



Marilyn Reynolds. Photos courtesy of Piano By Nature



Rose Chancler

# Dreams Revealed

By Benjamin Pomerance

*“The future of music may not lie entirely in music itself, but rather in the way it encourages and extends, rather than limits the aspirations and ideals of the people, in the way it makes itself a part with the finer things that humanity does and dreams of.”*

— Charles Ives

A BOY was pounding on the piano. Perhaps anyone who owns an instrument and raises a child will recoil at this single sentence, for it may raise red flags of familiarity, with their beloved progeny thrashing away at their parent’s costly musical investment. Such behavior commonly ends with a scolding, an adult admonition never to engage in such conduct again. If the parent is lucky, the child complies, and the ruckus stops forever.

But when George Ives walked into his Connecticut home one day and saw his 5-year-old son thumping the piano keys with both fists, the locally beloved bandleader reacted in an unexpected way. “It’s all right to do that, Charles,” the father advised, “if you know what you’re

doing.” Then he sent his child down the street to a musician who could give him drum lessons.

It may seem merely cute at first glance, this story of a father and son. Yet this is a moment with staying power, an illustration of far more than an isolated interaction. In this single encounter, one can find the roots of the quotation printed at the top of this article that Charles Ives would later utter, the words of a composer who saw that music could embody the spirit of encouragement and innovation — the seedlings, in its broadest sense, of the American Dream.

And now, in the course of four duets played in Elizabethtown, a violinist and a pianist will weave their own tapestry of the American Dream. It was not the

theme that Marilyn Reynolds, a veteran of the Orchestra of St. Luke’s and multiple Broadway shows, and Rose Chancler, a performer whose career has brought her to venues across the United States and Europe, initially anticipated when they planned the recital that they will perform on April 9 and 10. There was, in fact, no theme at all, just four pieces that they sincerely wanted to play.

Only after they looked at those four compositions side-by-side, and thought about the people who had created these works, did the recognition of what they had done crystalize. Amid these musical masterpieces were four stories that subtly revealed the stitching in America’s fabric. From these tales, the title of “American Dreams”

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for their program organically emerged.

It arose, in part, from George's son. There are those who would argue that Charles never stopped banging on the piano. He burst onto the scene first as a whiz kid in the field of life insurance, publishing a book that remained the Holy Grail on that subject for decades. But Ives had a dream that flung him far from this realm of actuarial tables, a desire that he refused to relent. He intended to write music. And he wanted to write things that no one had written before.

As a teenager, he later recalled, his father drew his attention to a Connecticut stonemason who was lustily singing a hymn, badly off-key. "Look into his face and hear the music of the ages," George proclaimed. "Don't pay too much attention to the sounds, for if you do, you may miss the music. You won't get a wild, heroic ride to Heaven on the pretty little sounds."

The younger Ives wanted the wild, heroic ride. For several years, he attempted to sell insurance by day and write music by night. In 1906, when the strain of these endeavors provoked a physical breakdown, he ditched his profession to focus on his passion. For the rest of his life, although he would eventually form his own insurance firm, allowing him to earn an income without groveling to other bosses, he would consider himself foremost a composer.

From his pen came compositions like nothing that anyone had ever heard — sometimes as craggy as that stonemason's face, sometimes as exuberant as that child flailing away on the piano — with predictable public reactions. In preparing for this concert, Chancler read about one of the rare times that Ives invited someone to play his music. "He got this great violinist to come over to play one of his sonatas," Chancler says. "And the violinist kept having to stop because it was so hard, and he kept getting more and more angry."

Finally, the virtuoso had enough. "After a while, he just stopped," Chancler continues, "and he yelled at Ives, told him his music was no good and walked out." Around this same time, Ives started casting his music in terms dripping with enough machismo to make John Wayne blush. Critics of his writing were "soft-eared sissies." At more than one concert, he shouted at the crowd, "Stand up and take your dissonance like a man!"

Still, the Yankee maverick walked the walk. "He never caved and went mainstream," Reynolds pointed out. "He stuck to his guns." In large measure, his endurance stemmed from the uncompromising protection and encouragement of his wife, Harmony Twitchell, whose family Ives met on some of his multiple stays in the Adirondacks. Yet it was due equally to his own stubbornness, insisting that his music captured something unique about America and about life.

Today, posterity has affirmed Ives' beliefs. His second sonata for violin and piano, which Reynolds and Chancler will play in Elizabethtown, offers a perfect example, uniting familiar tunes from *Turkey in the Straw* to the hymn *Come Thou Font of Every Blessing* with crisp, jaggedly melodic connective tissue. In 1924, the crowd booed at this sonata's premiere in New York City. Now, by contrast, musicologists generally agree that this is one of the most important works for these instruments ever authored by an American composer.

But Ives was hardly alone in stirring controversies, only to wind up holding the winning hand. Antonin Dvorak arrived in the U.S. in 1892 with a hero's welcome, hailed as the man from Czechoslovakia who would help America discover its national voice. The following December, at Carnegie Hall, he premiered a new symphony, a work with a rustic-yet-romantic verve that left some commentators declaring that Dvorak had already achieved his mission.

Yet on the prior day, a newspaper article had caused pervasive unease. To the *New York Herald*, Dvorak described his influences for this new composition, a piece that continues to be labeled as his "New World" Symphony. "I am convinced that the future music of

this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies," he stated. "They can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed in the U.S."

He had gained this notion in his post as the director of the National Conservatory of Music, befriending an African-American pupil who sang while cleaning the buildings. That student, Harry T. Burleigh, is revered today as the mastermind behind more than 200 settings of African-American spirituals. At the National Conservatory, he shared several of these spirituals with Dvorak, spurring the European writer to think in novel ways.

"These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil," Dvorak declared of the spirituals that Burleigh sang. "They are the folk songs of America, and your composers must turn to them." In the music that he wrote in the U.S., from the *Sonatina* that Reynolds and Chancler will play to the "New World Symphony" itself, Dvorak followed his own advice, lacing these works with influences from spirituals, as well as from Native American melodies.

In modern times, new questions exist about what Dvorak did with this music, moving from the shock that a white composer took seriously the music of African-Americans and Native Americans into concerns that Dvorak's writings could represent cultural appropriation. But there is no dispute that Dvorak, like Ives, opened American ears. And it is reasonable to assert that this awakening became necessary a few decades later for a still-unfolding nation to hear an African-American artist named William Grant Still.

Raised in Arkansas at the turn of the 20th century, Still taught himself in his teens to play multiple instruments. In 1911, he entered Wilberforce University in Ohio and then set his sights on a spot at the Oberlin Conservatory. Initially, he went to the town of Oberlin and worked as a janitor, using some of his salary to obtain private lessons and saving most of the rest of it. In the 1920s, he gained the conservatory admission that he sought.

His breakthrough came in the waning years of that decade, writing a symphony that portrayed, in his words, "the sons of the soil, who still retain so many of the traits peculiar to the African forbears." In 1931, Howard Hanson conducted that work, which Still dubbed his "Afro-American" Symphony, in Rochester, the first time that a professional orchestra had played a symphony by an African-American writer.

In the years to come, Still's star seemed unassailable. He became known as the "dean of African-American composers," scoring breakthroughs in symphonic writing, opera, ballet and film scoring. The pieces that Reynolds and Chancler will play in their performances — *Blues*, *Here's One*, and *Summerland* — are emblematic of his work, mingling jazz and spirituals with European classical traditions in ways that involuntarily quicken a listener's pulse.

Yet some doors remained barred. At the World's Fair in 1939, Still's *Song of a City* played continuously at the "Democracy" exhibition for all visitors to hear. Later, though, Still's granddaughter reported that the composer could not attend the fair without police protection. The only exception, his granddaughter recalled, was on the fair's designated "Negro Day."

To Chancler, the story brings back raw memories of her junior high school days in Texas, informed by adults that she could not mingle with her Black friends from her basketball team after practices and games, when they were bussed off quickly to a distant part of town. To Reynolds, it reminds her of her upbringing on Long Island, where she never even knew a Black person until she went to a music camp that had a Black counselor. To both performers, Still's experience serves as a reminder that some American dreams continue to remain unfulfilled.



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Yet some have come to fruition, which is where Johannes Brahms enters the picture. With both eyes fixed on the past, Brahms wrote for the future, creating music that used structures developed long before he was born but filling those forms with indescribable forward-looking beauty. “For so long, Brahms was revered as the composer who Americans were supposed to strive to become,” Chancler notes. “He was the epitome of European tradition, which was all the rage over here. And he was so good at everything that it was almost overwhelming.”

Even Ives, Chancler notes, had in his Connecticut home a picture of Brahms at his piano. Still, Ives wrote in direct contrast to Brahms’ style, helping pave the path for American writers to break from the all-enveloping, impossible-to-summit plateau that Brahms’ beloved works had created. To this new group of creators, the old ways of Europe had reached their peak. A fresh and vital noise needed to come from their side of the Atlantic.

Nevertheless, the old masters retained their deserving aura. “At some point as a teenager, I became aware of Brahms’ music for the first time in my life,” Reynolds recalls. “And I was just in tears.” Now, for the upcoming recital, she finds similar emotions racing back as she prepares to play Brahms’ third sonata for violin and piano, a work that she first performed as a conservatory student and then re-discovered while coaching a student through this work in the midst of the pandemic. “Brahms,” she declares, “is my American Dream.”

It may feel old-fashioned, all of this talk of the American Dream, a rose-colored look at a vision that time and reality have tarnished. Yet if this concept is still allowed to live, its source flows in torrents here. One can see America in the

European hero who reached the pinnacle of his art, ultimately forcing composers in this newer land to break away from the past to carve their own identity. It is visible, too, in the guest from far away who had to illuminate for Americans the music that existed all around them, urging them to hear what they had for so long ignored.

In the history of an African-American man from Arkansas, it lives with equal vibrance, the sweet victory of a trailblazer’s fortitude mixed with bitter knowledge that he was forced into the trailblazer’s role by racial bias. A dream offers beauty, but not always liberation from human failings. Perhaps this is American to its core, making unforced errors when prejudice clouds the sounds of liberty and justice for all but still rising again, trying to get it right tomorrow.

And as it rises, vindication resonates for an insurance seller from Connecticut, a writer who even in boyhood delighted in imperfect explorations. From his captivating, devastating, towering structures came feelings that here, against the scorners, a vision could prevail. Even now, a quest toward “the finer things that humanity does and dreams of” shimmers in these daring notes, each one pointing toward a rugged, flawed, extraordinary dream that is more than the pretty little sounds, a dream that still, in the unlikely moments, shows signs of coming true.

*Marilyn Reynolds and Rose Chancler will present their “American Dreams” program on April 9 at 7 p.m. and April 10 at 3 p.m. in the parlor of the historic Hand House in Elizabethtown. All attendees must provide proof of full COVID-19 vaccination and wear a mask while inside the venue. For tickets and more information, call 518-962-8899, email [pianobynature@gmail.com](mailto:pianobynature@gmail.com) or visit [pianobynature.org](http://pianobynature.org).*