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## *The Unanswered Question*

**Charles Ives** (1874-1954)

A born New England iconoclast, Ives was also one of America's wittiest musical creators: His singular approach seems to have had no precursors and virtually no successors. He began his life with a solid background in counterpoint and traditional harmony, studying with pillars of tradition such as Horatio Parker at Yale University. Yet his symphonies, chamber music, and solo piano works can seem chaotic and wildly dissonant, frequently calling upon us to grasp several tunes being performed simultaneously by different sets of performers.

Indeed, part of what we value most in Ives's music is the manner in which it synthesizes rigid convention with a sort of cantankerous American inventiveness. *The Unanswered Question* from 1908 expresses this dilemma ingeniously: The backdrop of lush, tonal strings represents tradition, the flute-quartet interjections stand for the chaos of the new, and a trumpet solo seems to ask a pregnant question ("Whither music?" as Leonard Bernstein would later characterize it).

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Within fifteen years of the completion of *The Unanswered Question*, Gustav Mahler—who had stretched tonality nearly to its breaking point—was dead, and Arnold Schoenberg had plunged feet-first into the atonal abyss with his first twelve-tone compositions.

"The strings play *ppp* throughout with no change of tempo," the composer wrote in the printed score of the piece, which was first performed at Columbia University in May 1946. "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. ... At the center of the proceedings, then, is the solo trumpet, which repeats an arching motivic figure that one critic has intriguingly suggested is as close to a graphic representation of a question mark as might be notated on music paper." ✕

6 minutes ■ 1 movement

### AN UNRESOLVED ENDING

At some point between 1927 and 1935, Ives revised the trumpet part of *The Unanswered Question* so that, instead of each statement ending on the same note (B-flat), the final pitch of the trumpet statements alternated between B and C, as if to project uncertainty. The final statement ends on C, an "unresolved" pitch in the midst of the G-major "resolution" played by the strings.

