

Henry Cowell

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HENRY COWELL  
An Impression by  
CHARLOTTE TROWBRIDGE

# AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XXVI

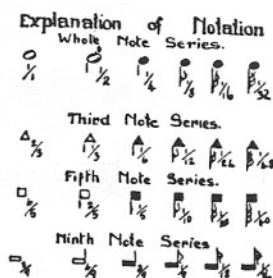
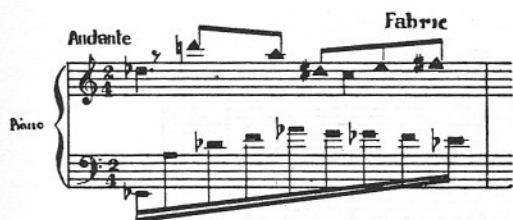
## Henry Cowell

EDWIN GERSCHEFSKI

**W**HEN Henry Cowell appeared at Leipzig in 1923 playing his own compositions, feeling ran so high that fighting broke out in the audience and the police had to be summoned. In London, writeups of his recitals were devoted to congratulating the piano manufacturers on being able to build instruments rugged enough to take such punishment. In New York a sports critic covered the fight between "Kid Knabe" and "Battling Cowell." Yet what he had to offer was considered important enough for appearances to be arranged for him in Berlin by Schnabel, in Paris by Bartok, at the Bauhaus in Dessau by the painter Kandinsky.

His music has been praised on the one hand as truly American – holding the key to the future – and has been condemned on the other hand as tuneless and cacophonous. He has been compared to Mozart and Mendelssohn by some, to a Ford factory and street noises by others. One widely prevalent idea (mistaken) is that Cowell is entirely self-taught. Actually he studied with Charles Seeger in California, attended Schönberg's classes in Berlin, and had five years' training in college and at the Institute of Applied Music.

Some of his compositions for piano are typical of present-day techniques in general use, others, such as *Sinister Resonance* with its violinistic treatment of the piano – muted strings, pizzicato and stopped strings – are unique in the employment of an entirely new approach and technique of performance. Frequently his ideas have resulted in the discovery of new systems of notation, sometimes in the invention of new instruments. Among Cowell's inventions is the rhythmicon, built to specification by Theremin.





Cowell's name has been connected with tone-clusters since his appearance at the age of fifteen with the San Francisco Musical Club in a program of his own compositions. Others had used successions of simultaneous seconds before him. Around 1890, Charles Ives used a flat board not unlike a child's ruler to play groups of notes. Gesualdo is known to have written pieces with small clusters. Percy Scholes mentions the composer Dandrieu's using enormous groups of notes to indicate the roar of cannon in the days when war pieces were fashionable. What Cowell *did* do was to give such combinations of seconds the name "tone-clusters," and he designed a simple scheme for their notation. Examples abound in recent years: they are found in the works of Bartok, Berg, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Shostakovitch, Casella and others, as well as in the scores of most American composers.

Cowell uses tone-clusters in different ways. They are found with a polyphonic significance in the *Movement* for string quartet, and in the orchestral part of the *Piano Concerto*, where they are arrived at through the motion of independent melodies. In the piano compositions *The Harp of Life* and *The Tides of Mananaun* the clusters are treated impressionistically – underplayed below the melody which is simply colored by them. In other piano pieces the tones are given equal weight and the clusters move in a unit with tremendous effect. Among Cowell's compositions of this type are *Tiger*, which he regards as one of his best examples of dissonant style tone-clusters, the set of variations entitled *Antinomy* and the virtuoso piece *Advertisement*. Cowell's own performance of *Advertisement* is almost unequalled as a pyrotechnical display at the keyboard. An example of dissonance employing only small clusters played in the usual pianistic manner occurs in *Maestoso*. Cowell here uses three staves to show the clusters as an independent melodic part. The question remains, however, whether the performer might not find the composition easier to play if the clusters were incorporated in the top right-hand staff.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Maestoso". The tempo is marked "Allegro non troppo". The score is written for three staves. The top staff is labeled "R.H." (Right Hand) and the bottom staff is labeled "L.H." (Left Hand). The middle staff is unlabeled but contains a melodic line. The top staff contains clusters of notes, some of which are marked "mf maestoso." The bottom staff contains a melodic line. The middle staff contains a melodic line. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. The tempo is marked "Allegro non troppo". The piece is titled "Maestoso".

Some years ago Otto Luening was attracted to the refreshing possibilities offered contemporary American composers by the hymn and fuguing

style of several generations back. Since then nearly every composer has devoted some attention to this idiom. Cowell's *Second Symphony, Anthropos*, written in 1939 before he consciously interested himself in the shaped-note hymn style, shows definite tendencies in that direction. Its characteristics are simplicity, vigor, straightforwardness. More and more Cowell has busied himself with this field, producing in rapid succession the *Hymn and Fuguing Tune Number 1*, originally for piano, now existing for orchestra and also for band (with a different hymn); *American Muse*, a choral setting with piano accompaniment of passages from Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body*; *Fire and Ice* (Robert Frost), a four-part chorus for men's voices with military band accompaniment; *Hymn and Fuguing Tune* numbers 2 through 5; the *Sonata* for violin and piano, one of Cowell's best scores – its carefully planned five movements are outstanding as examples of skilful and exhaustive use of an economical amount of source material, with an overall control marked by scholarliness, austere approach and admirable restraint; *Big Sing* for orchestra – not unlike the *Old American Country Set*, but more cleverly orchestrated and with much more go to it; and the following works in progress: a *Piano Sonata, Symphony Number 4* (a short symphony), and an eighteen-minute work in four parts – *Hymn, Air, Dance and Fuguing Tune*.

His natural style brings together in unified form: (1) old materials of all sorts; (2) new materials, not only his own individualistic treatment of clusters and rhythmic combinations, but also types of dissonances, rhythms and polyphony characteristic of other contemporary composers; (3) a suggestion of material from the folk music of many peoples of the world, though the actual folk tunes themselves are not used unless identified as such in the scores. Certain tendencies predominate in each work, but all of these characteristics are blended into a whole so that no work is so folksy that it does not reveal serious technical skill, as well as a new musical idea placed in a setting of age-old melodic and rhythmic style. The (apparently) most common sounding music always contains some new elements, so all the works have, in varying proportion and balance, conventional techniques including folk characteristics, a universality of expression and something new, if not something obvious – such as new dissonances – then some delicate new treatment of an old mode. In such music the new and old stem from the musical idea underlying the piece.

"I do not see at all why a composer's choice should be limited to the musical materials used in Europe for the past three hundred and fifty years alone. What interests me is music itself as organized sound, its forms, and all the possibilities of a musical idea, to write as beautifully, as warmly and as interestingly as I can." Cowell's nearly eight hundred compositions attest the scope of his musical credo.

# THE MUSIC OF HENRY COWELL

DATE		PUBLISHER
	ORCHESTRAL WORKS	
1918	Symphony Number 1 - - - - -	Manuscript
1923	Atlantis (a ballet for voices and orchestra) - - - -	Manuscript
1923	Vestiges - - - - -	Manuscript
1924	Some Music and Some More Music - - - - -	Manuscript
1925	Irish Suite (strings, piano and small orchestra) - - -	Manuscript
1928	Two Appositions - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Suite - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Steel and Stone - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Competitive Sport - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Piano Concerto - - - - -	M. Sénart
1930	Reel Number 1 and Reel Number 2 - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Rhythmicana (rhythmicon and orchestra) - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Synchrony - - - - -	Edition Adler
1931	Slow Jig - - - - -	Manuscript
1934	Hornpipe - - - - -	Manuscript
1934	Pulse and Return (percussion orchestra) - - - - -	Manuscript
1935	Ostinato Pianissimo (percussion orchestra) - - - -	Manuscript
1936	Vox Humana - - - - -	Manuscript
1939	Symphony Number 2 (Anthropos) - - - - -	Edition Adler
1939	American Melting Pot - - - - -	Manuscript
1939	Old American Country Set - - - - -	Associated Music Publishers
1939	Shoonthree - - - - -	Mercury Music
1940	Ancient Desert Drone - - - - -	Associated Music Publishers
1940	Symphonic Set, Opus 17 - - - - -	Arrow Press
1941	Suite (piano and string orchestra) - - - - -	Manuscript
1941	Tales of Our Countryside (piano and orchestra) - - -	Associated Music Publishers
1942	Concerto Piccolo (piano and orchestra) - - - - -	Manuscript
1942	Gaelic Symphony - - - - -	Associated Music Publishers
1943	Celtic Set - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1944	Hymn and Fuguing Tune Number 2 (string orchestra) -	Associated Music Publishers
1944	Hymn and Fuguing Tune Number 3 (full orchestra) -	Associated Music Publishers
1944	United Music - - - - -	Associated Music Publishers
1945	Big Sing - - - - -	Manuscript
1945	Hymn and Fuguing Tune Number 5 (string orchestra) -	Manuscript
1946	Festival Overture (two simultaneous orchestras) - - -	Manuscript
—	American Piper - - - - -	Associated Music Publishers
—	Pastoral and Fiddler's Delight - - - - -	G. Schirmer
—	Sinfonietta - - - - -	Edition Adler
—	Exultation (string orchestra) - - - - -	Edition Adler
—	Philippine Return - - - - -	BMI
	BAND WORKS	
1939	Shoonthree - - - - -	Mercury Music
1941	Shipshape Overture - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1943	Hymn and Fuguing Tune Number 1 - - - - -	Leeds Music Corp.
1944	Animal Magic - - - - -	Leeds Music Corp.
1945	Grandma's Rhumba - - - - -	BMI
—	Fanfare - - - - -	Boosey & Hawkes
—	Festive Occasion - - - - -	Manuscript



## CHAMBER MUSIC

1921	Quartet Pedantic - - - - -	Manuscript
1924	Six Paragraphs (violin, viola and cello) - - - - -	Manuscript
1925	Ensemble (two violins, two cellos and thundersticks) -	Associated Music Publishers
1926	Movement (string quartet) - - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Suite (violin and piano) - - - - -	Associated Music Publishers
1930	Six Casual Developments (clarinet and piano) - - -	Manuscript
1930	Suite (woodwind quintet) - - - - -	NMQ Recordings
1932	Seven Associated Movements (violin and piano) - -	Manuscript
1934	Mosaic Quartet - - - - -	Manuscript
1936	United Quartet - - - - -	Manuscript
1938	Three Ostinati with Chorals (clarinet and piano) - -	Music Press
1939	Suite (woodwind sextet and piano) - - - - -	Manuscript
1940	Toccanta (soprano, flute, cello and piano) - - - -	Manuscript
1941	Trickster Coyote (flute and percussion) - - - - -	Manuscript
1942	Two Bits (flute and piano) - - - - -	Cundy-Bettoney Co.
1943	Action in Brass (horn, two trumpets, two trombones or baritones) - - - - -	Edition Musicus
1944	Hymn and Fuguing Tune Number 4 (three instruments)	Manuscript
1945	Sonata (violin and piano) - - - - -	Associated Music Publishers

CHORAL WORKS include the following: 1938 - *The Coming of Light* (Harold Flammer); 1943 - *Fire and Ice* on a text by Robert Frost (Boston Music Co.); 1943 - *American Muse* on a text by Stephen Vincent Benét (Music Press); 1944 - *The Irish Girl and The Irishman* (BMI); 1946 - *To America* (BMI); 1946 - *Canon* (Music Press).

SONGS and numerous PIANO PIECES. Among the latter the following are published by Associated Music Publishers: *Anger Dance* (1917), *The Tides of Manaunaun* (1920), *The Hero Sun* (1920), *The Voice of Lir* (1920), *Six "Ings"* (1920), *Exultation* (1921), *Antinomy* (1922), *Dynamic Motion* (1922), *Amiable Conversation* (1922), *What's This?* (1922), *Fabric* (1922), *Episode* (1922), *The Harp of Life* (1925), *Lilt of the Reel* (1925) and *Sinister Resonance* (1930). *Aeolian Harp* (1923), *The Banshee* (1925) and *Fairy Answer* (1929) are published by W. A. Quincke. The State Edition publishes *Reel* (1925) and *Tiger* (1928); the Courier Musical, *Piece for Piano with Strings* (1928); the Inter-American Musicological Institute of Uruguay, *Heroic Dance* (1930); New Music, *Maestoso* (1929) and *Hilarious Curtain Opener and Ritournelle* (1937); Carl Fischer, *The Irishman Dances* (1934) and *The Irish Minstrel Sings* (1934); Axelrod Publications, *Amerind Suite* (1936); G. Shirmer, *Celtic Set* (1940); Edward B. Marks, *Square Dance Tune* (1941); and McKinley Music Publishers, *Kansas Fiddler* (1944). *Deep Color and High Color* (1938) is in manuscript.

*A Processional* (1942) for organ is published by H. W. Gray Co.