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# Henry Cowell, The Great Experimenter: Uncovering the Catalysts that Generated a Composer's Ultramodernist Piano Techniques

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HENRY COWELL, THE GREAT EXPERIMENTER:  
UNCOVERING THE CATALYSTS THAT GENERATED A COMPOSER'S  
ULTRAMODERNIST PIANO TECHNIQUES

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS IN MUSIC

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## ABSTRACT

In the scholarship surrounding piano repertoire, Henry Cowell is seen as a kind of “one-hit-experimental-wonder,” being known mostly for his astonishingly progressive piece *The Banshee*. However, Cowell was an enigmatic composer, a diverse scholar, an influential proponent of new music, as well as a music theorist and comparative musicologist.

Therefore in order to gain a more complete understanding of Cowell and his deeply influential piano works, this project seeks to explore the philosophical, cultural, and non-Western musical influences that inspired Cowell’s novel experimentation at the piano.

## LIST OF EXAMPLES

Example 1. *Dynamic Motions*, mm. 39-43.

Example 2. *Lily of the Reel*, mm. 1-8.

Example 3. *The Banshee*, mm. 1-17.

## Introduction

In an conversation with Michel Foucault in 1985, Pierre Boulez attempted to explain the ways in which modern music had moved away from the musical eras of the past, remarking that,

“In classical and Romantic music... there are schemas which one obeys. The movements of a symphony are defined in their form... they are distinct from one another... most of the time actually separated by a pause, sometimes tied by a transition that can be spotted. The vocabulary itself is based on ‘classified’ chords...Progressively, these reassuring elements have disappeared from ‘serious’ music... Musical works have tended to become unique events... not reducible to any guiding schema, a priori.”<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt from the dialogue between Foucault and Boulez articulates simply, yet profoundly, the very phenomenon that underscored Henry Cowell’s career. Cowell began his life as a composer in one of the most unique times in music history, that is, the divisive tumult of the early twentieth-century arts scene. Although each generation attempts, to some extent, to break down or change the musical paradigms employed by the previous generation, experimental twentieth-century composers were dismantling the very definitions of music and beginning to look to the basic concepts of noise and sound for inspiration, rather than remaining within the confines of traditional schema. In many ways the ultramodernist piano composers led this charge into modernity. In the post-war era, new trends emerged in music, including new sounds, novel musical textures through experimental techniques, and the incorporation of Eastern sounds into Western forms.

Eduardo De La Fuente, in his book *Twentieth Century Music and the Question of Modernity*, raises the following questions: “How to make sense then of musical

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, Michel and Pierre Boulez, “Contemporary Music and the Public,” in *Perspectives of New Music*, 24, no. 1 (1985): 8.

modernity, which seems to be governed by both order and disorder, both rationality and irrationality, and both the will-to-form and the will-to-contingency?”<sup>2</sup> As De La Fuente implies, during this period of music some composers were moving away from form in music altogether, preferring to constitute music as “noise” and allowing this concept to form the existence of their music. Varèse is one such composer who pursued the liberation of art music from the confines of traditional melody and harmony, from the regularity of pulse and meter, as well as from the mundane standardization of instrumentation and form. Others, such as Schoenberg and Webern, developed new kinds of hyper-organized musical systems that attempted to democratize the pitches in a scale, while really just trading in one set of musical rules for another.

In the United States specifically, there were two main roads that a composer seeking to distance themselves from the European tradition could take. The first is that of the Americanists, who sought to find unique American “sounds” and incorporate them into European musical forms as a kind of nationalism. The second path was pursued by the ultramodernists, who sought new musical sources entirely through philosophy and experimentation. Cowell joined with the latter. Despite the obvious variety of the music being produced at this time across the Western world, one of the most important trends of the ultramodernists came as a shift in the philosophy of music itself. The ultramodernists began to deconstruct institutional definitions of music and examine music in its most basic form, that is, “noise.” The concept of “noise” was a highly contested musical paradigm. Cowell wrote in his article “The Joys of Noise” that,

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<sup>2</sup> Eduardo De La Fuente, *Twentieth Century Music and the Question of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 4.



Although existing in all music, the noise-element has been to music as sex to humanity, essential to its existence, but impolite to mention, something to be cloaked by ignorance and silence. Hence the use of noise in music has been largely unconscious and undiscussed. Perhaps this is why it has not been developed, like the more talked-of elements, such as harmony and melody. The use of noise in most music today is little beyond the primitive; in fact, it is behind most native music, where the banality of the thumps often heard in our concerts would not be tolerated.<sup>3</sup>

Reclaiming the notion of “noise” in this spirit of exploration and excavation is what fueled Cowell from the very genesis of his musical vocation.

This is the artistic climate that produced a composer like Henry Cowell; a man so eclectic in his tastes and varied in his musical styles, that he created a vast array of compositions in hundreds of styles. Despite his massive corpus of music, Cowell is most remembered as being one of the fathers of experimental piano music, and one of the originators of extended piano technique. This project seeks to uncover the catalysts that led to the creation and cultivation of Cowell as an inventor of extended piano technique by examining Cowell’s philosophical influences, his reconnection to his Irish roots, and his perpetual interest in non-Western musics.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Cowell, “The Joys of Noise,” in Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 23-24.

## **Chapter 1: From Futurism to Philosophical Fixations, Henry Cowell's Intellectual Influences.**

### Early Bohemian Influences

In the early twentieth-century, Henry Cowell composed against the backdrop of many famous experimentalists. Claude Debussy was experimenting with harmony in innovative ways while Arnold Schoenberg had abandoned tonal harmony altogether in favor of atonality and, eventually, serialist techniques. Due to Cowell's unconventional upbringing and lack of formal music instruction, his experimentalism manifested in a very different way than that of his contemporaries. Cowell did not have the formal training that would have initially taught him the limitations of harmony and traditional piano technique in the first place. As opposed to composers like Debussy and Schoenberg, Cowell's experimentation at the piano was much more kinesthetic than theoretical in its genesis. In his own book *New Musical Resources*, Cowell writes that,

Contemporary music makes almost universal use of materials formerly considered unusable. These materials are in some degree acceptable to almost all music lovers, and there is a tendency on the part of critics and the sophisticated public to be somewhat bored by new music which uses only old fashioned means.<sup>4</sup>

Cowell wanted to write new music, but not by "old fashioned means," instead he sought new means to write new music, unlike many of his contemporaries who were utilizing only traditional means to create non-traditional sounds.

However, the greatest influences to Cowell's experimentalism were the extra-musical ideas and philosophies that he was exposed to through the various communities

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources*, (New York: Something Else Press, 1969), 1.

and composers with whom he came in contact. Like Ives and Stravinsky, Cowell appeared to be conscious that history would be watching him. Because of this notion, he meticulously crafted his image and chose which elements of his creative process would be accessible to the public and to posterity. Unfortunately for Cowell, his influences are much more transparent than he would have liked to admit. In his biography on Cowell, Michael Hicks makes the valid assertion that Cowell's aim was to magnify his own innovations, isolate himself from progenitors, and tinge his self-portrait with uniqueness.<sup>5</sup> Cowell's efforts to sever his ties to the teachers, philosophers, and musicians that made him great does not hinder the search for his most profound philosophical and musical influences. Tracing back these influences is imperative in order to understand Cowell's piano compositions and their genesis. This chapter will therefore explore the easily reconcilable philosophical encounters and influences in Cowell's life with specific piano works in an effort to shatter the composer's falsified self-portrait of himself as an entirely autonomous artist. More specifically, this chapter will discuss the influences of Futurism and Theosophy upon Cowell's experimental piano techniques with the hope of illuminating the origins of his befuddled musical influences. In order to understand Cowell's piano compositions with the utmost sensitivity, this endeavor into his philosophical influences is imperative.

From the very beginning, Cowell had an unconventional life. Cowell's parents were radical in their beliefs and in their lifestyle. They were anarchists, philosophical libertarians, and skeptics of any societally constructed institution. Henry Cowell's father,

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 2.

Harry Cowell, possessed a spirit of separatism from his traditional Irish- Christian parents, a trait he no doubt passed down to his own son.<sup>6</sup> Harry Cowell was a drifter at heart. He was an avid writer who dropped out of college in Ireland to move to an obscure commune in Canada, all the while shrouding his past in myth and mystery. It is interesting that Cowell's father actively clouded the truth of his past life and facts of his biography, and this is a syndrome that he also passed down to his son. Cowell's mother, Clarissa, came from the same group of bohemian creatives. She was a free-spirited, nonconformist writer as well, and she dedicated her life to her son's interdisciplinary education. Cowell's parents inhabited the same group of avant-garde writers, philosophers, and artists, spewing libertarianism and cynicism for all forms of social and political order. Hicks writes that, "What these parents would want for their boy was clear: he should be free, independent, progressive, literate, versatile, devoted to nature in both its scientific and poetic aspects, versed in religious tradition but skeptical, and perhaps above all, devoted to art."<sup>7</sup> It is abundantly clear from the biographical information on Cowell that the radical views and bohemian lifestyle of his parents shaped who he became as a composer. Unfortunately, "Cowell's reluctance to dwell on the ideological influence of his parents is symptomatic of his frequent failure to acknowledge to any degree how others shaped his techniques and opinions."<sup>8</sup> Hicks' thesis is that Cowell tried to present himself as an autonomous prodigy, while he was really the inevitable product of his unconventional environment. While I agree with this thesis,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2.

there are a few topics that need to be considered more closely in regards to the philosophical underpinnings of his music; specifically Cowell's ideological ties to Futurism and Theosophy.

### Leo Ornstein and Futurism

In 1917 Henry Cowell went to study at the Institute of Musical Art (later renamed the Juilliard School). However, being the rugged individual that Cowell was, he spent only seven weeks there and refused to attend most of his classes and loathed the formality of institutionalized education. He was not interested in learning formal ear training, or even attending his piano or composition lessons. Because of this fiery spirit of rebellion, Cowell was dishonorably dismissed from the Institute. In response, Cowell explained that he needed to pursue a different kind of originality in music and a more abstract education to motivate him as a composer. Therefore Cowell sought inspiration elsewhere, which led him to Leo Ornstein, a Futurist composer who influenced his compositional style more than any musical institution could.<sup>9</sup> Although there is no evidence that Ornstein filled the role of teacher or mentor to Cowell in any traditional way, the two young composers certainly did meet and exchange music. Cowell greatly admired Ornstein, though he was only five years Cowell's senior, and found his piano techniques to be fresh and innovative.<sup>10</sup> In his book detailing the connection between Futurism and the arts, Günter Berghaus writes this entry on Leo Ornstein,

The perception of Ornstein's music was neither ultra-modern in the sense of abstraction or lack of repetition, nor did its style relate particularly strongly to Schoenberg. The aspects of his work which caused it to be regarded as "Futurist"

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<sup>9</sup> Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 70.

were the frequent recourse to violent and dissonant tone clusters, complex polyrhythmic patterns, and the repetition at high speed of short percussive phrases designed to achieve a feeling of motion and acceleration.<sup>11</sup>

Although Cowell had begun his technical experimentation before his meeting with Ornstein, it was this encounter that spurred the young composer into full pursuit of the “ultra-modern.” Nearly any description of Ornstein’s music that related it to Futurism, such as his, “frequent recourse to violent and dissonant tone clusters, complex polyrhythmic patterns, and... repetition at high speed,... and a feeling of motion and acceleration” can be directly applied to Cowell’s music as well. Although most scholarship on Cowell does not explicitly focus on Cowell’s connection to Futurism, this connection remains vital to understanding why Cowell chose to experiment in the way that he did.

Cowell’s experimentation at the piano is most famously remembered by the extensive use of tone clusters, an idea that was first Ornstein’s and stemmed directly from his interests in Futurism. Cowell was interested in Ornstein’s Futurist movement and the sound possibilities of tone clusters, and he developed this technique much further than Ornstein did. Cowell even continued to explore other elements of Futurism in his music throughout his compositional career. The *Manifesto of Futurism*,<sup>12</sup> written by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, is a document with which Ornstein has become irrevocably attached. This philosophy of the changing aesthetics of beauty and the arts draws upon the essentials of industrialism: the speeding of cars, the crashing of shop

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<sup>11</sup> Günter Berghaus, *International Futurism in the Arts and Literature* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2000), 331.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A

windows, the abrasiveness and ubiquitousness of technology in the modern age.

Marinetti, writes that,

We intend to sing to the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. Courage, boldness, and rebelliousness will be the essential elements of our poetry. There is no beauty that does not consist of struggle. No work that lacks an aggressive character can be considered a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent assault launched against unknown forces to reduce them to submission under man.<sup>13</sup>

Ornstein's Futurist piano compositions were certainly bold and rebellious. Ornstein composed with Futurist ideals in mind and his radical techniques and the harmonic abrasiveness of tone clusters were no doubt offensive to many contemporary listeners.

Although traces of Futurism can be found both implicitly and explicitly in Cowell's work, the most important connection that exists between Cowell and the ideals of Futurism is the way this modern philosophy of beauty influenced his unique piano techniques, not just the titles of pieces like *Savage Suite* or "War Dance." In regards to this Futurist suite from 1913, Goodwin writes that it has a "youthful enthusiasm for the fast and loud."<sup>14</sup> The evocative title of the suite and its subsequent movements have a vocabulary that can be connected with the text of the Futurist Manifesto. Marinetti writes that, "We intend to glorify war—the only hygiene of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of anarchists, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and contempt for woman." Marinetti's work glorifies war in a way that can be heard in Cowell's relentlessly rhythmic and harsh third movement called "War Dance."

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<sup>13</sup> Rainey, Lawrence S., Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman. *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 450.

<sup>14</sup> Goodwin, Joscelyn. "The Music of Henry Cowell." (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1969), 22.

Cowell is known for his extended use of tone clusters such as the angular and jarring clusters found in “Futurist” from *Savage Suite*. The Marinetti’s artistic philosophy required that art in the modern age must assault the senses, and that art must serve as a mirror to the abrasiveness of the ubiquitous industrial complex. As quoted above, Marinetti believed that, “[n]o work that lacks an aggressive character can be considered a masterpiece.” Regardless of the dynamic with which a two-octave cluster is played, it will have an abrasive and aggressive presence in the ear. A thoughtful consideration of this technique is representative of the simultaneousness of noises in an industrialized world. The ancient world was comparatively silent. The world at the turn of the twentieth century was a tumult of noise from machinery and urban soundscapes which deeply inspired Cowell.

In Henry Cowell’s piece *Resume’ in 10 Movements*, the tenth movement is called “Futurism” and this title confirms the connection between Cowell and the Italian aesthetic movement, as well as ties to Ornstein. This movement boldly embodies the aesthetic ideals of this philosophy, and is perhaps a subtle dedication to Ornstein himself. Cowell said that the piece was a tone painting of a New York Subway, celebrating the modern marvels of the booming metropolis.<sup>15</sup> Cowell’s musical representation of a staple of the industrial revolution that is the subway is an overtly Futurist endeavor. The fifth plank of the Futurist Manifesto states that, “We shall sing the great masses shaken with work, pleasure, or rebellion: we shall sing the multicolored and polyphonic tidal waves of revolution in the modern metropolis.”<sup>16</sup> Cowell directly sought to portray in music what

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<sup>15</sup> “Cowell Plays Own Music For Club,” *San Francisco Call and Post*, 19 June 1919.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix A



he had seen and heard in a post-industrialization New York City. As is the case with many of his pieces, *Savage Suite* and *Resumé in 10 Movements* remain unpublished so information on these pieces come almost entirely from Cowell's own writings on them. These pieces are in the Henry Cowell Collection at the New York Public Library but electronic transcriptions have not been made so they are largely unavailable to the public.<sup>17</sup>

*Dynamic Motion* is another quintessential Futurist piece by Cowell. As opposed to *The Tides of Manaunaun*, which simultaneously features both extensive tone clusters as well as a constant diatonic melody, *Dynamic Motion* is a showcase of two-arm tone clusters, startling accents, and wildly abrasive and accelerating cluster passages. Cowell “assaulted the senses” (to use Marinetti’s language) through the employment of radical dynamic changes. Although clusters that include more than twenty notes can have a harsh quality when played *pp*, Cowell orders the pianist to play two-octave clusters with each arm at a dynamic marking of *ffff* with accents and crescendos. This piece is certainly Cowell’s way of singing “to the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.”<sup>18</sup> In this piece, Cowell celebrates the inherent danger that comes with such dramatic breaking of tradition and he extols the energy that comes from maximizing the sound capacity of the piano. Furthermore, this music revels in the fearlessness with which one must play

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<sup>17</sup> Because *Savage Suite* and *Resumé in 10 Movements* largely inaccessible, my assessment of these pieces comes from close analysis of David Nicholls, Joscelyn Goodwin, Michael Hicks, and Joel Sachs’ writings on the works.

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix A

this piece; wholly committed with both body and mind. Each of these aspects can clearly be seen from measures 39-44 (Example 1).<sup>19</sup>

Example 1: Forearm Clusters in *Dynamic Motions*

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Dynamic Motions' by Henry Cowell, specifically measures 39-44. The score is written for piano and is marked 'Allegro'. It features complex forearm clusters in both hands, with dynamic markings like 'ffff' and various articulations such as accents and slurs. The notation includes many beamed notes and rests, creating a dense, textured sound. The score is arranged in three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate line for the right and left hands. The first system shows a cluster of six notes in the right hand and a cluster of six notes in the left hand. The second system shows a cluster of seven notes in the right hand and a cluster of seven notes in the left hand. The third system shows a cluster of five notes in the right hand and a cluster of five notes in the left hand. The score is a clear example of the 'forearm clusters' technique, where the pianist uses their forearm to strike multiple keys simultaneously, creating a dense, textured sound.

This inclination to view music as a product of the industrial complex caused Cowell to view the piano as a piece of technology that is also subject to the dynamic nature of an industrialized society. This mentality of piano as technology made Cowell more likely to experiment with the sounds of the instrument as a scientist would experiment with technology. In 1913, author Luigi Russolo published *L'arte dei rumori* (The Art of Noises) in which he asserts that the evolution of modern music is parallel to

<sup>19</sup> Example 1. *Dynamic Motion* (New York: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1922), mm. 39-43.

that of industrial machinery.”<sup>20</sup> In this writing, Russolo claims that one must break from the mold of traditional sounds in order to explore the infinite sound possibilities of the industrial age; he believed that this notion of forward thinking must be the very nature of art. Cowell inherently understood Russolo’s claims and boldly broke tradition in order to explore a broader realm of sound and musical possibilities.

### Halcyon, Varian, and Theosophy

After the death of his mother in 1916, Cowell officially joined a different kind of seemingly “bohemian” community: the Temple of the People in Halcyon, California. The Temple of the People was, and remains to this day, a community near Pismo Beach, California that is dedicated to the teachings of Theosophy. Theosophy is an esoteric philosophy that suggests that all things in the universe are united. It is simultaneously a philosophical, religious, and mystical movement. Theosophy has its roots in Protestantism but has branched out into the occult as it has blurred the divisions between religion, philosophy, and mysticism. Furthermore, Theosophy draws upon enlightenment ideals. Theosophists are particularly interested in the concept of divinity and see that the way to understanding the mysticism of divinity lies in the unity of academic disciplines such as, science, philosophy, world religions, art, music, and literature.<sup>21</sup> In a letter to the American branch of the Theosophical society, Blavatsky neatly sums up the intents and beliefs of the Theosophical Society,

[There are those] among us who realize intuitively that the recognition of pure Theosophy—the philosophy of the rational explanation of things and not the

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<sup>20</sup> Russolo, Luigi. *The Art of Noises* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Blavatsky, H. P., and Michael Gomes. *Isis Unveiled: Secrets of the Ancient Wisdom Tradition, Madame Blavatsky's First Work* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Pub. House, 1997), 13.

tenets—is of the most vital importance in the Society, inasmuch as it alone can furnish the beacon-light needed to guide humanity on its true path. This should never be forgotten, nor should the following fact be overlooked. On the day when Theosophy will have accomplished its most holy and most important mission—namely, to unite firmly a body of men of all nations in brotherly love and bent on a pure altruistic work, not on a labor with selfish motives—on that day only will Theosophy become higher than any nominal brotherhood of man.<sup>22</sup>

Blavatsky makes clear that the main goal of the Theosophical Society is to unify humanity in the search for an objective truth. In 1879, the Theosophical Society published these objectives for their movement,

- a) To keep alive in man his spiritual intuitions.
- b) To oppose and counteract—after due investigation and proof of its irrational nature bigotry in every form.
- c) To promote a feeling of brotherhood among nations.
- d) To seek to obtain knowledge of all the laws of Nature and aid in diffusing it; and especially to encourage the study of those laws least understood by modern people and so termed the Occult Sciences.
- e) To gather for the Society's library and put into written forms correct information on ancient philosophies, etc.
- f) To promote in every practicable way non-sectarian education.
- g) To encourage and assist individual Fellows in self-improvement, intellectual, moral, and spiritual.<sup>23</sup>

The leader of the Temple of the People was an eccentric poet named John Varian. Not only did Varian and Cowell have an interest in socialist politics and the arts in common, but Varian was also Irish and became a kind of cultural mentor to Cowell during his time at the Temple. Cowell never admitted to the profundity that this group, and Varian in particular, supplied to his artistic career; even Cowell's wife outwardly

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<sup>22</sup> Abdill, Edward. "The Universal Brotherhood of Humanity." *Quest* 96.5 (September-October 2008): 177-179, 191.

*Quest Magazine* is the official publication of the Theosophical Society.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

rejected the idea that Theosophist ideas influenced her husband's work.<sup>24</sup> Yet Cowell produced some of his best known and most innovative works during this period of his life, so more attention must be given to Cowell's relations with Varian and Halcyon.<sup>25</sup> Even Cowell and Varian's correspondence provides evidence for this assertion. Thus far, most scholarship on Cowell has failed to connect specific aspects of Theosophy to Cowell's unique inclination toward experimentation. Steve Johnson explored the relationship between Cowell, Varian, and Halcyon in his article on the subject, however this article mainly focused on the biographical implications of Halcyon and the shared Irishness of Cowell and Varian, rather than focusing on how specific aspects of the theosophical dogma might have influenced the composition of some of Cowell's most notable piano works.

In Cowell's bohemianism, he sought to be free from formalized systems of thought. However his wandering and open mind often led him into the arms of artistic communities with which he could identify, quite opposite of his intentions. Theosophy offered Cowell both structure, and freedom within a formalized doctrine of philosophy because of its simultaneous emphasis on the experience of the individual, which suited Cowell's artistic whims perfectly.<sup>26</sup> Theosophy encouraged Cowell to explore spiritual truths without conforming to a creed, and to explore knowledge through artistic expression without being tied to a specific musical system. The Temple of the People emphasized the individual within a community where each member would exist for the

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<sup>24</sup> Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Steve Johnson, "Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon." *American Music* 11, No. 1 (1993), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music*, 66.

common good on his own terms, by his own volition. Because of the culture of individualism and simultaneous support from a community, Cowell flourished in Halcyon.

A moment of impact for Cowell's career came in 1913 when he met John Varian for the first time. In an article published in 1931 as a tribute to John Varian, Frederick Whitney wrote a romanticized account of the meeting of two creative forces.

And I doubt not that in that very moment that the poet and the composer looked at one another in soul recognition across the ages, and the gods approved. The poet asked the composer to play his piece, which he did; and, so far as anyone knows, that was the end of the sonata, for it seems to have been lost. But the singer had met his poet and the poet his singer, coming together thus in this quaint way, with its touch of unconscious Irish humor, on a momentous day. A day of portentous and prophetic skies whereunder the rhythmic thunders of creation were to break forth in new-formed music and distinctive song.<sup>27</sup>

The Temple of the People's integration of religion and science to create unity and pursue the ancient wisdom of divinity seems to have been integral in fostering Cowell's experimentation at the piano. What set Cowell apart from the progressive musical experiments of composers like Debussy and Schoenberg was his primary interest in the instrument itself, not just the generality of tonality and the possibilities of tonal and atonal musical systems. In her article "Embodied Experimentalism," Cizmick aptly asks of her reader, "Why is it so easy to forget that the piano is a piece of technology?"<sup>28</sup> This question seems to be at the heart of Cowell's experimental inclinations. Throughout the course of history, music has been subject to changing technologies. However, the

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<sup>27</sup> Frederick Whitney, "How the Poet and the Composer Met," *Troubador* 3 (July 1931): 6-7.

<sup>28</sup> Maria Cizmick. "Embodied Experimentalism and Henry Cowell's *The Banshee*." *American Music* 28, no. 4 (2010): 437

industrial revolution brought a new meaning to instruments and technology made them accessible. This could likely have led Cowell to see the piano as a piece of technology that is never stagnant, with ever changing and evolving capabilities. The idea of embracing technology and science were, and remain, central to the teachings of Theosophy. It is clear that, “Varian and the Temple of the People... fueled Cowell’s Imagination... with mysticism and mythic poetics on the one hand and the bend for scientific experimentation on the other.”<sup>29</sup>

In *New Musical Resources*, a treatise on musical possibilities in the modern world, Henry Cowell explores the sound possibilities of music from a scientific standpoint, examining the laws of acoustics and overtones to support his experiments and give them a logical foundation, rather than being just rebellious whims of a rugged composer. Cowell writes that

The result of a study of overtones is to find the importance of relationships in music and to find the measure by which every interval and chord may be related. It is discovered that the sense of consonance, dissonance, and discord is not fixed, so that it must be immovably applied to certain combinations, but is relative....It is also discovered that rhythm and tone, which have been thought to be entirely separate musical fundamentals... are definitely related through overtone ratios.<sup>30</sup>

Cowell’s written treatises that theorize the foundations of his systems imply that he sought to build a whole new framework within which experimental music could exist, rather than condemning it to exist as second-rate within the Western tradition.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Hicks. *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, 90.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Cowell. *New Musical Resources* (New York: Something Else Press, 1969), 1.

We know from Varian's own writings that he experimented in many different kinds of artistic endeavors, including building instruments to fit his particular fancy. For instance, he spent more than a year trying to build an oversized harp for use in his operas at Halcyon, as well as things like "drum pianos" and "bell pianos." Varian haphazardly left many sketches for these innovations on scraps of paper and on the backs of poems.<sup>31</sup> Johnson suggests that Varian's experiments with the harp most likely inspired Cowell's "string piano" in pieces like *Aeolian Harp* and *The Banshee*. String piano is a technique that Cowell developed during his time at the Temple of the People in which the pianist strums or plucks the strings of the piano directly, bypassing the keys on the piano entirely. This creates a harp-like quality to the instrument and also expands the sound capabilities of the piano by allowing the pianist to create harmonics, as well as overtones and undertones. Whether or not the development of this technique came specifically from Varian's own experiments, certainly his wild musical and technological whims were bound to affect Cowell's inclination towards physical experimentation at the piano.

Interest in spiritualistic movements like Theosophy was common among artists in the early decades of the century. Those attracted to such ideas include William Butler Yeats, Alexander Scriabin, Wassily Kandinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg. Additionally, Dane Rudhyar and Ruth Crawford - two other musicians with close ties to Theosophy - were close friends of Cowell's in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>32</sup> Hicks remarks that, "If Ornstein had inspired Cowell and given him a template for a career playing cluster music... the

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<sup>31</sup> Johnson, "Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon," 10-11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



Variations had filled his mind with scientific ideas and speculations.”<sup>33</sup> Cowell had by then developed (or borrowed from) his teachers essentially all the modernist techniques, ideas, and theories that would fuel his best-known compositions.”<sup>34</sup> While it seems presumptuous to call Cowell a *theosophist*, per se, it would be irresponsible not to carefully regard the specific doctrines of Theosophy in any study of Cowell’s experimental piano music.

There is an interesting correlation between the two ideologies that grabbed Cowell’s attention early in his career as a composer. While Theosophy encourages the integration of science into philosophical and religious, Futurism similarly celebrates the advancement of technology and science of the modern age. The commonality of Theosophy and Futurism’s respective integration of science highlights a consistency in Cowell’s interests as well as his personal ideology. Cowell clearly valued the natural progression of science and the development of technologies, and with this notion in mind, Cowell’s particular experimental inclinations are elucidated. Cowell was especially interested in writing music that reflected the sounds of the modern age, industrialism, and booming scientific discoveries. Futurism and the theosophical doctrines at Halcyon, “stimulated his interest in science, encouraged his unconventional treatment of musical instruments, and provided an audience and a context for his early experiments in music.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, 89.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, “Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon,” 9.

## **Chapter Two: Of Harps, Banshees, and Jigs: Henry Cowell's Reconnection to his Irish Roots**

As I have already explored the more abstract philosophies and ideologies that inspired Cowell to become a great experimental composer and pianist, I will now turn to a more concrete system within which to understand much of Cowell's experimental piano repertoire. It is clear that Cowell was a man of diverse interests, multifarious musical sensibilities, and varied repertoire. However, when attempting to uncover the composer's personal and musical influences, time must be devoted to the exploration of his relationship to Irish Traditional Music, as well the way that Irish myth and folklore helped invent Cowell as an experimental composer.

A man named John Osborne Varian, who has already had numerous mentions in relation to Cowell's early philosophical influences, played another vital role in shaping Cowell's career as a composer. As I have previously mentioned, Cowell's own father was an Irish immigrant and although he was not to remain in Cowell's life, he instilled in his son a subliminal curiosity in traditional Irish culture. Although the seeds of interest were planted by Cowell's father, it was John Varian who ultimately encouraged Cowell to explore the specific musical and mythological facets of his native culture. Because Varian was also an Irish immigrant, he was deeply familiar with the dance and musical styles of Ireland and he taught Cowell the reels and jigs from their mutual homeland. This mentorship greatly influenced the ways in which Cowell's previously conceived extended techniques would manifest in actual musical works. Hicks writes that,

Although they looked forward to building a new life, many Irish folk tried to maintain their ethnic identity by preserving their traditions, folklore, art, and

music. At the core of all these was a Celtic mythology that taught of a cosmos populated by gods, fairies, sprites, and other preternatural creatures whose deeds were celebrated in poems and songs. Overlaying this mythology was Roman Catholicism, its transcendent view of the world, its miracles and its pageantry.<sup>36</sup>

John Varian certainly embodied this statement regarding the preservation of tradition, especially in the music and folklore, and he passed this on to Cowell during his time in Halcyon. From Cowell's first introduction to Varian around 1913 to about 1931, Cowell enjoyed a warm friendship with Varian, and they collaborated on poetry, songs, building instruments, and composition, as well as philosophy and Theosophy. In regards to Varian's involvement with Irish culture and its influence on Cowell's early career, Steve Johnson writes that,

Varian grew up in Ireland, too, descending from a long line of politically active, free-thinking Irishmen. After immigration to the United States he maintained close contacts with people in Ireland, spoke proudly of his Irish heritage during meetings at the Temple Square, and --like Harry Cowell--- taught old Irish songs to his sons. Irish elements abound in Varian's poetry and epic plots, in which he combined Irish and Celtic mythology with Theosophical doctrines. Those figures form Irish Lore, then, that appear often in the texts and titles of Cowell's early pieces (for example, *The Tides of Manaunaun*, *The Voice of Lir*, *The Building of Bamba*, and *The Trumpet of Angus Og*) come, in fact, from works by Varian for which Henry Cowell provided the music.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear that Cowell and Varian had much in common, from their Irish heritage to their diverse artistic interests. This chapter explores how this relationship, and Cowell's inherent interest in Irish traditional music, culture, and folklore contributed to his experiments at the piano and formed his identity as a composer.

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Steve Johnson, "Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon," 4.

### String Piano Technique: Influences from Irish Harp

No discussion on the folk music of Ireland can begin without first reference to the harp, especially in relation to Cowell's musical output. The Irish have a long and intimate history with the harp, not just in music, but in myth and politics as well. The harp was thought to be introduced to Ireland as early as the eighth century, and proved to be the most practical for the Irish climate because other instruments suffered in the cold and humid environment of Ireland. Beginning in ancient Ireland, the role of harpist was considered prestigious, and as the harp continued to play a influential role in defining Irish music and dance, it also became a nationalistic symbol for Ireland that can be found everywhere from a pint of Guinness to the flag of Leinster; on coins, stamps, and passports. In myth, the harp holds extraordinary power as it has the power to bring sorrow or joy, it has the power to destroy enemies and even heal the sick.<sup>38</sup> It is no wonder that Cowell gravitated to the harp, not just because of its musical qualities, but because of the profound connectedness to all aspects of Irish life. Because the harp exists as both nationalistic symbol and musical instrument, it is easily conjectured how the Irish significance of the harp inspired Cowell to experiment with harp-like sounds at the piano.

Johnson, in his article "Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon," tells a story about Varian's experiments trying to build a very large harp to use in operas at the Temple of the People. In a play called "The Harp of Life," Varian offers this explanation of the significance of the harp:

Little modern children of Humanity, now for the third time the old Celtic Gods  
will be with you. They will be showing you now how the great ever-living

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<sup>38</sup>Nora Joan Clark, *The Story of the Irish Harp: Its History and Influence* (Lynnwood, WA: North Creek, 2003), 109.

wonder-harp was called into existence. That harp that is indeed a gigantic mystery of Imagination. For is not its key-board above the farthest stars upon the ridge of Heaven, and is not its peddle stool within the abyss of Death, Darkness and Destruction, and is not its front post the great spear of Truth, and are not its strings strung across Time and Space and Eternity, and is not its sounding board the very Soul of Cosmos itself!"<sup>39</sup>

It is fairly obvious that Cowell's interest in the Irish harp, as well as Varian's own experiments, led to his conception of the string piano and that Cowell's motivation was to find away of using the piano to mimic the sonorities and timbres of Ireland's most beloved instrument. Johnson writes that Cowell's use of the piano as a harp is "a reversal of means and ends, since Varian sought unusual sounds by applying a keyboard to unconventional objects, whereas Cowell created unusual sounds on a conventional piano by avoiding the keyboard."<sup>40</sup>

### *Sword of Oblivion*

Since the harp is not only a national symbol of Ireland but a significant part of Celtic mythology, the importance of the harp in Irish culture inspired Cowell to see the similarities between the structure of the harp and the piano. Sometime in the 1910s, Cowell conceived of playing the piano as a stringed instrument rather than a percussive instrument by avoiding the keys altogether and strumming the strings directly with ones hands. The first piece that Cowell wrote for string piano was *Sword of Oblivion* (ca. 1920-1922). A note on the title of the music says "one of the Swords in John Varian's Irish Mythology." Because of the title that is evocative of Irish mythology and the specification after the title, the performer is able to understand the context of the piece

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<sup>39</sup> Steve Johnson, "Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon," 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 13.

and may therefore strive to demonstrate the extent of the programmatic vision for the piece. This specificity manifests in the score as well. *Sword of Oblivion* gives very specific directions for the pedal, dampening the strings, as well as crosswise and lengthwise string playing techniques. Cowell also writes performance notes for more particular techniques such as scraping the coil on a string with the back of one's fingernail to mimic the sound of a sword being pulled from its sheath. Because this piece is really a first attempt at writing for string piano, it is not particularly developed, but the *Sword of Oblivion* is an important stepping stone in achieving a much more developed string piano technique that will be found in *The Banshee*, Cowell's most notable use of string piano.

#### *Aeolian Harp*

The next development in Henry Cowell's string piano was *Aeolian Harp*, which was written shortly after *Sword of Oblivion* in 1923. Aeolus was the Greek god of wind and the harp is so named because it is played by the wind rather than by a person. Without knowing the history of the aeolian harp specifically, the piece is easily recognizable to be the piano mimicking the harp. However, because the piano is fundamentally different from the harp, the wind element plays a particular role in interpreting the music. Because of the angle at which you play the string piano, as well as the difference in string types, strumming the strings with the flesh of the finger is a soft and subtle effect that is connected to the sonic effect of the wind harp. Because of the performance tradition of the piano and the untraditional means that Cowell prescribes in

the performance of Aeolian Harp, the sound is just as unexpected as the novelty of a harp being played by the wind.

Cowell goes even further than simply using “string piano” to emulate the harp. Even the way he writes the music, with chordal strums followed by individual plucked strings, emphasizing both the chordal and melodic capabilities of the instrument, emulates the harp tradition. Although this technique is highly experimental as far as piano repertoire is concerned, the tradition of the harp is preserved in this piece in a way that demonstrates the composer’s reverence for and interest in the music of his homeland. Therefore “...Aeolian Harp was novel in technique, but old fashioned in harmonic idiom.”<sup>41</sup>

#### *The Banshee: Irish Folklore and Catholicism*

The most important product of Cowell’s string piano technique is *The Banshee*. Although the specificity of the composition of *The Banshee* will be covered in detail in the following chapter, it is important to first examine this piece in its Irish context as a product of Cowell’s Irishness as well as John Varian’s influence. Both *Sword of Oblivion* and *Aeolian Harp* embody both technical innovation at the piano as well emulation of Irish folklore, yet *The Banshee* takes the next step in juxtaposing experimental techniques and ancient Irish folklore by additionally including elements of more modern Irish belief, that is, Catholicism. Initially, the inspiration for this piece was the lore of the banshee as a wailing women that signifies death, a sort of ancient grim-reaper. However, in determining the pitch content of a piece, Cowell turned to the overtly nationalistic Irish

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, 112.

Catholicism that has been in place for hundreds of years, and continues into modern Irish culture, by using traditional liturgy from the Catholic funeral mass. The quirky mix of pagan and Christian myth found a congenial home in eclectic neighborhoods of Cowell's San Francisco and this mix found an even more genial home in the composition of *The Banshee*.<sup>42</sup>

The title of *The Banshee* is a programmatic one, meant to represent the banshee from Celtic mythology, however the piece derives its melodic material from *Dies Irae*, a hymn from the Catholic liturgy written in the thirteenth century. This piece is not just inspired by mythology like *Aeolian Harp* or *Sword of Oblivion*, this piece is a cross section between modern Irish belief in Catholicism as well as the ancient Celtic mysticism. In this case, the imagery of the banshee and the text of *Dies Irae* work together to achieve one goal, as they are two different belief systems' representations of death. The banshee in mythology is said to wail at high pitches when death is imminent, whereas *Dies Irae* is a medieval text in Catholicism about the day of judgement which is sung as part of funereal masses. Additionally, *Dies Irae* has held a consistent presence in Western art music, most famously in the requiems of Mozart and Verdi. Maria Cizmici writes:

The *Dies irae* forms the structural core of *The Banshee* and each iteration of the melody calls for a different physical technique. Each measure in the first half of *The Banshee* begins with a left-handed glissando sweeping up from the bass and delivering the melody from a dark and rumbling death. For the initial *Dies irae* melody, the flesh of one fingertip moves along the length of each string in melodic succession...The next *Dies irae* (mm. 12-19) grows in intensity as the pianist drags a fingernail along each string, changing the finger's position to bring the harder surface into contact with the rugged string...*The Banshee* culminates

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



with the *Dies irae*'s third arrival (mm. 25-31), now harmonized with tone clusters played by the fingernails of both hands.<sup>43</sup>

As with Cowell's interests in Futurism, his string piano experiments were realized powerfully by means of programmatic music, culminating in the creation of *The Banshee*. Not only is *The Banshee* a completion of Cowell's experiments with string piano, but it is also a modern symbol of Ireland as a juxtaposition of mystic folklore and staunch nationalistic Catholicism.

#### Irish Tradition Music: Dance and Rhythm

As well as being introduced to the mythology of Ireland and being inspired by the ideals of Irish culture through harp, Cowell also found a profound value in the folk music and dance traditions themselves. Throughout his compositional career, he consistently wrote music based on the dance forms, as well as folk tunes themselves. Cowell went on multiple tours of Ireland, both for the purpose of performing and also seizing opportunities to encounter different folk musics. Joel Sachs gives this account of Cowell's third tour of Europe which began in 1929:

Their first destination was Ireland. Equipped with a recording machine and a list of singers and players obtained from a priest and Varian's Theosophist friend, the poet and political activist, Ella Young, Henry, Harry, and Olive rented an old car and driver and set off from Cork for a trip around the southwest. When two young men in Killarney let him try their pipes, Henry ordered a set, counting on its instruction book and advice from the pipers to get started, and Harry equipped him with a traditional piper's costume. A little mountain climbing topped off the pleasures. Five years later he used the recordings for an article on Irish traditional music. Even more important, hearing Irish music performed by traditional musicians created a much stronger bond between Henry and his

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<sup>43</sup> Maria Cizmic, "Embodied Experimentalism and Henry Cowell's *The Banshee*," 445-446.

ancestral culture than had Varian's translations of myths of the songs Harry sang to him when he was small."<sup>44</sup>

Maurice Hinson notes in his *Guide to Pianist's Repertoire* that, "Most of Cowell's piano music is based on folk materials, either American or Celtic,"<sup>45</sup> and his travels around the countrysides of Ireland inspired him greatly.

When examining the whole of Cowell's compositional output, there is much variation, but there is always the common denominator of music that is driven by rhythm rather than harmony. In his earliest works for piano such as *Dynamic Motions* and *Resume' in 10 Movements*, it was the harsh rhythms of the Futurist artistic ideal that drove these pieces. They do not conform to harmony in any concrete way and simultaneously lack strong melodic content, but they continuously draw on the harsh rhythm of the industrial age. Although Cowell's musical inspirations outgrew his youthful devotion to Futurist ideals, his profound attention to the possibility of rhythm in music remained. As his interest in folk music grew, and as Varian's zeal for Irishness continued to penetrate Cowell's art, the composer sought to express the relationship between music and dance through rhythm. Joel Sachs writes that,

From his youth, Henry was drawn to the combination of music and motion through ballroom dancing and folk dancing in Monrovia and Ireland, which, in turn, stimulated his fascination with the relationship of dance and music in extra-European cultures.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music*, 161.

<sup>45</sup> Maurice Hinson, and Irwin Freundlich, *Guide to the Pianist's Repertoire*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1973), 228.

<sup>46</sup> Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music*, 109.

Cowell consistently sought to create an incontrovertible sense of motion in his music, and dance seems to be the originator of this pursuit.

Cowell was very interested in rhythm as a musical source. Looking at the titles of his compositions alone reveals his interest in the rhythms of Irish dance. Cowell wrote at least ten pieces for piano, and a plethora more for other instrumentations, whose titles alone explicitly relate them to traditional Irish dance forms. Of these, the only two that have been published for piano are *Irish Dance Style* and *The Irishman Dances* (1935). Cowell's piano works based on the Irish jig alone are: *March of the Feet of the Eldana* [for piano] (1934), *Irish Jig* (ca. 1925), *Irish Jig for Children* (ca. 1928), *Jig* [for piano] (1916). An analysis of these pieces reveals the familiarity not only with the rhythmic forms of these pieces from Irish dance, but also familiarity with the dances themselves that shape the melodic content of the pieces. Cowell frequently wrote small excerpts under the titles of his pieces to give the performer information that he deemed necessary for the piece's performance and these reveal much about Cowell's intentions. An example of this comes from the inscription that follows the title *Irishman Dances*, which reads as follows: "This dance has an engaging Gaelic quality. The impression is due to its interesting rhythmic accentuation, racial characteristics, and to the repeated use of fifths in the bass, with their suggestion of pipes."<sup>47</sup>

An example of Cowell's unique juxtaposition of elements from Irish traditional music is *The Lilt of the Reel*. Traditionally a reel is in simple time (2/2 or 4/4); they are fast in tempo, played by a solo instrument (typically a fiddle, tin whistle, Irish flute, etc),

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<sup>47</sup> *Irish Dances*, (New York: Carl Fischer, 1936)

they consist of 4 bar phrases. They are in binary form with eight-bar phrases that typically repeat. Since Cowell was not writing a piece to be danced to necessarily, he chose which traditional elements would remain as well as which elements would be subject to his experimental means. Cowell maintains the basic structure of the reel with eight-bar phrases that are repeated, consistent note values (using mostly eighth notes), the fast and busy character of the music, as well as the tradition of being played by a solo instrument. Furthermore Irish folk music typically avoided large interval jumps in melody and this element is also preserved in the melodic lines of *The Lilt of the Reel*. The chords in the left hand also are reminiscent of the pipes that function as more of a drone, especially in the A section of the piece. The most significant departure from the traditional reel in this piece is the meter. This piece is in 6/8, which makes the piece sound more like a jig than a reel. However, it is doubtful that these details mattered much to Cowell because the piece still embodies the wild and carefree nature of Irish folk dances. The most important facet of Irish traditional music altogether is the improvisatory nature of the music. In order to create an improvisatory feel in a meticulously notated piece, Cowell frequently writes informal instructions above the right hand melody that say “hurry,” “slow,” “normal,” (see example 2) which creates an improvisatory feel that disguises the 6/8 meter and often makes the piece feel like it is in four instead of three, especially because of the way he groups notes with accents.

Example 2: Traditional Jig Rhythm and Clusters in *Lily of the Reel*<sup>48</sup>

Allegro con rubato (M.M. about - 108) (normal)

(normal) (hurry) (slow) (normal) etc.

The rhythmically driven Irish traditional music inspired many of Cowell's more rhythmically driven piano works such as *Exultation*. This piece is an interesting study in the threshold between traditional Irish tune types and experimental piano music, two things that rarely go together. First, the right hand plays in 4/4 for most of the piece while the left hand remains in 3/4. It is hard to listen to this piece and not think of the rhythmically improvisatory nature of the Irish music tradition because of the way the two time signatures interact. Beginning in m. 12 (at the beginning of section B), the main melodic content follows the format of an Irish hornpipe, which is a type of tune in Irish Traditional Music where rhythmic content from the melody exists in 4/4 time and where the first note of the first beat is a dotted eighth followed by a sixteenth note or by a couplet of thirty second notes. Most of the piece consists of this rhythmic motive. While

<sup>48</sup> Henry Cowell, *Lily of the Reel* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, Inc., 1982), mm. 1-8.

it can be difficult when listening to any piece in 3/4 to separate one's mind from a waltz-type dance, this piece makes it especially hard because for much of the piece, whichever hand is playing in 3/4 has the tone clusters. By using full-arm tone clusters on each beat of the 3 beats in each measure, the 1-2-3 of the time signature is relentlessly pounded into the ear of the listener. This is a fascinating example of the way that Henry Cowell used experimental techniques to expound upon the musical traditions from his homeland, as well as the ways in which he was inspired by them to create experimental piano music.

Lou Harrison, another influential experimentalist, studied with Cowell from 1934-1935, and respected him greatly as a mentor. After Cowell died, Harrison wrote *Reel: Homage to Henry Cowell* in the traditional Irish dance style, of course not neglecting to utilize ostinatos of tone clusters. Cowell's music was not only inspired by dance, but his music also inspired modern dance. "The vivid energies of Henry's 'experimental' piano pieces made them a natural magnet for 'interpretive dancers.'"<sup>49</sup> Additionally, between 1934 and 1941 Cowell wrote many articles on the relationship between composition and dance that were primarily published in music periodicals. Some of these include, "How Relate Music and Dance?", "Relating Music and Concert Dance", "Creating a Dance: Form and Composition", "New Sounds for the Dance." This further solidifies Cowell's interest in the bodily relationship to dance, stemming from his interest in folk music and Irish dance forms, that initially inspired so much of Cowell's work. Cowell's investigation into Irish traditional music, and the mentorship of Varian,

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<sup>49</sup> Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music*, 209.

made him interested in the rhythmic relationship between music and dance, as well as the Irish tradition of music as a medium for story telling and a constant source of inspiration.

### **Chapter Three: Henry Cowell's Whole World of Music: Influence of Chinese Music and New Musical Resources**

#### The East in the West: A Composer's New Musical Resources

Cowell's exposure to the rich musical heritages of other cultures heavily contributed to his inclination towards experimentation. It is clear that Irish traditional music played a large role in determining the specifics of his experimentation at the piano, yet the music of Asia also contributed heavily to Cowell's piano music. Although Cowell did not speak publicly about his relationship to Irish folk music, it is relatively simple to see the evolution of these techniques from their native Celtic musical system to Cowell's music. Interestingly, Cowell was much more vocal regarding the inspiration that he drew from non-Western music systems; he not only incorporated many techniques from China, Japan, and Iran into his music, but he also wrote heavily on matters regarding non-Western music as well as the budding field of comparative musicology. In his article "Globalization, Culturation, and Transculturation in American Music," ethnomusicologist Dale Olsen described Cowell as "one of the first composers in the United States to look beyond the Western Hemisphere for inspiration, and thus became global and transcultural."<sup>50</sup> The techniques that Cowell adopts from other music systems are not experimental in their respective musical languages, however by transferring these sounds from their native music systems to his piano music, they become progressive, controversial, and experimental in Cowell's cultural sphere of relatively conservative American art music.

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<sup>50</sup> Dale A. Olsen, "Globalization, Culturation, and Transculturation in American Music," in *Reflections on American Music: The Twentieth Century and the New Millennium-- A Collection of Essays in Honor of the College Music Society*, ed. James R. Heintze and Michael Saffle (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 200), 265-89.



Because Irish music is folk in its heritage and for all intensive purposes “western,” and because Cowell himself was Irish, issues of cultural appropriation do not emerge in the discourse on Cowell’s use of Irish culture in his music. However, before exploring the techniques that Cowell borrowed from Asian music systems, it is important to establish the artistic climate of America from the end of World War I to the end of World War II, and the cross cultural synthesis that took place, as well as clear Cowell of potential accusations of appropriation. Although Cowell wrote his most famous piano pieces in the 1920s and early 1930s, most of his academic writing on Eastern music comes from after world War II. In the introduction to *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, Yayoi Uno Everett writes that,

After World War I, greater mobility, growth in institutional resources, technological advances, and educational reform contributed to a rapid increase in cross-fertilization of Western and Asian musical cultures. With sweeping political and sociological changes, a great number of Asian musicians came to pursue musical education in the West, while Western musicians and composers traveled to various parts of Asia.<sup>51</sup>

In light of this analysis of the cross-pollination of musical cultures, the context within which Cowell’s multicultural music interest flourished becomes clear. In many ways, World War I made the world a smaller place and this greatly benefitted artists like Cowell who were seeking untraditional, or in this case non-Western, inspiration in order to create music that was more aptly suited to a changing world. In fact, this is the same spirit that drove the Second Viennese School: creating art that reflects a rapidly changing world and paving the way for art that embodies forward reaching aesthetics. Joel Sachs further suggests that composers like Cowell had a “growing social consciousness, especially

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<sup>51</sup> Everett, Yayoi Uno, and Frederick Lau. *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, 3.

after the outbreak of the World War, dissuading them from taking part in what seemed an elitist Western tradition.”<sup>52</sup>

Western composers sought inspiration in the East prior to the twentieth century. Everett notes that “in spite of differences in intent and motivation... composers have strived to interpenetrate East Asian and Western musical resources according to their own sensibilities, aesthetic goals, and ideological stances.”<sup>53</sup> She goes on to note that “the impact of East Asian culture on Western nations has led to new modes of aesthetic consciousness and expansion of topics and genres in art music in the course of the twentieth century.”<sup>54</sup> It is necessary to note that many European art music at this time had already largely abandoned traditional harmony. As American composers were sensing that their art was somehow “behind” that of the Europeans, yet not wanting to utilize the same experimental strategies, they began to explore other means of avoiding traditional harmony that did not lend their music to strict twelve-tone serialism. In his article “The East in the West” from 1968, John Cage writes that,

The composers who today wish to imbue their music with the ineffable, seem to find it necessary to make use of musical characteristics not purely Western; they go for inspiration to those places, or return to those times, where or when harmony is not of the essence.<sup>55</sup>

Pursuing musical innovation where “harmony is not of the essence” is exactly what Henry Cowell sought to do. This is not to suggest that Cowell took a turn for atonal composition because many of his pieces, regardless of the extremes in experimentation,

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, 66.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>55</sup> John Cage, "The East in the West." *Asian Music* 1.1 (1968): 18.

still maintain some sense of tonality and some facet of tonal tradition. This is, however, to suggest that Cowell understood harmony more in terms of the overtone series than according to the principles of the strict diatonic tradition.

Henry Cowell was not the only composer who expanded his musical resources through contact with Asian and other non-Western cultures. Many of his contemporaries who engaged in this cross-cultural musical exploration in the 1930s, including Henry Partch, Lou Harrison, and most notably, John Cage.<sup>56</sup> In response to this fact, Everett noted that, “in searching for the root of cross cultural musical endeavors in the United States, one cannot overestimate the catalytic role played by Cowell. His dual contribution as ethnomusicologist and composer set the ground for subsequent studies in non-Western musical cultures.”<sup>57</sup> In a sense, Cowell began this trend in American art music, and therefore it is critical to explore his motives as well as his means of turning inspiration from other cultures into experimentation. Furthermore, Cowell commented on his engagement with world music stating that borrowing from other musical systems is “not an attempt to imitate primitive music, but rather to draw on those materials common to the music of all the peoples of the world, to build a new music particularly relating to our own century.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, when looking at Cowell’s music through the lens of cross-cultural composition, it is essential to note Cowell’s own reasons to utilize musical material that is “common to the music of all the peoples of the world” and to create an

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<sup>56</sup> Yayoi Uno Everett, and Frederick Lau. *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 2.

American music that is reflective of the unity that America gave to people from all around the world as a melting-pot of culture.

Finally, I would like to establish the fact that Cowell's use of these techniques is not an example of cultural appropriation nor should his endeavors be rendered "orientalist." Regretfully, orientalism has found its way into much of Western Europe's musical canon, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries in works like Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and Saint-Saëns' *La princesse jaune*. In addition to directly borrowing traditional melodic material, a few composers even appropriated cultural elements in an effort to convey the "exotic" in their music. Since opera was much more prone to this kind of misrepresentation due to staging and libretto, in the case of Cowell it certainly helps that his music was instrumental. However the world music that inspired Cowell's composition was not borrowed in the "exotic" spirit of many nineteenth-century composers, instead this material broadened his horizons by presenting a greater wealth of inspiring compositional material that would be novel to the American audience. Cowell did not seek to represent these cultures through his composition but simply to draw on new musical material to inspire his career as a composer. Scholars have even read Cowell's music as deliberately fighting ideals of racism that were rampant in America between the wars, and even after World War II. Nancy Yunhwa Rao is one such scholar who asserts that because Cowell was writing this music "in a conservative political climate that included race-based immigrant exclusion" Cowell's music was "reacting against the racism sanctioned by the immigration law" in America.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Henry Cowell and His Chinese Music Heritage" in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, (2004):119-120.

Although Cowell was the child of an Irishman and the rich tradition of music from his father's homeland certainly inspired his career as an experimentalist, Cowell's upbringing brought him into contact with the broader community of American immigrants from all parts of the world. Rao remarks in her introduction to *On the Nature of Melody*, "The child of an Irish father and a mother of midwestern American descent, Cowell derived his musical experience not just from his family background but from the music surrounding youth immigrant America."<sup>60</sup> Henry reflected on his experience as a child writing that,

It seems very odd to me now that my mother should have taken me to the Chinese opera, but she did this more than once. It was probably the magic word opera that suggested to her, correctly as we all know, that this Chinese music is a sophisticated art form.<sup>61</sup>

We know from Cowell biographies that his family relocated from Menlo Park to San Francisco's "Oriental District" (now referred to as Chinatown) and we know that Chinese operas were in fact being staged there. Additionally, Cowell made multiple references to this part of his childhood. In his article "Music of the Orient," he tells this story as follows,

[W]e lived between the Japanese and Chinese districts and I had many Japanese and Chinese playmates between the ages of five and nine. I sang their folk songs in their native language, just as many children on the eastern seaboard sing those songs in German and French learned from their playmates. By the time I was nine years old, the music of these oriental people was just as natural to me as any music.... Most people who live in the middle and eastern parts of this country don't realize that Japanese and Chinese music is part of American music. As an

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<sup>60</sup> Nancy Yunhwa Rao. "American Compositional Theory in the 1930s: Scale and Exoticism in "The Nature of Melody" by Henry Cowell." *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2001): 625.

<sup>61</sup> Henry Cowell, "From Tone Clusters to Contemporary Listeners," *Music Journal* 14/1 (1956): 6.

American composer I would like to point out that Oriental music has influenced me a great deal.<sup>62</sup>

Although Cowell was unwilling to make reference to his musical inspirations regarding John Varian, Theosophy, and Futurism, there are at least five references that Cowell gave to this specific tale of his childhood friends and his multi-cultural upbringing. I do not think it inappropriate to infer that this was the way that Cowell wanted himself to be perceived by posterity. Because he consciously changed dates on his music to make himself seem more prolific at a young age, we know that Cowell calculated his image. He additionally was altogether unwilling to make reference to the sources of his compositions in an effort to seem autonomous, except for in this case. Cowell clearly wanted to be seen as a citizen of the world, as a composer that was aware of and engaged with the music cultures of the world in a way that his contemporaries did not. We can further infer this when considering the fact that Cowell went on to do very public work in cultivating the field of comparative musicology and even engaged in the ethnography of different musics in the later part of his career. Cowell's contribution to modern ethnomusicology is just as relevant to modern scholars as his contribution to the realm of experimental piano music.

#### Chinese Opera, Sliding Tones, and *The Banshee*

In her article *Henry Cowell and His Chinese Music Heritage*, Nancy Rao explores Cowell's use of sliding tone in many of his compositions. This is an interesting topic to consider because Cowell actually wrote about sliding tones in his theoretical works such as *New Musical Resources* as well as "The Nature of Melody." Many other sources on

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<sup>62</sup> Henry Cowell, "Music of the Orient," *Music Journal* 21 (September 1963): 25.

Cowell are conjecture because of his lack of transparency as an artist, however, he divulged many details from his early encounters with Chinese opera and other non-Western music. We are certain that Henry Cowell was exposed to Peking opera while he lived in Chinatown, and the sliding tone is native to this type of opera because of its relation to the linguistic dialectic expression in the Chinese language.<sup>63</sup> Rao writes that,

In Chinese opera a kind of heightened speech, *yünbai*, is used to dramatize the upward and downward motions of these inflections. This results in a string of relative pitches that gives the lyric its characteristic shape, and the sliding tones are often used to connect relative pitches. The sliding connectives between the relative pitches of the speech tone thus constitute an important part of the heightened speech...sliding tones are interpolated to render a smoother, or more emphatic, linguistic effect... in addition, the sliding motion is ubiquitous in Chinese folk songs, other vocal traditions, and in various instrumental music.<sup>64</sup>

In Cowell's earliest experiments with sliding tone, he maintained the tradition of sliding tone in vocal music. He applied the technique to voice in the opening movement of *Atlantis* (1926) with slow vocal slides over the interval of a thirteenth. Again in 1933 he wrote the song "Rest" in which he explores the more subtle power of sliding tones by writing slow, downward slides to add a dramatic color to the piece. Although Cowell may have been exposed to this musical technique through Chinese opera, and he did indeed experiment with the vocal technique, Cowell's innovation through experimentation with sliding tones comes from his piano music. In another article called "Cowell's Sliding Tone and the American Ultramodernist Tradition," Nancy Rao writes that,

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<sup>63</sup> Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Henry Cowell and His Chinese Music Heritage" in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, (2004):122.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 123- 124.

Cowell's slides must be seen not as an isolated idiosyncrasy or a special effect but as a reflection of the aesthetic goals and theoretical pursuits in American modernist compositions during this time. The varieties of sliding motion found in the work of Ruth Crawford, Johanna Beyer, and, later, Elliott Carter, Conlon Nancarrow, John Cage, and Lou Harrison are essentially realizations of Cowell's innovation in disparate dimensions.<sup>65</sup>

However, because access to much of Cowell's writing, and even much of his music is very limited, it has inhibited scholars from really understanding the value of sliding tones in his work. Fortunately, a few of his works that mention sliding tone in theory have been published.

Although Nancy Rao's article "Henry Cowell and His Chinese Music Heritage: Theory of Sliding Tone and His Orchestral Work of 1953-1965" focuses on Cowell's later orchestral work, her theories are easily applied to sliding tones in Cowell's string piano works as well. Although Cowell's earliest uses of sliding tones are from *The Birth of Motion* (1914)<sup>66</sup> and the string piano work *Piece for Piano with Strings* (1924), the most famous, and perhaps the most interesting example of sliding tones in Cowell's music, is *The Banshee*. This is one of the few pieces of Cowell's that is actually considered part of the canon of piano repertoire because of its novelty. *The Banshee* is written entirely for string piano, however unlike *Aeolian Harp*, in *The Banshee* avoids the keys altogether and the pianist is positioned in the crook of the piano. Because the keys cannot be relied upon to lift the dampers, the damper pedal must remain down through the entire piece. This allows for use of true sliding tones where the performer sweeps the strings from one

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<sup>65</sup> Nancy Yunhwa Rao. "Cowell's Sliding Tone and the American Ultramodernist Tradition." *American Music* 23.3 (2005): 282.

<sup>66</sup> No date, probably 1920 according to Nancy Rao.



pitch up or down to another, catching each note between and triggering the full capacity of overtones. Cowell explores both the origins and the possibilities of sliding tones, in at least two of his theoretical works. He writes that,

Sliding tones, based on ever-changing values of pitch instead of steady pitches, are sometimes used in music. Such tones are very frequently used in primitive music, and often in Oriental music; in our music they are rarer... It is not impossible that such tones may be the foundation of an art of composition as a new tonal foundation.<sup>67</sup>

Sliding tones, portamentos, or glissandi, as they are sometimes called, are not usually considered in musical theory, but it is our belief that they should be.<sup>68</sup>

This excerpt from *New Musical Resources* gives a glimpse into Cowell's motives for using the sliding tone that have nothing to do with ethnography, Orientalism, or exoticism. Rather, he saw this compositional technique as a means to create music that relies on the tonal foundation of the overtone series without the seemingly arbitrary rules of strict diatonicism. By specifying only the top note in each slide, it is easier to hear the specific overtones of the melody. Western tonality relies on chords, and emphasized the dominant- tonic relationship. However, *The Banshee* does not have chords. There are groups of notes played at the same time, even a few triads, but they do not function as chords. They serve primarily as physical emphases of the subtlety of overtones. When the first triad appears in m. 9, all of the pitches have already been heard as overtones through sliding tones, therefore this musical moment is a reinforcement of the overtones

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<sup>67</sup> Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources*, 19-20.

<sup>68</sup> Henry Cowell, "The Nature of Melody," in Nancy Yunhwa Rao's "American Compositional Theory in the 1930s: Scale and Exoticism in "The Nature of Melody" by Henry Cowell." *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2001): 625. 2.

Unpublished manuscripts of "The Nature of Melody" are held by the New York Public Library.

that bring out the *Dies Irae* melody. Unfortunately many of Cowell's essays and treatises on theory that include discussion of sliding tones remain unpublished, thus the use of sliding tones in Cowell's work has perhaps not been thoroughly understood as completely as he would have liked. Rao notes that, "[h]is unpublished essays, such as 'Musical Curves of Sound,' document the use of slides in various musical cultures."<sup>69</sup> However, in her article "Sliding tone and the American Ultramodernist Tradition," Rao fails to connect Chinese opera technique to sliding tones in *The Banshee*, which is a very important facet of understanding this piece.

There are two types of sliding tones that Cowell develops in *The Banshee*. The first are horizontal sweeps from the lower end of the piano up to a specified ending pitch, these are marked A in the score (Example 3). The second kind of sliding tone is created by rubbing the same string(s) lengthwise, indicated in the score by letter B (Example 3). The sliding tones that indicate that the performer must sweep horizontally create inarticulate pitch because every pitch between point A and point B is being triggered and it creates a massive nebula of sound. The most important factor of this kind of sliding tone is the way that it creates and expounds the overtones. It is clear that this is the most important facet of sliding tone in this piece because in Cowell's theoretical works, he uses sliding tones as a point of evidence for a tonal system based solely on overtones. Meanwhile, the second kind of sliding tone takes place on one string, moving the finger up and down on the same string to create a continual, yet gradual change of timbre of the pitch. Although Slide A is reminiscent of the Chinese opera vocal technique, and perhaps

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<sup>69</sup> Nancy Yunhwa Rao. "Cowell's Sliding Tone and the American Ultramodernist Tradition." *American Music* 23.3 (2005): 282.

as Rao suggests, the Chinese dialectic change itself, Slide B also has elements of vocal technique as well. Slide B sounds like a singer holding out a note for a long duration, the pitch starting out slightly closed off and gradually the vocalist lets the vibrato ring until it reaches its most intense potential and then slowly fades away. It is easy to see how slide A made its way from the Chinese opera to Cowell's piano music, and it is just as easy to see how Cowell's inspiration for slide B came from vocal tradition as well.

Example 3: Sliding Tones in *The Banshee*

The image displays three systems of musical notation for piano. The first system is in 2/2 time, featuring a series of notes with circular letter labels (A, B) and dynamic markings like 'pp' and 'rit.'. The second system includes 'a tempo', 'pizz.', 'p', and 'cresc.' markings, with notes labeled A, B, C, D, E. The third system includes 'f', 'a tempo', and 'nail' markings, with notes labeled A, E, F, G.

In his dissertation *A Transcultural Student, Teacher, and Composer*, Peter Schimpf writes that “Cowell advocated cultural hybridity as a productive direction of Western art music.”<sup>70</sup> This is an accurate estimation of Cowell's conscious choice as a composer to let the Chinese opera from his childhood inform the creation of an entirely new kind of experimentation at the piano.

In *New Musical Resources*, Cowell advocates strongly that overtones be more seriously considered in music theory and should, perhaps, be the foundation of a new

<sup>70</sup> Peter John Schimpf. *A Transcultural Student, Teacher, and Composer: Henry Cowell and the Music of the World's Peoples*. 2006: 126

kind of music theory that more aptly meets the needs of contemporary performers.

Cowell writes that,

Music is based upon, and conditioned by, the physical laws of sound-waves. These laws disclose that musical tones have a relation to each other which is measurable by mathematics. They further show that each tone produced generates a series of overtones which are related to that tone, and to each other, by definite mathematical ratios... On many instruments, such as the piano, the whole series as far as the ear can follow is present in almost equally graduated shades, the lowest being most easily heard, the higher ones growing gradually dimmer and dimmer.<sup>71</sup>

This passage bridges the gap between Chinese sliding tones from opera and the existence of *The Banshee*. By articulating his understanding of overtones, it becomes clear why Cowell chose the sliding tone from Chinese opera for this piece. Cowell employed the sliding tone because of its unique ability to enable a robust sonic exploration the overtone series. Cowell wrote *The Banshee* in 1925 and published *New Musical Resources* in 1930, so presumably he would have been working on, or at least thinking about, his treatise on the future of theory while he was writing *The Banshee*. The first chapter of the book argues for the fundamental nature of overtones in music as well as a call for a more stringent inclusion of overtones in the future of music theory. Cowell puts this chapter first in his work because it is the most essential element of much of his music, especially his piano repertoire. *The Banshee* is a thorough exploration of the possibility of overtones and the specific capability of the piano to convey these overtones, and it is the sliding tones that tap into the full overtone capability of the piano.

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<sup>71</sup> Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources*, 4

From a sociological perspective, Catherine Cameron describes American experimentalists' embracement of non-Western music as a form of social protest against the hegemony of European musical culture.<sup>72</sup> This statement is a perfect summation of Henry Cowell's exploration of Eastern music. American music has followed the Western art music tradition for the last several hundred years, and after the first World War, it became necessary for American composers to find their own voices that made them distinct from the European conflicts. Schimpf notes that Cowell's exploration of different world musics is a "self-conscious exploration of the ideals of transculturalism."<sup>73</sup> This ideal perhaps reveals an element of Cowell's motive for including these transcultural features, aside from being solely prompted by musical variety or general curiosity. Cowell wanted to present American music as a kind of music that did not have the cultural boundaries that other national musics did. Because of the immigrant culture in which he grew up, he saw America as a heterogeneous mix of cultures and arts that all played an equal part in forming the identity of America and American music.

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<sup>72</sup> Catherine M. Cameron, *Dialectics in the Arts: The Rise of Experimentalism in American Music* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Press, 1996), 20-21.

<sup>73</sup> Schimpf, *A Transcultural Student, Teacher, and Composer*, 123

## Conclusion

An article published by Russell Platt, an accomplished composer and Classical Music editor for *The New Yorker*, states in simple terms the difference between composers that are *creators* and *consolidators*. Platt cites some of the most famous composers of Western art music as examples of this dichotomy:

We consider J. S. Bach greater than Vivaldi, but it was Vivaldi, Corelli, and Tartini who developed the revolutionary string-writing techniques that Bach fused with the German traditions of counterpoint to fashion such gleaming treasures as the Double Violin Concerto...Debussy and Ravel were giants, but musical Impressionism would not have been the same without Edvard Grieg's progressive treatment of Romantic harmony, which was conveniently packaged for export in the composer's compact and user-friendly songs, piano pieces, and orchestral suites.<sup>74</sup>

Of course, all composers owe facets of their style to the composers that came before them, but when it comes down to what defines a composer, either *creator* or *consolidator* stands out as a marker of their career. In the case of Cowell, Platt celebrates his embodiment of a *creator*:

Cowell was a creator and an originator of modern piano repertoire. Cowell made the piano three-dimensional by reinterpreting the possibilities of the instrument, as well as the performer's relationship to the instrument. The composer relentlessly drew inspiration from any place he could find it; from philosophy, ideology, religion, comparative musicology, Chinese opera, and folk music. Cowell loosened the linear strictures of performance tradition, he developed the concept of string-piano, revolutionized the tone cluster, and was decades ahead of his contemporaries by drawing on Asian musical elements for his compositions. In addition to this, he extensively

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<sup>74</sup> Russell Platt, "Henry Cowell's Everlasting Originality." *The New Yorker*, September 19, 2012.

published writings and treatises on theory, ethnomusicology, and the philosophy of music. Although many beloved and influential composers were *consolidators*, even if they were genius *consolidators*, Russell Platt is correct in his description of Cowell as a *creator*, and this is what created his lasting influence of originality.

Although Cowell is characterized as an originator of many influential piano techniques, and a cultivator of the ultramodernist movement, he certainly had his own sources for inspiration. Cowell's colorful biography and variety of unique interests gave way to the creation and cultivation of new capacities for the piano, as well as new modes for modern music. Questions regarding the transmission of ideas are convoluted and must be approached with care, however a thorough investigation into the possible sources for such influential work are fruitful, as well as being essential to gaining a fuller understanding of both the composer and his art.

Consideration of Henry Cowell's musical and extramusical inspirations is not full nor complete without an appraisal of the ways in which he *became* an inspiration to the next generation of composers. Despite the fact that Cowell lacked a formal education in any capacity, he became one of the first to encourage the study of comparative musicology (the predecessor to ethnomusicology) in university settings and left a lasting legacy in the genesis of this field. He started the New Music Society in Los Angeles, and heavily promoted new American music.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Cowell became an important model for John Cage, a gallant force and giant of musical modernity. Cage himself gave credit to Cowell's adventurous inside-the-piano techniques for laying the groundwork for

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<sup>75</sup> David Burge, *Twentieth-century Piano Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 123.

his prepared piano works.<sup>76</sup> Cowell's bold musical endeavors laid the foundation for what was to come in twentieth-century piano music. In conclusion, Virgil Thomson summed up the novelty of Cowell as a person, as a composer, and as a pedagogue:

Henry Cowell's music covers a wider range in both expression and technique than that of any other living composer. His experiments begun three decades ago in rhythm, in harmony, and in instrumental sonorities were considered then by many to be wild. Today they are the Bible of the young and still, to the conservatives, "advanced"... No other composer of our time has produced a body of works so radical and so normal, so penetrating and so comprehensive. Add to this massive production his long and influential career as a pedagogue, and Henry Cowell's achievement becomes impressive indeed. There is no other quite like it. To be both fecund and right is given to few.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> John Cage, "How the Piano Came to Be Prepared," in *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 7.

<sup>77</sup> Virgil Thomson, and Richard Kostelanetz, *Virgil Thomson: A Reader: Selected Writings, 1924-1984* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 167.



## Appendix A

Futurist Manifesto as printed in *Futurism: An Anthology*<sup>78</sup>

1. We intend to sing to the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.
2. Courage, boldness, and rebelliousness will be the essential elements of our poetry.
3. Up to now literature has exalted contemplative stillness, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt movement and aggression, feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the slap and the punch.
4. We affirm that the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car with a hood that glistens with large pipes resembling a serpent with explosive breath . . . a roaring automobile that seems to ride on grapeshot—that is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.
5. We intend to hymn man at the steering wheel, the ideal axis of which intersects the earth, itself hurled ahead in its own race along the path of its orbit.
6. Henceforth poets must do their utmost, with ardor, splendor, and generosity, to increase the enthusiastic fervor of the primordial elements.
7. There is no beauty that does not consist of struggle. No work that lacks an aggressive character can be considered a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent assault launched against unknown forces to reduce them to submission under man.
8. We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! . . . Why should we look back over our shoulders, when we intend to breach the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, for we have already created velocity which is eternal and omnipresent.
9. We intend to glorify war—the only hygiene of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of anarchists, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and contempt for woman.
10. We intend to destroy museums, libraries, academies of every sort, and to fight against moralism, feminism, and every utilitarian or opportunistic cowardice.
11. We shall sing the great masses shaken with work, pleasure, or rebellion: we shall sing the multicolored and polyphonic tidal waves of revolution in the modern metropolis; shall sing the vibrating nocturnal fervor of factories and shipyards burning under violent electrical moons; bloated railroad stations that devour smoking serpents; factories hanging from the sky by the twisting threads of spiraling smoke; bridges like gigantic gymnasts who span rivers, flashing at the sun with the gleam of a knife; adventurous steamships that scent the horizon, locomotives with their swollen chest, pawing the tracks like massive steel horses bridled with

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<sup>78</sup> Rainey, Lawrence S., Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman. *Futurism: An Anthology*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

pipes, and the oscillating flight of airplanes, whose propeller flaps at the wind like a flag and seems to applaud like a delirious crowd.

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