Piano Concerto

Henry Dixon Cowell *was born in Menlo Park, California, on March 11, 1897, and died in Shady, New York, on December 10, 1965. Cowell completed his Piano Concerto in 1928 and as soloist introduced the first movement and possibly also the second with the Conductorless Orchestra in New in April 1930; he was also the soloist in the first complete performance, on December 28, 1930, with the Havana Philharmonic conducted by Pedro Sanjuan. The only previous performance by the San Francisco Symphony was given in June 2000; Ursula Oppens was soloist and Michael Tilson Thomas conducted. The score calls for an orchestra of three flutes (first doubling piccolo), three oboes and English horn, three clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, large and small cymbals, triangle, and crash cymbals), and strings. Duration: about seventeen minutes*

Some composers have the bad luck to come up with an idea whose label leaves such a strong imprint that it dogs their name and reputation to the point of blotting out all their really significant achievements. It happened to Schoenberg with atonality, to Hindemith with *Gebrauchsmusik* (music for a practical purpose or a specific use), and to Henry Cowell with tone clusters. Although he did not invent the device--that was Vladimir Rebikov, followed by Charles Ives--it was Cowell who invented this term for the simultaneous sounding of a bunch of adjacent or close-together notes on a keyboard. At the piano recitals with which he both delighted and infuriated audiences in Europe and America, Cowell himself made much use of tone clusters, playing with the outside of his hand, his forearm, or a stick cut to a specific length. He was so much associated with the tone cluster that in 1924 Bartók actually asked him for permission to include clusters in his own music. But there was much, much more to Henry Cowell.

Virgil Thomson noted that "the variety of [Cowell's] sources and composing methods is probably the broadest in our time." Being born and brought up in California had a lot to do with that. He grew up free of the assumption that all worthwhile culture came from the other side of the Atlantic. Nearby San Francisco was full of Asian music, and to the end of his life, his musical fantasy was more and more drawn to sounds from across the Pacific. His father, a failed fruit farmer from Ireland by way of British Columbia, and his mother, a writer from Midwestern farming stock, called themselves "philosophical anarchists" and allowed their son the most wide-ranging and improvised of educations. He explored the piano by himself, tried his hand at inventing new pieces, absorbed whatever was in the air in San Francisco's Chinese and Japanese neighborhoods, developed a deep love of Irish folk music, and came to include in his concept of "music" virtually all sounds put into the air by nature and human beings.

At seventeen, he met his first real teacher, the remarkable Charles Seeger. Seeger, the freest of free spirits, was one of the first classically trained musicians (a Harvard graduate and at twenty-four an opera conductor in Germany) to accept non-Western music as no less interesting than European. Cowell found himself nicely in tune with him. He even allowed Seeger to persuade him that a little formal training in harmony and counterpoint would help give clearer form to his ideas.

After the end of World War I, Cowell plunged into international music traffic with characteristic vigor. He gave a recital in New York, toured Europe five times in ten years, was the first American musician to visit the Soviet Union, made useful contact with publishers, played for Schoenberg's composition class in Berlin, and met Bartók, who introduced him to Falla, Ravel,

and Roussel. He had already written an extraordinary book titled *New Musical Resources*, in which he formulated fresh ideas on harmony, rhythm, acoustics, and notation.

All his life, this composer of about a thousand pieces was more than just a composer. A Guggenheim Fellowship took him to Berlin for study of comparative musicology; during World War II, he was the Office of War Information's resident expert on Asian music. He edited the much-imitated symposium *American Composers on American Music*, and with his wife, Sidney Robertson Cowell, he wrote *Charles Ives and His Music*, the first book on that great pioneer. He founded and edited the quarterly *New Music*, where he began by publishing *Men and Mountains* by Carl Ruggles, and where works by such composers as Schoenberg, Webern, Varèse, and Ives would find their first homes in print. No less important was the magazine's spin-off, New Music Recordings. Cowell found time to teach at the University of California in Berkeley, and at Stanford, Mills, Bennington, Columbia, the Peabody Conservatory, and the New School for Social Research, and among those who learned from him were John Cage, Lou Harrison, George Gershwin, and Burt Bacharach.

By the time he was thirteen, Cowell was already composing pieces that employed the tone cluster. Where the chords of traditional harmony are made of notes separated by intervals of pitch, tone clusters use groups of contiguous notes, which traditional harmony classifies as dissonant to one another. In 1913, at an event sponsored by the San Francisco Musical Society at the Saint Francis Hotel, Cowell went a step further by unveiling to amazed listeners a further pianistic development: altering the instrument's tones by inserting objects on the piano's strings and by plucking or strumming directly on the strings with his hands, dispensing with the intermediary of the keyboard. These would become favorite devices of John Cage's; in fact, Cage would formulate the insertion of hardware into what became known as the "prepared piano."

In the hierarchy of musical instruments, the piano was (and still is) placed on a pedestal by many listeners. Monkeying about with its strings or extracting sounds from it in any non-traditional way were therefore considered by many to be musical sacrilege. It took a while for Cowell's sound-world to catch on, and, until it did, critics bound to uphold traditional values had a field day. Warren Storey Smith, writing in the March 12, 1929 edition of the Boston *Post*, reported to his readers (in an article irresistibly titled "Uses Egg to Show Off the Piano"): "Henry Cowell, in the suite for what he is pleased to term 'solo string and percussion piano' with chamber orchestra, has added to *materia musica* a darning-egg and a pencil, with which, together with more familiar implements, he assailed the innards of a grand piano. . . . Many of the sounds which Mr. Cowell achieved last evening might be duplicated with a tack-hammer and any convenient bit of unupholstered furniture." And from across the seas, Paul Zschorlich observed, in Berlin's *Deutsche Zeitung* of March 13, 1932, "It is said about Cowell that he has invented tonal groups that can be played on the piano with the aid of fists and forearms! Why so coy? With one's behind one can cover many more notes! The musical inmates of a madhouse seem to have held a rendezvous on this occasion."

Such procedures were certainly still outré when Cowell first played his Piano Concerto. He actually unleashed the piece on the public gradually, playing one movement—or possibly two—with the Conductorless Orchestra in New York before mounting a complete performance in December 1930, with the Havana Philharmonic. It really is a pity that such a fun piece has gone

almost unplayed since its premiere; it waited until 1978 for its first full performance in the United States. The concerto's three movements—"Polyharmony," "Tone Cluster," and "Counter Rhythm"—together last only about seventeen minutes, and they're full of tonal, rhythmic, and (after a fashion) melodic variety. The solo part cannot be negotiated successfully by a pianist whose idea of technique is defined by Hanon and Czerny exercises, as quite a lot of the playing involves attacking the piano with the forearms rather than with the fingers. It may look—and sound—like pretty wild stuff, but Cowell actually plumbs the harmonic implications of competing clusters with considerable sophistication, and the pianist is challenged to figure out how to enliven Cowell's score by combining fidelity to the notation with sensitive voicing and phrasing.—**Michael Steinberg and James M. Keller**

Michael Steinberg, the San Francisco Symphony's program annotator from 1979 to 1999 and a contributing writer to our program book until his death in 2009, was one of the nation's pre-eminent writers on music. We are privileged to continue publishing his program notes. His books are available at the Symphony Store in Davies Symphony Hall and at sfsymphony.org/store.

James M. Keller is Program Annotator of the San Francisco Symphony and the New York Philharmonic. His book *Chamber Music: A Listener's Guide* was published in 2011 by Oxford University Press; it is available at the Symphony Store in Davies Symphony Hall and at sfsymphony.org/store.