>78</sup> I similarly lean toward what Larry Starr describes as the "rough, effusive, messy quality" of Ives's music, its "willingness to risk apparent chaos," rather than Starr's broader metaphor of "a union of diversities."<sup>79</sup> The point, it seems, is not that varied musical practices or genres are meeting on common ground, sharing space equally, and learning to get along perfectly, but that they are crossing over and colliding, bumping up against one another, struggling to be heard above the commotion, even as they participate in the process of trying to work things out. Because it engages with so many sources of musical friction—between traditional European and modern American compositional practices, between the sacred and secular, between classical and popular, between races—*Four Ragtime Dances* presented a major challenge for Ives. In its concluding moments Ives tries to resolve some of the built-up tensions in a way that asserts his personal priorities by avoiding references to ragtime and using "Bringing in the Sheaves" as a countermelody; however, as the chromatic neighbor chord that deflects the final cadence intimates, even he is unable to reach a decisive resolution.

### "A RAGTIME WAR"

Ragtime has continued to resonate with composers for the last century, infusing the music of American composers such as John Alden Carpenter and Virgil Thomson and reaching overseas to influence international figures, in-

cluding Erik Satie, Paul Hindemith, Igor Stravinsky, and Sergei Prokofiev.<sup>80</sup> Like Ives, each of these composers drew on aspects of ragtime—its percussive, syncopated qualities, its formal structure, its infectious dance rhythms, its cultural connotations—as points of departure toward very different ends. Such a wide range of purposes can be gauged by the diverse aims of two ragtime-influenced compositions that appeared around the time Ives composed *Four Ragtime Dances*: Scott Joplin's attempt to expand the music's expressive possibilities by composing a ragtime opera, *Treemonisha* (1911), and John Powell's satirical treatment of ragtime in his piece "Clowns" (1912), the attitude behind which complemented Powell's public speeches against racial miscegenation.<sup>81</sup> Like *Four Ragtime Dances*, these two pieces feature their own articulation of musical lineage, the classical-popular divide, the ethics of appropriation, and racial and class politics. Likewise, they trigger interest and debate in large part because the cultural and musical tensions that permeate them are audible and unresolved.

Charles Ives was keenly aware of the ability of music to register cultural debate, and he drew on this knowledge in his orchestral composition *Central Park in the Dark*, which appears to have been composed in the same period that saw his early ragtime experiments (ca. 1906).<sup>82</sup> As Denise Von Glahn illustrates in her analysis of the piece, Ives attempts in *Central Park* to contrast the timelessness of nature, embodied by the park, with the transitory distractions of contemporary urban life, represented by the encroaching sounds of the city.<sup>83</sup> Looking back, Ives characterized the piece as presenting a "picture-in-sounds of the sounds of nature and of happenings that men would hear some thirty or so years ago (before the combustion engine and radio monopolized the earth and air), when sitting on a bench in Central Park on a hot summer night."<sup>84</sup> To channel the atmosphere of the era, Ives conspicuously quotes the melody of "Hello! Ma Baby," an 1899 ragtime song by Joe Howard and Ida Emerson.<sup>85</sup> The lilting tune may strike twenty-first-century listeners as old-fashioned and nostalgic, even those familiar with the vestiges of racial politics that are present in the original song: the "coon" references in the second verse, the dialect of its black characters, and the two African American figures depicted in the cover art of its sheet music. Instead of serving chiefly as a marker of racial difference or musical nostalgia, ragtime also functions here as a symbol of modern disruption, emblemized by a Tin Pan Alley creation and expressed in the song's insistent refrain, "Hello! ma baby, Hello! ma honey, Hello! ma ragtime gal."

Around two-thirds of the way into *Central Park in the Dark*, during the seventh of ten iterations of a slow-moving atonal ostinato that evokes the

park at night, Ives brings in this ragtime song to evoke "pianolas having a ragtime war in the apartment house over the garden wall."<sup>86</sup> Producing a series of sonic interruptions, the melody of "Hello! Ma Baby" appears repeatedly in various forms: quietly distorted at first (m. 67), announced more prominently by the piano (m. 79) and the E-flat clarinet (m. 80), and eventually blasted by the trumpet with support from the percussion (m. 103). Rather than assigning it an unassuming, unmarked role, as an interchangeable musical element feeding into this piece, Ives here calls on ragtime for its unruly and boisterous qualities, its capacity to pierce the New York night and raise a ruckus. Indeed, the quotation of "Hello! Ma Baby," a song that tells of two lovers courting by the recent technological advance of the telephone, contributes its own testimony to Ives's portrait of the intruding modern world. This notable Ivesian moment, featuring different subsets of the ensemble moving at separate tempos, also registers the onset of another aspect of musical modernity. For in the process of quoting ragtime to capture a bygone era, Ives chronicles exactly what had begun to materialize around him at the turn of the twentieth century: the rising influence of African American musical practices on musical life in the United States, the rapid growth of the Tin Pan Alley publishing industry, and the widening reach of popular music in America. Together, these developments, spurred on by the pioneering achievements of the recording era, would bring to prominence a new set of musicians who relied on sharply alternative ways of making music, musicians like the jazz pianist Jelly Roll Morton, the subject of the following chapter, whose music presents a radically different perspective not only on the use of ragtime but also on the nature of American music.