

# What Charlie Heard



## Synopsis

The extraordinary story of the composer Charles Ives. "Sometimes little Charlie lay in his crib just listening. He heard his mother's long dress as she moved around his room. He heard big clocks and little clocks. He heard wagons and horse hooves. He heard dogs and crickets and the church bell next door." Charlie listened all through his boyhood, and as he grew into a man, he found he wanted to re-create in music the sounds that he heard every day. But others couldn't hear what Charlie heard. They didn't hear it as music – only as noise. In this daring and original book, Mordicai Gerstein graphically translates the audible into the visible – filling his pictures with noise – to tell the story of Charles Ives (1874–1954), a great musical innovator who let neither criticism nor public scorn keep him from composing music that expressed all that he heard in the world. He was finally recognized with a Pulitzer Prize in 1947. *What Charlie Heard* is a 2003 Bank Street - Best Children's Book of the Year.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 4 - 8 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 3

## Customer Reviews

HProfiling American composer Charles Ives, Gerstein (*The Wild Boy*) plies an artistic style as densely and consciously layered as one of Ives's compositions. The illustrations provide an instant visual connection to the music, which attempts to encompass the sounds of everyday life: Gerstein

overlays his spry pen-and-wash artwork with multiple clusters of sound-effect words (e.g., a series of tweety tweets surrounds a caged bird, big red clangs surround toddler Charlie as he bangs on a metal pan). "Charles Ives was born with his ears wide open," Gerstein begins, detailing the kinds of sounds "Charlie" might have heard as a child: included are Charlie's music teacher father's trumpet, the swish of his mother's long dress and "dogs and crickets and the church bells next door," sounds that would later be woven into Ives's music. He tells of Charlie's high school efforts as a composer and how, later, Charlie composed music on the train as he commuted to his insurance job. Gerstein also describes the music's chilly reception: "Most people didn't know how to listen to it. Some thought it was a joke. Others just heard noise and got angry." The book concludes on a triumphant note: not only does Ives finally win acclaim, but he plans to write a Universe Symphony: "Wouldn't that be a glorious noise!" Gerstein creates a rousing visual cacophony that echoes Ives's compositions in this inspired picture-book biography. Ages 4-8. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Grades 3-6--A prominent 20th-century American composer is brought to life through this biography in picture-book form. Young Charlie always listened to the sounds around him and tried to re-create them as he started writing music, whether it was a cheering crowd or a brass band parading through the town on the Fourth of July. However, his work wasn't taken seriously until late in his life when it was accepted as a new form of music called Art Music. The cleverly drafted illustrations show how the many sounds combined in Charlie's head to form one musical idea. Sounds in different colored typeface, from ducks quacking, fire engines clanging, and trumpets "tatatating," appear over the energetic art, and readers can almost hear the cacophony of life. In one of the most memorable scenes, two marching bands, one colored in blue and the other in yellow, move toward each other playing different music with the myriad sounds combining in a rainbow of colors above their heads. The local residents can be seen in the background with their hands over their ears. Older children, especially those with some musical training, will come away with a good understanding of Ives and his work. This is an excellent purchase for libraries looking to develop their music collections on a subject about which little has been published. Lisa Mulvenna, Clinton-Macomb Public Library, Clinton Township, MI Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

I bought this book four years ago for my new-born granddaughter on the strength of the review of my friend and Ives scholar, the late Bob Zeidler. Through moves and the intervening few years, My daughter and her husband kept the book. On a recent visit, this grandfather was surprised to learn

that it had become a favorite. My graddaughter knows the story. "Who is that", I ask, pointing to a picture. "Charlie", she says. "And what's Charlie's wife's name?" "Harmony" she replies. The great American composer, Charles Ives (1874 -- 1954) filled the air with what author Mordicai Gerstein calls that "mysterious, invisible, magical stuff -- music." I remember from my own childhood books on Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and the like. But a children's book on Charles Ives is a welcome rarity. Gerstein makes it succeed. Ives was the son of a Civil War musician and band leader in Danbury, Connecticut. The precocious child absorbed his father's love for and wayward way with music -- the glorious noise -- as young Charlie used the piano, organ, and trumpet to capture the sounds and ideas that filled his life. Charlie attended Yale, married, and became a successful insurance executive. He kept composing increasingly audacious music, including songs, piano sonatas, violin sonatas, short orchestral pieces, and symphonies. But when his work was played, it was met with bewilderment and mockery. Ives stopped composing in mid-life. In his latter years, he saw his music attain recognition, as he received a Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for his Third Symphony. Gerstein's book recounts Charles Ives's reaction to the premiere of his Second Symphony in 1951, when the composer was 77. Many musicians began to champion other music of Ives, including his difficult "Concord" sonata for piano. "If only they would open their ears they might open their hearts" Charlie says to Harmony in Gerstein's book. Gerstein captures the bravado and pace of early 20th Century America as well as the spirit of Ives's music, with its combination of American traditionalism and wild iconoclasm. Gerstein makes music a joyful experience. Gerstein captures the influence of revival meetings on young Charlie. "They didn't have beautiful voices, but they made beautiful music", is Gerstein's apt and important for young readers characterization of the influence of the hymn singing Charlie heard. Gerstein based his book on Jan Swafford's biography of Charles Ives, "Charles Ives: A Life with Music" and on his own listening. A page at the end of the story offers a summary of Ives's work to parents who themselves might be encountering Ives for the first time in reading this book to a child. This book delightfully introduces young children to a great American composer. More importantly, it may help "open their ears and their hearts" to the world of music. Robin Friedman

This is a very well-told story about the life of Charles Ives, composer of music that many would call cacophonous. Mordicai Gerstein, the author, shows us that to Charlie music was all the sounds he heard, all at once. The entire world, all one's experiences, everything at the center or periphery of one's life, all of this Charlie heard. I like the way the story is told, with great understanding and sympathy and insight. Much as I like the story and the way it's told, I find the illustrations difficult to

look at: my eye can't settle on any part of them.

I enjoy this bk very much as a piano teacher Tatiana de Fidler

This is a great book to use in the classroom to bring a composer to the forefront that doesn't get mentioned too often.

My biography of Charlie was part of the inspiration of my old friend Mordicai's singular, splendid book. I say part because a lot of it came from his own ears and sensibility, both of which are sharp and highly attuned to Ives. Here's a story about the book's inception. Mordicai came for a visit to my studio and kind of shyly told me that he'd drafted the text of a proposed picture book on Ives, and wondered if I'd collaborate on it with him. He handed me the typed pages, fairly close to the final text. I read them over, burst into tears, and told him I could not possibly improve on it. My admiration only intensified when I saw the final version, which he showed me in his studio in the original drawings. Mordicai is one of the best, and this book is him at his best. Jan Swafford

(sung to the melody of "If I were a rich man...") Why, I'd be reading him this splendid illustrated children's book! What on earth is an heirless geezer like me doing, reviewing a children's book? Well, that's a reasonable question. The only sensible answer that I can come up with is that I'm simply somewhere in the middle of my second childhood, "up to my eyeballs in Ives." Mordicai Gerstein prefaces this enjoyable children's book with the statement "Everything I know about Charles Ives I learned from listening to his music, and from my dear friend, Jan Swafford, whose epic biography, 'Charles Ives: A Life with Music,' was the main source and inspiration for this book." And so it is that Jan Swafford has also been the main source and inspiration for my own second childhood with Charlie Ives. I can actually date my "second childhood" study of the life and music of Charlie to the time I was reading a borrowed copy of his Ives biography while awaiting my own copy. The narrative text of "What Charlie Heard" (all accurate, and admirably complete, by the way) is quite brief; probably not much more than a few hundred words in total. (While no expert on the matter, I believe that the narrative can be read by a child of 7 or 8. In fact, I provided a copy of this book to a friend's son for his 8th birthday. But I wouldn't consider him "average" by any definition; very precocious would be more like it. Hopefully he didn't find it to be boring.) Is it possible that a book so brief in its narrative text can actually "tell" the story about Charlie Ives and his life with music, with all of its "ups" and "downs"? Sure it can! All one needs to do is to pay heed to the

remarkable illustrations, and to take the time necessary for pulling out all of the clues hidden in these illustrations. And, while it isn't necessarily possible to figure out from the narrative and the illustrations just what Charlie Ives's music sounds like, the youthful reader should certainly come away with the expectation that the music sounds "different," given how it was that pretty much everything in Charlie's life and environment found its way into his music in one form or another. And that may be "half the battle," as they say, toward an early appreciation of America's greatest composer. I know-rather directly-that Jan Swafford admires Mordicai Gerstein's book on Ives as much as Gerstein admires Swafford's. So I just had to take a look at it. (I never did have an opportunity to see the earlier copy that had been a birthday present; it was a "drop ship.") Now I've got my own copy, I've seen and read it, and I'm impressed. But what next? Well, given the circumstances, perhaps I'll just read this really neat book to my cat. He's about the right age in "human years": between 7 and 8 as I write this. And he's listened to Charlie's music along with me, without raising a noticeable fuss. And his name happens to be Charlie. And, no, it's no accident.

:)Bob Zeidler

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