Charles Edward Ives would probably have been content to be recognized as simply an important American composer. He has become something more: an iconic figure, the embodiment of the quintessential American artistic loner, original and uncompromising. An insurance executive who spent his weekends and vacations composing works of astonishing originality, Ives was ignored by the musical establishment of his day, which he scorned in return. As a result, he worked for years in artistic isolation, producing music that he had little hope of ever hearing. Only after he had all but abandoned composition did a small band of American modernists discover and begin to champion his music. Not until nearly the end of his life did he receive even a small part of the respect he since has been accorded.

Among the compositions now recognized as Ives’ masterpieces is the orchestral triptych *Three Places in New England*. Ives sketched its three constituent movements at different times between 1903 and 1911. In about 1912, he decided to join them into a “New England Symphony.” Ives finished scoring this work for large orchestra in 1914, but he rescored it for a more practical ensemble around 1930.

Of the many uniquely Ivesian traits that *Three Places in New England* embodies, two merit particular discussion. One is that each of its three pieces relates to a specific scene and event. Ives rejected the notion of composition as a purely abstract activity, and most of his works are programmatic — that is, musical representations of places, occurrences or narratives.

The other special quality of *Three Places in New England* is its embrace of diverse musical elements. Ives’ orchestral fabrics characteristically bring together a wide range of disparate materials: common chords and dense dissonances, melodies in conflicting keys and moving at different speeds, instruments grouped into contrasting ensembles. Rather than seek a homogenized aural experience, Ives reveled in the idea of variegated sonic textures, which seemed to him a true reflection of the tumult of American life. He tended especially to use traditional American melodies in such textures, a practice we find highly developed in *Three Places in New England*.

The first of the three pieces evokes Boston Common, where a bas-relief by the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens commemorates the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, a Black regiment in the Civil War. Ives had long admired this work, and it inspired a musical reverie about the soldiers it portrays. The sober faces of Saint-Gaudens’ infantrymen explain why this “Black March,” as the composer referred to the piece, is not boisterous and rousing but quiet and contemplative.

*Putnam’s Camp* takes us to a spot near Ives’ home town of Danbury, Connecticut, where, in the winter of 1778–79, General Israel Putnam and a detachment of Continental soldiers spent the
darkest days of the Revolutionary War. Ives related a story to illuminate this piece. It tells of a boy attending an Independence Day picnic at the site. Falling asleep, he dreams of the Revolutionary troops who had camped there, then awakes to the sounds of the celebration.

On a Sunday morning in June 1908, during a honeymoon trip through rural New England, Ives and his wife strolled beside the Housatonic as it flowed past the village of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. “We walked in the meadows along the river,” Ives later recalled, “and heard the distant singing from the church across the river. The mist had not entirely left the river bed, and the colors, the running water, the banks and trees were something that one would always remember.” The third of the Three Places in New England captures this scene in one of the most remarkable pieces of impressionist nature music ever written.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR
The first of Ives’ New England places, Boston Common, quotes fragments of three familiar melodies: Stephen Foster’s “Old Black Joe” and the Civil War songs “Marching Through Georgia” and “The Battle Cry of Freedom.”

Putnam’s Camp, the most complex of the three pieces, contains one of the most famous passages in all of Ives’ work: a collision of two different marches, which Ives imagined being played by two different bands at an Independence Day celebration. The music also quotes a number of familiar songs in a rich, almost hallucinatory, multi-layered collage. In the third piece, The Housatonic at Stockbridge, strains of hymn tunes are heard filtered through the mist of shimmering orchestral sonorities.

Scored for 3 flutes, the third doubling piccolo; 2 oboes, the second doubling English horn; 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani and percussion; piano, celeste and organ; 2 harps and strings.

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