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“NEW GROWTH FROM NEW SOIL”: HENRY COWELL’S APPLICATION AND  
ADVOCACY OF MODERN MUSICAL VALUES

by

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## ABSTRACT

An examination of Cowell's musical aesthetic found in his critical articles and essays is necessary in approaching his compositions, many of which push against mainstream compositional currents of their day. According to Henry Cowell, experimentation and innovation were the special province of American modernist composers who needed a way to distance themselves from European values. The purpose of this thesis is twofold. First, it is an examination of the relationship between Henry Cowell's critical writing and his many disparate compositional styles, with the aim of untangling his complex musical aesthetic within its proper historical context. Consequently, the paper will also illuminate certain key issues with which Cowell remained engaged throughout his life, and to show how his thinking surrounding these issues changes over the course of his career. A contemporaneous critical analysis of Cowell's written advocacy and musical compositions is broken into chronological periods that span his entire career, showing his changing philosophies surrounding key issues.

## CHAPTER 1

### HENRY COWELL'S MUSIC CRITICISM

A tireless composer, theorist, advocate and educator, Henry Cowell (1897-1965) was an enigmatic figure in twentieth-century American music. Scholars, however, have had difficulty realizing the value of his many contributions. With his New Music Society, founded in 1927, Cowell became the foremost advocate for modern music in the country. He also published over two hundred articles and essays between 1925 and 1964, most of which were some form of criticism of his fellow composers. An examination of Cowell's musical aesthetic as found in his critical articles and essays illuminates his over 900 compositions,<sup>1</sup> many of which push against mainstream currents of their day.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, American modern music critics such as Paul Rosenfeld and W. J. Henderson wrote mainly about European-informed modernism: the works of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Beginning his advocacy in the early 1920s, Cowell was one of the first champions of American musical modernism. According to Cowell, experimentation and innovation were the special province of American modernist composers who needed a way to distance themselves from European values. Thus, Cowell drew upon an American individualist tradition that reached back to transcendentalism and to Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for Americans to free themselves from Europe's courtly muses.

Only more recently have scholars turned their attentions to the serious study of Cowell's works. The only book-length biography of Henry Cowell is Michael Hicks's *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*.<sup>2</sup> Hicks concentrates on Cowell's early life and career. His aim

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<sup>1</sup> Although Lichtenwanger's catalogue of Cowell's works lists 966 items, the precise number is difficult to determine. Cowell often either recycled material or grouped separate works together, creating a new catalogue entry.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

is not only to fill in the more hazy details of Cowell's biography, but to address what had been missing from Cowell research: a systematic analysis of his early musical and ideological influences. Carol Oja's book, *Making Music Modern*,<sup>3</sup> offers a unique contribution to Cowell scholarship: it explores his spiritual influences and Cowell's own need for his music to deliver emotional sustenance. Rita Mead's book on the New Music Society, *Henry Cowell's New Music 1925-1936*,<sup>4</sup> provides the essential background for Cowell's early modern music advocacy.

Cowell's own writings form the core of this study. His book *New Musical Resources* (written in 1919, revised and published in 1930), while not necessarily indicative of the way new resources function in his own music, offers insight into his musical thought. Cowell's book is an attempt to link his music to a historical lineage and to define a new precompositional musical system in the absence of tonality.

Cowell's critical articles provide a much clearer picture of his artistic philosophies than his music alone. He wrote almost two hundred articles, most of them for widely distributed music journals such as *Musical America*, and *Modern Music*. He also wrote frequently for journals with a more targeted audience, most notably *Musical Quarterly* (he contributed to the "Current Chronicle" from 1948 until 1954). In addition to music and dance publications, Cowell wrote for non-musical journals and newspapers such as the *Freeman*, the *New York Times*, *Century*, and the *New Republic*. These articles, as can be expected, are on topics of more general musical interest.

An invaluable resource has been Bruce Saylor's *The Writings of Henry Cowell: A Descriptive Bibliography*. It has allowed for an informed selection of primary source materials from Cowell's literary oeuvre. Similarly, William Lichtenwanger's *The Music of Henry Cowell: A Descriptive Catalog* has facilitated the selection of appropriate compositions for analysis.

Cowell's prolific writing career spans the period from 1921 until 1964. In his writings, Cowell clearly articulates certain features of modern music that he endorses, such as the successful use of new musical materials, as well as features of which he is

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 127-143.

<sup>4</sup> Rita Mead. *Henry Cowell's New Music 1925-1936: The Society, the Music Editions and the Recordings*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981.

markedly cynical, such as the reliance on European musical tradition. For this study, representative editorial articles have been selected that span twenty-eight years of Cowell's literary career. The sample includes fifty-four articles, all of which are on composers, individual works, or specific musical issues.

A large number of Cowell's total published articles (eighty-one out of two hundred) are critical assessments of individuals or groups of composers. These include performance and publication reviews, as well as essays on the composers themselves. Cowell chose mainly to review those contemporaries in whose works he found considerable innovation or historic import. Blatantly disapproving statements about specific composers are rare and brief, but they are particularly acerbic when present. However, most of Cowell's negative criticisms are couched in praise so as to lessen their blow. For example, of Virgil Thomson's *The Seine at Night*, Cowell wrote that it "will be more played than others of his works in which the severity of manner is more obvious to the ear."<sup>5</sup> The reader is then left to decide which has more weight in Cowell's mind: that Thomson's other works are too severe for his taste or that *Seine* is more worthy of critical attention.

Other of Cowell's opinions are simply presented as fact, and are sometimes juxtaposed with an opposing viewpoint so that Cowell's reader must infer his meaning. In 1941, Cowell wrote an essay on two Cuban composers: Amadeo Roldán, who "had enough Negro blood to be stirred and interested by the Afro-Cuban rhythms of the natives," and Alejandro Caturla, who "studied a short time with Nadia Boulanger." Cowell remarked that Roldán's work "preserves that spirit [of native Cuban performance] through the use of characteristic rhythms and instruments . . . no composer has ever succeeded better in capturing the feeling of native music in symphonic works." Later in the essay, it becomes apparent that Cowell believed Caturla to have suffered from his European training with Boulanger, since he "used more conventional instruments to imitate the sounds of Cuban music."<sup>6</sup> By juxtaposing the two composers it is evident that Cowell found Roldán's music more authentic and therefore more effective than Caturla's.

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<sup>5</sup> Cowell, "Current Chronicle: New York," *Musical Quarterly* (July 1948): 410-415.

<sup>6</sup> Cowell, "Roldán and Caturla of Cuba," *Modern Music* 18/2 (January-February 1941): 98-99.



Of E. F. Burian, Cowell noted, “A thoroughly modern young man, he values publicity at any cost.”<sup>7</sup> However, in the context of Cowell’s own career (he was often accused of “typical American careerism”<sup>8</sup>) this is not a negative assessment. Similarly, to be called “thoroughly modern” is perhaps the best compliment Cowell could have offered the young composer. Because Cowell wrote about music with unusual sensitivity, a close examination of his critical writings is helpful in grasping his set of aesthetics.

Thirty-four of Cowell’s articles focus on specific musical dilemmas, issues or trends. He was particularly aware of issues concerning the performance of American music. In the 1930 article “Batons are Scepters” in the *New Freeman*, for example, Cowell examined the unhappy circumstance that no American conductor was at the helm of any major American symphony orchestra and that performances of American works were drastically outnumbered by their European counterparts.<sup>9</sup> Another issue about which he wrote frequently was the problem of Western musical notation. In the 1926 article, “Our Inadequate Notation,” Cowell opined that, “the present notation can give bare details of the pitch and rhythm of conventional modes, but little else. It cannot convey subtle tonal effect . . . quarter steps, exact slides and involved cross-rhythms cannot be accurately notated.” He reiterated this theme often in other writings.

The role of modern music critic was seemingly inevitable for Cowell, who from an early point in his career was dedicated to musically educating the American masses. He was remarkably adept at tailoring his writing style to a lay audience, and firmly believed in the vitality and applicability of new music to modern American life. In addition to his many critical pieces for music journals, Cowell wrote thirty-five articles and essays for non-musical journals, from his co-authored 1921 article for the *Freeman* entitled “Harmonic Development in Music”<sup>10</sup> to the 1964 article “International Music” for the *World Union-Goodwill*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cowell, “Vocal Innovators of Central Europe,” *Modern Music* 7/2 (February-March 1930): 34-38.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Seeger, “Henry Cowell.” *Magazine of Art* 33 (1940): 323.

<sup>9</sup> Cowell, “Batons are Scepters,” *New Freeman*, 1/16 (July 2, 1930): 374-376.

<sup>10</sup> Cowell, “Harmonic Development in Music,” with Robert L. Duffus, *Freeman* III/55 (March 30, 1921): 63-65. This is Cowell’s first published assertion that movement away from conventional tonality in modern music is due to the acoustical phenomenon of the sequential acceptance of overtones beyond the fundamental.

<sup>11</sup> Cowell, “International Music,” *World Union-Goodwill* III/1 (February 1964): 22-24.

Several of Cowell's early published writings can be categorized as general advocacy of American or new music, including one of his earliest articles in 1925, "Modernism Needs No Excuses." In response to W. J. Henderson of the New York *Sun*, who, according to Cowell, objected to modern music for its "lack of artistic principle," Cowell calls for "a new type of critic who will specialize in a genuine understanding of the aims of the moderns. Not that he will always praise, but that his likes and dislikes will be based on a knowledge of the laws underlying modern musical construction."<sup>12</sup> With this statement he was responding not only to Henderson, but to a host of music critics who ignored or disparaged any music considered modern. There were certainly critics who wrote regularly about modern music in the early twenties. The most prominent among these was Paul Rosenfeld, but his European-informed modernism largely discounted American developments, the very ones that attracted Cowell's attention. "Modernism Needs No Excuses" was Cowell's first published article. It seems his intention was to undertake the requisite role of American modern music critic.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold. First, it is an examination of the relationship between Henry Cowell's critical writing and his many disparate compositional styles, with the aim of untangling his complex musical aesthetic within its proper historical context. Second, it will illuminate certain key issues with which Cowell remained engaged throughout his life; we can observe how his thinking changed over the course of his career.

The title of this thesis includes Cowell's own phrase, "new growth from new soil," the way he described developments in American composition in the 1920s. Ideas of organic and innovative musical growth from a new place (other than Europe)<sup>13</sup> formed the basis of his advocacy of modern American music.

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<sup>12</sup> Cowell, "Modernism Needs No Excuses," *Musical America* 41/13 (January 17, 1925): 9.

<sup>13</sup> Both organicism and relocation of cultural values hearken back to Emersonian transcendentalism.

## CHAPTER 2

### NEW GROWTH FROM NEW SOIL: INNOVATION AND AMERICAN MODERNISM

Cowell's artistic aesthetics can be traced to his unorthodox upbringing.<sup>14</sup> His father, Harry Cowell, was an author and an upper-class Irish immigrant who made his way to California after an unsuccessful business venture in British Columbia. In California, Harry Cowell met Clarissa Dixon, a Midwesterner by birth and also a writer, with a dominating character. The couple settled in a rural area southeast of San Francisco, and it was there that Henry Cowell was born in 1897.

Harry and Clarissa Cowell shunned the public school system. Young Henry was never successful in school, and was bullied so much in the third grade that Clarissa began teaching him at home. He did, however, display early musical talent. By the age of five, he was taking violin lessons with San Francisco violinist Henry Holmes and showing tremendous promise. Unfortunately, after three years of training, Cowell offended his teacher during a lesson. Holmes henceforth refused to instruct him. The onset of juvenile chorea, with its tics and spasms, further squelched Henry's desire for formal violin lessons.

Henry's parents divorced in 1903, and following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Henry and Clarissa moved to New York. She became the caretaker in a Greenwich Village home that was being renovated, and intended to start her professional writing career. Eventually, poverty and Clarissa's illness drove them from New York to Kansas, where they lived with relatives for a very brief period. The pair returned to

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<sup>14</sup> Biographical material is from David Nicholls, "Henry Cowell," In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, edited by Stanley Sadie. (London: MacMillan, 2001) 3: 620-630, and Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*.

Menlo Park in September 1910. Clarissa was ill with cancer, so Henry became the main wage-earner, selling wildflowers and working part-time as a janitor.

Around 1912, Cowell managed to save enough money to buy a second-hand piano. He had been composing since about 1907, but from 1913 onwards he began keeping a list of his compositions. With the financial help of the Cowells' literary friends in San Francisco,<sup>15</sup> Henry began his career as composer-pianist with a formal debut on March 5, 1914, in a concert promoted by the San Francisco Musical Club. He garnered promising reviews, but local critics noted that he needed formal education in order to realize his potential. Harry Cowell took his son to the University of California at Berkeley, where he enrolled in the fall of 1914. Henry studied harmony and counterpoint with E.G. Stricklen and Wallace Sabin, and had weekly discussions on modern composition with Charles Seeger.

After a brief sojourn to New York in 1916, where Cowell studied at the Institute of Musical Art<sup>16</sup> and met composer-pianist Leo Ornstein, he returned to the West Coast. He became involved in the Temple of the People, a theosophical community in Halcyon, California. There Cowell met John O. Varian, a theosophist poet, who engaged the young composer to write music inspired by Varian's mystic texts, most notably to accompany his Irish mythological opera, *The Building of Bamba* (1917).

Cowell enlisted in the United States army in World War I, in the hopes of receiving a safer assignment than those men who were drafted. He spent 15 months (1918-19) performing kitchen duties in the Army Ambulance Corps in Camp Crane, Pennsylvania. As a cook, Cowell was allowed overnight leave to New York City once every three days. He took these opportunities to see concerts and meet with Leo Ornstein and Carl Ruggles. Cowell returned to California in May 1919, when, with Samuel Seward's help, he drafted a manuscript entitled, *New Musical Resources*. The young composer's career as advocate of ultra-modern music had just begun.

During the 1920s, Cowell began concertizing in New York and Europe. Following the example of Leo Ornstein and George Antheil, who fashioned personas as maverick composers and virtuoso pianists, he made his Carnegie Hall debut on February

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<sup>15</sup> Their circle included ethnographer and linguist Jaime de Angulo, Stanford professor Samuel Seward, and psychologist Lewis Terman.

<sup>16</sup> Later, The Juilliard School.

4, 1924. The concert generated an enormous amount of publicity and was followed by an encore performance at Town Hall on February 17. *New York Herald* critic W. J. Henderson wrote favorably describing Cowell's tone clusters as "extraordinary and genuinely musical effects."<sup>17</sup> European tours in 1923 and 1926 bolstered Cowell's popularity and established his place as a leading ultra-modern composer and performer.

It was during his 1923 tour that Cowell was exposed to new European compositional currents. He also became acquainted with activities related to modern music advocacy, particularly Hermann Scherchen's Melos society and its publication *Melos*. As Rita Mead observes, the Melos society provided Cowell with a distinguished model for a new music organization. Its periodical, which contained music by, among others, Artur Schnabel, Stefan Wolpe, Bela Bartók and Paul Hindemith, sported a conspicuous red and black cover. Later, *New Music Quarterly*'s cover was similarly bold, printed in magenta and black, with a striking design by Hazel Watrous.<sup>18</sup>

Cowell had been involved with two modern music collectives, the International Composers' Guild (ICG) and E. Robert Schmitz's Franco-American Musical Society (later Pro-Musica). The latter, founded in 1920, organized chapters in cities across the United States. Its aim was educational, to supply performances of unfamiliar music to the cities in which it had chapters. Pro-Musica flourished in the 1920s, probably due to its predominantly European and conservative programming. By December 1927 it had thirteen chapters and 3,500 members.<sup>19</sup>

ICG was founded in 1921 by composers Edgar Varèse and Carlos Salzedo. Its distinctly international programming and its juxtaposition of European and American works was designed to offer audiences a wide variety of styles. Varèse wrote a manifesto for the guild, in which he stated: "The International Composers' Guild disapproves of all 'isms'; denies the existence of schools; recognizes only the individual,"<sup>20</sup> a creed that Cowell would later echo in his desire to "live in the whole world of music."<sup>21</sup> Varèse ruled the ICG with a heavy hand, claiming that the purpose of the society was to give

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<sup>17</sup> Rita Mead, *Henry Cowell's New Music 1925-1936: The Society, the Music Editions, and the Recordings*. (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981): 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 165.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted many places. See, for instance, Hugo Weisgall, "The Music of Henry Cowell," *Musical Quarterly* 45/4 (1959): 498.

performances to as many modern compositions as possible. His refusal to schedule a repeat performance of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* caused a schism among more democratic ICG members who thought an appropriate goal of the society was education. Subsequently, the League of Composers was founded in 1923 by former ICG members Clare Reis, Alma Wertheim, Louis Gruenberg and Lazare Saminsky. In its early years, the League's programming was decidedly less catholic than ICG's; its focus for its first few seasons was mostly on European works.

Cowell, who had been thinking of establishing a modern music society on the west coast since his first European tour in 1923, had several east coast-based American models on which to draw. In conception, his aims were most similar to those of the ICG, but with a more aggressively American slant. In 1925, he announced the founding of the New Music Society of California. Its purpose was to present "the works of the most discussed composers of so-called ultra-modern tendencies."<sup>22</sup> The society sponsored only one concert in the 1925-26 season, and a second one in the following year. The first concert, held in the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, presented a balanced national profile. Although five of the seven works were by composers living in the United States, only one of those composers, Carl Ruggles, was native-born.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the second concert included music by Darius Milhaud, Carl Ruggles, Arnold Schoenberg, Dane Rudhyar, Cowell and Alfredo Casella. However, when Cowell decided to publish *New Music: A Quarterly of Modern Compositions* in 1927, his stated goal was to promote "the modern American composer" by providing widely-disseminated published scores of modern compositions. As Carol Oja observes, *New Music Quarterly* had enormous weight compared to one-time performances. As published sources, they "were not just local phenomena, but objects with mobility."<sup>24</sup> Mobility and dissemination were indeed Cowell's goals. He purposely sought the addresses of prospective European recipients of *New Music*, as he was "eager to introduce the finest examples of modern American composition into European circles."<sup>25</sup> Cowell, then, turned American musical modernism on its head on two counts. He not only shifted the balance of ultra-modern activity from

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 191. Other composers represented were Darius Milhaud, Leo Ornstein, Dane Rudhyar, Edgar Varèse, Arnold Schoenberg and Feodor Kolin.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 192.

the east coast to California, but in a period when so much European modernism was being imported from Europe, he was among the first to attempt the exportation of American ultra-modernism across the Atlantic.

Cowell's vigorous American advocacy found a literary outlet as well. The 1925 article, "America Takes Front Rank in Year's Modernist Output," is nothing less than a manifesto of American musical modernism. Here Cowell first sounds his lament that the cause of American music has been "much retarded because of over-enthusiastic performances of works by Americans having so little merit as to give Europeans an idea that we cannot produce fine composers."<sup>26</sup> It is then Cowell's pleasure to inform readers that an exceptional modern work performed in New York that season was *Men and Mountains* by Carl Ruggles. In it he observes "something distinctly American in the freshness and openness of Ruggles' music." In contrasting *Men and Mountains* to previous modern American works, Cowell expresses an aversion to "the pallor-stricken music of one who writes in a gas-lit box of a city room, [and] the exaggerated nuance and over-refinement of even the greatest modern Europeans."<sup>27</sup> With this remark, America's now mythical unadulterated natural environment is opposed to European industrialized society. Such dichotomous images are not Cowell's own, but had been common since the eighteenth century and used to distance America from Europe, which was necessary to the development of the young nation's identity.

Natural wilderness had been used as an icon to represent America long before the nation's founding. Its first philosophers, musicians, poets and painters breathed life into nascent American culture with artistic representations of divine, natural beauty.<sup>28</sup> This not only gave the otherwise uncharted and rough terrain an advantage over Europe's increasingly crowded cities, but in a broader sense, it devalued European cultivation in favor of unadorned American simplicity.

The advocacy of naturalness in music was appropriate for Cowell, whose education was a strong case study in autodidacticism. In describing music he found attractive, Cowell tended to use such adjectives as unstudied, naïve, and unsophisticated.

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<sup>26</sup> Cowell, "America Takes a Front Rank in Year's Modernist Output," *Musical America* 41/23 (28 March, 1925): 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Particularly that of Niagara Falls. Refer to Denise Von Glahn, *The Sounds of Place*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2003.

While such words often have negative connotations in any artistic discipline, Cowell used them as high praise. He summarized his philosophy on autodidacticism in an essay on Paul Creston, in which he stressed that traditionally trained composers are left without the impulse to challenge conventions; an impulse, “which takes on, for the self-taught, an aura of inevitability that they are late to lose.”<sup>29</sup>

Cowell’s aesthetic of naturalness put him in direct opposition to another critic of modern music, Paul Rosenfeld. In an April 1924 review of Cowell’s work, Rosenfeld opined that some of Cowell’s pieces “exhibit a musical helplessness and suffer from monotonous repetitions,” and that others come “dangerously close to constituting literal transcriptions of nature. Naturalism is the general characteristic of the work of people whose primary interest is the development of a new method or a new instrument.”<sup>30</sup> Such statements warrant closer analysis.

Rosenfeld remarked on two tendencies he recognized in Cowell’s music. First, “constituting literal transcriptions of nature” referred to the ultra-modernist affinity for program music. Cowell, Ornstein, Ives, Ruggles, and Rudhyar, among others, composed within a programmatic idiom, something that would have been distasteful to the European-trained Rosenfeld, who at this time was promoting the anti-Impressionist works of Eric Satie.<sup>31</sup> Considering that Satie’s compositions featured spare textures, repetitive harmonies and unaffected melodies, it is surprising that Rosenfeld identified similar traits in Cowell’s music as “monotonous repetitions.” Rosenfeld’s statement is echoed by Michael Hicks’s observation that “whatever else [tone] clusters may have expressed, they bespoke . . . a return to childlike principles in the hopes of rejuvenating technique.” This remark points to Rosenfeld’s second implicit complaint: Cowell’s primary interest in the development of new techniques.

It was the development of new techniques that Cowell advocated when he wrote “America Takes Front Rank.” The aggressive tone of his article underscores Cowell’s main thesis: while modern European composers emulate each other, it is the duty of American moderns to fully realize their innate inventiveness and cast off the yoke of

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<sup>29</sup> Cowell, “Paul Creston,” *Musical Quarterly* 34/4 (October 1948): 540.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Rosenfeld. “Henry Cowell,” *The Dial* 76 (April 1924): 389-90. Quoted in Appendix 1 of Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002): 152.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenfeld, *Discoveries of a Music Critic*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936).



European tradition. Cowell scrutinizes modern Europeans who do not share his aesthetic of naturalness, and who are evidently not as innovative as American moderns; composers such as Stravinsky, whose 1924 *Piano Concerto*, Cowell maintains, contains so much “Mendelssohnian polyphony” that it “scarcely deserves mention as a modern work.”<sup>32</sup> Not even Leo Ornstein, a composer who had been an inspiration to Cowell in the early 1920s, escaped the author’s disdain. Of Ornstein, Cowell wrote that he “began by being extremely individual, but now imitate[s] older composers freely . . . it is saddening to find the once vivid Ornstein writing parlor reminiscences to the taste of old ladies.”<sup>33</sup> The harsh tone from Cowell, typically a generous critic, suggests motivations beyond mere criticism: to establish his own career as a unique and innovative composer and to make a place for American musical modernism (and thus for himself) through his advocacy.

Although innovation was a key component of Cowell’s early advocacy, he was also sensitive to criticisms accusing modernism of capriciousness. According to Cowell, innovation was not to be undertaken for its own sake. “Surely the first requisite of the modern is that he sincerely feels in the idiom that he employs.”<sup>34</sup> He points out that Alois Haba does not use quarter tones merely to demonstrate their application, but because his music demands a closer, more dissonant interval.<sup>35</sup> The philosophy presented in “Modernism Needs No Excuses” and “America Takes Front Rank” can be summarized thus: Critics, take heed: moderns are writing radically new music because both our nationality and our zeitgeist demand it. Therefore, a new type of criticism based on the acknowledgement of these revolutionary concepts is warranted.

By the late-twenties, Cowell believed that his New Music Society had succeeded in establishing a place for modern music in the minds of the American public, and such manifesto-like articles were no longer required. Cowell turned to more practical concerns of twentieth-century composition and promoted those composers who excelled in the field of technical innovation. In “Our Inadequate Notation” (1926), he challenges traditional Western notation, observing that it is not graphically accurate. Cowell had in fact experimented with new ways of notating his tone clusters beginning in 1916. In the

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<sup>32</sup> Cowell, “America Takes Front Rank,” 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Cowell, “Modernism Needs No Excuses, Says Cowell,” *Musical America* 41/13 (17 January, 1925): 9.

<sup>35</sup> Cowell, “The Impasse of Modern Music” 675.

process of explaining the various problems associated with the inadequacy of Western notation, he used his skills as publicist to promote Charles Seeger's forthcoming book on new notation systems.

In 1927, Cowell introduced more concrete ideas about the direction of modern American music. In an article entitled "The Impasse of Modern Music," he called upon acoustics to justify musical modernism. Cowell observed that the acceptance of certain intervals as consonant had occurred in the order in which tones appear in the harmonic series. For example, the first interval considered stable in Western music was the first harmonic above the fundamental, the octave. The second harmonic above the fundamental, the fifth, was the next interval to be accepted as a consonance, and so on. Cowell points out that the acceptance of new intervals was usually hard-won and sometimes not acknowledged until a generation after they were proposed. He then compares today's modernist composers to innovators throughout music history, citing Palestrina, Monteverdi, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner and Debussy as the "modernists of their day."<sup>36</sup> Identifying and linking music of the present with music of the past is not a novel strategy, but an effective one.

Consciously or not, Cowell was participating in a tradition that extends back to a number of theorists, including Rameau, who also derived basic principles of functional harmony from acoustics.<sup>37</sup> Cowell's generation witnessed the widespread use of the interval of a minor second (if not definitively as a consonance, it was at least no longer considered entirely unstable) which, Cowell observed, was spurred by "the harmony of Schoenberg mark[ing] the interval between the fifteenth and sixteenth overtones."<sup>38</sup> To Cowell, the accepted use of the minor second, the smallest diatonic interval, as a stable harmony represented a crisis because it hindered modern composers from writing music that could be heard as dissonant. Audiences, Cowell reasoned, must make a giant leap to the acceptance of quarter-tones or composers must expand other musical elements ripe for development, specifically, simultaneous combinations of rhythms, combinations of tempi, atonality, and tone clusters.

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<sup>36</sup> "Impasse," 672.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Phillippe Rameau, *Traite de l'Harmonie*, 1722.

<sup>38</sup> "Impasse," 674.

Also in “Impasse” is a discussion of Charles Seeger’s system of dissonant counterpoint, which reverses traditional contrapuntal rules: now consonances resolve to dissonances. In Seeger’s system, the most dissonant intervals, minor seconds and major sevenths, were “perfect dissonances,” followed in the hierarchy by the “imperfect dissonances,” major seconds and minor sevenths. All other intervals were considered consonant and only to be used in passing motion to dissonances. Such thinking, for Cowell, constituted an important area of future musical development. He used this system in his work *Four Combinations for Three Instruments* (1924).<sup>39</sup>

Rhythm, too, required additional development in Western music. In the same article, Cowell wrote, “we have limited ourselves to [rhythms divided in] half notes, quarters, eighths, and further division by halves, but we do not divide by thirds, fifths, sevenths or ninths and we have no means of notating such divisions.”<sup>40</sup> According to the composer’s own account, his concern with the development of rhythm extended back to the beginning of his brief formal musical training. While attending classes at the University of California at Berkeley in 1914, Cowell’s first music theory text<sup>41</sup> informed him that the lower reaches of the overtone series expressed the same ratios as simple counter-rhythms (2 against 3, 3 against 4). Soon after, he began collaborating with a physics student who had access to a pair of sirens. In his experiments with two simultaneous sirens tuned to the ratio 3:2 (one siren tuned to the first harmonic above the fundamental, the other tuned to the second harmonic above the fundamental), he found that they not only sounded a perfect fifth, but when slowed down, keeping the same 3:2 ratio, they arrived at the rhythm of 3 against 2, “heard as gentle bumps but also visible in tiny puffs of air through the holes in the siren, so easily confirmed.”<sup>42</sup>

In truth, these experiments were performed and documented by Hermann von Helmholtz in his book *Die Lehre von den Tonempfindungen* (1863). In describing Helmholtz’s experiments with tuned sirens and the relationship between the vibration of a

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<sup>39</sup> Discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>40</sup> Cowell, “The Impasse of Modern Music,” *Century* 114 (1927).

<sup>41</sup> Cowell studied at U.C. Berkeley from September 1914 through May 1916. Written by his professors Charles Seeger and E. G. Stricklen, this text stressed one fundamental scheme from which rhythm, tone, and form all derived, and that a unified science of harmony could be based on physical laws of tone production (the overtone series) [Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 69].

<sup>42</sup> Cowell, “Preface,” *Quartet Romantic*. (New York: C.F. Peters, 1964).

tone and its consequent pitch level, the English translation, published in 1875, translates the German word *Schwebung* (fluctuation) using the rhythmic term “beat,” implying a relationship between rhythm and pitch. It is possible, therefore, that Cowell was familiar with this text as early as his 1914 experiments, though he doesn’t reference it directly until 1927’s “Impasse.”

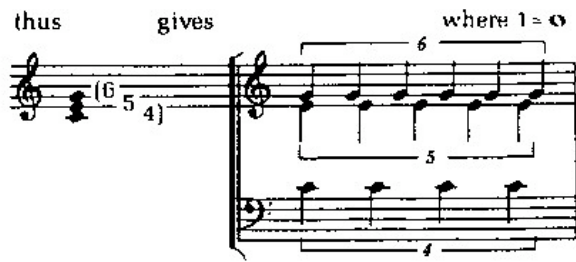
It is also likely that Helmholtz’ text was one catalyst for Cowell’s rhythm-harmony experiments, which build on the principle that vibration ratios are expressed as rhythm when slow and pitch when fast. These experiments eventually culminated in Cowell’s idea of counterpoint between different rhythms. Two pieces written between 1915 and 1919 explore this notion: *Quartet Romantic* and *Quartet Euphometric*.

In *Quartet Romantic* (1915-17), Cowell first composed a simple four-part chorale, assigning to low C, the fundamental, the length of a whole note. He then translated the chorale theme into rhythms, with each note-length based on its vibration ratio in relation to the fundamental. This process, described in *New Musical Resources*, is best explained graphically.



Example 2.1 Reprinted from David Nicholls, *American Experimental Music 1890-1940*, p. 141.

If the fundamental C has a value of 1 (equaling a whole note), the third, fourth, and fifth partials above the fundamental would yield values of 4, 5 and 6, respectively. Thus, they are translated into four, five and six divisions of a whole note:

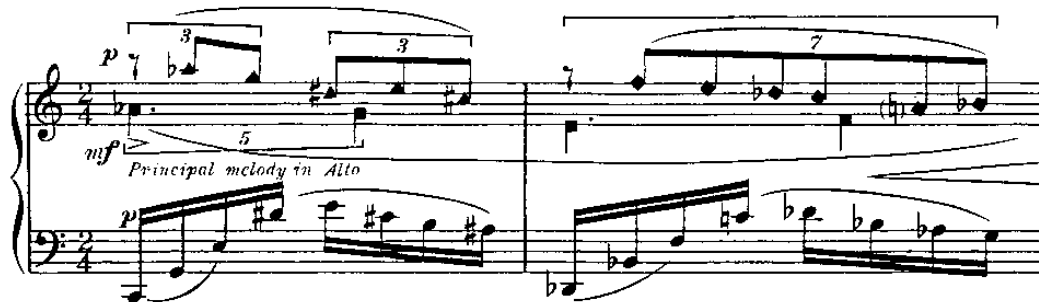


Example 2.2 Reprinted from David Nicholls *American Experimental Music, 1890-1940*, p.141.

As David Nicholls explains, “the rhythmic value of pitches outside the overtone series of any given fundamental is initially expressed as a ratio:  $f^1$  is two octaves and a perfect fourth above C. The vibration ratio for this interval is  $16/3$  and the consequent rhythmic value is  $5\frac{1}{3}$  beats per bar.”<sup>43</sup> The rhythm-harmony experiments proved remarkable, but not immediately successful due mainly to the fact that they were, at the time, so complicated as to be unplayable by humans.

Other experiments with rhythm from this period include the 1917 piano piece *Fabric*, which exhibits a contrapuntal texture of three different simultaneous rhythms. In order to facilitate reading the multiple rhythmic relationships, Cowell devised a new system of notating the subdivision of a whole-note. He called the eighth-note triplet a “twelfth-note,” since this note value occupies a twelfth of a whole note. Thus, three half-note triplets become “third-notes” and five quarter-note quintuplets are notated as “fifth-notes.” All are indicated using differently shaped noteheads. Although initially mystifying to critics, this practical new notation eliminated the need for many tied notes as well as figures and brackets, as shown in example 2.3.

<sup>43</sup> David Nicholls, *American Experimental Music, 1890-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.



Example 2.3 *Fabric*, mm. 1-2.

However radical such a notation system may appear, most of Cowell’s innovations during this early period are exceedingly practical. Marc Blitzstein recognized that *Fabric*, while “purporting to be a demonstration of poly-rhythms . . . turned out to be an inoffensive, romantic little morceau, with the old-style *rubato* mathematically calculated.”<sup>44</sup> It is not likely that Cowell would have objected to such a remark. His rhythms were carefully calculated, but upon listening seem to flow organically, even effortlessly.

“The Impasse of Modern Music” had several aims. It tied modernism to a Western musical tradition and simultaneously called for a break from that tradition. It also argued that modernist innovation was not haphazard, but well-reasoned and born of necessity. The article ends thus: “The further development of harmony is halted, and from this impasse we must strike out in other directions through the development of those other elements in music which the classicists passed over in their race for more and more complicated harmony. Never have composers taken their task more earnestly, and never before has America . . . stepped to the forefront in music with compositions that are not merely echoes and imitations of Europe, but alive with the vitality of new growth from new soil.” Cowell’s concluding remark attempted to persuade his readers that having exhausted resources of harmony created a situation that threatened composers’ ability to write innovative music. He argued that American modern composers had successfully

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<sup>44</sup> Hicks, 101.

broken that barrier, and that Americans were at last freed from Europe's oppressive influences.

Just five years after "Impasse" was published, Joseph Yasser presented vastly different views on the future of musical composition. In the preface to his book *A Theory of Evolving Tonality*, Yasser seemed to be responding directly to the conclusions of Cowell's 1927 article. He acknowledged that modern music points to a "profound and volcanic process in musical art" by which new tonal systems will be created. However, Yasser maintained that "there are no reasonable grounds for supposing ... that with these two present-day scales (diatonic and chromatic) the general evolution of tonal foundations in music has reached its final stage or, still worse, has come to an *impasse* from which there is no possible way out" (Yasser's<sup>45</sup> emphasis). He argued that it was out of ignorance that "some modern composers, who earnestly long for increased tonal material," naturally looked for a short-cut to the problem, "namely, to a purely mechanical division of the ... intervals of our present system into quarter-tones,"<sup>46</sup> precisely one of the solutions Cowell advocated in "Impasse." That a theorist and musicologist in New York felt the need to address these issues as the premise of his book on tonality speaks both to the revolutionary quality of Cowell's theories in his early career and to their widespread dissemination.

In 1925's "Modernism Needs No Excuses," Cowell examined the claim that the music of the ultra-moderns was dependent upon an extra-musical program and that "the modern composer has practically declared that this is the highest type of music."<sup>47</sup> As conservative critics (in this case, W. J. Henderson) disparaged this programmaticism in favor of "pure" music, Cowell contends that "it is often interesting and does not detract from the purely musical content to have a program."<sup>48</sup> He certainly would have had in mind not only his own works, but the works of other Ruggles, Ives, and Rudhyar which often exhibited programmatic tendencies.

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<sup>45</sup> Joseph Yasser, *A Theory of Evolving Tonality*. New York: American Library of Musicology, 1932 (3). It is possible, of course, that Yasser used italics here because this word occurs not only in English, but in French. However, on the same page, he italicizes "tonality," "evolving" and "static" merely for emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Cowell, "Modernism Needs No Excuses," 9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

In Cowell's own compositions, programmaticism had a special relation to the new musical resources that he had been cataloging since his studies with Seeger. Cowell had used extended piano techniques to represent extra-musical ideas since he began setting the poetry of John Varian in *Halcyon*, California. It was around this time that Cowell developed his tone-cluster technique, which he employed in two distinct ways: to characterize programmatic elements, as in *The Tides of Manaunaun* (as early as 1913), and to represent movement, as in his futurist work, *Dynamic Motion* (as early as 1914).

These two piano pieces, with their dissimilar use of tone clusters, demonstrate two different approaches to dissonance. In *The Tides of Manaunaun*, written as a prelude to an opera based on the mythic tales of John Varian, tone clusters are employed to accompany and add color to an otherwise largely conventional harmony.<sup>49</sup> Of this short piano piece, Cowell said,<sup>50</sup> “Manaunaun was the God of Motion and of the waves of the sea. And according to mythology, at the time when the universe was being built, Manaunaun sprayed all of the materials out of which the universe was being built with fine particles which were distributed everywhere through cosmos. And he kept these moving in rhythmical tides so that they should remain fresh when the time came for their use in the building of the universe.” This unusual narrative is typical of the *Halcyon* community's distinctive version of theosophy and Varian's eclectic treatment of Irish mythology.

Tone clusters in the bass register of the piano represent a distinctly programmatic element in this work. These clusters signify the vastness of the cosmos as well as the rhythmical tides themselves (example 2.4).

*Dynamic Motion* represents a more futuristic treatment of the tone cluster. No longer merely a coloristic effect for a tonally conventional foreground, as in *Tides*, clusters emerged in various incarnations as the primary sonic resource.<sup>51</sup> The piece exploits the entire range of the piano keyboard to suggest motion, combining brief,

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<sup>49</sup> This particular use of tone clusters is also clearly exhibited in *Harp of Life* (c. 1916), *Exultation* (c. 1921), *Lilt of the Reel* (c.1916), *Amiable Conversation* (c. 1917), *Jig* (c. 1921), *Snows of Fujiyama*, *The Voice of Lir* (c. 1920), and *The Trumpet of Angus Og* (c. 1920).

<sup>50</sup> In a 1963 recording for Smithsonian Folkways in which he played and commented on a selection of his piano works.

<sup>51</sup> Other pieces in which tone clusters are the primary sonic material include *Tiger*, *Antinomy*, and *Advertisement*.



juxtaposed gestures of shifting physical directions with rapidly changing dynamic levels (example 2.5).

Example 2.4 *The Tides of Manaunaun*, mm. 22-23.

Example 2.5 *Dynamic Motion*, mm.44-52.

Of Imre Weisshaus, Cowell wrote in 1927 that he often “concentrates on one line of repeated notes only, with rhythmic variation and subtle fluctuation.” He goes on to

explain that “his technic is like Picasso, suggesting more in the turn of a line than can be done by flaunting all the color masses of a Matisse.”<sup>52</sup> A comparison of ultra-modern composition with contemporary trends in French painting was more germane than Cowell may have realized.

Two figures in modern art form the center of Cowell’s comparison. Henri Matisse was a leading exponent of fauvism, an avant-garde current of French painting at the turn of the century. While the fauvists focused on vibrant, wild primary colors, Pablo Picasso expressed his preference for line rather than color. In 1908, his *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* revolutionized modern painting. The prostitutes that people the painting can be viewed from several perspectives simultaneously, annihilating lines of artificial perspective, a convention well-established in painting since the Renaissance.<sup>53</sup> In musical composition, a sense of perspective is often achieved through the establishment of a tonality, a subsequent move away from that tonality, and the return to it. Perspective in non-tonal music can be achieved by repetition or through the presence of a regular phrase structure.

Cowell recognized that the lack of a regular phrase structure in music could be seen as analogous to the loss of a single point of perspective in painting. When he compared Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* to Carl Ruggles’ *Men and Mountains*, he wrote, “Ruggles has at least one advantage over Schoenberg, that of a long melodic line, giving him a greater flow.”<sup>54</sup> Cowell was particularly sensitive to the way Ruggles’ long melodic lines flouted the Classic convention of predictable phrase structure. He had, in fact, been experimenting with seemingly endless melodic lines a year earlier, in *Four Combinations for Three Instruments* (1924).

Although this work contains few suggestions of extended technique and no programmatic elements, and is largely tonal, it eschews comparison with European tradition. The non-descript title avoids comparison with a piano trio in a Classic four-movement plan. Indeed, the rhapsodic style that pervades this work seems the antithesis of Classic form and phrase structure. Its movements are as follows:

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<sup>52</sup> Cowell, “How Young Hungary Expresses Individuality,” (*Musical America* 46, June 1927): 11.

<sup>53</sup> William Everdell, *The First Moderns*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997): 245.

<sup>54</sup> Cowell, “America Takes Front Rank” 5.

1. Allegretto (D minor)
2. Largo (C# Minor)
3. Allegro (chromatic/atonal)
4. Largo (C# Minor/ends on F#Major)

The movements are brief; the longest of them is about two minutes and forty-five seconds. The first movement, *Allegretto*, is scored for violin and cello. Although its key signature is d minor, this movement exhibits “dissonant counterpoint,” Charles Seeger’s systematic inversion of traditional contrapuntal rules. Without the establishment of a regular downbeat, the violin and cello weave contrapuntally, almost always in opposite directions. The lack of a point of rhythmic perspective causes a surprising moment when the two instruments converge on the final chord. The instruments move equally in turns, so that one sustains a half or whole note while the other moves in quarters. The first line is given here as an example.

Example 2.6 *Trio: Four Combinations for Three Instruments*, movement 1, mm. 1-3.

The idea of one instrument carrying melodic interest while another is quiescent presages the concept behind Cowell’s later “elastic form.”<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the through-composed first movement, the first *Largo* is a loose ternary form. The piano accompaniment contains chords that function as semi-diatonic clusters. Also unlike the *Allegretto*, the rhythmic pulse is very regular in the second movement. The piano accompaniment has three right-hand triplets against two left-hand quarter notes in 4/4, but the violin melody soars high above, its phrasing not confined to the piano’s two-bar segments; its first phrase is seventeen measures long. The end of the B section at measure 27 is inconclusive; the last note, an eighth, falls on beat three.

<sup>55</sup> This type of form, discussed in chapter three, was developed so that modern dance choreography and music would have equal importance in performance. In it, the music held little melodic or rhythmic interest while the dancer moved. As the dancer slowed, the music would take a more active role.

Similarly, when the A section returns half a bar later, the violin melody enters on beat two, creating the effect of starting *in medias res*:

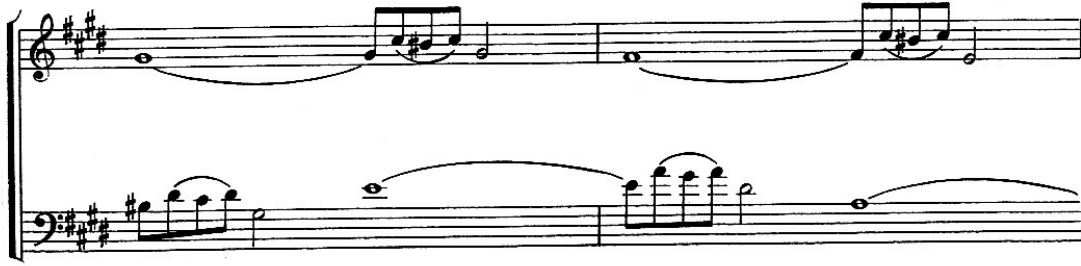


Example 2.7 *Trio: Four Combinations for Three Instruments*, movement 2, mm. 27-29.

The most salient feature of both the third movement *Allegro* and the final *Largo* is its alternation between parts, as in the first movement. The instruments develop melodic material as it is exchanged. This is particularly clear in the fourth movement. The violin initiates a simple melodic idea (example 2.8) over a chord/cluster piano accompaniment. The cello imitates this idea and the instruments enter into a conversational texture (example 2.9).

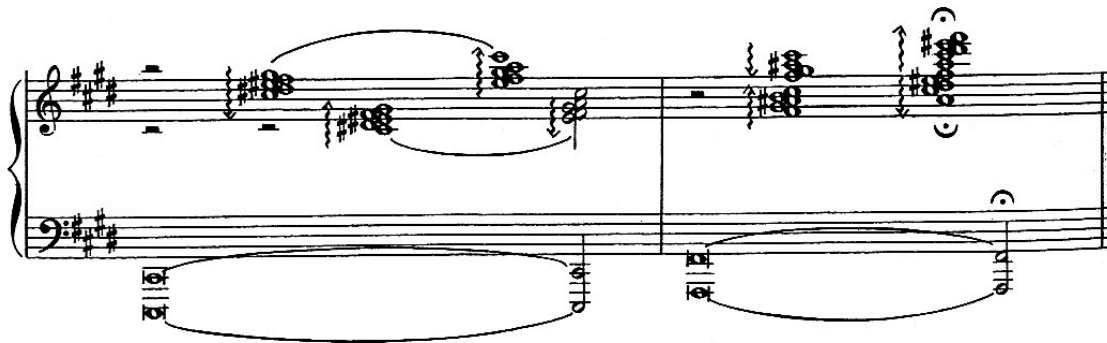


Example 2.8 *Trio: Four combinations for Three Instruments*, movement 4, mm. 1-2



Example 2.9 *Trio: Four Combinations for Three Instruments*, movement 4, mm. 9-10.

The direction-specific rolled clusters in the piano are the only examples of extended technique in this work (example 2.10).



Example 2.10 *Trio: Four Combinations for Three Instruments*, movement 4, mm. 23-24.

Cowell demonstrated in the *Trio* what he suggested in “The Impasse of Modern Music,” that many musical elements other than conventional harmony were ripe for development. Like *Fabric*, the *Trio* flows effortlessly and could also be described as a

romantic morceau, but the simultaneous combinations of rhythms, atonality, combinations of tempi, and tone clusters<sup>56</sup> make this a thoroughly modern work.

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<sup>56</sup> Cowell listed all of these possibilities in “The Impasse of Modern Music.”

## CHAPTER 3

### TRANS-ETHNIC MUSIC: BEYOND NEO-PRIMITIVISM

If the exploration of new musical resources, particularly timbre and rhythm, characterized Cowell's music in the 1910s and 20s, investigation of various musics of the world's non-Western peoples characterized virtually every facet of Cowell's advocacy and composition in the 1930s. His recognition of what Guido Adler had termed "comparative musicology"<sup>57</sup> in 1885 exposed Cowell to folk and traditional musics from around the world, providing him with further justification to devalue European tradition. His study of comparative musicology also gave him great impetus to continue his developments in the area of rhythm. Cowell's examination of the music of Russian composers<sup>58</sup> in his critical prose stimulated an interest in practical uses of new music, which in turn led him to write workers' songs and become involved in the Composer's Collective, one of New York's communist artistic groups. Also, Cowell's awareness of what he called "primitive" music led him to examine the problematic relationship between music and modern dance. Perhaps most significantly, Cowell's study of non-Western musics allowed him to revalue early American folk tunes, which laid the groundwork for his 1940s experiments inspired by the musics of William Billings and Billy Walker.<sup>59</sup>

In 1930, Cowell began teaching at the New School for Social Research in New York. The school had been founded in 1919 by "a group of prestigious freethinkers who

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<sup>57</sup> Adler, Guido. "Umfang, Methode und Zeil der Musikwissenschaft," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 1 (1885): 5-20. ". . . the comparison of the musical works—especially the folk songs—of the various peoples of the earth." Cowell was likely made aware of comparative musicology by Charles Seeger, who was an early proponent of the discipline.

<sup>58</sup> Especially Alexander Mossolov, Dmitri Shostakovich and Vladimir Vogel. Cowell wrote about these composers in "Towards Neo Primitivism," *Modern Music* 10/3 (1932-33): 149-153.

<sup>59</sup> Discussed in Chapter Four.

believed their academic freedom had been abridged at other universities.”<sup>60</sup> Cowell would not agree to teach anything but modern music, and that was amenable to the directors of the New School. His first course was entitled “A World Survey of Contemporary Music.” In four lectures, Cowell presented his views on musical topics that interested him. The first was an assessment of the musical situation in Russia and its social-realistic conservatism, and also of its emphasis on the practical uses of music. The second lecture was about Neo-Classicism in Western Europe, the precepts of which he later denigrated in the 1933 article “Towards Neo-Primitivism.”<sup>61</sup> The third was on Oriental musical principles, and in the fourth, Cowell examined American composers loosing the “apron strings” of Europe through the use of indigenous musical materials. Occasionally, he taught a course in ethnic musics.<sup>62</sup> Michael Hicks observes that for Cowell, ethnic music was synonymous with new music.<sup>63</sup> The connections he drew between them changed his musical philosophies. During the 1930s, economic depression and a four-year imprisonment on charges of homosexual activity caused Cowell to renounce his radical experimentation.<sup>64</sup>

After suggesting in 1927’s “The Impasse of Modern Music” that quarter-tones and rhythm were two areas ripe for modern development, Cowell continued his experiments with rhythm that began with the rhythm/harmony quartets in 1915.<sup>65</sup> He subsequently produced a number of pieces based on new uses of rhythms in the early 30s, such as the unpublished piano work aptly titled “Rhythm Study.” During this period Cowell also wrote a concerto that featured the rhythmicon, a proto-electronic instrument developed in association with Leon Theremin. The rhythmicon was built on the principles of the rhythm/harmony quartets. It was a keyboard instrument based on the

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<sup>60</sup> Hicks, 125. These were historian Charles Beard, economist Thorstein Veblen (his wife, Ellen, was one of Cowell’s earliest financial supporters in California), economist James Harvey Robinson, and philosopher John Dewey. The New School University, as it is now called, still views education as a tool to produce positive changes in society.

<sup>61</sup> Cowell, “Towards Neo-Primitivism,” *Modern Music* 10/3 (1932-33): 149-153.

<sup>62</sup> Both John Cage and Lou Harrison took this class in the mid-1930s.

<sup>63</sup> Hicks, 126.

<sup>64</sup> Whether this activity was with a minor, according to Michael Hicks (*Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, 134), or with a non-minor who had attempted to blackmail Cowell, is not clear. The latter is reported by Joel Sachs in “A Biographical Perspective,” (published in *Henry Cowell’s Musical Worlds*, by the Institute of Studies in American Music, 1997).

<sup>65</sup> Discussed in chapter two, pages 12-15.



Theremin, using the same type of sound generation.<sup>66</sup> The 1931 concerto for rhythmicon, titled *Rhythmicana*, was later published as *Concerto for Rhythmicon and Orchestra*.

As early as 1928 Cowell identified several composers who exhibited tendencies toward rhythmic complexity. In examining the music of Edgar Varèse “from the standpoint of the modern usages of melody, harmony and rhythm,”<sup>67</sup> Cowell observed that Varèse “frequently does away with melody entirely by having only repeated tones for certain passages . . . induc[ing] a keener awareness of other musical elements such as rhythm and dynamics.”<sup>68</sup> Cowell also noted the composer’s “rhythmical subtleties,”<sup>69</sup> by which he meant the layering of different rhythms. Always sensitive to ultra-modern innovation, Cowell acknowledged Varèse’s rhythmic fertility, remarking, “in *Hyperprism* on the first page alone there are thirty-two different rhythmical means of filling a measure.”<sup>70</sup>

Hans Eisler was another composer whose music contained rhythmic subtleties that Cowell was eager to promote. In addition, Eisler’s music displayed “an amazing number of modern harmonies,” and Cowell observed a fullness of sound driven by “primitive rhythms . . . [and] the primitive desire to give vent to feeling by shouting.”<sup>71</sup>

Inspired by teaching world musics at the New School, Cowell began using the term “primitive” to describe music that contained instances of rhythmic complexity. In “*Music of and for the Records*” (1931)<sup>72</sup>, in which Cowell suggested the possibilities inherent in writing music specially for recordings, he discussed the value of primitive music for the first time in print. He promoted the use of player pianos that can achieve “ratios of rhythms of the most exquisite subtlety . . . such rhythms are played by primitives at times, but our musicians find them almost if not entirely impossible to perform well.”<sup>73</sup> Such a remark, imbuing musics of other cultures with greater

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<sup>66</sup> Leon Theremin was most famous for inventing the “theremin,” the first electronic musical instrument. For more detailed information on his collaboration with Cowell, see “Rhythmicon.” <http://www.theremin.info/info-95-Rhythmicon.html>, retrieved 6 October 2004.

<sup>67</sup> Cowell, “The Music of Edgar Varese.” *Modern Music* 5/2 (1928): 9.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>71</sup> Cowell, “Vocal Innovators of Central Europe.” *Modern Music* 7/2 (1930): 36.

<sup>72</sup> Cowell, “*Music of and for the Records*.” *Modern Music* 8/3 (1931): 32-34.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 34. Cowell’s student, Conlon Nancarrow, later became famous for his use of player piano rolls for this same purpose.

complexity than Western traditional music, marks a turning point both in Cowell's compositional career and in his advocacy of modern music. By valuing the primitive, he challenged an aesthetic dominated by European art music values.

Cowell's sympathies with the vernacular musics of many cultures were of long duration. According to the composer, as a child growing up in California he had been more exposed to Appalachian, Irish, Chinese, Japanese and Tahitian music than Western art music. Teaching courses and giving lectures in "Music of the World's Peoples" at the New School, he discovered new opportunities for ultra-modern music in a decade of severe economic depression. Cowell received a Guggenheim Foundation grant in 1931 to study comparative musicology in Berlin with Erich von Hornbostel. It is possible that Cowell was following the lead of his former professor, Charles Seeger, who was concurrently developing a curriculum for comparative musicology studies at the University of California at Berkeley. Hicks's claim that Cowell had, throughout his career, co-opted many of Seeger's ideas and published them as his own is overstated. In Cowell's forays into ethnomusicology, he did more than merely "listen to records in Europe,"<sup>74</sup> as Hicks suggests. While in Berlin, he studied Carnatic theory with P. Sambamoorthy, as well as gamelan with Raden Mas Jodjhana and Ramaleislan.<sup>75</sup> His understanding of gamelan music is demonstrated in his *Ostinato Pianissimo* of 1934, which suggests colotomic structure.<sup>76</sup>

Cowell emerged from his Berlin study with new purpose. In the articles that followed, he strongly advocated the integration of other cultures' musics as a way to rejuvenate ultra-modernism. In his 1933 article, "Towards Neo Primitivism," Cowell compared modern music that integrated non-Western elements and other music that adhered to European traditions.<sup>77</sup> The title suggests the substance of the article: a sharp criticism of European-informed Neo-Classicism. As demonstrated above in "Music of and for the Records," Cowell enjoyed turning received wisdom about the supremacy of Western art music on its head. In this article he again observed that the works of early

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<sup>74</sup> Hicks, 127.

<sup>75</sup> David Nicholls, "Henry Cowell." *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

<sup>76</sup> Found in some Southeast Asian music, in which gongs or similar instruments in hierarchical sets are sounded to mark the beginnings and endings of sections, each characterized by recurrent melodic and rhythmic patterns [*The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, edited by Don Michael Randel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.): 180.

<sup>77</sup> Cowell, "Towards Neo Primitivism." *Modern Music* 10/3 (1933): 149-153.

modernists Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Ives exhibit complex rhythms which demonstrate a close kinship to the primitive. In Cowell's context, primitivism represents not the "divine infantilism"<sup>78</sup> of tone clusters. Rather, it bespeaks the ability of certain musical elements, particularly rhythm and timbre, to evoke the musics of non-Western cultures.

Later in the article, Cowell identified Neo-Classicism as a counter-tendency to the primitivist techniques of the early moderns. Without clearly defining Neo-Classicism, he recognized in it the preoccupation with external aspects of Classic period music. As a true champion of American composition, Cowell acknowledged Neo-Classic influence in "nearly all important European composers in form, melody, harmony or general polyphonic line."<sup>79</sup> From the ultra-modern perspective, the popularity of this idiom was largely due to its accessibility; a composer who adopts it "run[s] no risk of being misunderstood."<sup>80</sup> Cowell conceded that Neo-Classic music contained new elements, but that its harmonic, melodic and rhythmic background was too familiar. He then called for the development of a "strong new counter-movement, full-blooded and vital," that "reacts against the over-complexity of the earlier modern music but not against experiment, [and] against the supercilious formalism of a return to the particular style of some past century but not against the use of primary musical elements."<sup>81</sup>

One of the early aims of comparative musicology was to dispel the idea of uniformity in non-Western musics. Cowell used his new familiarity with world musics to spend the greater part of one page describing distinctive characteristics in the music of various peoples. He does, finally, identify general characteristics of non-Western music. According to Cowell, most of it is sung to percussion, so he concludes that melody and rhythm are the primary elements. On the subject of texture, Cowell observed of so-called primitive musics, "Where several different voices sing together they are either in unison or heterophonic, making a free polyphony in which each part is quite independent except that it must come out with the others at the end."<sup>82</sup> Further characterizing primitivism are

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<sup>78</sup> Hicks, 48. "Whatever else clusters may have expressed, they bespoke the divine infantilism to which modern art routinely surrenders, a return to childlike principles in the hopes of rejuvenating technique."

<sup>79</sup> "Towards Neo Primitivism," 150.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 150-151.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 152.

“rapid rhythmical changes and syncopations, [as well as] wide melodic ranges”<sup>83</sup> (contrasting with European conventions of regular meter, melodies with narrow ranges, and much conjunct motion). Cowell’s incorporation of some of these primitive elements into his own music will be discussed later in this chapter.

Cowell described a new movement that he termed “primitivistic,” recognizing in some American and Russian music the tendency toward the use of the musical elements listed above. As an example, he gave the new Russian proletarian choruses of Shostakovich, Mossolov and Vladimir Vogel, with their stark melodies, percussion, and lack of harmonic accompaniment. However, the recognition of Russian music during the 1930s holds significance beyond neo-primitivism. In 1931, Cowell, Seeger and Jacob Schaefer established a series of meetings to focus on the technique of writing Communist workers’ songs. Cowell wrote six workers’ songs under a pseudonym.<sup>84</sup> What began as a series of regular meetings grew into the Composers’ Collective of New York. Soon after the group’s establishment, collective member Carl Ruggles officially joined the Communist party and became founding editor of the periodical *New Masses*, for which Cowell wrote several articles. In one of them, entitled “Useful Music,”<sup>85</sup> Cowell expounded on practical uses of music, such as provoking citizens to action or uniting otherwise disparate peoples.<sup>86</sup>

According to Cowell, other American moderns exhibited similar primitive tendencies in their works for percussion instruments. He noted that since he began publishing *New Music Quarterly* in 1927, he had not published a piece for percussion alone. In the 1932 season, however, Cowell was offered fifteen different works with such instrumentation, including Varèse’s *Ionization* and William Russell’s *Fugue for Eight Percussion Instruments*.<sup>87</sup> In “Towards Neo Primitivism,” he advocated “draw[ing] on those materials common to the music of all the peoples of the world [to] build a new

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>84</sup> Hicks acknowledges the existence of this pseudonym, but does not give it. (124). These songs are entitled, “Canned,” “Free Nations United!,” “Proletarian Song,” “We can win together,” and “Working men unite, we must put up a fight!” My attempts to locate the only work (“Proletarian Song”) that was published under his pseudonym have proven unfruitful.

<sup>85</sup> Cowell, “Useful Music,” *New Masses*, 1935.

<sup>86</sup> Hicks, 125.

<sup>87</sup> “Towards Neo Primitivism,” 153.

music particularly related to our own century.”<sup>88</sup> For Cowell, the integration of materials from world musics was the new direction of ultra-modernism.

Another way in which Cowell drew on “primitive” practice is in the relationship between music and modern dance. In his many collaborations during the 1930s with choreographers such as Martha Graham and Bonnie Bird, Cowell acknowledged a dispute about the importance of music in dance.<sup>89</sup> Cowell approached this problem practically. He wrote in 1934 of the “practice that is universal among primitive peoples ... performing ceremonials which utilize dance and sound together.”<sup>90</sup> He mentioned his collaborations with Martha Graham in “establishing a contrapuntal relationship between the high points of interest . . . this way, neither one of the arts relied on the other, and neither [was] a servant of the other.”<sup>91</sup> In a similar article published three years later, Cowell made a case for composing dance and music concurrently. The problem, he said, was that dance was too improvisatory, while the music that accompanied it was often too rigid. “In ancient art music,” he wrote, “during the time when notation was just being experimented with, a composition was the kernel of an idea, and its actual production was expected to vary, each performer add[ing] his own touches to it.”<sup>92</sup> To establish some middle ground between the composition of dance and music, Cowell proposed “elastic form.” In his *Mosaic Quartet* of 1935, Cowell had already given control to his performers by allowing them to re-arrange movements of a work to form a larger structure. The score of this quartet includes the performance note: “One suggested way of performance is to alternate movements as follows: I-II-I-III-IV-III-V-IV-V-I-II-III-IV-V but any other succession is equally valid.”<sup>93</sup> Within the quartet, each movement is understood as a unit within the total mosaic pattern of the form.<sup>94</sup>

Elastic form functioned in a similar way. Within this new form, melodic phrases, rhythms and larger structural sections were subject to expansion, contraction, repetition

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>89</sup> Early modern dance pioneers such as Isadora Duncan sometimes used already extant music unrelated to their choreography, or often no music at all, instead of music written specifically for the dance.

<sup>90</sup> Cowell, “How Relate Music and Dance,” *Dance Observer* (1934): 52.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>92</sup> Cowell, “Relating Music and Dance,” *Dance Observer*, (1937): 8.

<sup>93</sup> Cowell, *Quartet No. 3, “Mosaic.”* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1962).

<sup>94</sup> The seeds of indeterminacy expressed here flowered in the music of the next generation of American composers, perhaps most famously with the works of John Cage.

or reorganization to suit the desires of the choreographer. Cowell's only published elastic pieces are the *Two Ritournelles* of 1939. *Ritournelle* was composed for part of a 1939 performance of *Marriage at the Eiffel Tower* (text by Jean Cocteau), produced by choreographer Bonnie Bird at the Cornish School in Seattle. The short piano piece is in two sections, a twenty-four bar *largetto* and an eight bar *trio*. It demonstrates the application of Cowell's flexible formal structure by providing various "elastic constructions," in which any number of different measures may be fitted together plausibly. (Examples 3.1 and 3.2)

Not surprisingly, Cowell included early American folk music in the category of primitive music. In a 1932 article, he praised Charles Ives as the father of indigenous American music.<sup>95</sup> This article, like many from Cowell's early career, is laden with anti-European sentiment. Cowell extolled the virtues of Ives's fresh use of American hymn tunes, whose rhythms had been "invariably altered . . . to fit the current European modes in meter and note-length" in their previous manifestations in early-American tunebooks.



Example 3.1 *Ritournelle*, Trio.

<sup>95</sup> Cowell, "American Composers IX: Charles Ives," *Modern Music* 10/1 (1932): 24.

**SECTION TWO (Trio)**

|     |              |              |         |               |
|-----|--------------|--------------|---------|---------------|
| 3 M | 3 Measure    | Version: Use | Numbers | 1-2-3         |
| 4   | 4 "          | "            | "       | 1-2-7-8       |
| 5   | 5 "          | "            | "       | 1-2-6-7-8     |
| 6   | 6 "          | "            | "       | 1-2-5-6-7-8   |
| 7   | 7 "          | "            | "       | 1-2-3-5-6-7-8 |
| 8 A | 8 As written |              |         |               |

Example 3.2 *Ritournelle*, performance indication for Trio section.

Similarly, “All those slight deviations of pitch in the scale of the American village folk, wrought out of deepest ecstasy, were ‘arranged’ for the conventional European major or minor tuning . . . a school-book, hymn-like four-part harmonization was imposed on everything. The original life and fire of the music were completely squeezed out.”<sup>96</sup> In short, Cowell portrays Americans as inherently original, innovative, but ruined by European training, a theme that had characterized his polemical criticism from his early career onward. Humorously, he observes that “Kreisler and Heifetz are masters of their art, yet neither could play the fiddle in an old American dance. They would not know where to accent, where to dip and pull the tone, where deliberately and joyfully to be ‘off-tune!’”<sup>97</sup> These comments are reminiscent of many found in Ives’s own *Memos*, which contain numerous biting criticisms of European music and musicians.

Ives’s music exhibited the same trait Cowell admired in Varèse’s *Hyperprism*: the “primitive” layering of different rhythms, what would later be known as polyrhythms. He proclaimed, “Just why the harmony of rhythm has remained practically undeveloped . . . is hard to say. They [multiple, simultaneous rhythms] sound magnificent, and are in current use among all the peoples of the world, except in the conventional music of Europe.”<sup>98</sup>

In addition to discussions of rhythm and the remarkable use of hymn tunes, Cowell raised the issue of primacy in the same article. He observed, “Like atonality, the

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 30-31.

idea of wide melodic skips is usually credited to Schoenberg, but is to be found earlier in the work of Ives.” This remark reflects a logical inconsistency with what Cowell proposed earlier in “The Impasse of Modern Music.” If the free use of dissonance was a product of logical, organic development (an idea Schoenberg himself espoused), then its concurrent development on different continents should come as no surprise, and questions of primacy are not entirely relevant. Nevertheless, Cowell enthusiastically pursued the struggle against assumed European cultural supremacy, and he embraced his hard-won position as champion of American music.

This position was sadly undermined on May 22, 1936, when Cowell was arrested on charges of engaging in homosexual activity.<sup>99</sup> In spite of the best efforts of friends and family, he was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment. He ultimately served four years and the sentence was commuted. Though incarceration was undoubtedly difficult, Cowell’s creativity never waned. He continued to compose, published six articles, wrote two textbooks (neither of which were ever published)<sup>100</sup> and rehearsed the prison band, sparking an interest in band music he would draw upon during the next few decades. For the band, Cowell composed a piece entitled, “How They Take It,” which reflected on the different emotional states of the culturally diverse prisoners.

Whether Cowell was promoting the union of disparate peoples through “useful music” or the fusion of non-Western musical elements in his compositions (termed “trans-ethnicism” by David Nicholls)<sup>101</sup> his work reflected the innate diversity of American society. It also offered evidence of a changing world-view. The trans-ethnicism promoted by Cowell and other American moderns<sup>102</sup> reached beyond mere exoticism to a true integration of disparate musical styles and techniques.

The *United Quartet* of 1936 provided such a trans-ethnic integration of techniques. In the preface to the score, Cowell described the piece as a response to the “music-for-the-people” movement that attempted to broaden the appeal of modern music. Reaching a more popular, general audience became a concern of many moderns after the experimentalism of the 1920s waned and radical elitism was no longer financially

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<sup>99</sup> Hicks, 127-128.

<sup>100</sup> These were *The Nature of Melody* and *Rhythm* (both written in 1937).

<sup>101</sup> Nicholls, *American Experimental Music: 1890-1940*.

<sup>102</sup> Ruth Crawford and Charles Seeger are among those Nicholls lists as experimentalists interested in trans-ethnicism.



feasible. As David Nicholls observes, composers were as powerless as factory workers against the depression era.<sup>103</sup> The result was either inaction, as in the cases of Edgard Varèse and Harry Partch,<sup>104</sup> or the development of more accessible music. This is the decade in which Cowell, Cage, Harrison, Copland and others began associating themselves with modern dance.

“The United Quartet is an attempt toward a more universal musical style,” Cowell wrote in 1936. “There are in it elements suggested from many places and periods . . . Primitive music is represented, not by imitating it, nor by taking a specific melody or rhythm from some tribe, but by using a three-tone scale, and exhausting all the different ways the three tones can appear . . . The Oriental is represented by modes which are constructed as Oriental modes are constructed, without being actual modes used in particular cultures.” By alluding to “oriental” elements in his music, Cowell simultaneously evoked an exotic musical language and created a new one. Cowell recognized the Orient as an integral part of the American cultural fabric; the incorporation of far Eastern elements in his music generated a distinctly American modernist voice. Cowell’s conclusion suggests the same, that “The modern is represented by . . . the fact that the whole result is something new, and all that is new is modern!”<sup>105</sup> Trans-ethnicism provided Cowell with new opportunities for continued musical growth toward a more universal idiom.

The entire string quartet is built on a foundation rhythm of five beats with the following stress pattern:

- -    ◡    ◡

This pattern informs and unifies the work on multiple levels. On the macro-level, it represents the overall stress pattern of the five movements, based on overall dynamic level of each movement (loud, loud, soft, loud, soft) and the corresponding ground tones for each (C, C, G, C, G).

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<sup>103</sup> Nicholls, “Henry Cowell’s *United Quartet*.” *American Music* 13 (1995): 197.

<sup>104</sup> During the Great Depression Partch stopped composing, living for six years as a hobo wandering back and forth across the United States. Varèse completed his celebrated flute piece *Density 21.5* in 1936, but wrote no other new works for twenty years. Robert Morgan attributes this silence to the conservative trend of the 1930s and 1940s, which isolated Varèse.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Cowell, “Preface.” *United Quartet*. New York: C. F. Peters, 1969.

On a smaller level, the pattern is evident within the individual form of each movement. It is the most obvious in the first movement, which exhibits the form A A B A B. As well as in formal sections, the pattern appears in the corresponding dynamic markings for each phrase: ff, ff, f, ff, f in the A section, and p, p, pp, p, pp in the B section. Each measure also contains the stress pattern in the form of actual accents. Each of these small-scale instances of the unifying pattern can be observed on the first page of the movement (example 3.3)

**STRING QUARTET No. 4**  
United Quartet (composed in 1936)

**I** HENRY COWELL

*Allegro* ♩ = 156 *or faster*

\*) □ V V V V

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

♩ dynamics independent for cello

\*) 1, 2, and 4 accented throughout

Example 3.3 *String Quartet No. 4, "United,"* movement 1, page 1.

Nicholls has published an excellent movement-by-movement formal analysis of the entire *United Quartet*.<sup>106</sup> Rather than duplicate or challenge his findings, this discussion focuses on the cultural and compositional issues that concerned Cowell in the work. Such issues also emerge from his prose of this period.

Cowell often associated the use of functional harmony with European convention. As in the Russian proletarian choruses he admired, harmonic accompaniment in the *United Quartet* was secondary. Rhythm, duration and phrase patterning form the organizational basis of each movement. While rhythm follows the pattern on the level of each measure, dynamics follow the same pattern on the level of each phrase. Tonality, although not central to organization within each movement, informs the harmonic structure of the overall work by exhibiting the stress pattern through pitch centricity, expressed in ground tones (C, C, G, C, G). It is significant that melody and rhythm are musical elements that remain primarily audible throughout the quartet, emphasizing Cowell's own classification of this work in a trans-ethnic, populist idiom.

The first movement appears the most unified, following the basic germinal idea very closely in regard to duration, accents, dynamics, and form. To think of an incarnation of the organic pattern in dynamics at the level of the measure seems almost pedantic. However, in the only recorded performance of this work, the changes are nuanced rather than conspicuous. Judging by Cowell's admiration for Varèse's "subtleties of dynamic change"<sup>107</sup> in *Hyperprism*, this is as he would have preferred.

"Towards Neo Primitivism" provides some insight into Cowell's intentions in the *United Quartet*. The percussive use of chords is something Cowell uses in this movement, and also something he specifically identified as an element of primitivism in his 1933 article. Also, in the first movement, voices act together "making a free polyphony in which each part is quite independent except that it must come out with the others at the end."<sup>108</sup> In performance, the effect is of tones "wabbling back and forth or sliding up or down."<sup>109</sup> This is shown in the following example.

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<sup>106</sup> "Henry Cowell's *United Quartet*." *American Music* 12:2 (1995): 195-217.

<sup>107</sup> "The Music of Edgar Varèse," 9.

<sup>108</sup> "Towards Neo-Primitivism," 152.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 152.



Example 3.4 *United Quartet*, movement 1, mm. 18-23.

Nicholls has noted that the second movement strongly evokes a North Indian raga. In an attempt to identify a specific scale used in the first violin melody, he discovered a particular raga of the Bhairavi family of North Indian origin. Cowell stated in the lengthy preface that he did not use specific pre-existing modes. However, it is possible that he was made aware of the existence of this particular family of ragas during his studies in Berlin with Sambamoorthy of Madras. Regardless of the particular scale used, the movement contains other elements that easily relate it to Indian and Middle Eastern music. A drone on C, played by the cello, occurs without respite throughout the movement. The second violin and viola are directed to play an interlocking rhythm percussively (sometimes *col legno*, other times *pizzicato*). The effect is as tabla-like as strings are ever likely to sound. The omnipresent organic pattern is truncated to a three-stress pattern: - - ~ and is present in the quasi-tabla rhythms.

Since Cowell wrote extensively about the use of cross-rhythms (sometimes referred to in his prose as the “layering of rhythm” or “harmony of rhythm”), it comes as no surprise to find such an occurrence in the third movement. He grouped two bars of 3/4 in the first and second violins with three bars of 2/4 triplets in the viola and cello, providing ample opportunity for syncopation, especially hemiola. Consider the opening measures:

Example 3.5 *United Quartet*, movement 3, measures 1-2

Instead of merely two meters creating a cross-rhythm, Cowell actually wrote four different rhythms, one in each instrument. The first violin moves mostly at the level of the 3/4 quarter note. The second violin moves very often in a three-large-beat hemiola (covering two 3/4 measures) against the first violin. The viola has three triplet eighth notes in 2/4 per 3/4 quarter note. The cello begins with three triplet quarter notes in 2/4. What Cowell achieves is a layering of different rhythms that may be difficult for traditionally trained Western instrumentalists to play, but comes across to the listener as effortless and improvisatory. Additionally, the violin melody has an unusually wide range, which was, according to Cowell, another element of his definition of primitive music.<sup>110</sup>

Movement four displays “rapid rhythmic changes and syncopations,”<sup>111</sup> the use of “oriental modes based on as few as three notes,”<sup>112</sup> and percussive accompaniment produced by tapping the back of the instruments with a padded drum stick or with the back of the bow. The meter changes frequently, again without disrupting the musical

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 153.

<sup>112</sup> Henry Cowell, *United Quartet* (String Quartet No. 4) (San Francisco: New Music Edition, 1937).

flow. The fifth movement is curiously inconclusive. It ends with a crescendo, as if suggesting an upbeat to another movement.

Regarding his intentions in the *United Quartet*, Cowell wrote in the score's preface: "The quartet should not only be easy to understand, but it should be understood equally well by Americans, Europeans, Orientals, or higher primitives; or by anybody from a coal miner to a bank president."<sup>113</sup> Cowell's desire to live in the "whole world of music"<sup>114</sup> informed his decision to write music that exhibited a trans-ethnic blend of musical resources.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in many places. See, for instance, Hugo Weisgall, "The Music of Henry Cowell," *Musical Quarterly* 45/4 (1959): 498.

## CHAPTER 4

### LOOKING AHEAD TO AN AMERICAN PAST: RADICAL SIMPLICITY IN THE HYMNS AND FUGUING TUNES

Cowell had completed the *United Quartet* while being held in California's Redwood County Jail during the period of May 22 to July 8, 1936. After a humiliating trial, Cowell's subsequent incarceration in San Quentin penitentiary made a lasting impression on his life and work. His restricted access to a piano in San Quentin changed the focus of his compositions, which began to feature abstract musical structure rather than playing technique and timbral effect.<sup>115</sup> However, rather than hindering Cowell's compositional process, his musical and cultural horizons were broadened by this restriction. He had access to wind and string players, especially during his last year at San Quentin, resulting in a more sensitive approach to orchestral instruments. Also, being surrounded by inmates from many ethnicities and walks of life undoubtedly made Cowell even more aware of the importance of diversity in his own music.

Not surprisingly, Cowell used the scant resources he found in San Quentin to his advantage. The election in 1938 of Cuthbert Olson, a New Deal democrat, as the governor of California brought prison reform, the deemphasizing of punishment and the promotion of rehabilitation at San Quentin. Cowell took advantage of the opportunity and created a thriving school of music in San Quentin. By June 1939, he was teaching twenty-two hours a week, supervising other classes three more hours, rehearsing the prison band five hours and playing the flute with them seven additional hours. He had 1,549 registrants in music classes, 343 registrants in elementary correspondence courses, and 59 more in advanced courses.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Hicks, 143.

<sup>116</sup> Hicks, 140.

Based on his good behavior, and the efforts of numerous friends speaking on his behalf, Cowell's sentence was commuted and he was granted parole in June 1940. In December of that year, Seeger recommended Cowell for a position in a federal program involved in what was known as "cultural defense"; it was designed to combat Nazi propaganda that claimed artists in the United States disdained Latin American culture. On July 3, 1941 the San Quentin Prison Board restored Cowell's civil rights, allowing him to be employed by the government. In September of that same year, Cowell married a former student and assistant of Charles Seeger, Sidney Hawkins Robertson, demonstrating to his colleagues and friends his full rehabilitation.

Now employed by the office of the Pan-American Union, Cowell edited and submitted for publication most of the Latin American music that was issued over the course of the next few years. In addition, he supervised the Music Distribution Project at the New School in New York, a program that disseminated the music of composers in the United States to Latin American countries. It wasn't until he received a full pardon in 1943, however, that he could travel abroad. He then became senior music editor of the overseas branch of the Office of War Information.

Ultra-modernism, for so long identified with virile, rugged masculinity, was no longer a viable foundation for the career of an exposed homosexual. Also, due to economic depression, experimentalism had been superceded in the 1930s by a more universally appealing trans-ethnic approach to composition. Cowell's ethnomusicological leanings from that decade found a logical outlet in his more traditional Americana style of the 1940s.

Many critics saw Cowell's new compositional conservatism as a weak counterpart to his earlier experimental approach. The feminization of tradition in music was practiced by other proponents of musical modernism, most notably Ives and Ruggles,<sup>117</sup> who often justified their avoidance of European convention in favor of experimentation. Cowell himself had propagated the notion of feminized European art music when he suggested that Americans cut the "apron strings" of European traditions.

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<sup>117</sup> Both expressed their frustrations with European cultural influence by using terminology that, by today's standards, is widely regarded as misogynous.



In order to thrive in this boys' club of ultra-modernism, female composers in the early part of the twentieth century had to be extremely resourceful. One of Cowell's associates, Ruth Crawford, felt tensions in her dual identity as a woman and an ultra-modern composer. She resolved them at the time by linking the traditional with the modern. Her biographer, Judith Tick, observed, "She understood tradition through a modernist perspective . . . Just as modernism flouted conventional practice, so did tradition. Just as modernism rejected Romantic excess, so did tradition."<sup>118</sup>

No longer a proponent of macho experimentation, Cowell turned away from newer currents of ultra-modernism<sup>119</sup> in the 1940s and began to value more authentic, traditional idioms. He certainly had help in this endeavor from his wife Sidney Robertson, who had specialized in studying the practical uses of traditional musics. Robertson had ample training and experience in this field. After studying romance languages and philology at Stanford, she briefly taught ethnic music at the Peninsula School for Creative Education in Menlo Park, California. Determined to dedicate her life to social work, she divorced her first husband, Kenneth Robinson, and moved to New York, where she immersed herself in the Jewish immigrant community to study social music. In 1936, she became Charles Seeger's assistant at the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration in Washington, DC, which was dedicated to promoting folk music as a cohesive force in new farming communities in the United States. Between 1936 and 1937 Seeger sent Robertson, Margaret Valiant, and others into eastern and midwestern states to make field recordings for use in such government projects as training recreational leaders for rural settlements. Robertson recorded Lithuanian, Finnish, Serbian, Gaelic, Swedish, and American Indian music, and a substantial number of Appalachian and Ozark songs and dance tunes.

Robertson's influence on Cowell's changing philosophies should not be understated. They co-wrote a number of articles, including "Our Country Music," which appeared in *Modern Music* in 1943.<sup>120</sup> This article defined Cowell's musical and philosophical parameters for the next two decades, much as "Towards Neo-Primitivism"

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<sup>118</sup> Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): ix.

<sup>119</sup> Such as those espoused by John Cage in the early 1940s.

<sup>120</sup> Cowell and Robertson, "Our Country Music." *Modern Music* 20/4 (1943): 243-247.

had laid the groundwork for his trans-ethnic composition of the 1930s. “Our Country Music” began with a complaint: “We in the United States today know less about our own country music than do any other people in the world.”<sup>121</sup> The authors blamed commercialized popular tunes, as well as the radio and film industry, which had “developed a gaudy, artificial version of what passes for folk song, under the classification of ‘hill-billy’.” They protested that this “broadway cowboy style”<sup>122</sup> reduced America’s oral tradition to a dead level of uniformity, which was understandably disturbing to a composer who valued pluralism in his own music, and an ethnographer who had spent the past decade exploring America’s diversity through her field studies.

American folk musics, claimed Cowell and Robertson, largely stem from the “Anglo-Saxon convention of understatement in poetry and performance,” which had developed a subtlety “not immediately perceptible to city people accustomed to great dynamic range, to the effect of shock by contrast.”<sup>123</sup> The authors suggested a remedy for anyone willing to learn more about traditional American music: a “thorough study of the records.”<sup>124</sup> Conveniently, the Library of Congress had just made available seven albums of American folk music from the Archive of American Folk Song. Many of the recordings from this collection were Robertson’s own, which had been made under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration in the mid-1930s.

Although the authors emphasized the plurality of American traditional musics, they noted that no attempt was made to gloss over natural “hybridizations” in the Library of Congress collection. By highlighting tendencies of syncretism within America’s pluralist musical culture, Cowell justified the integration of disparate musical elements in his own compositions. “Our Country Music” elucidates the transition from Cowell’s trans-ethnicism of the 1930s to the revaluing of tradition in his 1940s nationalism. As Ruth Crawford had felt largely shut out of the male-dominated advance-guard establishment and had forged links between the very old and the very new with her creative harmonizations of folk tunes, Cowell similarly focused on various American traditions for new musical resources.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 244.

Informed by his own thorough study of the records, Cowell began to explore the resources of his own country in the 1930s. Prior to this time, he had written several jigs and reels based on his Celtic heritage, but after his engagement to Robertson, Cowell's forays into America's traditional musics drew on more disparate sources. A mounting awareness of America's own diversity informs the 1939 piece for small orchestra entitled *Old American Country Set*.<sup>125</sup> The movements are titled "Blarneying Lilt," "Meetinghouse Chorale," "Comallye," "Charivari,"<sup>126</sup> and "Cornhusking Hornpipe."

The following year Cowell wrote a similar piece, showing even more diverse traditions, and exhibiting more descriptive titles. The *American Melting Pot Set* for chamber orchestra includes a "Chorale (Teutonic-American)," "Air (African-American)," "Satire (Franco-American)," "Alapna (Oriental-American)," "Slavic Dance (Slavic-American)," "Rhumba with added Eighth (Latin-American)," and "Square-Dance (Celtic-American)." This piece offers a curious listening experience. While the movements announce their reference to different ethnicities and nationalities in their titles, each sounds more like a blend of all the traditions. In this sense, the music truly depicts a "melting pot."

World War II and the fight against German political domination underscored Cowell's lifelong personal struggle against the supremacy of Teutonic music. In 1943 he accepted a position with the overseas branch of the Office of War Information (OWI), where he worked with the Radio Program Bureau to "reach hundreds of millions of foreign peoples with Allied news and American views."<sup>127</sup> Cowell was asked to advise on "serious works [and] American pieces." The necessity of an expert in the field of American music became evident when, according to Cowell, German radio "began ridiculing America, claiming that we were incapable of producing a native culture and had to fall back on German tunes as part of our national music." (A previous OWI producer had attempted to demonstrate American folk song through the unfortunate use of "Maryland, O Maryland," which was based on the German Christmas tune

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<sup>125</sup> Composed while he was in San Quentin.

<sup>126</sup> Charivari refers to the French tradition of a mocking serenade meant to annoy newlyweds that was brought to Louisiana by Acadian settlers; it was probably included here as a tribute to Sidney, at the time Cowell's fiancée, who had "a bit of New Orleans French blood" (Hicks, 142).

<sup>127</sup> Cowell, "Shaping Music for Total War," *Modern Music* (1945): 223.

“Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum.”)<sup>128</sup> Such views were not new, of course, but Cowell eagerly embraced the opportunity to present American music to a world audience through government-sponsored radio. He was ideal for the position: knowledgeable in many musics of the world and particularly sensitive to the political uses of music.

In 1945’s “Shaping Music for Total War,” Cowell discussed the practical use of music to divert listeners in neutral and occupied countries away from enemy broadcasts. In a shameless but earnest plug for American music, he wrote, “we used art music, old and new, from all countries, and found that pieces by modern Americans whose style is not too complex were well received.”<sup>129</sup> That he valued music that was “not too complex” demonstrates Cowell’s own move away from the advance-guard, a move that many composers made due to economic woes and wartime shortages of resources necessary for the promulgation of modern music.<sup>130</sup>

The issue of syncretism returns in this 1945 article. “Hybrid forms,” Cowell wrote, “have sprung up everywhere and proved helpful. Our popular tunes are to be found in every Oriental country played and sung on native instruments in the style of the land ... [they] establish the bond between East and West.”<sup>131</sup> Using his discovery from the previous decade that traditional musics of many cultures shared certain general characteristics, such as singable melodies and percussive accompaniment, Cowell used folk and traditional songs from around the globe to reach his world audience. After observing the effectiveness of folk musics in this regard, he explained, “country music comes closest to being international.”<sup>132</sup> Between 1948 and 1954, Cowell regularly reviewed concerts for *Musical Quarterly*’s “Current Chronicle,” a column in which music critics reported on musical happenings from various regions of the United States. His remarks offer insight into his changing musical aesthetic.

Because Cowell revalued tradition, the question of authenticity arose in his criticism from the 1940s. As he demonstrated in a review of Colin McPhee’s music, the study of a particular culture’s musical idiom, either one’s own or another’s, can lend a degree of authenticity to a composer’s work. In evaluating McPhee’s symphony *Tabuh*

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 224.

<sup>130</sup> Especially of shellac, used in the production of records; it was being reserved for military use.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 225.

*Tabuhan*, Cowell appreciated the composer's "knowing use of Balinese modes, together with the characteristic rhythmic polyphony and melodic contour and embellishment . . . these are the important elements for this music's authenticity."<sup>133</sup> Cowell then contrasted McPhee's accomplishments to Henry Eichheim's, whose music gave "so curiously false an impression [because] he mixed Eastern and Western instruments in such a way that the best values of each are lost, [and also because] he never did understand the system that underlies Eastern music and is responsible for its special organization."<sup>134</sup> Both composers attempted to use traditional musical elements of another culture, but McPhee was more successful because of his solid knowledge of Balinese music, its principles as well as its sounds.

Inauthentic music was not necessarily the result of a composer utilizing elements of a different culture. According to Cowell, the use of one's own native musical heritage could be hindered by European training. In a comparison of two Cuban composers, Amadeo Roldan and Alejandro Caturla, the more authentic in Cowell's view was Roldan, whose music "preserves that spirit [of native Cuban performance] through the use of characteristic rhythms and instruments." Caturla, on the other hand, who had studied with Nadia Boulanger, "tried to use more conventional instruments to imitate the sounds of Cuban music . . . his works give an impression of native sounds rather than of being native in style."<sup>135</sup> The underlying message, which had been stated and restated in Cowell's prose since the beginning of his career, was that conventional European training was useless to the truly current modern composer.

In the 1930s, the burgeoning American film industry provided an opportunity for composers to reconnect with their nation's roots. In reviewing an evening of documentary films with music presented by the League of Composers in 1941, Cowell raised the issue of authenticity of setting. He disapproved of Roy Harris' score for *One Tenth of a Nation* because its "sophisticated tonal weaving and the tone-quality of the city-union string section were very much out of place in the cornfields." Similarly, Douglas Moore's score to *Power and the Land* was "appealing and well-written, in a style neither very simple nor very complex," although it exhibited the "familiar tones of

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<sup>133</sup> Cowell, "Current Chronicle: New York," *Musical Quarterly* (July 1948): 410.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>135</sup> Cowell, "Roldan and Caturla of Cuba," *Modern Music* 18/2 (1941): 98

symphonic instruments [which] gave an unavoidable impression of city concert-hall [rather] than of the bucolic atmosphere of farm life.”<sup>136</sup> Cowell proposed that the farmers should have instead sung their own tunes to the strumming of banjos and guitars.

Marc Blitzstein’s score for the film *Valley Town* used simple tunes that seemed to fit the film in mood, but Cowell objected to his use of “wailing semi-popular style social-content songs.” This remark raises a peculiar paradox of Cowell’s music philosophy. In the 1930s he championed the “music-for-the-people” movement, and he advocated an increased awareness of traditional musics in the 1940s. However, instead of incorporating jazz and blues elements into concert music to make it more palatable to a broader audience, he eschewed this practice, separating “populist” music from those particular “popular” idioms. Virgil Thomson initially shunned jazz because it represented to him baser elements of American society.<sup>137</sup> Cowell, however, may have avoided its use because jazz was the one element of American music that European, particularly French, composers adopted most readily. Regarding the music of Frank Wigglesworth, Cowell wrote, “the sort of irregular off-beat accents that characterize the rhythm of so many followers of Stravinsky or jazz is interestingly absent. Wigglesworth demonstrates that new kinds of rhythmic life are possible without resort to those particular devices.”<sup>138</sup>

Revealing his lack of patience for jazz elements in concert music, Cowell eviscerated Howard Swanson’s “well-schooled” *Short Symphony* for a “simple blues melody [that] emerges, seemingly without reference to anything that happened before. It gives an irritating sense of being tacked on for its shock value, because it is so much at variance with the rest of the symphony [demonstrating] a certain pompousness that is not really natural to him.”<sup>139</sup>

Despite avoiding popular idioms such as jazz, Cowell continued to champion populist music, particularly any music that exhibited the interconnectedness of the arts. As he had promoted the cooperation of composers and modern dance choreographers in the 1930s, Cowell thought a similar approach was appropriate for film scoring. He especially appreciated Virgil Thomson’s score to Pare Lorentz’s celebrated film *The*

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<sup>136</sup> Cowell, “The League’s Evening of Films,” *Modern Music* 18/3 (1941): 176.

<sup>137</sup> Thomson, Virgil. “Jazz (1924).” in *Composers on Modern Musical Culture*. Bryan Simms, ed. New York: Schirmer Books, 1999.

<sup>138</sup> Cowell, “Current Chronicle: New York,” *Musical Quarterly* 37/1 (1951): 76.

<sup>139</sup> Cowell, “Current Chronicle: New York,” *Musical Quarterly* 37/2 (1951): 252.

*River*. The music was suited to the film “in a measure lacking in all the other [documentaries]: it does not try to be complete in itself.”<sup>140</sup>

The integration of music, text and staging in opera was, to Cowell, a promising new avenue of populist music. In his review of Ernst Bacon’s 1942 music-play *A Tree on the Plains*, he encouraged the formation of an American opera tradition, one that would make works based on American themes popular successes in the United States. “This is the quality of plainness,” he wrote, “dramatization of the real rather than the artificial, [and] reliance on simple tunefulness rather than pomp and circumstance.”<sup>141</sup> Cowell noted with satisfaction that Paul Horgan’s text “for the most part, uses the language of plain people,” and that the opera ended “not with a bang, but with pleasant resumption of duties on the farm.”<sup>142</sup>

Virgil Thomson earned Cowell’s praise again in 1948 for his opera, *The Mother of Us All*, the second collaborative effort with Gertrude Stein.<sup>143</sup> Cowell thought the opera was “sure to delight any English-speaking audience, chiefly on account of a sophisticated modern simplicity of manner.” He lauded the work’s chordal simplicity by remarking, “the austerity of dominant triads . . . is especially refreshing.” Cowell also observed that in the same way Gertrude Stein’s “basic, everyday words” have more meaning, Thomson’s “basic, everyday chords” are imbued with more significance, perhaps because the setting of Stein’s words realized their natural speech-rhythm. Cowell concluded that Thomson’s radical simplicity was so significant that, “a new American opera tradition will be established around [the work], a tradition founded on wit and clarity, conducive to widespread amateur performances.”<sup>144</sup>

Cowell believed that “radical simplicity” was the immediate future of American concert music. In July 1948’s “Current Chronicle,” Cowell included a review of Douglas Moore’s *Symphony in A*, which, he said, “ingratiates itself by its unpretentiousness . . . Its simplicity is that of the composer who has gone through the throes of complexity.”<sup>145</sup> Cowell seems to imply that a composer who first catalogs all available musical resources

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<sup>140</sup> “The League’s Evening of Films,” 178.

<sup>141</sup> Cowell, “A New Opera on an American Theme,” *The New York Times* (May 24, 1942): Section 10, p. 7.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>143</sup> The first was their 1933 opera *Three Saints in Four Acts*.

<sup>144</sup> Cowell, “Review: Virgil Thomson – *The Mother of Us All*,” *Notes* 5/2 (1948): 262.

<sup>145</sup> Cowell, “Current Chronicle: New York,” *Musical Quarterly* 34/3 (1948): 413.

should then simplify his music, reducing it to essential elements. His own mature works reflect this process. Cowell also suggested that simplicity was a distinctly American trait. Again, he wrote of Thomson, “in Paris he found an appreciation of the bareness of Protestant hymns, the French capital being then rather bored with Impressionism.”<sup>146</sup> From Cowell’s perspective at least, more than jazz was being exported to France. On the influence of jazz in American musical identity, Nadia Boulanger was quoted in an interview near the end of her life: “Beginning from [the musical heritage of black Americans] . . . American musicians have managed to generate a very advanced civilization without roots; [they] had to create simultaneously the fruit and the root.”<sup>147</sup> If Cowell had had an opportunity to respond directly to her statement, he likely would have asserted that Americans indeed had musical roots, that their musical heritage, like American society, was inherently pluralistic in nature, and that the future of composition in the United States should be based on the rediscovery and integration of elements within that diverse heritage. The American musical roots Cowell chose to develop in the 1940s came from the early-American styles of William Billings and Billy Walker.

In 1930, musicologist Edwin Hall Pierce published one of the first scholarly examinations of William Billings (1746-1800) and his early-American fusing tunes. Pierce framed his article, “The Rise and Fall of the ‘Fugue-Tune’ in America,” in terms that defined the genre as short-lived American autonomy from “long-continued dependence on Old World influences.” He described the fusing tune as a “distinctively native musical art-form, small, yet genuine and having considerable possibilities.”<sup>148</sup>

Cowell also believed in the untapped possibilities of the genre. In 1940, three of William Billings’ fusing tunes were rediscovered and edited by Clarence Dickinson.<sup>149</sup> Their subsequent publication as *Three Fusing Tunes* spurred the curiosity of a new twentieth-century audience. Cowell knew this publication well; he arranged one of the

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 412.

<sup>147</sup> Nadia Boulanger, from “Two Interviews,” in *Mademoiselle: Conversations with Nadia Boulanger*, ed. Bruno Monsaingeon, trans. Robyn Marsack (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988). Reprinted in *Source Readings in Music History: Volume Seven, The Twentieth Century* ed. Robert P. Morgan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998): 218.

<sup>148</sup> Edwin Hall Pierce. "The Rise and Fall of the 'Fugue-Tune' in America." *Musical Quarterly* 16:2 (1930): 214-228.

<sup>149</sup> Clarence Dickinson (1873-1969), a founder of the American Organists Guild, was known as the dean of American church musicians. He edited and published the *Three Fusing Tunes for Four Part Mixed Chorus*, (New York: Music Press, Inc., c. 1940).



pieces for band in 1943. He explained his first attempts at writing “fuguig tunes” thus: “I asked myself the question, what would have happened in America if this fine, serious early style had developed?”<sup>150</sup> Another inspiration for Cowell’s experiments in the early-American genre was *The Southern Harmony*, an important pre-Civil War book of American hymns, collected and edited by William (Billy) Walker in 1835.<sup>151</sup> Here were new resources for modern music that were undeniably American. Both informed Cowell’s music in the 1940s and 50s, particularly his “Hymns and Fuguig Tunes.”

Cowell’s involvement with early-American music appears in his prose as early as 1941. In discussing Virgil Thomson’s score to *The River*, Cowell located the composer’s main thematic material, the tune “Mississippi,” in “one of those very old music books . . . [of] the Southern uncultivated tunesters”<sup>152</sup>: it was from Walker’s *Southern Harmony*, which had been reprinted in 1939 by the WPA Writers Project of Kentucky. Thomson had also used the same tune in his *Symphony on a Hymn Tune*, composed in 1928, though it is not likely that Cowell would have known that piece before embarking on his own hymn-style compositions; its premier was not until 1945. Nevertheless, Cowell identified in Thomson’s music simple diatonicism that sounded radically different from the music others had been composing. Such works likely spurred his own return to the untapped traditions of the American folk spirit.

Cowell had turned to various traditions for new musical resources since his trans-ethnicism of the previous decade. It was a logical next step for him to apply the same principle to his own country’s rich heritage. It was also natural for him to identify such a trend in other composers’ music. Cowell reviewed Otto Luening’s opera *Evangeline*, noting the syncopated cadences of different lengths, which were “devastating to the listener’s sense of form, but only for a moment. The dancers delight in this shift (which is paralleled in the best American mountain music).” Cowell also noted that Luening “finds new uses for archaic modes [that] make them seem modern.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> “Fuguig” was Cowell’s spelling. The quotation is from Bruce Saylor, *Writings of Henry Cowell: A Descriptive Bibliography*. (Brooklyn, NY: ISAM Monographs: Number 7) 1977.

<sup>151</sup> Sidney Robertson Cowell had introduced it to him in 1941. (Wayne D. Shirley, “The Hymns and Fuguig Tunes,” 97).

<sup>152</sup> “The League’s Evening of Films,” 178.

<sup>153</sup> Cowell, “Current Chronicle: New York,” *Musical Quarterly* (1948): 599.

This sentiment is echoed in Cowell's examination of Alan Hovhaness' *Saint Vartan*, which "sounds modern . . . in a natural and uninhibited fashion, because [Hovhaness] has found new ways to use the archaic materials with which he starts, by following their natural trend towards modal sequence and polymodalism . . . it is a contemporary development of the archaic spirit and sounds like the music of nobody else at all."<sup>154</sup> Cowell was particularly sensitive to others' attempts to return to archaic modes and materials because he had discovered the most archaic tradition of his American heritage: the hymns, anthems and fusing tunes of the first genuine American composers.

It is not at all difficult to imagine why Cowell would have been attracted to the music of Billings, especially if he had read anything about him. As H. Wiley Hitchcock wrote of Billings, Cowell, too, was known for his "colorful personality, his apostleship of artistic freedom and individuality, his sense of humor, and his flair for tuneful melody."<sup>155</sup> In 1770, this Boston tanner, singing-school master and tunesmith had published the first widely disseminated collection of pieces written by an American. *The New England Psalm Singer* contained one hundred and twenty-seven of Billings' own pieces. In his preface, the composer clearly stated his artistic independence and confirmed autodidacticism: "Nature is the best Dictator . . . I don't think myself confin'd to any Rules for Composition laid down by any that went before me."<sup>156</sup> Perhaps more importantly, the texts of many early fusing tunes expressed the fledgling nation's desire to unfetter itself from British domination. Consider the jubilant text of Stephen Jenks's tune "Liberty": "No more beneath the oppressive hand of tyranny we groan. Behold the smiling, happy land, that Freedom calls her own."<sup>157</sup>

In describing his own hymn and fusing tune style, Cowell merely said that it was meant to be "something slow, followed by something fast."<sup>158</sup> However, his prose became more expansive when writing about similar works of other composers. In Peter Mennin, Cowell must have found a kindred spirit, because he wrote about Mennin's music as if he were discussing his own hymn and fusing tune style. Of Mennin's fifth

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<sup>154</sup> Cowell, "Current Chronicle: New York" *Musical Quarterly* (1951): 399.

<sup>155</sup> H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States*. Fourth edition, 2000. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall): 14.

<sup>156</sup> Quoted in Hitchcock, 10.

<sup>157</sup> As it appears in the 1911 edition of *The Original Sacred Harp* by Benjamin Franklin White and E. J. King, edited by J. S. James.

<sup>158</sup> Wayne D. Shirley, "The Hymns and Fusing Tunes," 97.

symphony, Cowell explained that it was constructed in a “large, general sweeping fashion; it is never over-filled with detail. A simplicity is thus achieved for which one is grateful . . . the composer avoids exact canonic imitation (which can become artificial and boring) in favor of the ‘fuguing tune’ idea, associating related forms of the melody one after another rather than exact repetitions.”<sup>159</sup>

Cowell’s early Hymns and Fuguing Tunes owe much to Billings’ style.<sup>160</sup> They exhibit simple meters and four-part texture. Harmonic patterns are largely based on triads and open fifths. Imitation in the fuguing sections is, as in Billings, brief and informal rather than literal or systematic. It is often no more than the reiteration of a rhythmic pattern. Cowell made clear, however, that his hymn and fuguing tune style was not a pastiche of Billings or Walker, but a development of that style. There are, however, some obvious differences: Cowell’s rediscovery of wind and string timbres during this period prompted him to write most of his hymns and fuguing tunes for those instrument families. He also replaced the strophic structure with straightforward ternary forms.

Cowell’s Hymn, Choral and Fuguing Tune, No. 8 (1947) represented a departure from his earlier attempts in the genre. The hymn was no longer homorhythmic and homophonic, as in the previous seven. Instead, Cowell highlighted the independence of each part by stating a short rhythmic motive that was immediately involved in informal imitation, similar to the fuguing tune style (example 4.1). No. 8 was also the first of Cowell’s works in the genre to exhibit moments of conspicuous chromaticism, as in measures 13-16 (example 4.2).

To No. 8, Cowell added a “choral,”<sup>161</sup> which is really no more than a slow, imitative introduction to the fuguing tune. The largo chorale returns twice to interrupt the allegro fuguing tune. The voices roam in free polyphony until they converge at the end, as in Billings. Even before adopting this style, Cowell had been fond of free polyphonic textures that avoided merging until the very last notes, as shown in his *Trio: Four Combinations for Three Instruments*.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Cowell, “Current Chronicle: New York,” *Musical Quarterly* 37/2 (1951): 249.

<sup>160</sup> For a generic study of all the Hymns and Fuguing Tunes, see Wayne D. Shirley, “The Hymns and Fuguing Tunes,” in *The Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*. Ed. David Nicholls. (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1997): 95-144.

<sup>161</sup> His spelling of “chorale.”

<sup>162</sup> Discussed in Chapter two.



Example 4.1 *Hymn, Choral and Fuguing Tune*, hymn, mm. 1-6.



Example 4.2 *Hymn, Choral and Fuguing Tune*, hymn, mm. 13-16.

Cowell, always more receptive to the roads less traveled in modern music, sought a way to give “an impression of native sounds”<sup>163</sup> without the use of jazz elements. The style of Billings, with its simple tunes and spontaneous imitation, provided Cowell with a way to reconnect with his nation’s roots using materials that he judged as forward-looking as current trends in experimentalism. Truly the “contemporary development of an archaic spirit,”<sup>164</sup> his hymns and fuguing tunes exhibit a sophisticated modern simplicity of manner through the austerity of its conventional harmony, and “sound like the music of nobody else.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Cowell, “Roldan and Caturla of Cuba,” *Modern Music* 18/2 (1941): 98.

<sup>164</sup> Cowell, “Current Chronicle: New York” *Musical Quarterly* (1951): 399.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS: COWELL'S MUSIC REVALUED

As composer, innovator, teacher, publisher and critic, Cowell had his hands in many diverse spheres of musical creativity. Perhaps for this reason, Cowell's critics have often claimed that his musical innovations and philosophies were more important than his compositions, and that his ideas have subsequently been developed by other composers because he wasn't well-trained enough to develop them himself. This sentiment naturally leads to questions of what it means to be a "well-trained" composer in twentieth-century America. Cowell certainly wasn't trained according to a European standard, such as his contemporaries Copland, Sessions, or Thomson. But he considered himself very well-trained, and, like Billings, regarded self-education as the highest form of training. This could be read as a form of justification, or the composer merely turning his lack of formal training into an advantage. But Cowell had had many opportunities for formal schooling in music. His early studies at the University of California at Berkeley, and later at the Institute of Musical Art in New York, had provided him not with groundwork on which he would build, but with a springboard from which he could bound.

From an early age, Cowell fully owned his autodidacticism, rejecting much of what he was taught by the European establishment. John Varian had warned him early against East-coast cultural hegemony and also that gaining musical recognition would depend on Cowell's own efforts and those of very few others'. Both of these assertions were made painfully evident in 1919, when Cowell visited Sergei Rachmaninoff, who had made his home in Menlo Park that year. Cowell carried with him a stack of manuscripts, but the elder composer chose to examine only one, his piano piece, "Fleeting." Cowell recalled that Rachmaninoff "marked tiny circles around 42 notes, saying, 'You have 42 wrong notes.'" When Cowell inquired why the chosen notes were

wrong, Rachmaninoff replied that they were “not within the rules of harmony.” Cowell then asked if composers still needed to follow those rules, to which Rachmaninoff replied, “These are divine rules.”<sup>166</sup> For a young man whose erstwhile circle of acquaintances had included San Francisco’s literary anti-establishment, this was not an acceptable answer.

A musical inventor in every sense, Cowell reinvented the very idea of what it meant to be a composer. Like Michael Faraday, another autodidact and a founder of modern physics, whose ignorance of advanced mathematics allowed him to develop a simple, nonmathematical explanation of electrical phenomena, Cowell fashioned ideas about modern music using his own intuition.<sup>167</sup>

Consider Cowell’s unique track of self-education. As a child, he was exposed to a more varied range of music than many of his contemporaries. He heard Asian musics in the Chinese quarter of San Francisco, as well as various Celtic and Appalachian folk musics. Cowell was stimulated by these vernacular sources from an early age, showing his musical independence through the development of new sonic possibilities for his own instrument, the piano. Plucking, banging, muting and strumming the piano strings were just a few techniques Cowell invented to produce new and different sounds. However, as he discovered new timbral resources, he did not discard tradition completely.<sup>168</sup> When it suited his musical ideas, Cowell applied his experimental techniques to often starkly triadic harmony.

Experiments naturally led to Cowell’s own justification of and theorizing about his innovative techniques, and he subsequently developed a deeper understanding of the processes of composition. Seeger convinced Cowell that he needed a more disciplined and systematic approach to the invention of novel musical sounds. The result was *New Musical Resources*. This book detailed and cataloged Cowell’s innovations in the areas of melody and notation, but most deliberately in the area of rhythm. The rhythm/harmony experiments resulted in a new approach to such relationships, which influenced a

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<sup>166</sup> Hicks, 97.

<sup>167</sup> These ideas were, of course, informed by his modernist father-figures, including Seeger, Seward, Rudhyar, and Ives.

<sup>168</sup> Unlike his younger contemporary, Harry Partch, who eschewed all elements of Western tradition.

generation of American composers in the 1950s who were interested in serialized rhythms.

Another Cowell innovation that was further developed by the following generation was the use of indeterminacy. Undetermined musical elements were present in the music of some Baroque composers who didn't specify instruments, and in Ives, who allowed different ensembles in his *Unanswered Question*, but Cowell gave unprecedented control to the performer, by allowing<sup>169</sup> him or her to choose how many times to repeat a passage. Later, in the "elastic form" of his *Mosaic Quartet* of 1935, he left the choice of movement order to the performer as well.

Deemphasizing the role of composer may have been inspired by his friend and fellow composer Dane Rudhyar. Rudhyar's 1930 article, "The New Sense of Space"<sup>170</sup> examined new concepts of musical space and relationships between the artist (composer) and the composition. He described the whole range of sonic possibilities as the "infinite sea of Cosmic Energy which fills space." He further explained, "The peasant tilling his fields does not obey a set of intellectually perceived theories. His instinct is of the soil's life and needs."<sup>171</sup> According to Rudhyar, the composer thus became less important. His demotion from "genius" to "peasant" reflected his new role, which was no longer to create a masterpiece out of a void, but to shape pre-existing sonal energy. To give the performer power of musical decision must have seemed to Cowell a logical next step.<sup>172</sup>

Rudhyar also warned against "artistic creation of [a] purely personal [nature]—it becomes limited by race, tradition, feeling, milieu, and loses its universal meaning."<sup>173</sup> As discussed in chapter three, Cowell tried to achieve universality in his music through trans-ethnicism. Compare Cowell's methodical all-encompassing approach to composition with Aaron Copland's view of "internationalism," which combined Americana with the Neo-Classic forms espoused by Stravinsky and Boulanger.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> In some of his piano works, most notably *A Composition* (1925).

<sup>170</sup> Dane Rudhyar, "The New Sense of Space: A Reorientation of the Creative Faculty of Man." In *Art as Release of Power: A Series of Seven Essays on the Philosophy of Art*. (Carmel, CA: HAMS Publications, 1930).

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>172</sup> Cowell may have read Rudhyar's article; they had been close friends since 1922. The author mentioned Cowell's tone-clusters as the very symbol of the spiritual force of music extending in cosmic space.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>174</sup> Such as jazz rhythms in the *Piano Concerto* (1926) and American folk themes of the ballets *Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942).



In the 1930s, when Copland and other European-trained composers were turning to American folk song and hymns, Cowell also turned to simpler music to reach a broader audience, but he looked outward to the musics of other cultures. His *United Quartet*, one of the first pieces to explicitly draw on a wide range of non-Western sources, contained many stylistic elements that were later adopted by a generation of composers, particularly the minimalists of the 1960s: a static harmonic background, drones of some sort, highly repetitive melodic materials confined to a few pitches appearing in changing combinations, and scales suggestive of oriental modes.

With a new respect for folk and traditional musics, Cowell then rediscovered and reevaluated his own country's distinct traditions, but not in the same way as his contemporaries. In the 1940s and 50s, when Americana had run its course and a new strain of experimentalism appeared in the American academy, Cowell continued on his previous trajectory, combining non-Western structures and characteristics with Western genres. But he also returned to early-American sources. Between 1943 and 1963 his series of compositions entitled *Hymn and Fuguing Tunes* were based on a traditional two-part form favored by a group of eighteenth-century New England composers.

This later music has not been valued as highly as his early experimentalism because, as critics claimed, its surface elements sounded too simple and conventional. During this period Cowell advocated in others' works "simplicity beyond the throes of complexity,"<sup>175</sup> a sentiment that harkens back to his earlier defense of autodidacticism.

The aspect of Cowell's output that is most confounding to scholars and listeners is the simultaneous co-existence of vastly disparate styles. Cowell's theoretical and critical writings, however, offer a wealth of information and insight into the issues surrounding his musical thinking. From his early attempts to export American musical culture to Europe to his critical assessments of his contemporaries, Cowell's prose always reflected and elucidated his own compositional practices.

In 1925's "Modernism Needs No Excuses," Cowell defended the modernists' use of program music and the development of new techniques; both issues had informed his own work since he began composing at the age of 13. "Our Inadequate Notation" (1926) exemplifies articles in which Cowell expressed an issue he had confronted in his

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<sup>175</sup> Cowell, "Current Chronicle: New York," *Musical Quarterly* 34/3 (1948): 413.

composition. In this case the issue was the inadequacy of Western notation to modern music, a long-time frustration of Cowell's.

Cowell's preoccupation with rhythm, particularly his rhythm/harmony experiments, was evident in many articles over the course of his career. Its first manifestation was in "The Impasse of Modern Music." Here he attempted to justify his experimental development of rhythm by relating it to harmony and grounding it in the natural phenomenon of acoustics, thus providing a context for several of his pieces that employed the "layering of rhythms."<sup>176</sup>

"Towards Neo-Primitivism," a seminal work in Cowell's oeuvre, described the incorporation of rhythmic complexity and non-traditional timbres into American art music as a way to rejuvenate ultra-modernism, the feasibility of which had declined due to world war and economic depression. The use of melody and rhythm as primary elements, heterophonic textures, and rapid rhythmic changes all characterized his *United Quartet*. In addition, wide melodic ranges, a percussive approach to chords, and the use of cross-rhythms are evident in his neo-primitive or trans-ethnic style. From the quartet, it is evident that Cowell practiced precisely what he advocated: "drawing on materials common to the music of all the peoples of the world to build a new music particularly related to our own century."<sup>177</sup>

The concept of trans-ethnicism itself informed the very genres in which Cowell composed during the 1930s. In "Relating Music to Concert Dance" (1934), Cowell described the "practice that is universal among primitive peoples," the utilization of dance and sound together as equal components of a composition. Cowell's concept of "useful music," inspired in part by his communist activities in the early 1930s, returned in 1945 in the article "Shaping Music for Total War." His position with the Office of War Information gave him an opportunity to promote syncretic forms. "Hybrid forms," as Cowell called them, "establish the bond between east and west." His trans-ethnicism was thus endowed with a cultural mission.

In 1943, Cowell again recommended what he had already practiced (with Sidney's help): a "thorough study of the records [of American folk music]." His own

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<sup>176</sup> Such as *Four Combinations for Three Instruments* and *United Quartet*.

<sup>177</sup> Cowell, "Towards Neo Primitivism," 151.

study of the records was evident in his *Old American Country Set* (1939) and *American Melting Pot Set* (1940).

Cowell responded to the effectiveness of other composers' uses of non-Western musical elements. It is apparent from his assessments of works by Colin McPhee and Amadeo Roldan that compositions employing traditional or folk elements should display a thorough knowledge of those musics.

The lack of any jazz elements in Cowell's music is easily explained by his essays on Frank Wigglesworth and Howard Swanson. That Wigglesworth demonstrated "new kinds of rhythmic life . . . without resort to [the] devices [of jazz]" and Swanson's blues melody was used for "shock value" speaks volumes about Cowell's preferences in his own compositions.

Cowell found the bareness of Thomson's protestant hymns refreshing and pronounced his use of dominant triads "austere" and "imbued with new significance," almost as if diatonic harmony had become so passé it was new and shocking again.<sup>178</sup> These remarks coincide with a return to simple tunefulness and diatonicism in Cowell's own works, based on the early-American "folk spirit."

Despite Cowell's efforts, Americans still value formal training more highly than self-education. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, former president of the Modern Language Association, wrote in 1988, "The endurance of a classic canonized author such as Homer owes not to the . . . universal value of his works, but, on the contrary, to the continuity of their circulation in a particular culture."<sup>179</sup> In the age of university patronage, the stature of an academically sanctioned composer such as Milton Babbitt allows a musically trained person to accept his music as highly organized, although on the surface it may sound random. Perhaps this is because Babbitt carries with him a pedigree of the highest rank. The musical pedigree of academic composers such as Babbitt has earned them the privilege of canonization, not only of ideas, but in the aspect of performance as well. Cowell, a lifelong critic of formal training, devalued pedigree in favor of intuition, and so his music is often similarly devalued.

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<sup>178</sup> This was a full sixty years before Shulamit Ran claimed her generation of so-called Neo Romantics espoused the "emancipation of the consonance." (Public lecture: Florida State University, January 30, 2003.)

<sup>179</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988): 14.

The future of Cowell research looks promising. Only with the centenary of his birth in 1997 have scholars embraced Cowell's ideas and music, and a wealth of new scholarship has been published. Performances of his music are increasing in frequency as well. The American Music Center, an online clearinghouse for activities in American music, offers grants under the auspices of the "Henry Cowell Performance Incentive Fund." This fund is made possible by a partnership between the Henry Cowell Estate and the American Music Center. Its aim is to support and encourage public performances and recordings of Cowell's music; the fund awards \$10,000 to \$20,000 biennially to individuals and ensembles for this purpose. Under its criteria for grant awards, the Center lists "quality of performing artist(s)" and "breadth of potential audience"; student ensembles need not apply.<sup>180</sup> The message of the fund is clear: that Cowell's music has too long been in the shadows of his critical and theoretical writings. The American Music Center thus seeks to disseminate Cowell's compositions in the hopes of dispelling the myth that his ideas superceded his music in significance.

Cowell's trans-ethnicism is one of his most important contributions to American music. Among other innovations that were later adopted by a generation of composers, the incorporation of disparate cultural elements has influenced numerous and varied schools of American composition. Cowell's student, John Cage, is perhaps the most salient example. Many of Cage's works from the early 1940s evoked "primitive" images, including *Totem Ancestor*, *And the Earth Shall Bear Again*, and *Primitive*.<sup>181</sup> He also expanded the catalog of new musical resources to encompass all types of noise.

In an increasingly pluralistic cultural age, the music of trans-ethnicism's most important advocate is rapidly becoming better known. His critical writings not only represent a source of his musical aesthetics and philosophy, but the keen observations on the compositions of Cowell's contemporaries that they contain can also ameliorate much frustration in approaching Cowell's "whole world of music."

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<sup>180</sup> Found at <[www.amc.net/resources/grants/cowell.html](http://www.amc.net/resources/grants/cowell.html)>. Accessed 24 October, 2004.

<sup>181</sup> All composed in 1942.

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