

Analysis of Charles Ives' "The Unanswered Question"

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In this paper, I will guide the reader through the different musically theoretical aspects of Charles Ives' "The Unanswered Question," while drawing attention to how the theory behind the music contributes to the story of the piece.

Since the flutes and trumpet/strings have different numbers of measures, each part of the music I refer to will be as it most closely occurs over the strings/trumpet measures, which are numbered on the attached annotated copy of the piece, (for instance, I might refer to "the flute line that occurs over the strings measure 20," etc.).

Ives' Foreword

In order to best understand how the music expresses the programmatic nature of the piece, it is important to include Ives' foreword:

"The parts of the flute quartet may be taken by two flutes, upper staff, oboe and clarinet, lower staff. The trumpet part may be played by an English horn, an oboe or clarinet, if not playing in 'The Answers.' The string quartet or string orchestra (*con sordini*), if possible, should be 'off stage,' or away from the trumpets and flutes. The trumpet should use a mute unless playing in a very large room, or with a larger string orchestra. If more than four strings, a basso may play with the 'cellos (8va basso). The strings play *ppp* throughout with no change in tempo. They are to represent 'The Silences of the Druids – Who Know, See and Hear Nothing.' The trumpet intones 'The Perennial Question of Existence,' and states it in the same tone of voice each time. But the hunt for 'The Invisible Answer' undertaken by the flutes and other human beings, becomes gradually more active, faster and louder through an *animado a con fuoco*. This part need not be played in the exact time position indicated. It is played in somewhat of an impromptu way; if there be no conductor, one of the flute players may direct their playing. "The Fighting Answerers," as the time goes on, and after a "secret conference," seem to realize a futility, and begin to mock "The Question" – the strife is over for the moment. After they disappear, 'The Question' is asked for the last time, and "The Silences" are heard beyond in 'Undisturbed Solitude.'"¹

¹ Ives, Charles E. *The Unanswered Question*. New York: Southern Music Publishing Co. Inc., 1953.

Ives gives a clear description as to what each instrumental “section” is supposed to represent. The strings represent “The Silence of the Druids – Who Know, See and Hear Nothing,” which act as passive observers of life who have no purpose but to exist. The trumpet is a lone figure whose purpose is to ask “The Perennial Question of Existence,” a pondering of the meaning of life. The flutes represent “The Answers” who at first seek to find an answer to the question, but then realize they can’t, and begin to mock the trumpet for continuing to pose the question.

The purpose of this paper is to address the question, “How does the music represent these characters and their story?” I intend to answer this question by analyzing the piece, one group of instruments (or “characters”) at a time.

The Strings

In the scheme of the story, the strings have a passive role. They are observers of life and are present only to exist. Seeing as they play a constant, tonal chorale texture, I analyzed the strings from a traditionally harmonic perspective. They are in the key of G major and play a series of chords that is thirteen measures long, and then repeats. The first thirteen measures (mm. 1 – 13 in the piece) harmonically look like so:

G: | I | I | I | iii | iii vi_4^6 | vi_4^6 I^6 V_5^6/IV | IV IV_4^6 | IV | IV V^6 | V^6 ii | ii | ii | I^6 |

During the second cycle of thirteen measures (mm. 14 – 26) there is no change. However, in what would at first appear to be a third cycle, Ives changes the strings’ harmonic progression. He prolongs the use of the I chord, iii chord and IV chord, but then, in strings measure 37, he introduces a modal interchange chord, the $bVII$. From there, it appears the cycle is broken, but through the end of the piece, Ives uses a lot of the significant chords (such as I, ii, iii, IV and vi) in

order to keep musical continuity and hold the role of the strings as being the Druids, who Know, See, and Hear Nothing. The continuous dynamic and textural flow represent how the druids don't gain anything enriching in their lives, so they don't change very much. But, the instances of breaking the thirteen-measure cycle represents the fact that life changes no matter what, whether it's meaning is actively questioned, or if they are just along for the experience.

The strings end in the same texture as they started, further solidifying their role as passive observers of life.

The Trumpet

The role of the trumpet is to ask "The Perennial Question of Existence," or the meaning of life. The trumpet does this by posing the question in the same tone and style each time. This question's motif is "B-flat, C-sharp, E, E-flat, C," or set class sc(01346). It is significant to point out that on every other statement of the "question," the last note is changed from C to B, creating set class sc(01356). Perhaps this is a nod to the idea that if we can't find an answer to a question, we ask it in a different way to see if the answer will be easier to find. Even as the "answerers," (the flutes) begin to mock the trumpet by the end of the piece, the trumpet is determined to persist with the question and look for the answer throughout life.

The Flutes

The flutes play the role of "The Answerers," who seek to find the answer to the trumpets question about the meaning of life, at first trying to answer the question, then getting more and more agitated, then deciding there is no answer and mocking the trumpet for even posing the question in the first place.

Their first entrance is above string measure 20. Their texture is mostly in long tones with just two moving lines in string measure 21, with an expressive mark of Adagio. The set class contained is a mostly-chromatic collection, but missing C, B-flat, A, G-sharp, and G. The existing notes in the chromatic set create a set class of sc(0123457). The second entrance occurs in string measure 25. The texture has a little bit more movement, with each part having their own different

moving line, incorporating quarter notes and eighth notes. Additionally, the expressive marking is *Andante*, which is a little bit faster, and helps create the “gradual increase in activity.” Even more so, Ives uses more notes in the chromatic collection this time, using every note in the full collection except for E, E-flat and D, creating the set class $sc(012345678)$.

The third answer occurs starting in string measure 33. The parts are a little more active still in terms of their individual movement, although, no significantly new rhythmic material is introduced. However, Ives uses the tempo mark *Allegretto*, faster still than *Andante*, and uses the set class $sc(012346789)$ (it’s important to note that the number of pitches Ives uses in a set class increases with each answer, for the most part). The fourth answer comes in at measure 40. At this point, Ives uses the full chromatic collection, at an even faster tempo of *Allegro*, and introduces the dynamics of *forte* and *fortissimo*. Along these answers, it seems as though the flutes become more and more frustrated that they haven’t found an answer, and so every answer becomes more and more agitated.

The fifth answer occurs around string measure 46. It contains another portion of the chromatic collection, except it’s missing B-flat and A. It is at *Allegro Molto*, the fastest tempo so far, and the dynamics are *forte* and *fortissimo* with a *crescendo*, and the rhythm of triplet eighth notes is introduced, making this answer clearly the most agitated and active thus far. In string measure 48, the answers suddenly play a rhythmically concerted long tone of a chromatic tetrachord at *pianissimo*. This is likely the point in the music where they are having their “secret conference,” and deciding that the question cannot be answered, and begin to turn on the trumpet and mock them for posing the question in the first place.

The final “answer” is where the flutes mock the trumpet. It starts in measure 51, with flutes I and II playing the trumpets question (B-flat, C-sharp, E, E-flat, B natural) except that the second flute plays a B-flat at the end as opposed to a B natural. In true mocking fashion, they have effectively distorted the trumpets question. The flutes continue this climax of rhythm, range and dynamic, using the full chromatic collection and going through expressive marks of *molto agitato*

and con fuoco, ending in string measure 55 in the high part of their range and at a molto fortissimo, ending their part of the piece.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ives, Charles E. *The Unanswered Question*. New York: Southern Music Publishing Co. Inc., 1953.
 - This is the score that I analyzed and referred to in my paper, and also where I obtained Charles Ives' foreword to the piece.

The Unanswered Question

CHARLES E. IVES

(1908)

I
II
Flutes
(or Oboe) III
(or Clarinet) IV

Largo molto sempre (for strings & trumpet) (about 50-♩)

Trumpet
(or English Horn,
or Oboe,
or Clarinet)

Violin I
ppp con sordini

Violin II
ppp con sordini

Viola
ppp con sordini

Violoncello
(or Contrabass)
ppp con sordini

I
II
Flutes
(or Oboe) III
(or Clarinet) IV

Trumpet
(or English Horn,
or Oboe,
or Clarinet)

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello
(or Contrabass)

actual notes

sc (0123457)

missing (4 root in strings), B^b, A, G

Adagio

I
II
Flutes
(or Oboe) III
(or Clarinet) IV
Trumpet
(or English Horn,
or Oboe
or Clarinet)
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
(vs. Contrabass)

Vi^b₄ I^b V^s IV IV⁴ V II

Andante

I
II
Flutes
(or Oboe) III
(or Clarinet) IV
Trumpet
(or English Horn,
or Oboe,
or Clarinet)
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
(vs. Contrabass)

sc (012345678) missing E, D, C

sc (01356)

I^b I

55(012346789)

Allegretto

Flutes I
II
(or Oboe III)
(or Clarinet IV)
Trumpet
(or English Horn,
or Oboe,
or Clarinet)
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
(or Contrabass)

Allegro

Flutes I
II
(or Oboe III)
(or Clarinet IV)
Trumpet
(or English Horn,
or Oboe,
or Clarinet)
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
(or Contrabass)

Full chromatic collection

7
S(0123456789) missing B^b, A

Allegro molto

I
II
Flutes (or Oboe) III
(or Clarinet) IV

Allegro molto *ff*

Trumpet (or English Horn, or Oboe, or Clarinet)

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello (or Contrabass)

S(012346) 48

Allegro-accel. to Presto

I
II
Flutes (or Oboe) III
(or Clarinet) IV

Trumpet (or English Horn, or Oboe, or Clarinet)

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello (or Contrabass)

chromatic tetra chord

S(01556)

Trumpet holds here until flutes start.

V^b/_{IV} IV ii I

full chromatic set used

Molto agitando

I
II
Flutes
(or Oboe) III
(or Clarinet) IV
Trumpet
(or English Horn
or Oboe
or Clarinet)
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
(8va Contrabass)

I
II
Flutes
(or Oboe) III
(or Clarinet) IV
Trumpet
(or English Horn
or Oboe,
or Clarinet)
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
(8va Contrabass)

IV 4

sc (01356)

If played by Oboe and Clarinet, last measure ends

Oboe
Clarinet
actual notes