

# Bohemian Rhapsody

the music and world of

# Henry Cowell

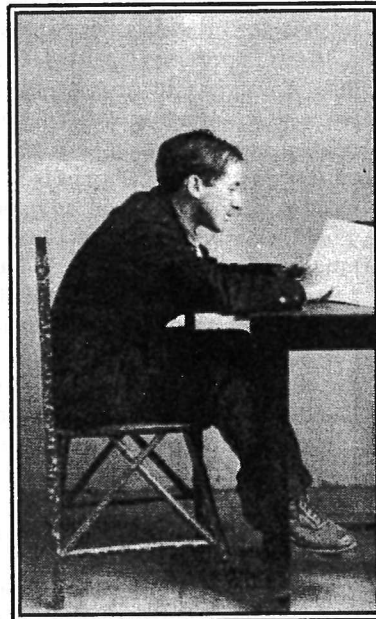
by Rod Smith

It's unfortunate that generic slipcases aren't a commonplace item, because when two books really belong together, as with *Henry Cowell, Bohemian* (University of Illinois Press, \$29.95) and *The Essential Henry Cowell* (McPherson & Co., \$35), a slipcase would be that much more fitting. These two volumes constitute an enormous revelation about one of the most influential composers in American musical history. Cowell was the person who coined and popularized the term "New Music"; a tireless inventor of new composing and playing techniques; an early champion of Latin American, African, and Asian music; and most of all, the composer who did more than any other to put American music on an equal footing with its European counterpart, at least where audiences and critics in the United States were concerned.

Giant that he is, Cowell remains something of an enigma, even nearly 40 years after his death. He's well known and quoted frequently, but his work is rarely performed or recorded. His influence can be heard in the work of composers ranging from John Cage and Lou Harrison (both of whom were students of Cowell) to LaMonte Young and Glenn Branca. In fact, Cowell's freewheeling approach has become so pervasive that it's seeped out of the world of conservatory music and can be felt in the work of Sonic Youth, Tortoise, and even newer projects. Most puzzling of all is the gulf that separates Cowell the scruffy California mystic, leftist firebrand, and relentless experimenter, from Cowell the impeccably groomed New York musical luminary, relatively conservative composer, and, ultimately, elder statesman of American music—one who was chosen toward the end of his life by JFK to represent America at countless conferences all over the world.

It's the latter mystery that Michael Hicks addresses most vigorously in *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*, a slim volume that

accomplishes the rare feat (in the world of composer's biographies) of combining a pulpy level of excitement and readability with a treasure trove of fact, much of which has never appeared in print before. His thesis is simple: Cowell's arrest



Cowell, ca. 1916, from *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*

and subsequent imprisonment in 1936, for having sex with a 17-year-old boy, not only made a model citizen of him, it also effectively snuffed the rebel spirit that had made Cowell's work so adventurous and so vital earlier in his life.

Toward this end, Hicks devotes most of his account to Cowell as he was before the arrest, starting just a bit before the composer's conception. Cowell's parents, Henry "Harry" Cowell, an Irish immigrant, and ex-Illinoisian Clarissa Dixon, met and were married in San Francisco, where they had come to pursue careers as writers and to immerse themselves in the city's thriving bohemian scene. While each enjoyed a measure of success in both pursuits, neither was able to make a

living at writing; hence the couple dwelled in relative poverty, a condition only exacerbated by young Henry's birth in March of 1897. Still, the child lacked neither love nor culture. His parents, whose friends included Ellen Veblen (wife of economist Thorsten Veblen) and Jack London, were determined to provide him with the best education they could—which meant home schooling for the most part.

It was while Henry was in his early teens that his education, as well as his career, began in earnest, thanks to two benefactors: the aforementioned Veblen, who provided assistance with artistic and financial matters; and Lewis Terman, a Stanford psychologist who, after testing Cowell extensively, declared him a genius, a sobriquet he was to wear in one form or another for the rest of his life. Hicks provides a wealth of information, including some great anecdotes, about this crucial and heretofore little-known period of Cowell's life. For example, during Cowell's brief stay at the Institute of Musical Art (later the Julliard School), an institution whose conservative curriculum and approach to teaching held little appeal for the young innovator,

Cowell became exasperated at receiving his harmony assignments back covered with blue-pencil corrections. So he tried an experiment, turning in a Bach choral harmonization as his own to see how it would fare. When it too came back covered with blue, Cowell showed it to Damrosch [Frank Damrosch, founder and director of the Institute], told him that his teachers were wasting his time, and asked for his tuition deposit back.

Hicks's account of Cowell's return to California, where he resumed studies with composer and musicologist Charles Seeger as well as began collaborating with poet Charles Varian, is even more illumi-



nating. Cowell, like Varian, was a member of the Temple of the People, a Theosophical organization that flourished in the Bay area during the early part of the 20th century. But in the grand tradition of those who live long enough to rewrite their own life stories, Cowell glossed over this period later in life, much as he eliminated any and all references to his connections with the Communist Party in the '20s and '30s.

It's in the story of Cowell's arrest, imprisonment, and parole—a part of Cowell's life treated gingerly, if not downright squeamishly, by previous biographers—that Hicks really shines, demonstrating how the four years he spent in San Quentin did, in fact, rehabilitate the composer. Unfortunately, he glosses over Cowell's working relationship with his first post-parole employer, composer Percy Grainger, an ardent and unabashed libertine and S&M enthusiast. As he himself admits, Hicks provides just enough information about the last 25 years of Cowell's life to prove his thesis. He accomplishes this succinctly and with great efficiency, showing how, without repudiating his early discoveries—tone clusters, polyrhythms, and the like—Cowell, the respectable symphonist, educator and musical ambassador, simply stopped innovating.

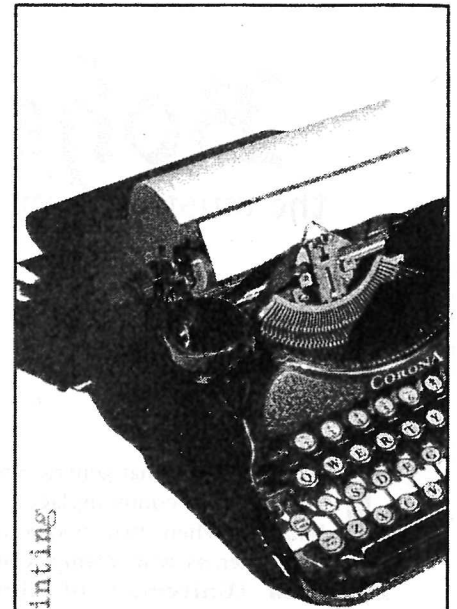
Those seeking more information about Cowell's later life and works will be more than satisfied with *The Essential Henry Cowell*. Editor (and Fluxus luminary) Dick Higgins, a former student of the composer, provides an exemplary cross-section of Cowell's writing from all periods of his career, as well as an enlightening introduction. Higgins divides the book into seven parts: "HC on HC," "Contemporaries," "Music of the World's Peoples," "HC on Works by HC," "Music and Other Arts," "Musical Craft," and "Theory and Music History." Cowell wrote widely and well, often contributing to popular magazines, and while some entries, particularly "The Nature of Melody," an excerpt from Cowell's still-unpublished (and by most accounts unpublishable) *magnum opus*, might be a bit abstruse for the layperson, much of the collection is highly readable and very entertaining.

Of all the parts, "HC on HC" illustrates the transition of Henry the Younger to Henry the Elder most tellingly. It consists of only two entries: "Playing Concerts in Moscow" (1931) and "Music is My Weapon" (1934). In the first, Cowell's infat-

uation with the Soviet Union—and with Communism—is undeniable, despite the trials and tribulations he suffers at the hands of the State. In the second, a statement Cowell read during his appearance on *This I Believe*, a program hosted by renowned broadcast reporter Edward R. Murrow, Cowell writes: "I abhor Communism, under which individualism is impossible and expression of liberal thought is punishable." Cowell never became all *that* conservative, though. He goes on to say, in an obvious jab at McCarthy and his followers: "I abhor its right-wing counterpart under which innocent liberals fear persecution and reprisals of various sorts if they express their sincere ideas for the betterment of the government." Two years later, Cowell was briefly investigated by the FBI, who ended up deciding he wasn't a "subversive."

"Contemporaries" provides a great deal of insight into Cowell's life as well. He wrote frequently about fellow composers great and small, and while some entries, particularly "Charles Ives," display exactly the amount of adulation one would expect Cowell to lavish on his longtime mentor, he didn't hand out praise indiscriminately. Cowell dismisses Harry Partch's *Genesis of a Music* rather curtly, stopping just short of calling Partch a crank. His assessment of John Cage's work is a bit more humorous. Obviously having a little fun with his former student at Cage's expense, Cowell suggests that the only way to properly evaluate the composer's work is by a throw of the *I Ching*.

Ultimately, the impression one gets from reading *Henry Cowell, Bohemian* and *The Essential Henry Cowell*, is that Cowell was something of a musical Nicolai Tesla, a man both ahead of his time and entirely out of it. Many of the ideas he first put forth nearly a century ago have yet to be fully implemented, and he fertilized vast tracts of musical territory he never got a chance to till in his lifetime—tracts that still lie waiting. As writer and composer Kyle Gann states in his thoroughly charming preface to the latter volume, what Cowell provided was a "vision of what an American music could be that has inspired composers of every subsequent generation, and is likely to do so far into the future." If only the two books weren't just slightly different in size, a custom-made slipcase just might be worth the money. ♦



Poetry Fiction Translation Letterpress Printing

## summer writing program

June 9 - July 6, 2003

"Keep the world safe for poetry."

-Anne Waldman

For summer catalog please call

(303) 546-5296

lisab@naropa.edu

www.naropa.edu/swp



2130 Arapahoe Avenue, Boulder, CO 80302

(303) 546-3572 (800) 722-6951

NCA accredited BA, MA, MFA degrees  
credit & non-credit

The Jack Kerouac School of  
Disembodied Poetics