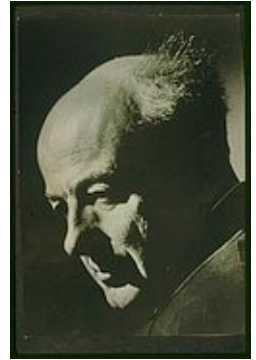




Cowell, Henry (1897-1965)

by Charles Krinsky

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Henry Cowell.
Courtesy Library of
Congress Prints and
Photographs Division.

American composer, pianist, theorist, and teacher Henry Dixon Cowell was an important musical innovator who sought to create an "ultramodern" style based on the synthesis of Western, Asian, and African music. His brilliant career as composer and performer was severely damaged when he was arrested at the age of 39 for having sex with a seventeen-year-old male and subsequently imprisoned.

The circumstances of Cowell's upbringing were unusual and influenced his personal and musical perspectives throughout his life. He was born on March 11, 1897 in Menlo Park, California, then a rural area southeast of San Francisco. For many years, he made his primary residence in Menlo Park. Cowell's parents, who divorced in 1903, were writers of anarchist bent who provided him with home schooling.

As a boy, Cowell was better acquainted with Appalachian, Irish, Chinese, Japanese, and Tahitian music than with European concert forms. In 1910 he came to the attention of Stanford University's Lewis Terman, a pioneer of intelligence testing. Terman took note of the boy's erudition, facility in conversation, and limited academic skills. He observed, "Although the IQ is satisfactory, it is matched by scores of others . . . but there is only one Henry." Terman later diagnosed the composer as not a "true homosexual," but someone delayed in his heterosexual development.

From the start of his career as composer and performer, Cowell was a musical innovator. His piano composition *The Tides of Manaunaun* (1912) was the first to include tone clusters (adjacent notes sounded simultaneously, requiring that the keys be struck with the arm or hand). *Aeolian Harp* (1923) was one of Cowell's first pieces to require performers to manipulate the strings of a piano directly, a practice later associated with the "prepared piano" technique of Cowell's student, John Cage.

In 1931 Cowell collaborated with the Russian engineer and musical inventor Léon Thérémin to develop an electronic keyboard instrument called the Rhythmicon.

Although he composed some twenty symphonies, his series of *Hymns and Fuguing Tunes* (1941-1945), orchestral and choral works based on early American hymnody, remains his best known work.

Cowell was an untiring advocate of contemporary music and frequently acted as mentor to other composers. As a teacher in California and New York, his students included Cage, Lou Harrison, George Gershwin, and Burt Bacharach.

In 1925 Cowell organized the New Music Society of California. In 1927 he founded the quarterly *New Music*, which grew to include a concert series and record label. During the late 1920s and early 1930s Cowell guided the Pan American Association of Composers. In 1930 he published *New Musical Resources*, a book he had worked on since 1919. Besides these efforts, he disseminated his views on music in countless articles and interviews, frequently championing other American composers, particularly Charles Ives.

In 1936 Cowell's career halted abruptly when he was arrested for having sexual relations with a seventeen-year-old male. Hoping for a lenient sentence, Cowell pled guilty, confessing not only the incident with the seventeen-year-old but other homosexual contacts as well. Rather than leniency, he received a sentence of one to fifteen years in prison.

Beginning his term in San Quentin Penitentiary in 1937, Cowell continued to compose, teach, and write. Although he was vilified by much of the press, he received loyal support from his family and many colleagues, including dancer Martha Graham and composer Percy Grainger. Of his close friends, only Ives, whose work he had supported so faithfully, cut off relations with him.

In 1940, Cowell was paroled and moved to White Plains, New York. He accepted work as an assistant to Grainger. In 1941 Cowell married Sidney Hawkins Robertson, an ethnomusicologist who had lobbied for his release and with whom he was to collaborate on a study of Charles Ives. In 1942 he received a pardon that enabled him to become a Senior Music Editor in the Office of War Information.

In later years, until his death on December 10, 1965, Cowell continued to write, teach, and (though less frequently) perform. He was the recipient of many grants and honors. A prolific composer, he inspired contemporaries and younger musicians to embrace both world music and innovative techniques.

Many friends and music historians, however, believe that he never lived up to the promise he had shown before the disaster of his arrest and conviction, though some attribute the decline of his influence to his (idiosyncratic) interpretations of non-Western musical forms rather than to the trauma of his imprisonment.

Bibliography

Cowell, Henry. *New Musical Resources*. New York: Knopf, 1930.

Hicks, Malcolm. "The Imprisonment of Henry Cowell." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 44 (1991): 29-119.

Nicholls, David. "Cowell, Henry (Dixon)." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 2nd ed. Stanley Sadie, ed. 29 vols. New York: Grove, 2001. 6:620-630.

_____, ed. *The Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*. Sydney: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.

Skinner, Graeme. "Cowell, Henry." *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History from Antiquity to World War II*. Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 107-108.

About the Author

Charles Krinsky serves as Senior Lecturer in the College of Professional Studies of Northeastern University. His current research focuses on the construction of youth in American film and television. He is the editor of *Moral Panics over Contemporary Children and Youth* (2000).