

Internet from a book, so it is absurd to spend too much time reading about Net surfing. The knowledge needed to log on is not that complex, and once you've logged on, you

learn at the keyboard, not by turning pages. That said, this Rough Guide has the virtues of concision and thoroughness.

—David Nicholson

## Arts & Letters

**CHARLES IVES:**

*A Life with Music.*

By Jan Swafford. W. W. Norton. 450 pp. \$27.50

Why, after being discovered, rediscovered, revived, and celebrated for three-quarters of a century, is Charles Ives's music still new and challenging? Perhaps because of its contradictions. Of all expressions by an American in any field of the arts, it is at once the most backward looking and the most forward looking, the most concrete and the most abstract, the most rooted and the most soaring. Even more than Walt Whitman or Winslow Homer, Ives is the quintessential American artist, as elusive in character as the country itself.

Until now, that is. Benefiting from a generation of first-rate Ives scholarship, both historical and musicological, composer and writer Jan Swafford has produced a striking biography that meets the toughest challenge facing any biographer of an artist: elucidating the links between the life and the work without trivializing either.

Here is a vivid depiction of the commercial and musical world of Danbury, Connecticut, where Ives (1874–1954) was raised. His eccentric father, George, director of the municipal band, appears playing his echo cornet and experimenting with half-tone scales—a radical experiment for the time, inspired both by his boundless imagination and, it turns out, by his reading of the work of the German acoustician Hermann von Helmholtz. Here also is an affecting portrait of Harmony Ives, one of history's most devoted artistic spouses. And, of course, Ives himself: a jock at Yale, a superb church organist, an innovator in the field of estate planning (which won him a fortune in the insurance business), a campaigner on behalf of the League of Nations and other lost causes, and, finally, an irasci-

ble old man spending a small part of that fortune promoting his music.

During Ives's early career, Americans were too swept up in the automobile, the radio, and the other accouterments of progress to focus on the music of this radical who dwelt on the past. One exception was Gustav Mahler, who chanced upon a score of Ives's Third Symphony in 1911. Mahler, then winding up an unhappy stint at the New York Philharmonic, recognized a kindred spirit in the Yankee composer

and took the score back with him to

Europe. It might have been Ives's

big break, but it was not to

be. Within months, Mahler was

dead, and 35 more years were to

pass before the Third

Symphony was first per-

formed in public. Ives

received a Pulitzer Prize for

it in 1947.

Swafford does an admirable job of discussing Ives's work, especially the programmatically rich Concord Sonata (his first success) and the Fourth Symphony, which drew upon his entire life's work. Free of technical jargon, Swafford's text demands nothing from the reader but curiosity and willing ears.

Like his would-be champion Mahler, Ives used music to express a complex vision of loss and transcendence. Both composers used commonplace sounds to create extraordinary new landscapes of sound. But there the similarity ends. With Ives, the "found sounds" of daily life were unscrubbed and raw, at times wildly dissonant. And the musical quotations included such drastic departures from approved European models as camp meeting spirituals, brass band marches, turn-of-the-century croon songs, and ragtime.

Here is the essence of Ives's Americanism. His taste was omnivorous, and he possessed a keen ear for the authentic and passionate in all types of music. Yet he refused

to arrange his musical source material in neat hierarchies. Instead, he treated all music that expressed genuine human emotions as equal, applying the principles of Progressive-era democracy to sound in a way that harks back to Louis Moreau Gottschalk and looks forward to Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, and Gunther Schuller.

Like the American horizon, Ives's oeuvre remains open, unfinished, though not unexplored. Thanks to Swafford's skillful retelling, we can better understand why Ives's music remains so fresh. Its jagged juxtapositions, shifting moods, and eclectic references may have baffled Ives's contemporaries. But they speak to an adventurous, inclusive conception of art that is widely felt, and much disputed, a century after his greatest works were composed.

—S. Frederick Starr

#### **SOUL SAYS:**

##### *On Recent Poetry.*

By Helen Vendler. Harvard Univ. Press.  
256 pp. \$24.95

#### **THE GIVEN AND THE MADE:**

##### *Strategies of Poetic Redefinition.*

By Helen Vendler. Harvard Univ. Press.  
160 pp. \$29.95 cloth; \$14 paper

#### **THE BREAKING OF STYLE:**

##### *Hopkins, Heaney, Graham.*

By Helen Vendler. Harvard Univ. Press.  
160 pp. \$29.95 cloth, \$14 paper

When Helen Vendler describes the act of reading poetry, she makes it seem as straightforward as understanding the newspaper or humming a favorite tune: "The senses and the imagination together furnish rhymes for the poet. The rhythms of the poet translate themselves back, in the mind of the reader, into the senses and the imagination."

But nowadays the space between poet and reader is often too clouded for such clear passage. The contemporary reader at ease with Whitman but at sea with his successors may, in distress, look to the contemporary critic for a compass. Alas, most criticism written today in the academy, by critics whose proprietary interest in literature has yielded to a proprietary interest in self, will cause readers to jump ship and take their chances with the sharks.

Vendler's criticism is a saving exception. A university professor at Harvard, she responds generously to the workings of the poetic imag-

ination, in our time and across centuries: "The purpose of lyric, as a genre, is to represent an inner life in such a manner that it is assumable by others." Her singular talent as a reader is to assume the inner life of poet after poet, and to write precisely and eloquently about this merger of sensibilities.

When Vendler was 17, lyric poetry seemed to her "the voice of the soul itself." It still does, by the evidence of her three latest books: a volume of review essays and two volumes of thematic lectures. The essays on 20 contemporary poets in *Soul Says* date from the late 1980s and early 1990s, and generally mark the appearances of each author's newest work. But time and again, a brief topical essay is a map to the larger world of the poet's achievement.

*The Given and the Made* (the 1993 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent) considers how "an unmasked-for *donnée*" shaped the work of four poets. Robert Lowell's *donnée*, given by his famous family, was history. John Berryman's, given by his alcoholic manic-depression, was the Freudian concept of the id. Rita Dove's, given by birth, is her identity as a black American woman. Jorie Graham's, given by her trilingual upbringing, is the arbitrary attachment of word to thing, and the corresponding relation of an invisible to a material world.

*The Breaking of Style* (the 1994 Richard Ellman Lectures in Modern Literature at Emory University) traces the process by which three poets—Gerard Manley Hopkins, Seamus Heaney, and (again) Jorie Graham—shed an old style for a new: the equivalent, for Vendler, of casting off a material body. These transformations permit Vendler to explore the essential connection between style and substance in poetry, and to argue (against interpretive fashion) for "the human perceptual, aesthetic, and moral signals conveyed . . . by such elements as prosody, grammar, and lineation." Hers is a method of steady engagement with the poetry—with line length, with images, with odd detail, and overarching argument. There is a soul in the body of a poet's successful disposition of words.

Not every page of these books is equally persuasive, and there is some repetition among the volumes—especially when the same poets, and poems, are discussed. The books are best read not straight through but with time out to sample the poetry. Of living