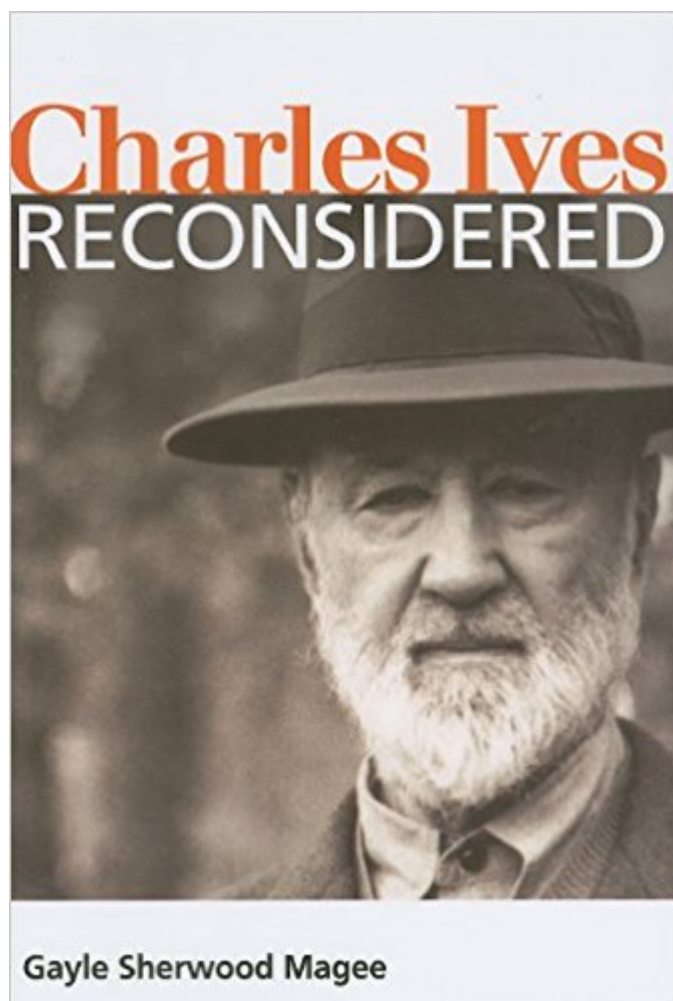


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# Charles Ives Reconsidered (Music In American Life)



## Synopsis

Charles Ives Reconsidered reexamines a number of critical assumptions about the life and works of this significant American composer, drawing on many new sources to explore Ives's creative activities within broader historical, social, cultural, and musical perspectives. Gayle Sherwood Magee offers the first large-scale rethinking of Ives's musical development based on the controversial revised chronology of his music. Using as a guide Ives's own dictum that "the fabric of existence weaves itself whole," Charles Ives Reconsidered offers several new paths to understanding all of Ives's music as the integrated and cohesive work of a controversial composer who was very much a product of his time and place. Magee portrays Ives's life, career and posthumous legacy against the backdrop of his musical and social environments from the Gilded Age to the present. The book includes contemporary portraits of the composer, his peers, and his teachers, as seen through archival materials, published reviews, and both historical and modern critical assessments.

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## Customer Reviews

"Charles Ives Reconsidered" is exactly the word here. Magee takes on the idolators and the revisionists with equal vigour, and in doing so, restores Charles Ives to a more nuanced and realistic place in the American canon: a man of his times, to be sure, but also an artist who continued to evolve and create. . . . Magee hasn't just written a very good book about Ives, but a very good book about what Harold Bloom calls 'the anxiety of influence.'--The

Wire" "Magee's book is a model of contemporary musicology, sympathetically sober in its judgments and interdisciplinary in its methods." "The Nation" "Magee's provocative and insightful new biography of Charles Ives examines the man, his legend, his music, and its reception. An important work." "Journal of the Society for American Music" "This is in every way an exemplary interpretive study of Ives's aesthetic and compositional career as considered against the background of his biography. . . . A first-rate exposition of current knowledge and thinking about Ives, and Magee's own views are a welcome contribution. Essential." "Choice" "Anyone looking for new windows into the life of this unique composer will find here a rich source, clearly written and abundantly illustrated with photos and copies of musical transcripts." "American Record Guide

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This is a horribly revisionist essay--in blatant disregard of the timeline and evidence--Magee has promoted radical unsupported and unsupportable claims that scream of a self-serving agenda to provide a foothold for her own 'revised' dates of Ives's compositions. Magee manages to contradict herself at every turn. While recasting Ives in the image of flawed and weak, rather than exceptional and strong, Magee brazenly has shifted his output ever more forward into the present, thus safely within her musicologically-acceptable prescribed formula (to which she subscribes) for attaining his extraordinary compositional skills and innovation. The fact that Magee stands atop the very institution that is supposed to be preserving Ives's legacy shows just how far this brand of musicological gobbledygook has come in placing itself over what really happened and the true legacy of a remarkable human being and musical force. In addition to her more brazen arbitrary

redating of Ives's output, Magee has come up with a "fictional" account of major segments of history surrounding Ives and his life--all while medically assigning some outrageous and wholly disproved turn-of-the-century faux illness to him. In the absence of citing one shred of supporting corroboration for anything she proposes, and ignoring what indeed can be established fairly readily, she has attempted to relegate Ives to opportunistic crackpot status, and Kirkpatrick and his catalog to irrelevance, when, in fact, it remains a nearly perfect record of what Ives did and when he did it. No less harmful are her efforts to besmirch Henry Cowell and George Ives, two remarkable people who also deserve infinitely better and more respectful treatment than that accorded them here; their roles and contributions were pivotal. Magee has hidden behind what people are not around to answer, and what cannot be sustained other than by mere claim, perhaps in the hope that if one states something often and loudly enough it will become accepted as fact. This hollow book is a sloppily constructed hodge-podge of conveniently placed gaps and emphasized fantasy to advance Magee's cause; in spite of rejecting the charge made by Maynard Solomon that Ives was dishonest, the upshot one takes from Magee's interpretation hardly differs in its effect. As such, the book more accurately deserves a zero-star rating, and ranks at the bottom of the heap. The reader is advised to stay away. In diametric contrast, Jan Swafford's heartfelt, genuine treatment of Ives--a colossus in modern times ("Charles Ives: A Life with Music")--treats all concerned with real appreciation, objectivity and reverence sadly missing in so many of today's new "authorities." Especially this one.

I can think of no composer who has taken a more thorough beating from musicologists in the past few years than Charles Ives, and I was waiting eagerly for Gayle Sherwood Magee's new book, *Charles Ives Reconsidered*, to set the record straight. At last, I thought, someone was going to speak up for him with the weight of scholarship behind her. Ives's stock crashed in 1987, when Maynard Solomon published a paper in *The Journal of the American Musicological Society*, titled "Charles Ives: Some Questions of Veracity," in which he charged that Ives deliberately backdated his scores to appear more of a musical innovator than he actually was. Solomon took as his starting point Elliott Carter's notorious, damning review of the *Concord Sonata*, which suggested that Ives might not be a true prophet. "The fuss that critics make about Ives's innovations is, I think, exaggerated," Carter wrote, "for he has rewritten his works so many times, adding dissonances and polyrhythms, that it is probably impossible to tell just at what date the works assumed the surprising form we know now. The accepted dates of publication are most likely those of the compositions in their final state." In later interviews, Carter recalled visiting Ives in his home in the late 1920s and watching him revise his scores to, in his phrase, jack up the level of dissonance. But Carter never

accused Ives of dishonesty. In his review of the Concord, he specifically faults critics. It was up to Solomon to take the next step, convicting Ives of a "systematic pattern of falsification," backdating his scores and lying about just when his innovations appeared. The cry of protest from Ives specialists was immediate and loud, but like the truth about Sarah Palin and the bridge to nowhere, it could not stamp out the growing narrative. Almost every CD of Ives's music released in the decade after Solomon's article appeared contained, in its program notes, a reference to the chronology scandal, inevitably followed by a lame comment that it really didn't matter. (Carter made the same point in his review, but that part of the controversy seemed to disappear, and in any event, saying that the chronology doesn't matter is just a polite way of admitting that Solomon was right. If he was wrong, we wouldn't need irrelevance as a fallback position.) Scholars such as Peter Burkholder and Philip Lambert defended Ives's integrity and originality, but only Gayle Sherwood Magee, a doctoral candidate at Yale (now teaching at the University of Illinois), answered Solomon's challenge directly. Focusing on Ives's choral music, she dated the paper he used, analyzed his handwriting, and found, according to Ives's biographer Jan Swafford, that Ives's own dates were more accurate than not, and indeed, some pieces were written later than Ives's dating indicates. Solomon's systematic pattern of falsification, Swafford wrote, was neither systematic, nor a pattern, nor false. So, when I learned Sherwood Magee was writing a book on Ives, I was excited. Here, at last, would be the definitive story of Ives's career, grounded on the indisputable, revised chronology of his music developed both by Sherwood Magee herself and by James Sinclair at Yale University. It would be a vindication. Well, it's a vindication all right -- mostly of Solomon and Carter. While Sherwood Magee does not believe that Ives backdated his scores, as Solomon contends, she does acknowledge that many of his major works evolved over a period of years, even decades, and, in the end, he usually gave the years in which he began a piece as the date of composition. Echoing Carter's epistemological doubt, she concludes on the last page of her text that "many of his most important works cut across the arc of his compositional life in complex and probably unknowable ways." Of course, if the claims for Ives's precedence had never been made, the debunking would not have been necessary, and his honesty would never have been questioned. In Sherwood Magee's telling, the source of the claim -- and of all the subsequent trouble -- is Henry Cowell. It was Cowell who, in his early writing about Ives in the 1930s, concocted what Ives's biographer Frank Rossiter called the Ives Legend, which described a visionary working in isolation, indifferent to success, inventing the language of modernism years ahead of his European contemporaries. Cowell had an agenda, Sherwood Magee writes: he wanted to establish American precedence in 20th century music, and he found a patriarchal figure in Charles Ives. To cleanse the stain of European influence

from Ives' *Autobiographical Memoirs*, Cowell made George Ives into the central influence of young Charlie's life and expunged from the record the indispensable lessons Ives learned from Horatio Parker, his genial, German-trained music professor at Yale. Ives seemed happy to go along with the charade. According to Sherwood Magee, he sensed that throwing in his lot with the up-and-coming modernists would lead to recognition and acceptance in the larger community of musicians, and he fashioned his autobiographical *Memos* of the early 1930s to suit Cowell's purposes. First, he gives the earliest possible dates to his major compositions. Second, he denigrates Parker's contribution to his development and even concocts a homey little parable to praise his father's open-minded experimentalism at the expense of his professor's myopic conservatism: Parker told him that he there was no excuse for an unresolved dissonance at the end of one of his songs, Ives recalled, and when he related the comment to his father, George replied that not every dissonance has to resolve, any more than every horse should have its tail bobbed in response to the prevailing fashion. As Sherwood Magee points out, Ives did not begin taking classes with Parker until two years after his father died. The story is impossible. Ives thus comes off as an ingrate, an opportunist, and yes, a prevaricator. He also appears as a hypochondriac, a misogynist, a xenophobe (though largely by association), and oddly passive. In a concise 180 pages, Sherwood Magee succeeds better than any writer I know in re-creating the musical and social atmosphere Ives breathed, but the composer himself almost disappears under the pressure of his influences. Everything he does seems to be a reaction to something else. One can understand it in the early chapters, when, as a young musician finding his place in the world, Ives emulates his heroes and tries on a succession of professional hats, but his extraordinary burst of creativity in the decade after 1907 remains unaccounted for. During these years, Ives was free to compose the music he wanted. He had given up the life of a professional organist for the security of the insurance business, and he did not have to write for the American market. No younger composers like Cowell were recasting him in their own image. And yet Sherwood Magee says only that this new phase, which she dubs "nationalist-militarist," was at some level a questioning of the European romantic tradition, and that Ives's renewed interest in quoting hymn tunes might have grown from his wife's religiosity. (Ives married Harmony Twichell in 1908.) Both theories attempt to draw a positive musical progression out of a negative space. Charles Ives certainly did not spring from the head of his father as a fully formed innovator. It is now clear his most profound, effective work grew from years of searching and revision, and he absorbed many influences along the way. Sherwood Magee names them all as they go by, but none of them wrote the Concord Sonata, and none of them could have. The essence of the Ives phenomenon remains a mystery, as perhaps it must: no biography successfully

accounts for genius. It is just there, a given amid the mundane, external details of the subject's time, place, and personal failings. Mozart and Brahms were virtuosos by age ten, master composers in their early twenties. Such rapid blossoming of talent defies social and psychological explanation. Sherwood Magee winds up this short, depressing ride with a carnival psychic's cold-reading of Ives's character. He was, she says, "a flawed, brilliant, naïf, shrewd, insecure, compassionate, ambitious, deceitful, trusting, earnest human being." In short, a mess, but really not so different from the rest of us. The challenge of Ives studies in the future, she says, will be to appreciate the composer from this "unvarnished perspective." She can count me out. After years of keeping up with the revisionism, I'm too exhausted to do much more than put on a CD of the Second String Quartet and wonder, yet again, at the miracle of that luminous finale.

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