Charles Ives was so far ahead of his time that it’s questionable whether we, a century later, have caught up with him. Classically trained at Yale (class of 1898), he wrote for Horatio Parker’s composition class there several German Lieder, of which at least one, “Feldeinsamkeit,” is as Romantically beautiful as Brahms’s setting of the same poem a few years earlier. That Ives was a professional church organist from his teens through his twenties also validates him as being able to write and improvise “correct” music when he wanted to. But then he decided that, in fact, he didn’t want to, and he became an “amateur” musician while having an eminent and creative career as the founder of the life insurance firm Myrick & Ives. What he did want to write, and few wanted to hear, was the music that emerged from his childhood.

Charlie’s father, George, had been the “music man” of Danbury, CT. But as opposed to the titular character in the Meredith Wilson musical, George could play all those instruments, and form and lead bands, and conduct the church choir, and the pit orchestra for touring shows, all often in the presence of his second son. He also shared with Charlie an insatiable curiosity about new sounds. What happens, to take just one instance, when you start two bands at opposite ends of the park playing two different tunes and have them march in opposite directions around the circle so that they pass each other? How does that moment sound?

The genuine Charles Ives mixes and superimposes strands of such unrelated music, often disguised forms of vernacular tunes, and captures the result with a necessary notational complexity that long made him seem unperformable. Though for instance Arnold Schoenberg (they were born the same year) called him “a great man,” and though he was ardently promoted in the ’30s by such as Henry Cowell, Elliott Carter and (see below) Aaron Copland, it was only late in Ives’s life that he was ‘discovered’. One of the more prominent successes was when Lou Harrison conducted the Third Symphony (composed 1908-1910) with New York’s Little Symphony at Carnegie Hall in 1944 (long before Harrison became an Aptos resident); the resonance of that performance eventually garnered the 73-year-old Ives the 1947 Pulitzer Prize. (Copland’s “Appalachian Spring” had won it in 1945.) But this late recognition came too late inasmuch as Ives, famished for encouragement, had written little after 1916 and nothing in the last 27 years of his life.

“The Unanswered Question” merges two of Ives’s characteristics—his New England heritage, and the drive to experiment. As a child, Ives had been drenched in
Transcendentalism by his mother and grandmother, and his uncle Joe had hosted Ralph Waldo Emerson after inviting him to lecture in Danbury. Ives had written his Yale senior essay on the sage of Concord. His epochal piano sonata was to be the “Concord,” whose movements include “Emerson.” There is every reason to believe, then, that the present miniature “cosmic drama” (Ives) refers to Emerson’s poem “The Sphinx,” which attributes the chronic dissatisfaction of humanity to its relentless questing. Addressing Man, the Sphinx says “Thou art the unanswered question;/ Couldst see thy proper eye, always it asketh, asketh;/ And each answer is a lie.” — Leading protagonist in the “drama” is the trumpet, which asks The Perennial Question of Existence seven times. The first six times the wind band attempts to answer it, at first pensively, then with increasing frustration, and finally in anger that includes mocking the question. The last time, the question goes unanswered. Underneath it all, time, represented by sustained chords in the strings, continues impervious—“the Druids, Who Know, See and Hear Nothing” (Ives). The musically ground-breaking aspect of the composition is that three spatially separated sonic sources play in only approximate coordination, while ultimately complementing each other.

“The Unanswered Question” was first performed by an adventurous group of Juilliard students in 1946, 38 years after its composition.

Eleven Studies for Eleven Players (1959-1960)  
Ned Rorem (b. 1923)

A repatriated cosmopolite, Ned Rorem spent the years 1959-1961 as Composer-in-Residence at the University of Buffalo (on the recommendation of Aaron Copland). It was on commission from that institution that he wrote the “Eleven Studies for Eleven Players,” of which he conducted the first performance there in 1960.

Born in Indiana, educated at Northwestern, the Curtis Institute, Juilliard and Tanglewood (teacher: Copland – see photo), Rorem spent his gay mid-20s to mid-30s alternately in New York, and, mainly, Paris, as well as in francophone North Africa. In both metropolises he was, though self-reportedly shy, the beautiful darling of the clever set. And maybe more than clever—Francis Poulenc, Virgil Thomson, Jean Cocteau, Jerome Robbins, Man Ray, John Cage are but some of the names (usually first names only) spiked more than dropped into his ceaseless, ceaselessly epigrammatic diaries. In the midst of the drinking and lovemaking and obsession with early death (Rorem is 93 as of this writing), much serious composing has gotten done, including a body of songs for voice generally deemed the best of his generation. But instrumental works have also been acclaimed: “Air Music,” for orchestra, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1976 (don’t leave home without one!), and he has been played by all the major orchestras, with a Who’s Who of conductors at the helm.
“Eleven Studies...” is in part a reworking of disparate earlier material, considering which its structural unity is all the more impressive. All but three of these variations without an actual theme begin with a short figure of four or five notes, all within the compass of a perfect fifth, all involving the note “a” (the harmonic key of the work). The exceptions are “Contest” and “Invention for Battery,” which has no pitches. (“Contest,” however, expands on the little sliding figure that permeates “Allegretto.”) “Epilogue” begins with an introduction leading to a clarinet cadenza, the last four notes of which clearly reintroduce the main idea.—As regards disunity, the “Studies,” obviously intended in part as a vehicle to show off the various instruments (thanks, Ned!), also encompasses a generous range of sentiments. The variety is achieved most evidently by the differing combination of instruments playing, and also, as is to be expected, by changes in speed and in meter (how many beats to a bar). More interesting are the varied textures: sometimes just a melody with accompaniment; sometimes an intricate and scholarly form such as a canon (the overlapping imitation of a melody by two or more voices) or the more elaborately imitative “Fugato”; sometimes a strict rhythmic canon without pitch (the percussion variation); sometimes sheer (though organized) raucousness—perhaps an American raucousness, like blowing into a party noisemaker.

If there is a subtle link to Charles Ives there, it is surely involuntary. Two generations later, Rorem remained as steadfastly and consciously behind even his time as Ives was inexorably ahead of his. His music is much ‘older’ than Ives’s. For one thing, he never abandoned tonality (composing in a key, and in one key at a time).

“Why do I write music? Because I want to hear it—it’s simple as that. Others may have more talent, more sense of duty. But I compose just from necessity, and no one else is making what I need.”

“Appalachian Spring” Suite (1944) Aaron Copland (1899-1990)

That Aaron Copland remains the most popular American composer of ‘classical’ music cannot be held against him, though he is not without responsibility in the matter. Formed by European teachers on this continent and on theirs, keenly aware of the European traditions evolving around him throughout his life, strongly motivated to and capable of writing works as learned and thorny as those of his European contemporaries and those at home composing in their wake, he decided to also compose works accessible to a
general audience in idioms derived from American folk origins. He did so with unequalled success, creating a body of pieces central to the orchestral repertory from his day to ours—El Salon Mexico, Billy the Kid, Rodeo, A Lincoln Portrait, Fanfare for the Common Man and, above all, Appalachian Spring. Moreover, he did so without a trace of condescension. Coequal with the accessibility of these works is the rigor and integrity of their compositional procedures. Copland’s compositions have captured an American flavor in works that are as meticulously constructed as those of Bartok or Stravinsky, to name but two contemporaries who loomed next to him.*

“I've spent most of my life trying to get the right note in the right place.”

Copland’s father, whose birth name was most probably ‘Kaplan,’ immigrated from Russia to found several successful dry goods stores in Brooklyn. Aaron, literally born in the last minutes of the nineteenth century, clerked in one as a boy. (Another branch of the family had successfully launched the forebear of Nieman Marcus in Dallas, though whether that has any bearing on the ability of a metropolitan Jew to simulate cowboy music with such authenticity is not documented.) He was not tagged as a musician early on, and his serious studies began in his mid-teens. Soon, however, while absorbing Debussy and Ravel in lessons, he was playing the piano in jazzy dance bands. A crucial development (“the decisive musical experience of my life”) was his acquiring a scholarship, in 1921, to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, the Great Mother of several generations of American composers. “Mademoiselle” (herself only in her mid-30s at the time) instilled in her students a mastery of the techniques that had served the great composers from the Renaissance to the present, while at the same time divining and nurturing their unique voices. And so it was with Aaron, who benefited from her tutelage for three years, and remained a devoted friend for sixty more.

Within five years of Copland’s return home, the world succumbed to the Great Depression. Ideologically, this encouraged his latent bent towards the Left. At the time of the WPA, though never commissioned by it, and partly under the influence of the group around The American Place gallery and its owner Alfred Stieglitz (Georgia O’Keefe’s mentor and later, husband), Copland turned to writing works of and for The People. He never recanted his socialist politics, even after he had disassociated himself from overtly communist groups, or after he had been grilled by House Un-American Activities Chair Joe McCarthy (who, Copland was amused to discover, hadn’t the slightest notion of his victim’s renown).

Appalachian Spring was commissioned for the Martha Graham Dance Company at her
request by the great patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, to be performed at the 1943 Library of Congress Coolidge Foundation Festival, but due to delays in the collaboration was premiered on the similar occasion a year later. Graham, also in her Americana phase, sent the composer a libretto that evoked pioneer days; the central narrative was the celebration of a newly built home for a newlywed couple. Though she sent him scene-by-scene scenarios, Graham also told Copland not to feel bound by the plot, as things would evolve organically when she heard the music. His sketches and first score all bear the title “Ballet for Martha,” which became the subtitle when Graham came up with “Appalachian Spring.” This in turn is borrowed from a line in a poem by Hart Crane (in which “spring” refers not to a season, but to water!). Copland, who had been in California and Mexico after submitting the score, first heard the new title and saw the ballet—starring Graham herself, Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham—at the dress rehearsal, and was amused to see music he had written to underlay specific scenes being used for others instead. Somehow, the many misunderstandings produced what was immediately recognized as a masterpiece.

Copland knew early on that the musical material would include the Shaker tune ‘Simple Gifts’: “'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,'Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be, And when we find ourselves in the place just right, 'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.” It is the theme that spins off six variations near the end of the work. The concept ‘simple’ underlies the rest of the ballet, though it is a highly sophisticated simplicity. (Rorem: “Aaron stressed simplicity: Remove, remove, remove what isn’t needed.”) Copland evokes the plainness of the prairie with melodic ideas that use just the ‘white-key’ intervals of the major scale, though he mines them for dissonance; and the openness of the prairie with widely spaced intervals. Rhythmic materials are recognizably those of folk dance, but are perpetually altered in asymmetrical patterns with shifting downbeats, syncopation and cross accents. A debt to the Stravinsky of “The Rite of Spring” and of “Histoire du Soldat” is evident, and acknowledged as an ongoing influence by the younger composer.

A final note on the theme of cosmopolitan/domestic: Aaron Copland was a guest conductor for several of his works at the Cabrillo Festival of New Music in 1978.

*He professed great admiration for, and the influence of, Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire” and of Webern’s “Five Pieces for Orchestra,” recent *Espressivo* repertoire.