

MEDIA REVIEWS

Charles Ives, Complete Symphonies

Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, conductor. Deutsche Grammophon, 2 CDs, B0033369-02, 2020.

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The symphonies of Charles Ives have undergone a recording renaissance in the past five years, with commercial releases coming from three prominent conductors and orchestras. The first set, recorded by Ludovic Morlot and the Seattle Symphony in 2014 and 2016, featured the Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies over two separate albums.¹ Three years later (2019), Michael Tilson Thomas, whose recordings of the symphonies from the 1980s have been touchstones for years, rerecorded the Third and Fourth Symphonies with the San Francisco Symphony.² The latest entry into the Ives symphony collection may surprise at first blush; after a series of concerts and events focusing on connections between the music of Dvořák and Ives, Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic recorded all four Ives symphonies for Deutsche Grammophon in February 2020, just before the coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic shut down the ensemble. It was released later that year on streaming services, and in early 2021 on CD. Of all the recent entries, Dudamel's is perhaps the most exciting, given his celebrity status as a conductor as well as his previously unknown interest in Ives's music. On the whole, this recording does not disappoint and presents these works vividly, with a freshness that captures their charm, craft, diversity, and riches.

It may seem like an odd time for this renewed attention to Ives's orchestral music given the significant focus these days on composers *unlike* Ives (with respect to race and gender). However, Ives's symphonies resonate in more modern and striking ways than ever through the lens of our fractured and confusing 2022 world. The symphonies aurally depict a panorama of American music, aesthetic choices, and inspirations that mirror many elements of their creation, from the distinct European models of the First, the hybrid of European models and American source materials of the Second, the subdued spirituality of the Third, and the enigmatic Fourth with its myriad performance challenges and fusion of different styles. These works illustrate the four musical traditions in Ives's music identified by J. Peter Burkholder in his 1996 essay for *Charles Ives and His World*: the American experimental tradition, American hymnody, European classical music, and American popular music.³ Listening to this collection today reminds one of how extensive Ives's musical knowledge was, on the one hand quoting Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, and on the other quoting Stephen Foster, protestant hymns, and ragtime licks.

One concrete way to compare the musical interpretations of these three different recent Ives symphony recordings is to examine their lengths for insight into performance tempi. Here are timings for Ives's Pulitzer Prize-winning Third Symphony:

Ives, Symphony #3

Ludovic Morlot, Seattle Symphony (2016)

¹Charles Ives, *Symphony No. 2*, Seattle Symphony, Ludovic Morlot, conductor, Seattle Symphony Media, 2014, compact disc; Charles Ives, *Ives, Vol. 1*, Seattle Symphony, Ludovic Morlot, conductor, Seattle Symphony Media, 2016, compact disc.

²Charles Ives, *Ives: Symphonies 3 and 4*, San Francisco Symphony, Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor, SFS Media, 2019, compact disc.

³J. Peter Burkholder, "Ives and the Four Musical Traditions," in *Charles Ives and His World*, edited by J. Peter Burkholder (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–34.

Mvt. 1: 7:41
 Mvt. 2: 6:50
 Mvt. 3: 7:47
 TOTAL: 22:18

Michael Tilson Thomas, San Francisco Symphony (2019)

Mvt. 1: 7:50
 Mvt. 2: 7:32
 Mvt. 3: 8:17
 TOTAL: 23:39

Gustavo Dudamel, Los Angeles Philharmonic (2020)

Mvt. 1: 7:27
 Mvt. 2: 6:32
 Mvt. 3: 7:24
 TOTAL: 21:23

Dudamel's tempos throughout the Los Angeles Philharmonic set tend to be brisker overall, which can result in more energetic performances (not that faster is better, but some Ives orchestral recordings can be bogged down in *too* much nostalgia and romanticism). This is evident in the Third Symphony, where, for example, Dudamel shaves nearly a minute off the final movement ("The Camp Meeting") compared to Tilson Thomas's recording, injecting a greater poignancy and intensity into one of Ives's most subtle and spiritual works. The last movement, a cumulative form on the hymn "Just as I Am Without One Plea" (the hymn tune's full appearance at the end is brought out on this recording more audibly than ever), evokes a livelier religious revival camp meeting.

To take another example of the recording's interpretational and performance decisions, consider one of the most complex and riveting movements in all of Ives's symphonies: the second movement of the Fourth Symphony ("Comedy"). Assisted by second conductor Marta Gardolińska, Dudamel brings out some of the lesser-heard instruments like the piano and microtonal strings that often get swallowed up on other recordings, resulting in a clearer presentation of the many simultaneous musical layers: ragtime rhythms, brass fanfares, hymn tunes, patriotic songs, and more. The mixing highlights inner voices and tamps down the brass that overpower other recordings, ably capturing the "comedic" elements Ives composed.

The liner notes by Jed Distler, a New York-based composer, pianist, and critic, provide an adequate description of each piece, highlighting the musical borrowing employed (e.g., naming the hymn tunes in each piece) as well as noting for listeners key moments of interest. Some minor factual errors creep into the notes, with Distler claiming *Psalm 90* was "Ives' final work" (that would be "Sunrise" from 1926), stating the first movement of the Second Symphony is "fugal" (it is more imitative than fugal), and asserting that the third movement of the Fourth Symphony is a "double fugue" (it is a fugue, but not a double fugue). He also rehashes an old bromide about Ives's music: Distler states that Ives was a "maverick," and that he "stood outside the artistic mainstream of his time, creating determinedly modernist and visionary music that anticipated atonal, experimental, and avant-garde trends that would transpire later."⁴ That is partially true, especially since Ives was not a professional composer active in contemporary musical circles until late in life, but Burkholder and others (see Frank Rossiter's description of the "Ives Legend") have argued that Ives's music has a more complicated and sympathetic relationship to European classical music.⁵ Nevertheless, despite these minor faults, the notes complement the recordings well.

Recorded in Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles over the course of one week in February 2020, the Deutsche Grammophon sound on this collection is lovely, rich, and full, bringing out the subtleties of the softer moments in Ives's symphonies while not overdoing the more boisterous parts (the final Bernstein-influenced "blat" on the last chord of the Second Symphony

⁴Jed Distler, liner notes for *Charles Ives: Complete Symphonies*, 4.

⁵Frank Rossiter, *Charles Ives and His America* (New York: Liveright, 1975). For an explanation of what Rossiter calls the "Ives Legend," see the book's preface.

notwithstanding). With the collection winning the Grammy Award for Best Orchestral Performance in March 2021, Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic's recordings bring even greater exposure to this music. This set is highly recommended, and for my money, may become the new standard collection of these rewarding symphonies that speak to our time.

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Los Rurales Y Los Amigos de Buena Vista. *Ocotitia*. Released February 26, 2021. Cugate Clásicos Latinos, LC 08867, 2021. CD.

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The Mexican brass band, Los Rurales, consists of six members: Omar Cruz Ojeda (trumpet), Juan Manuel Lagunes Vásquez (trumpet), Francisco Jiménez Martínez (French horn), Edgardo Jiménez Orozco (trombone), Edgar Rubio Arias (tuba), and Eduardo César Hernández Vega (percussion). After initially meeting at the University of Veracruz, the members of Los Rurales came together to form a brass quintet and quickly advanced from playing gigs locally to appearing at larger regional venues such as *Around the World on 80 Bicycles*, *Otras Músicas de Oaxaca*, and *El Festival Señor de Chalca*. As the name of the band suggests, Los Rurales (“those from the countryside”) specializes in repertoire emphasizing rural cultural roots. They combine Oaxacan music with Eastern European Balkan brass techniques in a distinctive and lively way, occasionally performing in more popular styles such as rock’n’roll and jazz.

Los Rurales joined trumpeter Roberto Garcia (tracks 2, 8, and 9) and trombonist Jesús Aguaje Ramos (tracks 8 and 9) from the Buenavista Social Club, a Cuban ensemble, to collaborate on *Ocotitia*.¹ The album showcases thirteen energetic combinations of Oaxacan and Balkan folk music, from the fandango, a lively couple’s dance originating from Spain, to the Cocek, a popular genre of Balkan bass.² The band’s instrumentation allows for a well-balanced ensemble, with the trumpets on melody, the bass as the rhythmic motor, and the French horn, trombone(s), tuba, and percussion all acting as the inner voices. Multiple tracks begin with a slow, stately introduction that segues into a more lively section, while all tracks feature virtuosic solos or soli sections. These soli, which typically occur toward the middle of the tracks, consist of groupings of lower brass or, more commonly, virtuosic trumpet solos layered over a syncopated ostinato.

The first track, “Ceñidor Cocek,” not only exemplifies the aforementioned musical characteristics, but also the transcultural nature of this album. “Ceñidor Cocek” begins with a 30-second introduction that leads into a lively Mexican folk melody played by the trumpets. The melody is supported by the Balkan brass and percussion. The piece then transitions to a climax, which showcases a virtuosic trumpet solo. “Fandango,” another notable track, features a lively Mexican-styled fandango that utilizes predictable major harmonies and a lively brass section while also incorporating Oaxacan cultural imagery in the accompanying music video. The video emphasizes Oaxacan cultural traditions including customary Oaxacan clothing, local festivities, Catholic imagery, and a couple performing the

¹Rafael Lam, “Buscando la Sociedad Buena Vista Social Club,” *Gramma*, July 3, 2015, <http://www.gramma.cu/cultura/2015-07-03/buscando-la-sociedad-buena-vista-social-club> (accessed August 5, 2021).

²Israel J. Katz, “Fandango,” Grove Music Online (accessed August 4, 2021). Jan Laurens Hartong, *Musical Terms Worldwide: A Companion for the Musical Explorer* (Rome: Semar, 2006), 100.