

Listening Guide to **Charles Ives's**  
"Symphony No. 4" (1909-1916)

Charles Ives (1874-1954) was born and raised in Connecticut, the son of a band leader and music teacher. He had experience with all kinds of popular music while growing up. Upon the death of his father in 1894, Ives decided to pursue his musical education under Horatio Parker at Yale. Parker was intolerant of Ives's experimentation even in those early years, when Ives wrote his "Symphony No. 1."

Ives concluded that he could not support himself as a musician and composer, so he embarked on a career in business. He joined the Mutual Life Insurance Company (NYC) but continued composing. He wrote his "Symphony No. 2" and portions of "Symphony No. 3" while working at Mutual Life. In 1907 he and a partner formed their own insurance company, and Ives became an innovator in the field—e.g., he invented estate planning and created a training school for insurance agents.

Throughout this period, 1896-1916, Ives composed most of his music, even though little of it was performed. In 1915 he wrote two classic American books. The first was Essays Before a Sonata, to accompany his "Concord Sonata," and the second was The Amount to Carry, an insurance classic. He composed his Fourth Symphony, which you shall hear, over the period 1909-1916.

The Fourth Symphony shows Ives's innovations at their best, and at their most controversial. Consider these features as you listen:

- Ives wanted the **flow** of musical relationships to be like the flow of other experiences; think about William James's notion of "the stream of consciousness" and hear how Ives constructs his music by such phenomenological principles
- Ives did not want his listeners to be passive; he demanded **active listening**; what techniques does he use to ensure active listening?
- his music is **polyphonic**; tunes often compete, clash, cross over one another; his melodic lines are independent, and he "**quotes**" extensively from American folk music, popular music, and church music (listen to the fugue in the third movement)
- Ives helped destroy tonality; his music is often **polytonic** or **atonic** (this is the revolution sparked by Schoenberg)
- there is extreme **dissonance** in his harmonies
- his rhythms are complex, often **polyrhythmic**; the meters are very irregular, sometimes syncopated
- Ives liked to experiment with alternative composing systems, such as quartertones; he was interested in creating a new, **formal system** for musical composition