

Charles Ives: Psalm 67, s. 151

CRITICAL EDITION

PREFACE

Psalm 67 for unaccompanied chorus (SSAATTBB) is one of Ives's most famous and celebrated choral works. Known for its innovative harmonic organization and unique chanted text setting, the work has received significant scholarly attention and has been performed and recorded by many distinguished choral directors and ensembles since its premiere in 1937. One reason for its popularity and frequent performances may lie in its only moderate difficulty; the range is comfortable (lowest bass note is G₂, highest soprano is G₅), and once a choir becomes acclimated to the initial bitonality, *Psalm 67* is not as technically challenging as some of Ives's other extant psalm settings that feature substantial harmonic and rhythmic experimentation.

Ives used psalm texts for a total of 16 choral compositions, 10 of which have the title *Psalm* followed by the particular number. In the majority of these pieces, he set texts of complete psalms, taken directly from the King James Bible. *Psalm 67* uses the complete seven-verse psalm and is of a relatively short duration (ca. 3 minutes). Possibly in imitation of early church music, Ives keeps his setting unaccompanied.

Ives explains the inception of the piece in a memo included with the sketches (f5978-79) which is transcribed here verbatim:

This is a kind of enlarged plainchant the fundamental of which is made of 2 keys (but to be felt [or] heard as one) – G minor with C major (superimposed). The chords standing for other relations [to these] fundamentals keep a similar tonal relation. I remember father saying that this (as a basic formation and among some other combinations we had worked out) had a dignity and a sense of finality—quite a different effect from the dominant 9th. But when the lower parts take the major and the upper minor—or for example, in measure 5 (p. 1) it forms a kind of dominant 9th. Harmonically this fundamental chord could be (would be in harmony books of nice professors) catalogued as an inversion of the 9th. Father I think succeeded in getting a choir in Danbury to sing this without an organ—but I remember I had trouble in the New Haven choirs. The 2 keys gave trouble. It seemed for some reason more difficult for the ladies to hold their key than the men. Why—I couldn't quite make out—possibly because the lower parts are closer to the root (top). Occasionally it was sung by the men, while I played the upper staff on an enclosed manual. But whether or not an inversion, it seems to me to be a stronger chord than the 9th—which makes one feel that all inversions are not inversions—not always. A wider distribution of the same notes (so called in terms of one octave) will bring out to some

extent not exactly the same thing, if measured by the difference of overtone vibrations—beats—ratio of vibration numbers—and the ear feels this—but not in the classroom! To have the ear bossed all day by Jadassohn may not be the only way or the best way of growing – at least not in the morning.¹

Establishing a date of composition for *Psalm 67* has been a complicated process and the subject of substantial scholarly debate. John Kirkpatrick dated the work from the summer of 1894 based on Ives's recollections of discussions with his father about the opening sonority, as well as the reference above to George Ives apparently conducting the piece with a church choir in Danbury before Charles moved to New Haven in the fall of 1894. Furthermore, a sentence from a letter dated April 10, 1937 from Ives (copied by his wife Harmony) to Lehman Engel seems to support at least the work's genesis occurring before George's death in November 1894: "This [*Psalm 67*] was composed when Mr. I. was organist in a Danbury Church sometime before his father[s] death in 1894."

But Ives himself cited 1898 as the date of composition on his own list of works (see *Memos*, p. 153). This later date would also comport with other psalm settings conceived while Ives was employed at Center Church in New Haven (e.g., *Psalm 90*, *Psalm 150*). Moreover, the 1898 date has been supported by the extant sources, as well as handwriting and paper analysis by Gayle Sherwood Magee and thus is now the accepted date. It could be that in citing the earlier date Ives was referring to early musical experiments that later found their way into the piece (i.e., choirs singing in two keys simultaneously) held before his father's death.

The premiere of *Psalm 67* took place in New York City on May 6, 1937 in a performance by The Madrigal Singers conducted by Lehman Engel. Engel, a noted composer, conductor, and arranger had contacted Ives directly in early 1937 to request copies of some of his choral music for possible performance. In response, Ives sent Engel several choral pieces including *Psalm 67*; it is unclear exactly which other pieces were included in the shipment, because the only description of its contents are vague references in two letters between Engel and Ives from March 31 and April 4, 1937 to works "with organ or piano perhaps with two players in some pieces" and a "larger piece for chorus with orchestra." Engel was so impressed with the psalm that he not only premiered the piece, but also furnished the piano reduction used in the current edition. Engel was also instrumental in the first publication of *Psalm 67* by his own music company Arrow Music Press in 1939. In addition to Engel, the great conductor Robert Shaw championed *Psalm 67* a decade later, and began performing it regularly with his Collegiate Chorale.

Psalm 67 holds the distinction of being the first commercially recorded piece by Ives, appearing on a Columbia Records release (17139-D) in 1939 featuring Engel and The Madrigal Singers. Alluding to these momentous events, Ives expresses his appreciation to Engel in a letter from

¹ John Kirkpatrick also transcribed the memo, but reordered some of the sentences and corrected orthographic and grammatical errors. His transcription appears in *Memos*, pp. 178-79.

May 18, 1937, where he voices his surprise that *Psalm 67* was “so warmly received by critics and the audience . . . as it brought back the memory of the trouble it made, and the scowls it brought from the pews (but not the pulpit) about 40 years ago—because of its two-key tonality basis . . . Glad to get the record made.”

Critical reception of *Psalm 67* was varied, though the piece did receive largely positive reviews. There were three *New York Times* reviews of Engel’s performances with The Madrigal Singers published during 1937. The first followed the premiere on May 6 and was published May 7; it reveals that Ives’s piece was featured on the second half of a concert comprised of a potpourri of American choral music. The anonymous reviewer commented that the program’s second half began with Ives’s “unusual setting of the Sixty-seventh Psalm,” and thus created a “shrewd contrast” with the first half that featured early American selections including Revolutionary and Civil War songs. According to the review, Ives’s piece was followed by music of Edward MacDowell, Randall Thompson, Virgil Thomson, Engel, Richard Delaney, and William Schuman. At another performance on June 2, Engel conducted *Psalm 67* with works by the aforementioned composers in addition to music by Carlos Chavez and Hunter Johnson; the anonymous review published the next day says nothing about the music, other than observing that the concert “enjoyed the largest attendance of any [concert] in the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory at the Theatre of Music.” Finally, the influential critic and Ives supporter Olin Downes published a review of *Psalm 67* in the *Times* on December 13, 1937, complimenting Ives’s piece as “very carefully thought, deeply felt, individual in expression and not simple to perform. . . . The singers acquitted themselves excellently.”

In contrast to the mostly positive *New York Times* reviews, Ives’ piece received a lukewarm response from Virgil Thomson, who discussed it in the *New York Herald Tribune* on March 4, 1948 after it was featured in Shaw’s concert at Carnegie Hall on March 3, 1948; the concert also presented Ives’s *Three Harvest Home Chorales* and a work by Paul Hindemith. Thomson called *Psalm 67* a “dissonant diatonic piece that never quite comes off,” though he concluded his review by admitting that “it is always a pleasure to hear any of his [Ives’s] work carefully performed.”

Psalm 67 can be analyzed in ternary form with an inner fugato section (mm. 16-26) flanked by two outer homophonic (“enlarged plainchant”) sections (mm. 1-15, 27-35) set in the superimposed keys of C major (soprano/alto) and G minor (tenor/bass). The final three measures are particularly poignant and cumulative, with the choir chanting the text “God shall bless us/And all the ends of the earth shall fear Him” on the pitches of the same bitonal sonority that begins the piece, with the result that the setting starts and ends with its most recognizable harmonic innovation.

The sources for *Psalm 67* are relatively straightforward, consisting of pencil sketches of the complete piece, Photostat reproductions of the pencil sketch with inked emendations by Ives, and minor revisions in pencil of mm. 6 and 10. The present edition uses the Photostat reproduction

with the two revised measures, and corrects some errors that leaked into subsequent publications (see Critical Commentary).

Psalm 67 provides an ideal entry into the rich world of Ives's choral works for choirs of all types, and serves as an excellent example of the composer's experimental, yet still accessible compositions.

-- David Thurmaier

DESCRIPTION OF SOURCES

S Pencil sketch (possibly summer 1894), on a pair of 12-stave single leaves, headed “Ps. 67.”; p. [1] shares the leaf with an ink score of *March No. 5 for Piano, with “Annie Lisle”* (S. 112), p. [2] with the title p. for the song *Far from my heav’nly home* (S. 246).

p. [1] (f5974), mm. 1–11 (verses 1 & 2)

p. [2] (f5976), mm. 12–35 (verses 3–7)

p Pencil patch (f5975), patches for mm. 6 & 10 (on verso of **S**, p. [1]).

P Photostat of **S**, with Ives’s ink emendations (additionally Ives inked over a number of the notes and lyrics).

p. [1] (f5977), mm. 1–11

p. [2] (f7799), mm. 12–35

m Pencil memo concerning the nature of the harmonies (on pp. 13–[14] of Songbook B).

T Published score by Arrow Music Press, Inc., 1939; choral lines presented in four staves (SATB) with a piano reduction.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This edition is based on **P** and the **S** patches on its p. [2].

1: **S** has *f*; **PT** have *mf* (as here).

6: 4th eighth, T2: **T** has sharp (here, in brackets) for *c*; **SP** have nothing.

10: 4th quarter, T2: **SP** have *e*; **pT** have *g* as here).

11: 2nd half, B2: **T** has *d*.

13: 3rd quarter, S1: **T** has *c*².

14: 2nd quarter, T&B: **T** has no dynamic.

16: **T** lacks “poco agitato.”