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Critic's notebook: Revelatory Henry Cowell revival at Lincoln Center

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NEW YORK -- Henry Cowell, *the* all-American composer of the 20th century, did it all. "I want to live in the whole world of music," he said. He was "the open sesame of new music in America," John Cage said.

He was famous once and is now all but forgotten. There was a time when Leopold Stokowski championed him in New York, as did Eugene Ormandy in Philadelphia and Serge Koussevitzky in Boston. Schoenberg thought the world of him. So did Busoni. But since Cowell's death in 1965, the musical establishment has concluded his music, and particularly the plentiful late orchestral music, doesn't hold up.

Friday night at Avery Fisher Hall, the [American Symphony Orchestra](#) tested that assumption in a concert devoted mainly to that late-orchestral Cowell. Leon Botstein, the ASO music director and missionary of musical underdogs, led engaging and idiomatic performances. A hoped-for Cowell revival has had several false starts in recent years. But Friday was a revelation, and this time I think we are finally in business.

The program was entitled “An American Biography,” and Cowell’s is an extraordinary one. A century ago, he was a teenage piano pioneer in Menlo Park, Calif. He was the first to hit clusters of tones on the piano with fist and forearm (Bartók noticed) and the first to play directly on the piano strings. He all but invented the concept of world music and was on the front line of flexible phrasing, extreme polyrhythms, percussion music and mechanical music. He was a celebrated pedagogue. Cage, Burt Bacharach, George Gershwin and Lou Harrison were among those who found their own voices through him.

Cowell, who was born in 1897, was known in New York, Berlin and Moscow by the '20s. He helped found the study of ethnomusicology at UC Berkeley. He published and organized the concerts of progressive music from all over.

Cowell is primarily known for his Bohemianism, which led to the creation of the California school of music and, sadly, for his arrest on morals charges. He was publicly shamed in a celebrity trial for having had consensual oral sex with young men and sentenced to 15 years in San Quentin.

After four years of incarceration, he was paroled and eventually pardoned by Gov. Earl Warren so that he could become a musical ambassador for the State Department. He moved to New York and taught at the New School for Social Research, traveled and absorbed the musics of Asia and Latin America, wrote 21 symphonies and much else. When Malaysia was looking for a national anthem in the '50s, the country turned to him and Benjamin Britten for help.

But what about those 21 symphonies? Or the two koto concertos? And all the rest? Four symphonies were recorded half a century ago by the likes of the Louisville Orchestra and the Iceland Symphony.

Modern performances are exceedingly rare. The current thinking about Cowell is that he was a brilliant innovator who was broken by prison and never amounted to more than a facile polymath.

On Friday, Botstein offered only one radical work, “Atlantis,” in which three singers moaned in fairly sexually explicit ways. The orchestral background of percussion and

swooning strings is a 1931 premonition of things to come. It is wondrously strange music.

The knockout of the night was Variations for Orchestra from 1959. Here, a short 12-tone theme is briefly announced in a dozen different ways – declarative, moody, lyrical, pastoral, oracular – before it goes on a world journey, passing through a maze of musical cultures and styles. The stopover in Indonesia is pure heaven.

Two symphonies were on Botstein's program. The Second, "Anthropos," is a work from Cowell's incarceration (he taught music to his fellow inmates and started a prison band). The slow movement, titled "Repression," is a heavy, heartbreaking lament. It is followed by "Liberation," an uninhibited kick-your-heels-in-the-air Irish jig given Mahlerian emphasis.

Cowell called his 1953 Symphony No. 11 "Seven Rituals of Music," and it is a birth-to-death journey. This is beautiful, melodic and unexpected music, a brief study in love, war and mysticism. Another symphony, No. 13 ("Madras"), is based on Indian music and happened to be performed at the Juilliard School last week. Had such a composer lived in England or Denmark, beautifully packaged sets of his complete symphonies in gorgeous performances and sound would be common.

Botstein also found room to include Cowell's late Harmonica Concerto, a sophisticated score that uses the harmonica to create the modern American equivalent of ancient Japanese court music. The soloist was Robert Bonfiglio, who gave the posthumous premiere in 1986, and he was brilliant.

Virgil Thomson said of Cowell that there was no composer more radical or normal. But this "open sesame" needs an open sesame of his own. The first complete Cowell biography, by Joel Sachs (who conducted the Juilliard "Madras"), is now complete and promised for next year. Has anyone thought to slip a copy of the Variations under Gustavo Dudamel's door?

-- Mark Swed in New York

Photo: Henry Cowell. Credit: Courtesy of American Symphony Orchestra