

From “Henry Cowell (1897-1965)” in *Music of the 20thc. Avant-garde*, ed. Larry Sitsky Greenwood Press [2002]

“...Essentially an autodidact, Cowell’s earliest efforts at composition from 1912 to 1919 were driven entirely by his imaginative need to express, through means at his disposal, impressions of the Gaelic legends told him by his parents. He sought first to evoke the wind, tides, and spirits of these tales through new methods of playing the piano that included strumming and plucking the strings and playing the keys with fists and forearms. Other composers, such as Ives and Leo Ornstein, employed the latter techniques at about the same time, but Cowell alone developed a substantial repertoire of music to be played inside the piano. His piano works were especially influential on his avant-garde pupil John Cage, who---inspired by an idea of Cowell’s---later created a literature for a piano called “prepared piano,” in which the tones of the instrument were modified by the placement of objects upon its strings.

During the same years, Cowell also developed many novel ideas for generating materials and composing with them. Some of these concepts probably originated in conversations with Charles Seeger from 1914 to 1917. Cowell later wrote of these meetings that he remembered well Seeger’s delight at discovering devices such as polytonality and dissonant counterpoint. Seeger, however, reported that Cowell appropriated any idea he thought useful for his own music. Whatever the source of the ideas, Cowell composed works based on his version of them and later published *New Musical Resources* through which he shared these systems with the world. In such works as *Quartet Romantic* (1915-17) and *Quartet Euphometric* (1916-19), he postulated the generation and control of pitch collections, irrational rhythms, polyrhythms, and polymeters with reference to the overtone series. The most original aspect of these works is doubtless their development of the notion that rhythms might be organized by logic analogous to the pitch arrangement inherent in the overtone series. In such a system, the whole note (or common meter) is treated as equivalent to the fundamental or lowest tone of the harmonic series, while more elaborate rhythmic subdivisions are equated with higher partials of the series. Thus, Cowell could, by analogy, convert any collection of pitches into rhythms by means of detailed calculations that are beyond the scope of this article. Cowell’s early quartets were not played until the 1960s, by which time performers wearing headphones could be provided their rhythmic subdivisions by means of recorded “click tracks.”

Cowell learned from his efforts to have these complex early pieces performed that it was not easy even for skilled instrumentalists to negotiate his multi-rhythms. In *New Musical Resources*, Cowell suggests that composers might overcome performer limitations by scoring rhythmically complex works for player piano. Conlon Nanarrow, an avant-garde composer particularly interested in

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polyrhythms, followed this advice beginning in the 1940s and is today widely known for his many works for player piano.

Cowell, however, collaborated with scientist/inventor Leon Theremin on an electronic instrument that could perform any combination and number of rhythmic subdivisions of the whole note through a maximum of sixteen subdivisions. The result of these labors was the “rhythmicon” for which Cowell composed his *Rhythmicana* (1931). This piece was first performed in computer realization in 1971, well after his death.

Cowell was also a pathfinder in the field of notation. Early in his career, he was obliged to invent ways to delineate the unusual sonorities and methods of performance that characterize his piano music. Cowell found it desirable to express the unusual rhythmic subdivisions he employed by means other than bracketing. A group of five quarter notes in the time of four is usually delineated by a bracket including the number 5, but if one part is playing seven quarter notes in the time of four, another three quarter notes in the time of four, and yet another five in the same time, the score becomes crowded and difficult to read. Thus, Cowell began in *Fabric* (1919) to use notes with different-shaped heads for each type of subdivision. Other pieces from the 1920s brought forth other calligraphic inventions. Cowell chose a graphic notation to suggest his intentions for the American Indian “thundersticks” used in *Ensemble* (1924), while he represented the piano string finger glissandi in *The Banshee* (1915) with wavy lines that indicated, in general terms, directions in which the fingers should move. Similar practices were ubiquitous among avant-garde composers of the 1960s.

Cowell’s openness to new musical materials and normative procedures led him inevitably to explore World Music as a resource. *Ensemble* was probably his earliest work to incorporate non-Western materials, and one of the earliest by any Western composer. Although he wrote most of his better known works of this type after World War II when composers Colin McPhee and Lou Harrison were already active in the genre, it was Cowell’s early interest in World Music that drew not only McPhee and Harrison, but ultimately, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and other latter-day avant-gardists into this orbit.

Cowell was also the first composer to explore a variety of techniques of indeterminacy. I have already noted in this connection his use of indeterminate notation. In addition to representing his intentions graphically, Cowell also provides the thunderstick players of *Ensemble* with very few bars of music and suggests that they make up the rest of their part following the model he has provided. Other experiments in indeterminacy include: *String Quartet #3, Mosaic* (1935), in which he requires the performers to determine the order of movements of the work; *Elastic Music*, in which players are to add rests as they wish; and the *Amerind Suite* (1939), in which performers, according to their proficiency and taste, select which passages they will play. No composer other than Ives used such procedures before 1945 and none, save Cowell, used them as basic components of the syntax of their works....”