

Ragtime is chronologically one of the latest vernacular styles that Ives consistently uses in his music. In the Memos, Ives recalls hearing ragged rhythms in minstrel performances at the Danbury fair in the early 1890s, and Ives encountered ragtime in many contexts during his time in New Haven and New York at the turn of the twentieth century. Allusions to and paraphrases of ragtime occur in the songs, piano works, chamber and orchestral pieces. Yet Ives's use of ragtime, like so much else about his music, is idiosyncratic and difficult to interpret. In this paper I examine Ives's experience with ragtime and build on Peter Burkholder's application of topic theory to explain stylistic heterogeneity in Ives's works by proposing a ragtime topic in his music. I show how Ives uses the ragtime topic to explore rhythmic and metrical juxtaposition and to suggest secular, comic, and mechanical themes. Using pieces such as "Walking," "The New River," and the First and Second Piano Sonatas as examples to substantiate the ragtime topic, the paper culminates in an analysis of Study No. 23 for Piano. When viewed through the lens of ragtime, the compositional ideas in this enigmatic piece become clear.