

Robert W. Eshbach

Ives on Umpawaug Road

In 1912, Charles Ives bought a large parcel of land on Umpawaug Hill in the peaceful rural town of West Redding, Connecticut, 80 kilometers to the northeast of Manhattan and 8 kilometers to the south of his birthplace, Danbury. There, he built a country retreat: an 11-room, three-story house with a classic red barn and an ice house, and one of the first private tennis courts in the United States. At the entry to the property he built a small guesthouse, heated by a wood stove, with two tiny bedrooms that he and his wife would later occasionally lend out to families in need. Though his insurance business was in New York City, Ives lived in Redding from early spring until late fall of each year from 1913 until his death in 1954. Like many Redding residents today, he commuted to New York by train.

The Redding house held a particular significance for Ives. While still a student at Yale College, he had spent his summers hiking among the mountains and lakes of upstate New York, as a guest of his roommate, David Twichell. In the sublime surroundings of the Adirondack wilderness, he conceived or elaborated many of his most important works, among them, the *Concord Sonata*, parts of the third and fourth symphonies, the *Robert Browning Overture*, and the *Universe Symphony*. It was there that he also came to know his future wife, David's sister, Harmony.

The home that he built for Harmony and himself reflects the importance that those years of discovery held in Ives's aesthetic and emotional life. He designed the house to be reminiscent of the lake houses of upstate New York: a large, rambling, shingled dwelling in Adirondack Arts-and-Crafts style, with the entryway semi-concealed behind a latticework screen, a doorless, open floor-plan, a two-story great room with a large central fireplace and big picture windows, and — perhaps most characteristically — second-story screened sleeping porches, where the weary could be lulled to sleep by the sound of the wind in the treetops, and wake refreshed to the singing of the morning birds.

The years between 1902 and 1916 were the most fruitful of Ives's compositional career — a time when America's great poet of memory and place was intensely preoccupied with expressing his impressions and philosophies in music. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ives should have chosen to memorialize his new surroundings in tone. Umpawaug Hill is located near the place where Revolutionary War General Israel Putnam and his Continental Army encamped during the winter of 1778. Putnam's camp is the oldest state park in Connecticut, and it was already a national historic landmark when the Iveses moved to Redding in 1913. The second movement of Ives's *Three Places in New England*, »Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut« (written in 1912, re-using pieces that Ives composed in 1903 and 1904), evokes picnics and marching, and a boy's dream of soldiers and sacrifice, on a 4th of July sometime in the indeterminate past. Ives's composition is an example of how local history, and historic preservation in particular, inspired the creation of an important new work of international acclaim.

Redding has long been known as a town of writers, artists, and musicians. Authors from Mark Twain¹ to Flannery O'Connor, from naturalist Joseph Wood Krutch to children's book illustrator Tasha Tudor, have called Redding home, as have actors Hope Lange, Hume Cronyn, and Jessica Tandy. For many years, artist/photographer Edward Steichen was the Iveses' near neighbor, around the corner on Topstone Road.² Jascha Heifetz lived in the town in the 1940's (regrettably, the concert room that he added to his house has not been preserved). In the 1950's, Leonard Bernstein

1 »Stormfield« at Redding was Mark Twain's final home. Edison film footage of Mark Twain and his daughters having tea at Stormfield can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leYj--P4CgQ>.

2 In 1970, a group of local citizens incorporated as Redding Open Lands, Inc. to purchase, for public use, the Steichen property, part of which became the 270-acre Topstone Park.



Photo: Robert W. Eshbach

The Redding house in August 2012

lived on Fox Run Road, just 2 kilometers from the Ives House. More recently, harpsichordist Igor Kipnis and pianist John Kirkpatrick both had homes in town, as did folk singer Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary. Rock star Meat Loaf is a current resident.

Redding is a well-to-do town that prizes its history, which it seeks to preserve alongside the natural beauty of its open spaces. The town has an active historical society as well as a land trust that owns 126 properties — and holds 54 more in easement — comprising some 1,600 acres of meadows and woodlands. The Ives property abuts the 400-acre Saugatuck Forest Natural Area, making it a desirable potential addition to the town's open space holdings.

After Charles and Harmony's deaths, their estate remained in the Ives family. The house was occupied at first by the Iveses' adopted daughter, Edith, and her husband, George Tyler, and later by

Edith and George's son, Charles Ives Tyler, who used it as a summer home. The house has been kept in a remarkable state of preservation, and, with the exception of a new kitchen, it looks much as it did when Charles and Harmony Ives lived there, 60 and more years ago. In particular, Ives's music room was kept as a kind of time capsule or museum — his books still on the shelves, his music stacked in the drawers or lying on the piano, his hat and canes on the desk, and his pictures, posters and mementos tacked up on the door or leaning against the walls, just as he left them. Until recently the room appeared as though the composer had just stepped out for a moment and would presently return. This unique window into the world of America's first great composer has been known to Ives scholars for years. It has been called a national treasure, the equivalent of the Emerson house in Concord, Alcott's *Orchard House*, or Daniel Chester French's *Chesterwood* in Western Massachusetts.

It seemed inconceivable, therefore, when Ives's biographer Jan Swafford wrote last year in *Slate* magazine of its impending sale, that no individual or group would come forward to purchase and preserve this remarkable, historically important place.³ And yet, for an entire year, no credible buyer came forward.

The issue of the sale arose again on August 6, 2012 — this time with greater urgency. A *cri de coeur* by Zoë Martlew on Norman Lebrecht's »Slipped Disc« blog alerted the public that the sale of the property was imminent, that the house would soon be listed for \$1.5 million and would most likely be bought by a developer and torn down. Would the Charles Ives Society step in to save it? My own conversation with the Society's editor, James Sinclair, confirmed that the Society believed it lacked the resources; due to its small membership and its pressing editorial commitments (Ives's copyrights run out in 2024), the Society had determined it could not commit to such a significant project. It seemed, therefore, that the house was in danger of being lost. Together with Joe Kluger, past president of the Philadelphia Orchestra (now a principal with Wolf/Brown), composer Eric Chasalow, Irving G. Fine Professor of Music at Brandeis University, and attorney Richard M. Schwartz of Fried, Frank in New York, I formed a working group to explore feasible options. Thinking that Copland House in New York (<http://www.coplandhouse.org/>) might serve as a model, we initiated a dialogue with its artistic director, Michael Boriskin. Boriskin responded enthusiastically, generously sharing his experience and good ideas, and we briefly entertained the possibility of forming a partnership with Copland House to accomplish our goals.

On August 13, I toured the Ives House and met with Gayle Sherwood Magee and James Sinclair, president and chief editor, respectively, of the Charles Ives Society. Also present were several state politicians, and representatives of the Redding

Historical Society and the Redding Preservation Trust. A few days after that meeting, the Charles Ives Society decided to take the lead in purchasing and preserving the property, hoping to use it as a retreat for composers and scholars. Our working group threw its support behind their efforts.

In the course of the next month, the Charles Ives Society, the Redding Historical Society, and the Redding Preservation Trust did impressive work in hatching a plan to save the property, and all the pieces of the puzzle seemed to fall into place. There was strong local support for the venture; the town of Redding and the Redding Preservation Trust agreed to provide nearly half of the money necessary for the purchase, and the Charles Ives Society committed to raising the remainder of the funds. Together, they ultimately made an offer to Mr. Tyler of \$1.52 million — a sum that slightly exceeded his original asking price. It was dismaying, therefore, to be informed in mid-September that Mr. Tyler had chosen instead to accept a cash offer from a private party.

In response, articles appeared in the press, with prominent pieces in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Boston Globe*. I started an online petition, requesting Mr. Tyler to reconsider his decision (<https://www.change.org/petitions/charles-ives-tyler-save-the-charles-ives-house-2>). The petition quickly gathered more than 2,000 signatures — and a great many moving comments — from Ives lovers around the world, including many leading composers, performers, and scholars. On the petition website, Sylvia Van Sinderen of New Haven, Connecticut, expressed what many visitors to the house have felt: »The Ives house in West Redding, set in the countryside that was an inspiration to Charles Ives, is a magical place. The whole setting is more than the sum of its parts — it is a magical place that captures something special — a place that should not be lost by choice.« Composer Oliver Knussen wrote: »Thanks to James Sinclair, I was able to visit the house in August together with Zoë Martlew. I have been to many composers' houses over the years, but the Ives house — which he designed too — possesses a palpable sense of his presence comparable only with Sibelius' Ainola house, in my experience. It is

3 Jan Swafford, »Cleaning Out Ives' Closet: The tricky task of preserving an artist's life and work«, *Slate Magazine*, September 20, 2011, accessed online November 16, 2012. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music_box/2011/09/cleaning_out_ives_closet.html.

simply wrong that the place in which the Fourth Symphony, Holidays Symphony, Orchestral Sets and the Concord Sonata were written is to be disposed of as a piece of ordinary property. It should stand as a living monument to this great, visionary American artist and to the continuing importance of the art he made and supported, in a society which tries to pretend that these things don't matter.« Charles Peltz of Roslindale, Massachusetts, commented: »This house is to American music what Mt. Vernon or Monticello is to the general American community. In this house, the quintessential American innovator, iconoclast, epitome of creative self-reliance, conceived of a music that stunned the world. That is the desk where he, like Washington and Jefferson at their desks, created the works that threw off one of the last of the European fetters — that of cultural inferiority.« Frank Litterscheid, of Hehlen, Germany, wrote simply: »Many years ago I travelled hundreds of miles just to see that place.« Mr. Tyler remained unmoved, however, and, weeks later, the sale of the Ives estate to a private owner was consummated.

Mr. Tyler has not explained his choice. He has assured various people that the new owner is sensitive to the Ives legacy and does not intend to tear the house down. There was ample time and opportunity to preserve the property for the public, however, had he so wished. The contents of the Ives house and barn, including the composer's papers, manuscripts, and possessions, continue to be catalogued and archived — an effort begun many years ago by John Kirkpatrick and now being carried forward by James Sinclair, among others. Artist/composer Michael Gatonska has produced a touching three-part field recording of the soundscape surrounding Ives's home.⁴ There

4 <http://soundexplorations.blogspot.com/2012/08/soundscape-outside-charles-ives-door.html>.

are plans afoot to replicate Ives's music studio at the New York headquarters of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the owner of Ives's copyrights. Nevertheless, in losing this property, so wonderfully preserved for 60 years, posterity has lost a priceless treasure.

As I think about Ives, I am aware of how his artistry, more than that of any composer I know, evokes a sense of place, a sense of history. *The »St. Gaudens« in Boston Common, The Housatonic at Stockbridge, Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut, Ann Street, Children's Day at the Camp Meeting, Emerson, Alcott, Thoreau* — all show America's first composer of world significance to be deeply rooted in the New England soil and the New England character. He was inspired by his physical surroundings, by the history of America, and the example of its great men. His compositions and essays memorialize his world, even as they mark its passing.

»A rare experience of a moment at daybreak, when something in nature seems to reveal all consciousness, cannot be explained at noon«, wrote Charles Ives. »Yet it is part of the day's unity.« Like his house, Ives was open to the natural world around him. The breeze across the porch, the view from his window, the way the light fell on his desk, the surrounding soundscape of the hillside at daybreak — these were a part of the mysterious unity of his creative thinking. And so, saving his home — *Ives on Umpawaug Road* — seemed a particularly appropriate and important project. Having lost the Ives place, we have lost something truly irreplaceable: a source of insight that cannot be explained at noon or reconstructed in New York. With this sale, our memory of Charles Ives has grown dimmer, our access to his world more obscure. With it, an important piece of American history has been lost, and the American cultural landscape is poorer for it. ◀◀