

Man of Many Faces

New York
Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center
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Henry Cowell:*Hymn and Fuguing Tune No.3 (1944) – Atlantis(1926) (NY Premiere) – Variations for Orchestra (1956/59) – Symphony No.2 "Anthropos" (1941) – Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra(1962) – Symphony No. 11 "Seven Rituals of Music" (1953) (New York Premiere)*

Heather Buck (Soprano), Elise Quagliata (Mezzo-soprano), Jonathan Hays (Baritone), Robert Bonfiglio (Harmonica)
American Symphony Orchestra, Leon Botstein (Music Director and Conductor)



H. Cowell (© American Symphony Orchestra)

Henry Cowell shares the questionable honor—with Heitor Villa-Lobos, Darius Milhaud and Georg Philip Telemann—of probably having composed more music than any other composer. But Mr. Cowell, who lived a full, thriving, successful, creative 68 years, dying in 1965, is singular, in that the music of Cowell can't really be recognized as "Cowell music."

We think we know him for his piano clusters (which ever-genteel Béla Bartók asked permission to copy), or his fascination with Oriental music (along with fellow Californians Lou Harrison and John Cage) or his poly-tonalities and poly-rhythms. He taught many a composer his techniques, he wrote and edited books and journals. And amongst other things, he spent four years in prison (not for his Leftist views but an incident of oral sex), was the first American composer to visit the Soviet Union, and had his jovial music conducted by the austere Anton Webern.

Mahler said he wanted “to construct a world in my music”, while Henry Cowell said he “wanted to live his whole world in music”. Both were successful. But where Mahler’s world is recognized, Cowell was so inventive, original, playful, serious and abundant, that his “world” was like a game without rules.

Leon Botstein tried to change that last night, performing half-a-dozen works. From Cowell’s thousand-plus opuses, this is hardly much. But within almost two-and-a-half-hours, the conductor gave at least a few sketches of a many-sided genius.

They ranged from the most American Cowell: one of his 18 *Hymn and Fuguing Tune* pieces to a ballet score with three singers wordlessly sliding from glissando to glissando up and down the scale, ending with a Bach-like chorale! Two symphonies were played, and one concerto, this for harmonica composed in classical Japanese style!!!

So what do we get from this? First, with all his tricks, Cowell was at heart a conservative and most accessible composer. Second, I don’t know his working habits, but the music seemed to flow out effortlessly. (Joel Sachs’ book on Cowell coming out later this year should address the *modus operandi*.) We also got some marvelous moments.

Not the *Third Hymn and Fuguing Tune*, which was played in a blur by the ASO. (It should have been written for chamber orchestra.) But *Atlantis*, with its three vocally-amplified singers imitating fire engines roaring up and down the scales, harmonizing at times, playing against each other at times, always working with the orchestra, both a “trick”, and a frothy mix.

The *Variations for Orchestra* was a concerto for orchestra. Everybody in the ASO had a solo, from tuba to viola (a wonderful five measures from First Viola Daniel Panner). The pretty 12-note theme was transparent, the ASO probably felt little challenge, and Mr. Botstein, as always, led the unfamiliar music with his usual confidence.

Cowell’s *Second Symphony* was written in prison, but with no diminishing of enthusiasm or skill. The opening “Repose” resembled a series of easy physical exercises. Three or four measures, and stop. Repeat. Different cadences, different harmonies, but the same concept. Very relaxing. Not, though, “Activate”, its poly-

rhythmic Mexican-style music quite jolly. The over-long "Repression" enjoyed quotes from *Tristan*, and this led to the funkiest movement of all, "Liberation." For this—as for so much of Cowell—Irish music was the answer. An uninhibited jagged Irish jig.

The *Harmonica Concerto* was played by virtuoso Robert Bonfiglio, who gave its premiere. All three movements were in the form of a Japanese *gagaku* court orchestra, with Mr. Bonfiglio playing his reed instrument like a reed organ. Few chords, but lovely color in octaves with various ASO winds.

The final *11th Symphony* had seven short movements, showing Mr. Cowell at his fluid best.

It was a long evening, but hardly a tiring one, for Henry Cowell, a man of many faces, styles and lightning-quick mask changes, was always surprising. The ultimate question remains, though. Where, amidst his multifarious arts and crafts, lies the real Henry Cowell?

Harry Rolnick