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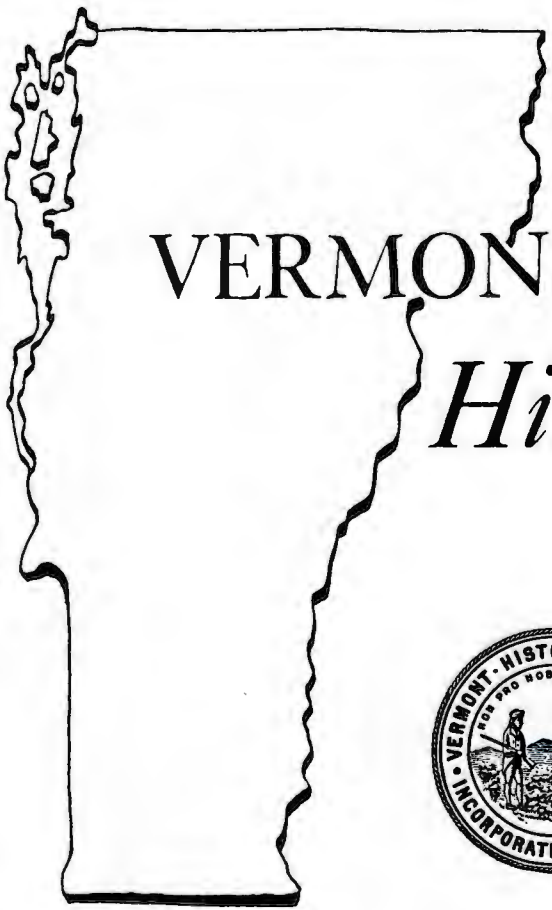

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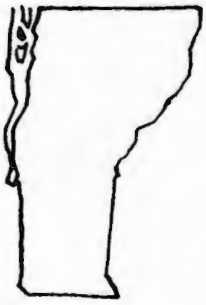


Ruggles's idiosyncratic approach to music and painting was one way of crossing the barbed-wire fences of convention.

Men and Mountains: Carl Ruggles, Vermont Composer

By JANE AMBROSE

Once when Henry Cowell, an important experimental composer and close friend of Carl Ruggles, visited his colleague in Arlington, he found him pounding out a single chord and singing a single tone at the top of his voice. Ruggles refused to be interrupted, and it was an hour or so before he would tell Cowell the meaning of his bizarre behavior. "I'm trying over this damned chord," said he, "to see whether it still sounds superb after so many hearings." "Oh," Cowell said tritely, "time will surely tell whether the chord has lasting value." "The hell with time!" Carl replied. "I'll give this chord the test of time right now. If I find I still like it after trying it over several thousand times, it'll stand the test of time, all right!"[1]

In this incident Ruggles displayed some of the characteristics of the New England mind first explored in Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1841 essay on self-reliance. There Emerson developed his ideas on the individual's need to seek an original means of expression. Emerson's central thesis was "Do not imitate." He summarily rejected fashion, tradition, "foolish consistency," and cant and thereby provided a key to the New England "original." The music of Carl Ruggles, as well as Charles Ives, can best be understood in the tradition of Emerson's essays, Thoreau's nature writing, and Emily Dickinson's poetry. What characteristics best describe Ruggles and his fellow originals? They were uncompromising, confrontational, dismissive, untraditional, and stubborn, but, above all, they did not imitate. Perhaps a metaphorical poem by Vermonter and contemporary of Ruggles, Frances Frost, most aptly states their position. In "Advice to a Trespasser" she wrote, "There are several ways of crossing barbed-wire fences / According to your inner differences / On various occasions,"[2] Ruggles's idiosyncratic approach to music and painting was one way of crossing the barbed-wire fences of convention.

Like Melville and Hawthorne or Thoreau and Emerson, the names of Ives and Ruggles are frequently linked. Although their styles are quite different, they are united in their commitment to the expression of the inner self as the ultimate goal of composition. The regionalism of Ives is evident in his several musical evocations of his Connecticut boyhood, in the titles of locations in his *Three Places in New England*, and in the content of the essays on Emerson, Hawthorne, "the Alcotts," and Thoreau that precede his *Second Pianoforte Sonata - "Concord, Mass., 1840-1860."* That Ruggles was just as prototypical a New Englander is perhaps not as immediately apparent, nevertheless his music reflected his belief in the New England brand of transcendentalism. The landscape around him was the core of his creative inspiration. A feeling for New England, while more literal in Ives, is fully as evident in Ruggles's work. Because he was a painter as well as a composer, Ruggles had a means to express visually his sense of place—his version of New England. Landscapes such as *Sea at B[uzzards] Bay* and *West Mountain* are, for example, titular analogs to his composition *Men and Mountains*. In perhaps a less obvious way, his music expressed his profound relation to place.

Carl Ruggles was born in East Marion, Massachusetts, on March 11, 1876, into a family that had settled in Roxbury in 1637. After experimenting with a cigar box violin, he began study with a New Bedford bandmaster, George Hill. (Charles Ives's first lessons were with his bandmaster father, George.) Like so many curious young musicians, he took advantage of the cultural riches of Boston. Unlike his better known colleagues Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson, he did not go to Paris to soak up the European sophistication of Debussy and Ravel. Perhaps he had read Emerson's now famous dictum: "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." He decided to attend English classes and study music with John Knowles Paine at Harvard.

At the time that Ruggles and Ives began composing, intellectuals and classical composers considered the United States a barbarian wilderness in terms of musical culture because there was no "tradition" of native classical music to provide a context for new compositions. Europe was the finishing school for composers pursuing careers in classical music. Nevertheless, Ives chose to stay in Connecticut where he attended Yale and studied composition with the Boston-born, European-trained Horatio Parker (although, as he said, he majored in baseball rather than music or economics). Parker, whose music sounded like that of his European contemporaries, had little influence on Ives's style. Ives developed into an untempered genius who anticipated many of the more "modern" aspects of twentieth-century writing. His career as a successful insurance executive gave him the freedom to compose with his creativity unhampered by the

need to please the musical public. Ives borrowed freely from American folk and popular music, and much of his genius lay with his talent for transforming those melodies into an idiosyncratic new music. Unlike Ives, Ruggles did not choose to incorporate recognizably American elements, such as folk tunes, in his pieces, but rather to experiment with independent and non-traditional compositional elements in an uncompromising search for what he called "sublimity." He chose the isolation of the untutored new world as a means to escape the past. In literal harmony, then, were his searches for a new means of communication and a new musical environment.

Populism in American music began in the 1920s and reached its heights in the 1930s when the Roosevelt Democrats appealed to artists to use their skills to heal the scars of the Depression by instilling in the American people a pride in their heritage. Compositions like Aaron Copland's *Billy the Kid*, William Schuman's *American Festival Overture*, Douglas Moore's *Devil and Daniel Webster*, and Randall Thompson's *Peaceable Kingdom* included folk elements. Elie Siegmeister and Charles Seeger committed themselves to the collection and dispersal of American folk songs. Ruggles, on the other hand, chose to reject folkloric references and recognizable themes in favor of a completely dissonant, abstract style. Critic Lawrence Gilman aptly describes him as "a unicorn with a New England conscience. For half the intensity and power of Ruggles's music—and it is both powerful and intense—proceeds from the unabating struggle in Ruggles's soul between the unicorn and the New England ancestry."[3] Ruggles, the untutored primitive who considered Brahms a "sissy," understood instinctively how to "evoke," to use his term, the sense of the old in the sound of the new.

Ruggles's first acquaintance with Vermont came in 1921 when Rockwell Kent invited him to share a large house in Sunderland. While there, Ruggles, in his later years perhaps as accomplished a painter as composer, did his first painting, a landscape of Mount Anthony.[4] He also sat as Kent's model for Captain Ahab for the Random House edition of *Moby Dick*. He returned the next summer as the guest of Dorothy Canfield Fisher and again in 1923, this time establishing himself as a member of the local artistic community by founding the Arlington Choral Society. The next spring, he and his wife, Charlotte, bought the old Arlington schoolhouse, which he was to keep until advanced age forced him to move. "There were blackboards all around," he wrote, "we had kerosene lamps and candles, electric lights came later. We lived there two or three winters but that was tough."[5] The schoolhouse was later renovated, and with the exception of short periods of time in Minnesota and Florida and a few winters in New York, Ruggles lived and worked in the state of Vermont until his death in Bennington on October 24, 1971.[6]

Ruggles was the model for this portrait of Melville's Captain Ahab, done by Manchester artist Rockwell Kent in the late 1920s.

As a painter, Ruggles had been influenced most directly by the ultra-modernist "Secessionists" who gathered around Alfred Stieglitz in New York. Their work was prominently displayed at Stieglitz's "291" gallery on Fifth Avenue and in his journal, "Camera Work." Like their European counterparts in Germany and Austria, they were convinced that art had its source somewhere within the artist. This philosophy was, of course, in perfect harmony with Ruggles's own beliefs. A European precedent for Ruggles's participation as a composer/painter was set by Arnold Schoenberg, an active participant in the Blaue Reiter group—the Munich Secessionists organized by Wassily Kandinsky—who began exhibiting their work in 1911.

From the point of view of these visual artists, music was unquestionably abstract. The credibility of their own non-representational art could therefore be validated by relating it to the abstract nature of music. The painters whose works look most like those of Ruggles were Marsden Hartley and John Marin, Stieglitz disciples and friends of Kent. Like Ruggles, their canvases sometimes had musical titles—Hartley's *Bach Preludes*, for example. Ruggles's own paintings are mostly landscapes—artistic descriptions of the same scenes that he was describing in his musical works. Ruggles landscapes are, as Nina Archabal suggested in her doctoral dissertation, "essentially records of something he had seen and en-

joyed and then rendered poetically . . . paintings and drawings of local scenes in Vermont. A favorite subject was his own converted schoolhouse home. Above all, these paintings reflect his intimacy with and love for the Vermont environment."[7]

The Robert Hull Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont owns nine works by Ruggles. Although most of them are landscapes and floral still lifes, they are not static representations. They are rich with activity and lines in motion. Even a *Landscape with a Building* suggests moving air currents. They are all to varying degrees abstract expressionist works—two, in fact, have "abstract" in their titles. Some, like *Lake and Clouds* and two turbulent storm scenes, need titles to identify their subjects. A vase of flowers reminds one in color, tone, and design of the pastels of Odilon Redon, a French symbolist painter. In all ways they are visual analogs of Ruggles's musical compositions. Like his music, they frequently present specific physical environments. A crayon and pencil "southern" scene with palms surely derives from Ruggles's years in Florida and reminds the viewer of Winslow Homer's Florida work. The other landscapes are from the Vermont years and one in this group is specifically identified as *West Mountain*.

In 1935 at Bennington Ruggles held his first one-man show. The next year another followed, as did a show in 1951 at the Southern Vermont Art Center of forty-nine of his paintings. There several of Ruggles's compositions were played. In 1962 he was awarded an honorary doctor of music degree at the University of Vermont. Department chair Howard Bennett's citation read in part, "He has been one of the outstanding pioneer composers of modern music in America, a man of uncompromising ideals and great originality. The compositions he wrote thirty years ago still sound advanced." President John T. Fey responded, "Carl Ruggles, because you have been true to yourself, as a man and as a composer, and thereby achieved true originality, which all independent Vermonters admire, we delight to honor you."[8] In 1962 Goddard College in Plainfield displayed twenty-two paintings and Bennington College pianist Lionel Nowak performed Ruggles's *Evocations*.

No doubt Ruggles's choice of Arlington was dictated in part by the presence of Harriette Miller, his patron for over fifty years and dedicatee of several of his pieces. Ruggles achieved his unrestricted freedom to compose what pleased him only through Harriette Miller's generous support. In his obituary for Ruggles, Charles Seeger, a close friend and himself the primary exponent of what he called "dissonant counterpoint," relates a Vermont story that inadvertently tells us something about the Ruggles relationship with Arlington. "Carl told the story himself: at a preceding town meeting (really lively, even for New England; they threw a troublesome disputant out of the window at one meeting) a motion was

This black and white photographic reproduction of Ruggles's "West Mountain" suggests the abstract quality of his painting. Original at Fleming Museum, University of Vermont.

presented to name the street 'Ruggles Street'; and it might have passed but for a neighbor who rose to say 'we all know Mr. Ruggles is a famous composer and Mrs. Ruggles is the nicest lady in town, but I don't think we should name a street in Arlington after anyone who has a mortgage on his house.' And they didn't."[9]

Otto Luening, Bennington composer and one of the fathers of American electronic music, recalled in his autobiography that he had invited Ruggles to the Bennington campus for two days for fifty dollars and room and board. Ruggles could do anything he thought "appropriate." "He came to 9:00 A.M. orchestration class. He was quiet for the first fifteen minutes and then, as I began explaining the term *col legno*, he hollered, 'For God's sake, why don't you give them something to chew on—something real, like Richard Strauss or *Götterdämmerung*? . . . The women were astounded and somewhat paralyzed. When they came to, they ran out and spread the news that a real man had arrived on campus."[10] Although Bennington's reputation as a leader in the support of new music

and art would have suggested an easy acceptance of Ruggles and his somewhat unorthodox manner, even it was surprised at his confrontational style.

Sophisticated listeners need time and patience when approaching Ruggles's music for the first time. His style still strikes our ears as dissonant and radically different from works by his contemporaries. Perhaps composer Lou Harrison makes the best effort to describe Ruggles's work. He coins words such as "disintegral" and "disbalance" in an effort to identify Ruggles's musical innovations, and concludes ". . . the chordal combinations are arrived at by a concatenation of melodies which are in themselves wide-intervalled, varied in rhythm, and of long, fully sustained flight. . . . Each element in the music is part of an almost innocent original oneness."[11] This language is challenging for lay reader and musician alike, yet listening to Ruggles's music will make clear why it is so difficult to describe.

Ruggles was a much less prolific composer than painter. Because he held extraordinarily high standards for himself and few of his pieces met those standards, his works number fewer than a dozen. He destroyed an opera based on German playwright Gerhart Hauptmann's *Sunken Bell* after more than a dozen years of work. All of Ruggles's compositions went through extensive revision and some remained incomplete through most of his life. The grandiose and mythic nature of many of Ruggles's titles suggests a breadth of conception comparable to the heroic efforts of some nineteenth-century romantics. *Angels*, an early piece, is dedicated to Charles Seeger and is a means of working out Seeger's theories of dissonant counterpoint. In this piece, as in much of Ruggles's work, the harmony is a consequence of intersecting melodic lines. In the original muted brass version, the nature of the harmony gives the effect of a distant, dissonant chorale. *Men and Mountains*, a short tone poem, is in three sections. The first, *Men*, "a rhapsodic proclamation" for brass with string support, a favorite Ruggles combination, gives a compelling sense of soaring and falling. The next, *Lilacs*, for strings alone, was described poetically by writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher: "*Lilacs*, music wistful, frail, tenuously complicated, tells of the ebbing away of humanity from the scenes of its old conquests, of sagging rooftrees and rotting farmhouses, of the soft-footed advance of the forest back over the land which man had wrested into his own hands, of dust on deserted hearthstones, of 'brush in the pastures'—that New England phrase which to any Yankee brings up the whole picture."[12] The third movement, *Marching Mountains*, pictures the majesty of Ruggles's chosen landscape, the mountains of southern Vermont.

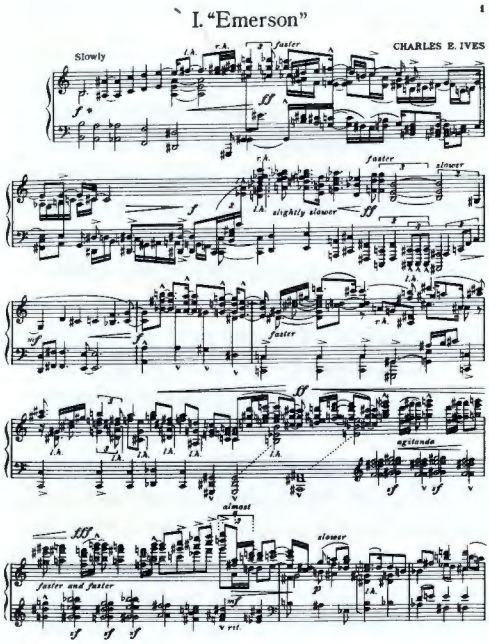
Sun-Treader is one of Ruggles's best and best-known works and one

of his personal favorites. The overall effect is of jagged melodies and of dissonances piled on top of one another. The rhythm gives a sense of disorganized forward movement. Repetitive tympani strokes introduce this exceptionally strong piece. Surprisingly soft episodic sections remind the listener of the more lyrical early romantic compositions of Arnold Schoenberg. Ruggles once said, "Oh, there are some fine works all right, the *St. Matthew Passion, Missa Solemnis, The Ring, Tristan*, and *Sun-Treader*. When I wrote *Sun-Treader*, I knew it was great. I knew it!" Given Ruggles's predilection for being hypercritical of his own work, he may very well have considered this composition comparable to the masterpieces of Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner.

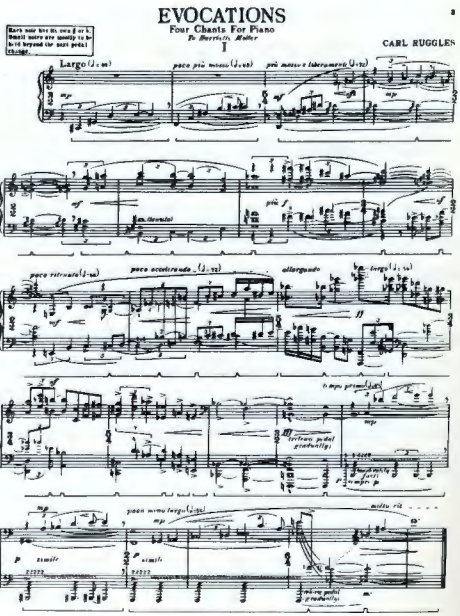
Vox Clamans in Deserto is a strongly expressionist cycle for chamber orchestra and soprano. *Portals*, a piece constructed of large and small orchestral elements, suggests perhaps the impressive gates to the hereafter of Charles Ives's *Unanswered Question*. Ives called his piece "a philosophical research into the Perennial Question of existence." Similarly Ruggles chose his text from Walt Whitman: "What are those of the known but to ascend and enter the Unknown? And what are those of life but for Death?"

The individual movements of *Evocations* are each dedicated to an important person in the composer's life. Sometimes the style of a composer is as visually recognizable as the style of a painter. Interestingly, the first movement, dedicated to Harriette Miller, looks to a musician on the page very much like an Ives composition. The second movement, based in large part on the highly dissonant interval of a second, a favorite of the composer's, is dedicated to John Kirkpatrick, a pianist who first introduced Ruggles's music to the public and who became the primary force behind its dissemination. Ruggles's wife, Charlotte, is the subject of a movement marked "moderato appassionato" and, later, "plangently, broadly singing, expressivo." The last movement is dedicated to Ives, a good friend and strong supporter. The original version is scored for solo piano. Ruggles's later version is for orchestra. In their heroic strength and force the bass unison and typani roll that introduce *Organum* are reminiscent of works of Brahms and Liszt. Ruggles's last composition, dedicated to Charlotte, was a beautiful hymn without words, called *Exaltation*, atypical in its simplicity and written in 1958 after he had moved to the Flanders Inn in Bennington following his wife's death. Its few dissonances are pungently effective in their ability to surprise and move the listener.

Finally, what is it that associates Ruggles so closely with his New England heritage? Music critic Paul Rosenfeld wrote, "Ruggles's harmonic schemes are of the greatest distinction. This quality, neither rich nor magnificent, and nonetheless exquisitely refined, and new to harmonic writing, in-



The first pages of the scores of Ives's "Emerson" and Ruggles's "Evocations" shows similarities in both melodic and harmonic structure. Note the ascending melodic lines and the increasing degree of dissonance in both pieces.



eluctably associates itself with early American furniture and Hartley's color, Portsmouth doorways and Hawthorne's prose. His instrumental timbre is equally this Cape Cod American's own. . . . The feeling of all Ruggles' more recent, rounder compositions is intensely local. The melancholy and smothered passion of the eloquently weaving violin music in 'Lilacs' . . . is as characteristic of the New England countryside as anything by Robinson or Frost. So, too, is the harshness of certain of Ruggles' brazen sonorities. . . ."[13] Listening to Ruggles's music and looking at his canvases is like taking an impressionistic journey through New England with a superb travel guide who has his own way of seeing things.

In a letter to a friend in early January of 1881, Emily Dickinson wrote, "A Little Boy ran away from Amherst a few Days ago, and when asked where he was going, replied 'Vermont or Asia'."[14] In the early part of our own century, as in Emily Dickinson's time, Vermont, though indisputably a part of New England, was still in many ways an exotic and strange land. While true foreign countries were, in fact, the training ground for most artists of his generation, Carl Ruggles chose the state (and state of mind) of Vermont as the place to explore the musical parallel of what Van Wyck Brooks called "literary Yankeedom." For Ruggles, the mountains of Vermont were a harmonious setting for the expression of the regionalism that lies at the heart of the New England creative imagination.

NOTES

[1] Lou Harrison, *About Carl Ruggles* (New York: Alicat Bookshop, 1946), introduction.

[2] Frances Frost, "Advice to a Trespasser," *Hemlock Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 32. And see Margaret Edwards, "Frances Frost, 1905-1959, Sketch of a Vermont Poet," *Vermont History* 56 (Spring, 1988): 102-111.

[3] Gilman quoted in Madeleine Goss, *Modern Music Makers* (New York: Dutton, 1952), 270.

[4] Cf Nina M. Archabal, *Carl Ruggles: An Ultramodern Composer as Painter*, Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1979.

[5] John Kirkpatrick, "The Evolution of Carl Ruggles," *Perspective of New Music* (Spring / Summer, 1968): 155.

[6] Earl Walter Booth, *New England Quartet: E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles*, Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 1974, 124, contradicts: "Carl Ruggles died in 1971 at ninety-five on Cape Cod, his birth-place, near the sea he loved." Perhaps Booth was subliminally influenced by Virgil Thomson's description of Ruggles, which he quotes on the same page. "Wiry, salty, disrespectful and splendidly profane, he recalls the old hero of comic strips, Popeye the Sailor, never doubtful of his relation to sea or soil."

[7] Archabal, 182.

[8] The author would like to thank University of Vermont archivist David Blow for providing a copy of the degree citation.

[9] Charles Seeger, "In Memoriam: Carl Ruggles (1876-1971)," *Perspectives of New Music* (Spring / Summer, 1972): 171.

[10] Otto Luening, *The Odyssey of an American Composer* (New York: Schirmer, 1980), 352-53.

[11] Harrison, 12.

[12] Program notes for CBS Masterworks M2 34591.

[13] Herbert A. Liebowitz, ed., *Paul Rosenfeld, Music Impressions* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1929, 1969), 286.

[14] E. D. to Mrs. J. G. Holland, January, 1881, *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, ed. Thomas A. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1958, 1971), no. 685.