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Another Songbook
ensemble für neue musik zürich
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Songs and Other Human Creatures – Songs and Instrumental Works by Charles Ives Arranged by Sebastian Gottschick

If a song “happens to feel like trying to fly where humans cannot fly, to sing what cannot be sung, to walk in a cave on all fours, or to tighten up its girth in blind hope and faith and try to scale mountains that are not, who shall stop it? – In short, must a song always be a song!”

This is what Charles Ives wrote in the Postface to his collection of 114 Songs, published at his own expense in 1922. He sent copies of the book to people he knew, critics and musicians, hoping to receive some positive feedback. Alas, if he received any response at all, it was mostly negative: Obviously the time was not yet ripe for Ives’ provoking and in equal measure irritating views on the function of music and the answers he gave in the shortest of the 114 Songs. Above all, he insisted that a song be accorded the same individuality and independence as a human creature. Consequently, Ives decided to include in the book and accept as part of his development even those songs he was dissatisfied with and which he considered epigonic. This explains the specific eclecticism of the collection, as it unites the extremes of simplicity and complexity, experiment and sentiment, nostalgia and utopia.

For the second part of his transcriptions Sebastian Gottschick again presents a selection of songs and chamber music works that reflect this broad range. The songs themselves, composed between 1898 and 1921, are so innovative that they invite experimentation in texture and orchestration. What is more, in Ives’ intellectual world the boundaries between genres are blurred: time and again, motifs, themes, gestures or even entire phrases appear in new vocal and/or instrumental contexts, that is, they change without losing their identity. The four oldest pieces, combined in pairs by Gottschick – Ich grolle nicht/I’ll not complain (Heine) with Ilmenau/Over all the treetops (Goethe) and Feldeinsamkeit/In Summer Fields (Hermann Allmers) with Weil’ auf mir/Eyes so dark (Lenau) – were written between Ives’ final year at Yale University and the year 1902, when he abandoned his career as a musician. Ives’ ability to transform the tone of the European and above all German art song is honoured in Gottschick’s arrangement by musical greetings from Ives’ European colleagues, Schubert, Schumann, Franz, and Brahms. In 1906 Ives composed The Cage, one of his best-known songs. Its spinning ostinato of stacked fourths pushes the boundaries of traditional tonality as Satie did before and Schoenberg would do later. Based on
Robert Louis Stevenson’s eponymous “poem in the poem”, *Requiem* dates from 1911 and impresses the listener with its expressive force, while the satiric commentary on the 1912 presidential election, *Vote for Names!*, which exists only as a fragmentary sketch, demonstrates Ives’ theatrical talent. *Swimmers* (Louis Untermeyer), a song of unsurpassed naturalistic drama and wild virtuosity, is a parable of the domination of nature with a surprising end. Created in 1915 and 1921 respectively, *Thoreau* and *Walt Whitman* are two further masterpieces in the collection and pay homage to two literary father figures; the music of *Thoreau* – whose text is partly recited – is directly taken from the *Concord Sonata*. In 1920 Ives wrote the wild cowboy song *Charlie Rutlage*, which is based on a poem by the well-known songwriter and poet D.J. “Kid” O’Malley. In the original, the pianist even joins in singing the slang chorus “Whoopee ti yi yo, git along little dogies”, which in Sebastian Gottschick’s version comes from offstage.

Ives had already set some of the songs for orchestra, for instance the opening piece of the collection, *Majority (The Masses)*; it lends itself well to orchestration, for Ives here writes massive, dramatic clusters that emphasise the socially reformative lyrics he wrote himself. *Ann Street* (Maurice Morris), one of the shortest of the 114 Songs, is a subtle criticism of the consequences of “Gilded Age” materialism symbolised by a small, almost forgotten alley in the Wall Street district. Taken from the group of war songs, *Nov. 2, 1920* contrasts election day with a father’s mourning for his son who died in World War I; Ives, who also wrote the song’s text, quotes Whitman’s *Lilacs* elegy in the impressive coda. *1, 2, 3*, which is also aphoristic and satirizes the peculiarities of the “Yankees”, is juxtaposed with two serious and deeply autobiographically tinged songs, *Maple Leaves* and *Remembrance* (1920/21), which in Gottschick’s arrangement have been combined into one piece. *Maple Leaves* (based on a poem by Thomas Bailey Aldrich) addresses the topos of transience; *Remembrance* the transcendent quality of music. Here, as was often the case, Ives sublimes the grief over the untimely death of his father into a delicate and fragile musical elegy.

The song arrangements are complemented by three instrumental pieces. In the take-off *Over the Pavements*, Ives imitates the different gaits and movements of pedestrians in the city and transforms them into a bold polyrhythmic and polymetric study. The second movement of the *Violin Sonata No. 4*, which was completed around 1915, has the subtitle “Children’s Day at the Camp Meeting” in memory of the Protestant outdoor services that impressed Ives as a boy. This and *Largo* for violin and piano of 1901 form an associative, meandering stream of sounds, which transports the tonal and atonal, the familiar and unfamiliar in equal measure, becoming a symbol of an aesthetic democracy in music, which to Ives was the anticipation of a free community of people.

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