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Mostly Music: Music by American Composer Henry Cowell, Mar. 17, 2005

Mostly Music Staff

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Mostly Music at NEIU

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The Department of Music and Dance

present

Music by American Composer

Henry Cowell

Thursday, March 17, 2005

1:40 p.m.

NEIU Recital Hall



Northeastern
Illinois
University

550 NORTH ST. LOUIS AVENUE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60642-1029

Performers

* Denotes NEIU Faculty Artists

Kuang-Hao Huang, piano

Phyllis Hurt, soprano*
Mikhail Yanovitsky, piano*

Lyon Leifer, flute*
Ricardo Castaneda, oboe*
Rose Sperrazza, clarinet*
Collin Anderson, bassoon*
Christine Worthing, horn*

Sylvia Myintoo, violin*
Sarah Barton Alexander, cello
Mikhail Yanovitsky, piano*

Lyon Leifer, flute*
Rose Sperrazza, clarinet*
Brian Torosian, mandolin*
Sylvia Myintoo, violin*
Jody Livo, violin
Jeff Yang, violin
Sarah Barton Alexander, cello
Julian Romane, bass
Jane Kenas-Heller, piano*
Shane Mizicko, persian drum*
Russell Vinick, conductor

American Composer

Henry Cowell (1897-1965)

Program

The Banshee for solo piano 1925

Two Songs
Firelight and Lamp 1962
The Little Black Boy 1952

Suite for Woodwind Quintet c. 1933
I. *Allegretto*
II. *Allegro*
III. *Adagio Cantabile*
IV. *Allegretto con moto*

Four Combinations for Three 1924
I. *Allegretto*
II. *Largo*
III. *Allegro*
IV. *Largo*

Persian Set (Iran 1956)
I. *Moderato*
II. *Allegretto*
III. *Lento*
IV. *Presto*

This concert is cosponsored by a grant from The American Music Center's Henry Cowell Performance Incentive Fund

Program Notes and Texts

The Banshee

As tonality expanded and exploded in the early decades of the 20th century, traditional instruments were being played in unusual ways. The piano was on the forefront of this trend, spirited primarily by composers like Henry Cowell who performed their own pieces in recitals. *The Banshee*, *Aeolian Harp*, and *Sinister Resonance* (1923-1925), took the performer inside the piano for the first time. Cowell's piano techniques include strumming the strings, plucking them, scraping them, and creating harmonics from the string fundamentals by lightly touching nodes on the instrument. In these pieces, he essentially created a new instrument from the piano.

The performer stands in the crook of a grand piano, with an assistant depressing the damper pedal throughout. The first sounds are produced by sweeping the fleshy part of the finger from the lowest string up to the B flat just below middle C; once this note is reached, it is sustained by drawing the finger back and forth along the string. Other notes are produced this way, then other effects give different sounds. Glissandi are played on the strings with both hands simultaneously, sometimes in parallel motion and sometimes in contrary. Chords are sustained by sweeping three or four fingers up and down the proper strings. Sometimes the palm of the hand is used to strike the strings, sometimes a fingernail. This results in a series of muted and blurred eerie, wailing sounds. Single notes and chords sometimes emerge, briefly. Sustained notes in the first six bars outline a whole-tone scale: B flat, A flat, G flat, E, D, C. After this there are diminished triads, then some sustained tone clusters, and movement back through diminished triads to final hints of the whole-tone scale.

Firelight and Lamp

Baritone Theodor Oppman sang the premiere of *Fireside and Lamp* on March 11, 1963. Gene Baro, author of the text, wrote to Cowell upon hearing the song: "It is difficult indeed to convey my feelings upon understanding how exquisitely you have read the intention of the poem. What I liked particularly was the directness and masculinity of the music, its willingness to give itself up to emotion, without loss of strength."

Firelight and Lamp (for Theodor Oppman)

Text: Gene Baro ©1962, The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

Now we have closed the door against the cold, shot home the bolt, drawn the curtains tight, puffed on the kindling till the flame took hold. We are prepared to know the winter night.

Outdoors, the ranting wind is in a rage, the shutters cry, the branches rap and creak; we lift our heads from firegazing or the page; our eyes meet; we have no need to speak.

Quickly, the hearth is warmed, iron and stone, the fire has gone to embers from a spark. The lamps we've lit, we'll snuff them, one by one, and climb the stairs to winter and the dark.

Cowell wrote *The Little Black Boy* (1952) for Roland Hayes, Cowell's friend since 1924. Hayes found a few of Blake's allusions to race in *The Little Black Boy* too indelicate for him to perform; so in 1954, Hayes and Cowell changed the text, omitting both the first stanza and the final two stanzas. Cowell then made the necessary musical alterations. Hayes sang the premiere at Town Hall on 20 November 1954.

The Little Black Boy (for Roland Hayes)

Text: William Blake

My mother taught me underneath a tree, and sitting down before the heat of day, she took me on her lap and kissed me, and, pointing to the East, began to say: Look on the rising sun: there God does live, and gives His light and gives His heat away, and flowers, and trees and beasts and men receive comfort in morning, joy in the noon day.

And we are put on earth a little space that we may learn to bear the beams of love. And these black bodies and this sunburnt face are but a cloud and like a shady grove.

For when our souls have learned the heat to bear, the cloud will vanish, we shall hear His voice saying: come out from the grove, my love and care, and round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

The *Suite for Woodwind Quintet* represents Cowell's style of combining spontaneous melodic flow with biting dissonance and extraordinary tone color. Each movement builds a consistent texture of concordant triads with the addition of a dissonant tone. The prelude is based on a running figure of combined tonic major and minor triads; the jig presents oboe and clarinet in alternating solo passages against a dissonant decorative setting; the chorale presents extended lines in slow, irregular meter, with a touching and sustained piquancy of harmony; the brisk fugal finale, offering a challenge to capable players, concludes the Suite in a spirit of boisterous optimism.

Cowell's *Suite for Woodwinds* was written c. 1933 for Georges Barrère and his group, who recorded it for New Music Quarterly recordings. After this performance, the manuscript was mislaid, and the work was "lost" until 1947.

The title *Four Combinations for Three* refers to the work's diverse scoring: violin and cello in movement 1; violin and piano in movement 2; cello and piano in movement 3; and all three instruments in movement 4. This composition reflects Cowell's more serious side. His use of dissonant counterpoint in these works may well reflect his studies with Charles Seeger, who pioneered this approach to polyphonic expression.

Persian Set

In 1956, Henry Cowell was sent by a cultural division of the U.S. Government on a musical tour of the world to gather in the music of other countries to share back home. The first sojourn was to Iran, formerly Persia. With the musical knowledge he gained, he chose to write a short composition that would condense many of the musical practices he encountered. The resulting piece was a reading not of specific Persian melodies, but of ambiguous Middle Eastern motifs. *Persian Set*, this merging of both Persian and Western instrumentation, became one of the most important hybrids of the American 20th century canon. *Persian Set* uses exotic scales and melodies in Western forms and harmonizes them with triadic chords foreign to Persian music. The work was premiered in Teheran in 1957.

Henry Cowell

A tireless musical explorer and inventor, Henry Cowell was born March 11, 1897 in Menlo Park, California, where he grew up surrounded by a wide variety of Asian musical traditions, his father's Irish folk heritage, and his mother's Midwestern folk tunes. Already composing in his early teens, Cowell began formal training at age 16 at the University of California with Charles Seeger, who persuaded him to undertake systematic study of traditional European musical techniques. He also urged Cowell to formulate a theoretical framework for his innovations, which he did in his book, "New Musical Resources" (written in 1919, published in 1930).

Cowell later studied comparative musicology with Erich von Hornbostel, one of the foremost musicologists of the 20th century. This experience stimulated and deepened his interest in the music of non-Western cultures; he studied Oriental and Middle Eastern music, and those non-Western elements appear in many of his compositions. Further studies of the musical cultures of Africa, Java, and North and South India enabled Cowell to stretch and redefine Western notions of melody and rhythm; mastery of the gamelan and the theory of gamelan composition led to further explorations with exotic instruments and percussion.

Cowell's use of varied sound materials, experimental compositional procedures, and a rich palette colored by multiple non-European and folk influences revolutionized American music and popularized, most notably, the tone cluster as an element in compositional design. In addition to tone clusters Cowell experimented with the "string piano" in works like *The Aeolian Harp* and *The Banshee* where strings are strummed or plucked inside the piano. Later, Cowell developed the concept of indeterminacy or "elastic form" in works like the *Mosaic Quartet* (where performers determine the order and alternation of movements).

Cowell's influence is legion, counting among his students John Cage, Lou Harrison, and George Gershwin. Cowell taught at the New School for Social Research in New York and also held posts at the Peabody Conservatory and Columbia University. A plethora of awards, grants, and honorary degrees was capped by his election in 1951 to the American Institute of Arts and Letters.