

Henry Cowell and Experimental Music

by Adam Fong

Harold Bloom, the writer and literary critic, would have us believe that great poets necessarily struggle to overcome the influences of their predecessors: that 19th-Century Romantic poets worked under the constant shadow of John Milton, and, perhaps (by interpolation), that mid-20th Century composers had always to deal with the music of Arnold Schoenberg... or that contemporary composers might critique themselves with Pierre Boulez or György Ligeti in mind.

Fortunately, for those of us who prefer not to constantly bear the weight of music history upon our shoulders, a spirit of exploration and experiment has come to define a musical tradition in America. For that, I believe we are most indebted to Henry Cowell.

Lineage and succession in music is often painted in broad strokes, describing aesthetic movements. Or else it is traced by the influence of one composer teaching another, as if learning to compose music were an apprenticeship akin to the repair of motor engines or the fabrication of chairs. But increasingly, to today's composers and in particular those that are of interest to (and are themselves) "other minds," to compose music involves a balance of "learned" execution with inventive design. For the latter quality, every composer seems to accumulate influences in a different manner, and never so simply as program notes or artist statements might describe.

Henry Cowell may have been fascinated by Irish myths, but of the millions of people and thousands of musicians who were familiar with those tales up until 1911, none had taken the opportunity to tell the story of Manaunaun in quite the way Cowell chose to do so. What brings about these moments of invention? How does something so elemental as a tone cluster take such a clear artistic form? While we can't know precisely, what we can learn from that invention and countless others that have taken place in music is that thanks to Henry Cowell's lifetime of achievements, the tradition of experiment in American music is alive and thriving, so that the accumulation of influences, of living everyday life, of living extraordinary individual lives, musical and otherwise, might find its way into the kind of immediate, contemporary, thrilling music that so moved Cowell himself.

There may be no greater tribute to Cowell's influence than the fact that the list of composers who have been deeply affected by him continues to grow. It is one thing to be influenced by personal contact, in the way that John Cage and Lou Harrison knew Cowell, as students. Likewise, Cowell played a significant role connecting artists to one another: it was at his urging that Charles Seeger accepted Ruth Crawford as a student, that Seeger first met Carl Ruggles, that Paul Bowles met Aaron Copland in 1930, that Vladimir Ussachevsky met Otto Luening in 1951 (to conduct early experiments with Ampex tape, many in Cowell's own home), and that, famously, Cage knocked on the door of Lou Harrison as he was considering a job at Cornish College of the Arts. These connections (and many others) were in a day's work for Cowell in the midst of an active life in new music.

At the next remove might be those composers whose work gained a wider audience thanks to Cowell's efforts in publishing and concert promotion: Charles Ives, Carlos Chavez, Dane Rudhyar, Wallingford Riegger, Henry Brant, Colin McPhee, Harry Partch, William Grant Still, and of course Ruth Crawford. Yet there are now four more generations of musicians who have come to know Cowell mostly, if not solely, through his works and publications. Among them are new music icons like Conlon Nancarrow, James Tenney, and Ben Johnston, more recently established composers such as Meredith Monk, Peter Garland and John Luther Adams, and countless aspiring artists, this writer included.

It is easy and convenient to begin from a contemporary musical concept, and trace a line back to Henry Cowell. While many composers, over the course of their career, may wander through the use of electronics, draw inspiration from the music of other cultures, or explore unconventional instrumental techniques, very few can be found at the vanguard of so many unusual practices. This is where Cowell seems always to be: the first of many. In 1930, he commissioned Leon Theremin to build the Rhythmicon, which would perform very difficult rhythms according to pitch relationships among the overtone series. Around that time he began teaching a course on "Musics of the World's Peoples" at the New School for Social Research, planting the seed for what would decades later become ethnomusicology. And his unconventional piano techniques, so well publicized then and now, might have become anathema to new music fans were they not used in such expressive ways in Cowell's works.

The force of those pianistic inventions have bred a shallow reputation for Cowell in historical surveys, as a bombastic inventor who later regressed to neo-Romanticism. In the same way that Cage's mainstream reputation has ballooned from David Tudor's 1952 performance of *4'33"*, Cowell's three iconic piano works, *The Banshee*, *Aeolian Harp*, and *The Tides of Manaunaun*, have been both a boon and a hindrance to his musical legacy. Those works rightfully symbolize Cowell's importance in a scene of "ultra-modern" composers. But to be challenging, rebellious, or difficult does not in retrospect appear to have been his mindset exactly. As the title of his book, *New Musical Resources*, and his copious writings makes clear, Cowell considered those inventions as mere tools for musical expression. Later in his career, those specific tools became less prominent, and he focused more on counterpoint, polyharmony, and modal writing. His reputation seems to have suffered, possibly due, in a reflexive way, to his lack of conformity: he failed to parallel his earlier self.

Cowell's willingness to reinvent himself is alone enough to garner this writer's admiration, and is a value that has become ingrained in the tradition of American experimental music. But perhaps equally admirable is that he managed to create a feeling of community, not among like-minded individuals, but among highly individual minds. Cage explained how, after Cowell's advice to study with Adolph Weiss (as a way to eventually study with Arnold Schoenberg) he "was now anxious to study composition, for working by myself and developing my own ideas had left me with a sense of separation from the mainstream of music, and thus of loneliness."

Cowell repaired that loneliness by articulating over and over again, in his concert programs, New Music Society publications, and journal articles, the importance of musical pioneers. Over time, his message has proven constitutional for a tradition whose influences only induce anxiety by their demanding of individual thought. Cowell has been called the "apostle," the "open sesame," and the "enlivener" of new music, and it does not seem a stretch to conclude that he is also the forefather of American Experimental Music.

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