

Ultramodernism—The 1920s

Each of the World Wars offered the United States, as one of the victors, an opportunity to radically upgrade its self-image. This was as true in music as in any other sphere. After 1918 American composers became less inclined to be intimidated by their European colleagues, and felt freer to invent and apply devices—jazz rhythms, unusual instruments, free dissonances, numerical structures—that Europe had not sanctioned. In fact, in retrospect the period between the world wars, especially before the Great Depression, seems a kind of golden age of musical Americanness. No major European composers were close at hand to exert direct influence (as they were and did after World War II), and Americans felt independent enough to determine their own musical destiny.

As Aaron Copland wrote, “contemporary music as an organized movement in the U.S.A. was born at the end of the First World War.”¹ The movement was no sooner born than it split into two camps, making explicit the underlying distinctions between nineteenth-century America’s European-trained and self-taught composers. The distinctions were apparent in the organizations that sprang up to promote contemporary music. The Franco-American Musical Society was founded in 1920 by the French pianist E. Robert Schmitz for the purpose of performing contemporary music (primarily European) in several American cities; the name was changed to Pro Musica in 1925. (Among other bold achievements, Pro Musica premiered the first two movements of Ives’s Fourth Symphony at Town Hall in 1927.) In 1921 the composer Edgard Varèse and the harpist Carlos Salzedo formed the International Composers’ Guild. Members who lost patience with Varèse’s egotistic way of running things broke off in 1923 and founded the League of Composers. In 1927, Varèse ended the Guild and formed the Pan American Association of Composers, dedicated to composers of the Western Hemisphere.

Through the late twenties and early thirties, the Pan American Association and the League of Composers found themselves on opposite sides of current musical issues, particularly regarding Europe. Pan

American's members included Ives, Henry Cowell, Ruggles, the Mexican Carlos Chavez, Varèse, Roy Harris, and Wallingford Riegger, the first four of whom had not studied in Europe. The League was typified by composers who had studied in Paris or Fontainebleau, the most important being Aaron Copland. Therefore the Pan Americans concentrated on works by North and Latin Americans, while the League performed European as well as American works. The Pan Americans largely rejected European trends and made their own musical materials from scratch; the League composers, influenced by Stravinsky, supported the new French style of neoclassicism.

There were social as well as musical differences. In general, the League had wealthier patrons; the Pan Americans kept going primarily through Ives's generous financial backing. The League composers were widely supported by two important conductors, Serge Koussevitsky of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Leopold Stokowski of the Philadelphia Orchestra. The Pan Americans had as their champion Nicolas Slonimsky, who, by 1934, had sabotaged his conducting career by aligning himself too stringently with the avant-garde. (Slonimsky went on to become an important musicologist, editing the indispensable *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*.) In these early years a split developed in America's musical personality that continues to the present day. On one side are the composers who believe in extending the European tradition, who have been more widely accepted (if not warmly welcomed) by the classical-music-orchestral establishment. On the other are those who have eschewed Europe to create an indigenous American tradition; they have worked mostly as outsiders and have received recognition only late in life, if at all.

Quaint as the term may seem at this historical distance, the American avant-gardists associated with the Pan American association called themselves "ultramodernists." The first announcement of Henry Cowell's New Music Society in 1925 referred approvingly to "the works of the most discussed composers of so-called ultra-modern tendencies, such as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Ruggles, Rudhyar, etc." George Antheil always ended his recitals, he said, "with a modern group, preferably of the most 'ultra' order."² If Strauss, Mahler, and the late romantics were still considered "modern" by audiences of the day, then the new advocates of free dissonance and rhythmic complexity would call themselves ultramodern. And the ultramodernists, disdainful of any mandate imposed by Europe or tradition, shrank from no musical effect that occurred to their imaginations.

Henry Cowell

No one in the first half of the century did more for the dissemination, support, and self-definition of American music than Henry Dixon Cowell (1897–1965). Born March 11, 1897, in Menlo Park, California,

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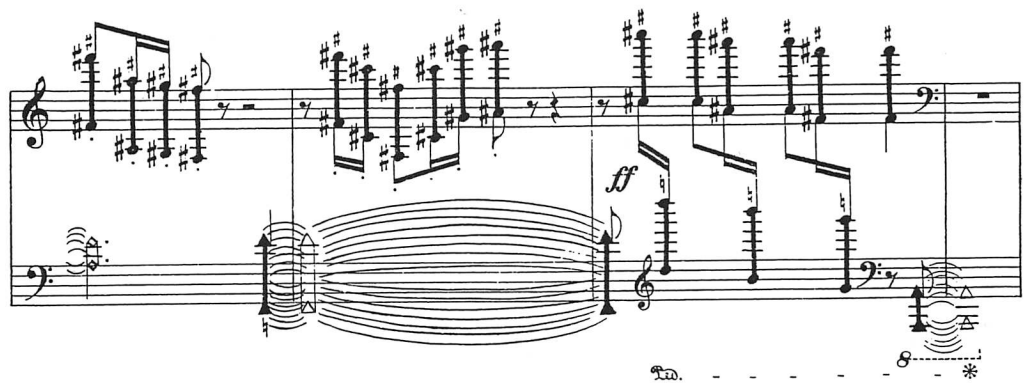


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Cowell left school in third grade but chanced upon a number of supportive mentors and patrons. The composer Henry Hadley found sponsorship for the young man to study at Berkeley with Charles Seeger.

Charles Louis Seeger Jr. (1886–1979) was a remarkably forward-looking theorist and ethnomusicologist. Cowell visited Seeger in 1914 and played him his Opus 108—his 108th composition. Already, at the age of 13, he had written a piano piece using tone clusters—chords made up of adjacent pitches, often played on the piano with the fist or forearm, and notated as in example 2.1, Cowell's *Tiger* (1928). By the time Cowell discovered them, they were not unprecedented, but Cowell was the first to justify them theoretically as further, upward extensions of the basic triads via the overtone series.



EXAMPLE 2.1 Henry Cowell, *Tiger*.

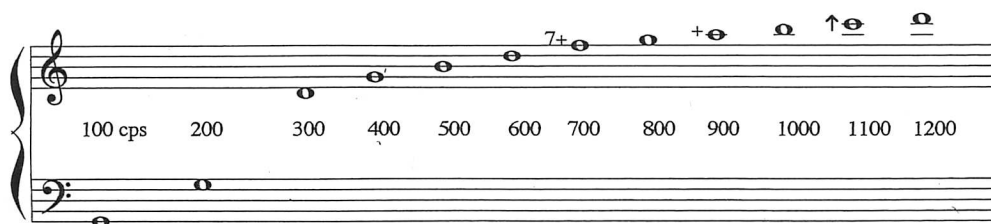
During Cowell's period of study with Seeger, he wrote one of the seminal books of twentieth-century music: *New Musical Resources*, written in 1917–1918 and published in 1930. "The purpose of *New Musical Resources*," he asserted, was "to point out the influence the overtone series has exerted on music throughout its history, . . . and how, by applying its principles in many different manners, a large palette of musical materials can be assembled."³

To demonstrate the overtone series, play any note on a grand piano. If you stop the string exactly in the center with your finger and strike the key again, you will obtain a pitch one octave higher, corresponding to vibrations that are twice as fast. Each smaller fractional length of the string will provide a higher note in the overtone series. For example, if we approximate a low G as vibrating at 100 cycles per second, the overtone series on G will rise as in example 2.2. What interested Cowell was the harmonic implications of the overtone series. For instance, take the fourth, fifth, and sixth overtones and one has a major triad, the most basic musical chord of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Continue up the overtone series, through the seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh overtones and so on, and one finds a tone cluster.



Henry Cowell performing directly on the strings of the piano. *Courtesy BMI Archives.*

Cowell's genius was even more apparent in the revolutionary section on rhythm. Here he applied the same ratios as are heard between pitches to different beats going at the same time. For example, the pitches of a G-major triad, G–B–D, vibrate at frequency ratios of 4:5:6. Why not express this relation rhythmically as well, by dividing a measure into six equal parts in one voice, five in another, and four in another? Cowell invented a rhythmic notation capable of specifying divisions of a whole note up to fifteen equal parts (example 2.3). Such a notation,



EXAMPLE 2.2 The overtone series. (Symbols indicate that the seventh overtone is a third of a half-step flat and the eleventh is a quarter-tone sharp. The notation is Ben Johnston's, discussed in chapter 4.)

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4-5ths n

4-7ths n

8-9ths n

8-11ths

8-13ths

8-15ths

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Whole Note Series.
Oval-shaped notes

Whole note: half note: quarter note: 8th note: 16th note: 32nd note:

Third Note Series.
Triangular-shaped notes

2-3rds note: 3rd note: 6th note: 12th note: 24th note: 48th note:

Fifth Note Series.
Square notes

4-5ths note: 2-5ths note: 5th note: 10th note: 20th note: 40th note:

Seventh Note Series.
Diamond-shaped notes

4-7ths note: 2-7ths note: 7th note: 14th note: 28th note: 56th note:

Ninth Note Series.
Oblong notes

8-9ths note: 4-9ths note: 2-9ths note: 9th note: 18th note: 36th note:

Eleventh Note Series.
Oval notes with stroke

8-11ths note: 4-11ths note: 2-11ths note: 11th note: 22nd note: 44th note:

Thirteenth Note Series.
Triangular notes with stroke

8-13ths note: 4-13ths note: 2-13ths note: 13th note: 26th note: 52nd note:

Fifteenth Note Series.
Square notes with stroke

8-15ths note: 4-15ths note: 2-15ths note: 15th note: 30th note: 60th note:

EXAMPLE 2.3 Rhythmic notation from Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources*.

Cowell argued, would make passages such as those in example 2.4 clear in intent, if not easier to play. Cowell used this rhythmic notation in a handful of works, such as the *Quartet Romantic* for two flutes, violin, and viola (1915–1917; see example 2.5).

At age twenty-six Cowell went to Europe on a daring concert tour, performing his own music in Germany and Austria. He returned to Europe several times in the next decade, and in 1928 he became the first American composer invited not only to tour Russia but to have his music published there. Amazed at how effective European composers were at getting their music performed and published, Cowell came back determined to organize American composers for their own benefit. In 1927 he began the quarterly *New Music*, and from 1929 to 1933 he directed the Pan American Association while Varèse was in France. Between 1927 and 1958, *New Music* published dozens of new, radical American works. For most of his tenure as editor, Cowell did all the magazine's correspondence, packaging, mailing, and bookkeeping without compensation. For many years only Charles Ives's contributions kept it solvent.

Under Cowell's tenure, the Pan American Association made a courageous bid to gain publicity for the orchestral works of radical Americans.

(a)

(b)

Flute 1

Flute 2

Violin

Viola

EXAMPLE 2.4 Rhythms from Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources*.

In Boston, Cowell had met a brilliant young conductor, a Koussevitsky protégé and Russian immigrant named Nicolas Slonimsky (1894–1995). Slonimsky was a colorful figure whose unique musical talents included the ability to conduct ambidextrously in two meters at once. With Ives's financial backing, Slonimsky conducted the Chamber Orchestra of Boston (which he had founded, using members of the Boston Symphony) in a concert at New York's Town Hall on January 10, 1931. The program included the world premieres of Ives's *Three Places in New England*, Ruggles's *Men and Mountains*, and Cowell's *Sinfonietta*.

While the Town Hall concert attracted little attention, Cowell and his allies realized what each new generation has realized since: that in order to conquer America, an American artist must first conquer Europe. Slonimsky quickly repeated the program in Havana and then conducted similar concerts in Paris (June 6 and 11). The following year,

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EXAMPLE 2.5 Henry Cowell, *Quartet Romantic*.

1932, Slonimsky conducted the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris in the premier of Ruggles's *Sun-Treader*, plus pieces by Ives, Cowell, and Rudhyar; he next led the Berlin Philharmonic in Cowell's *Synchrony*, Varèse's *Arcana*, *Sun-Treader*, and *Three Places in New England*.

European critics were intrigued by American rhythmic complexity and dissonance but mistakenly assumed that the composers had been

influenced by Schoenberg and Hindemith; surely Americans could not arrive at such innovations on their own. Ives's thickly layered rhythms, they wrote, must stem from Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, although actually *Le Sacre* was written in 1913 and *Three Places in New England* in 1903–1904. Characteristically, Philip Hale of *The Boston Herald* wrote:

If Mr. Slonimsky had chosen a composition by Loeffler, [Edward Burlingame] Hill, one of Deems Taylor's suites, Foote's suites, or music by some who, working along traditional lines have nevertheless shown taste, technical skill and a suggestion at least of individuality, his audience would now have a fairer idea of what Americans are doing in the arts.⁴

The Cowell-Slonimsky-Ives concerts in Paris and Berlin in 1931–1932, which cost Ives thousands of dollars, had little ultimate effect. Slonimsky was widely admired for his genius at negotiating such a repertoire's unprecedentedly complex rhythms; upon his return to America, however, similar programs in Los Angeles were denounced as too radical. Hitlerism soon swept across Germany, wiping out any sympathetic German response to the American modernists. Nevertheless, the Pan Americans had, for the first time, set a new American music on a world stage.

One of the saddest episodes in American music began in May, 1936, when Cowell was arrested on a homosexual morals charge involving a minor.⁵ Incarcerated at San Quentin, where he continued writing music, Cowell was paroled in 1940 at the urgings of many prominent musicians, and pardoned in 1941, a pardon requested by the prosecuting attorney, who had decided Cowell was innocent. Upon his release, Cowell entered into heterosexual marriage in 1941, with the ethnomusicologist Sidney Robertson.

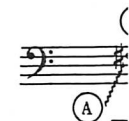
By this time, Cowell's music had taken a conservative turn, informed less by acoustical research and experimentation than by the influence of various ethnic musics from around the world. One indicator of this change is that the symphony became his preferred medium. His career turned toward teaching, at New York's New School for Social Research from 1940–1962, and also in California and at Columbia University. His *Ongaku* (1957), written in Tokyo and Kyoto, is based on the style of Japanese Gagaku and Sankyoku musics, and his *Persian Set* (also 1957) was premiered in Tehran. He did not abandon American sources, however. Among his most popular works are his sixteen *Hymns and Fuguing Tunes*, instrumental adaptations of a form invented by William Billings.

Listening Example: The Banshee (1925)

As a young man Cowell became notorious for his pianistic style, which included strumming and plucking the piano strings and playing clusters

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of keys with his palm or forearm. The piano pieces he toured with, mostly written between 1917 and 1930, are still the works with which he is most identified. One of the most original of these, *The Banshee*, was written around 1923–1925 (example 2.6).

Cowell based many of his works on Celtic mythology and Irish songs. In Irish folklore a Banshee is, in Cowell's words, "a woman of the inner world . . . who is charged with the duty of taking your soul into the inner world when you die. So when you die she has to come to the outer plane for this purpose, and she finds the outer plane very uncomfortable

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EXAMPLE 2.6 Henry Cowell, *The Banshee*.

and unpleasant, so you will hear her wailing at the time of a death in your family."⁶ The Banshee's wailing, produced by scraping the coils of the piano's lower strings, is eerie indeed.

The Banshee, a one-page score lasting two and a half minutes, falls into three sections with similar endings, a form that could be diagrammed as AAB, or even AB AB CB. The first six gestures feature a sweep with the flesh of the finger up to the notated pitch (marked A in the score), ending in a sweep lengthwise along the string (B). After a series of up-and-down sweeps (C), a motive is plucked on the strings (D). Seven gestures similar to the first six follow, but with the string swept with the fingernail (F) and then partly damped by another finger (G). As the notation clearly shows, H is a sweep of the strings in two directions at once, leading to the return of motive D.

The third section begins with the piece's climax, in which chromatic clusters are swept fortissimo. Following a decrescendo, sweeps up and down the strings lead to a final repetition of the D motive, followed by a dying series of diminished triads. No piece more clearly indicates the ultramodernist sense of freedom from European tradition.

Edgard Varèse

Two of the American ultramodernists were born in Paris: Edgard Varèse (1883–1965) and Dane Rudhyar (1895–1985). Both seemed to leave European aesthetics so far behind them upon their arrival that they are generally figured into the stream of American musical life. Varèse is widely considered the century's foremost genius in the area of timbre. His music seems to hover in air, reemphasizing sonorities without progressing or developing, and evoking the machine age with its rough edges and explosions of percussion. His colorful sonic images, often couched in repeated notes and harsh sonorities, are irreducible and unforgettable.

Varèse grew up in Burgundy and then Turin, Italy, before moving back to Paris. Groomed for a career in engineering, he trained in mathematics and science. (Later, his works would often take their inspiration from the concepts of molecular physics.) Over the intense opposition of his father, however, he entered the Schola Cantorum in 1904 to study with Vincent d'Indy and Albert Roussel, also studying at the Conservatoire with Charles-Marie Widor. He met Debussy in Paris and Richard Strauss and Ferruccio Busoni in Berlin; all three of them took an interest in his music. His other friends included Picasso, Cocteau, Malraux, and Henry Miller, and he also discussed theories of noise and new instrumental resources with the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo. An early marriage to an actress ended in separation, and he later married the American writer Louise Norton. Receiving a medical discharge from

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military service in 1915, he came to New York, leaving behind, to be lost forever, a series of at least nine orchestral works.

Varèse's life in New York was marked by poverty. For a while he sold pianos, and his attempts at a conducting career were not successful. In 1921 he and harpist Carlos Salzedo formed the International Composers' Guild. Then, in 1927, Varèse abruptly dissolved the Guild and formed in its place (along with Cowell, Ruggles, and Chavez) the Pan American Association. However, while Varèse had no sympathy for the neoclassical style that swept through Parisian music in the twenties and thirties, he was not happy about his fortunes in America and returned to Paris for the years 1928 through 1933. He was in Paris, then, when Slonimsky and Cowell, with Ives's financial backing, gave their 1931 concerts of American music, and was able to arrange press interviews and introductions.

Varèse returned to New York in 1933 to retake the reins of the Pan American Association, angering Ives with his gratuitous criticisms of Cowell's administration. Actually, Cowell's leadership of the Association was more efficient and less egotistic than Varèse's, and under Varèse the organization fell apart quickly, becoming inactive in 1934.⁷

Following the composition of *Density 21.5* in 1936, Varèse entered a period of depression and unproductivity, writing no more music for over a decade; largely because his sonic visions had so far outstripped what ensembles of conventional instruments were able to offer, and he had failed to interest either Bell Telephone, the Guggenheim Foundation, or the Los Angeles film companies in his visions of "organized sound" for new electronic instruments. He struck up a friendship with Leon Theremin (1896–1992), the Russian physicist and musician who invented the early electronic instrument named after him, an instrument Varèse later used in his *Ecuatorial*. The Theremin is played by moving the hands in space at varying distances from a fixed bar, the movements varying the pitch and timbre. The inventor, who had demonstrated his instrument to Lenin in 1922, presented a concert with ten Theremins at Carnegie Hall in 1930 and lived for awhile in America. Varèse worked with Theremin on ideas for electronic musical instruments and, in 1941, wrote to him, "I no longer wish to compose for the old instruments played by men, and I am handicapped by a lack of adequate electrical instruments for which I conceive my music."⁸

During World War II, thanks to the demands of espionage, great improvements had been made in the process of recording sounds on electronic tape. Soon after the war, an anonymous donor sent Varèse an Ampex tape recorder, and in 1958, at the age of seventy-five, he completed one of the first and most impressive works for electronic tape, *Poème électronique*, to be played through 240 speakers scattered throughout Le Corbusier's pavilion at the Brussels International and Universal Exposition. A collage of church bells, eerie voices, and simple synthesizer

tónes, the piece sounds naïve compared with today's digital acoustic wizardry, yet its communicative power remains firm.

Varèse's compositions are few in number, and uniformly dazzling. They include *Offrandes* for voice and orchestra (1922); *Hyperprism* for nine winds and percussion (1923); *Octandre* for septet (1924); *Intégrales* for small orchestra and percussion (1925); *Amériques* for orchestra (1921); *Arcana* for orchestra (1927); *Ionisation* for percussion ensemble (1931); *Ecuatorial* for bass voice, brass, piano, organ, percussion, and Theremin (1933–1934); *Density 21.5* for flute (1936); *Etude pour espace* for chorus, pianos, and percussion (1947); *Deserts* for winds, percussion, and electronics (1954); and *Poème électronique* (1958) for electronic tape.

During his life Varèse became the symbol of ultramodernism's most nihilistic excesses. His sonic concepts were simply too abstract and too unprecedented to find critical understanding. Ernest Newman's comments about *Intégrales* in the *New York Post* will serve as a typical example:

It sounded a good deal like a combination of early morning in the Mott Haven freight yards, feeding time at the zoo, and a Sixth Avenue trolley rounding a curve, with an intoxicated woodpecker thrown in for good measure.⁹

References to zoos were almost obligatory. By 1960, however, Varèse began to be honored with concerts and recordings of his music, and his genius, with its pervasive influence, was recognized worldwide. As Milton Babbitt said of him, "His mind's ear changed not only the sonic surface but the very anatomy of musical structure."¹⁰

Listening Example: Ionisation

Bursting into existence in the years 1931–1933, percussion music was an exciting, experimental new genre, pursued by Varèse, John J. Becker, Lou Harrison, Johanna M. Beyer, and the young John Cage. Written in 1931, *Ionisation* has the distinction of being the first piece by a Western composer written solely for percussion, and it remains the classic work for percussion, widely performed by university ensembles across the country.

Scored for thirty-nine instruments played by thirteen percussionists, *Ionisation* uses an exotic array of noisemakers: anvils, sleigh bells, slapstick, castanets, bongos, lion's roar (a drum through whose head a string is pulled), güiro (a serrated block of wood across which a stick is rasped), high and low sirens, triangle, maracas, cymbals, drums, tam-tams, chimes, glockenspiel, and piano. Note that only the last three instruments are capable of discreet pitches, and they appear only on the piece's climactic, final seventeen measures. As much as *Ionisation* sounds like a random noise-fest on first hearing, it has a carefully worked-out form with recurring motives and themes.

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The listener to *Ionisation* must acclimate him- or herself to listening for timbral ideas and rhythmic motives rather than melody or harmony. Varèse helps this process by beginning with a motive—three beats in the bass drums, a cymbal tremolo, and a snare drum roll—immediately repeating it, then repeating it with timbral variation. (Meanwhile the sirens crescendo menacingly.) He then proceeds directly to the main theme, a snare drum rhythm with contrapuntal accompaniment in the bongos and maracas, which will recur (example 2.7). The theme begins to start over but is interrupted and then more fully restated and expanded with variations.

EXAMPLE 2.7 Edgard Varèse, *Ionisation*, main theme.

A sudden burst of fortissimo drumming prepares the way for the secondary theme, stated in unison quintuplet patterns in the Chinese wood blocks, maracas, bongos, and snare drum (example 2.8). A triangle announces a section in which all of the metal instruments are struck, as the sirens begin again. After a fermata which allows the sirens to decrescendo from their highest pitch, the main theme returns. A brief reference to the second theme heralds the work's climactic coda: the entrance of the chimes, glockenspiel, and piano (the latter playing huge forearm clusters), accom-

EXAMPLE 2.8 Varèse, *Ionisation*, second theme.

panied by gongs, cymbals, and sirens. The unvarying sonorities of the pitched instruments can be seen in example 2.9.

Slonimsky conducted the world premiere of *Ionisation* in New York on March 6, 1933. As he recounts it, percussionists from the New York Philharmonic could not handle the quintuplets, and he had to recruit composers. Cowell played the piano, Wallingford Riegger the guiro, and William Schuman the lion's roar.¹¹

EXAMPLE 2.9 Varèse, *Ionisation*, pitched instruments at climax.

Ruth Crawford

Arguably history's first major woman composer, Ruth Crawford (1901–1953) was born in East Liverpool, Ohio. Though her composing career was interrupted and abbreviated, she was precocious and left a dozen major works impressive in their structural integrity and warm in their lyricism.

In 1920 Crawford left home to attend the American Conservatory in Chicago, where she found a heady atmosphere. She studied harmony with an open-minded German, Adolph Weidig, and piano with Djane Lavoie-Herz. Lavoie-Herz lived in the center of a stimulating circle. John Alden Carpenter sponsored her soirées; Cowell visited her as he traveled between California and New York; Rudhyar dropped in on his pilgrimages in the opposite direction, spreading the new gospel of

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Ruth Crawford. *Courtesy New York Public Library.*

Scriabin. In addition, Crawford taught piano to the daughters of the poet Carl Sandburg; the music critic Alfred Frankenstein fell in love with her; the Chicago Symphony conductor Frederick Stock took an interest in her music; and she studied with and eventually married Charles Seeger. Chicago's new-music scene, before it was dispelled by the Great Depression and World War II, was a lively one.

In 1930 Crawford became the first woman to win a Guggenheim fellowship, and left for Europe, visiting London, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Munich, and Paris and meeting Berg, Ravel, Hindemith, Bartók, Boulanger, Varèse, Roussel, and Josef Hauer. (She amused Berg by telling him that she preferred Schoenberg's music prior to Op. 25, and he advised her "to study German music more and to write something in a larger form demanding more coordination and development of ideas."¹²) When Slonimsky conducted his Paris concerts of American

music, Crawford was in the audience. Her return to America was not to Chicago, however, but to the more exciting scene of New York, where she and Seeger set up housekeeping together. In 1932, on the day Seeger's divorce from his first wife became final, they were married.

Crawford quickly absorbed Seeger's theories of dissonant counterpoint and was soon writing more ambitious works in the style than he had. If her early piano works show that Rudhyar's Scriabin-preaching had found a target, her first chamber works—the String Quartet (1931) with its remarkable palindromic finale, and the *Music for Small Orchestra* (1926)—show an astonishingly original handling of form and texture for someone so young. Her *Three Songs on Poems of Carl Sandburg*, scored for alto, oboe, percussion, and piano, are remarkable for their smooth fusion of a lyrical atonal style with an ultramodernist emphasis on percussive noise.

In 1936, however, Crawford gave up composing. The Depression had replaced the new-music patronage of the twenties with a concern for America's vanishing rural culture, and Crawford moved with Seeger to Washington, D.C., where she transcribed and wrote piano accompaniments for thousands of American folksongs. Another impediment to further composing may have been the four children she bore during the thirties. She broke her silence to write a small orchestra piece (*Risselty Rosselty*) in 1941 and returned to composition in the fifties with a fine Suite for Wind Quintet (1952), but she died at the age of 53.

Listening Example: Music for Small Orchestra, first movement

Written in 1926, Crawford's *Music for Small Orchestra* was first performed in 1975—a delay that symbolizes the difficulties women composers have had in getting heard. Considering that it is one of her earliest works, the piece's smooth fusion of diverse influences is astonishing. The melodic intervals suggest Scriabin or Berg, the rhythms come from the theories of Cowell and Seeger, yet the piece does not sound like anyone else's music; it is an impressively self-assured unveiling of Crawford's mature style.

Scored for flute, clarinet, bassoon, four violins, two cellos, and piano, the first movement is an atonal continuum remarkable for its limpid calm. Crawford divides the measure freely into three, four, five, or six equal beats for each instrument. The piano begins quietly playing an F in unchanging rhythm, 2 + 3 + 3 + 2. Soon the F becomes a steady half-note, the piano adds a bass chord every ten beats, one cello plays an open fifth every five beats, and the other cello begins a quintuplet ostinato within the measure, over which woodwind melodies enter in triplets (see example 2.10). Aside from Ives, Cowell, and Stravinsky, few composers had written music of this rhythmic complexity, yet the repeating ostinatos and bass drone chords allow an overall feeling of effortless gliding.

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EXAMPLE 2.10 Ruth Crawford, *Music for Small Orchestra*, Movement 1, mm. 21–26.

The American Five and Other Ultramodernists

Within the Pan American Association, Cowell particularly championed the work of four older composers who eschewed European methods: Ives, Ruggles, Wallingford Riegger, and John J. Becker. So frequently were these five figures associated on concerts that the important American musicologist Don Gillespie has dubbed them “the American Five,” analogous to the French “Six” and the Russian “Mighty Five.”

Wallingford Riegger (1885–1961) was the only one of the Five to acquire a European polish. Born in Albany, Georgia, he studied in Berlin with Max Bruch and became one of the first Americans to experiment with the twelve-tone method invented by Arnold Schoenberg; his use of the twelve-tone row can be lightly tuneful in a very un-Schoenbergian way. His *Study in Sonority* (1927) for ten violins, written in the height of the ultramodern years, is a remarkably well-crafted and original work inhabiting the chromatic language of Bartók and even late Schoenberg, with an endlessly inventive array of textures. Riegger’s *Variations for Two Pianos* (1952) and *Fourth Symphony* (1956–1957) are among his best works.

The least known of the Five, John J. Becker (1886–1961) was born in Henderson, Kentucky, studied in Chicago, and spent his career in the midwest, frustrated by geographic isolation and hampered by an acerbic personality from making inroads into New York musical society, despite generous personal support from Ives. A Catholic, Becker was drawn to church polyphony, quoted Gregorian chant in his *Soundpiece No. 1*, and modeled his dissonant counterpoint after the polyphony of Bach and Palestrina. Becker's most notable work is his Third Symphony, *Symphonia Brevis* (1929). The brief first movement is a savage scherzo of harsh dissonances, the second a calmer, more long-lined contrapuntal movement, its stately chorales in 5/2 meter interrupted by percussion. His series of chamber works titled *Soundpieces* are serious and well-crafted, and occasionally receive the revival they deserve.

Johanna Magdalena Beyer (1888–1944) is one of music's most shadowy figures. Born in Leipzig, she emigrated to New York in 1924 and, coming to composition in her forties, studied with Cowell, Seeger, Ruth Crawford, and Dane Rudhyar. Beyer's percussion and electronic works, such as *Three Movements for Percussion* (1939), made daring use of noise and anticipated minimalism with their rhythmic cycles and static textures. Nearly forgotten, she is being newly appraised and seems to have been in many ways decades ahead of her time.

Dane Rudhyar (1895–1985) has remained one of the lesser-known ultramodernists because his career got sidetracked into the improbable field of astrology. Born Daniel Chennevière in Paris, he was present at the world premiere of *Le Sacre du Printemps*. He came to America in 1916; two of his orchestral works were premiered in New York in 1917. Through a disciple of Scriabin, he became involved with the Theosophical movement begun by Madame Helena Blavatsky—a mystical philosophical movement based in Hindu scriptures—with which Scriabin was also tangentially connected. Though the first of Rudhyar's more than three dozen books was on Debussy, and the second on Hindu music, Rudhyar turned to astrology in 1930 and became one of the world's leading astrologers.

Rudhyar's music seems very much a continuation of Scriabin's aesthetic, though unhindered by the timid formalism that makes Scriabin's cut-and-dried forms a poor match for his mystic thematic materials. Rudhyar's music falls into two widely separated periods, 1915 to 1930 and 1976 to 1985, for he resumed composing when performers began taking an interest in his early music. Yet, aside from a notable Debussy influence in the earliest compositions, differences in style over that seventy-year range are nearly imperceptible. Most of his works are brief or else composed of a series of brief movements, such as *Pentagrams* (1924–1926), *Paeans* (1927), and *Syntony* (1968), all for piano.

For a few years in the 1920s, it looked as though America's great composer was going to be George Antheil (1900–1959). Bad career man-

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agement, though, combined with an inability to live up to his own hype, reduced him to the status of a minor film composer. Antheil, the son of a shoe-store owner in Trenton, New Jersey, studied privately with the Swiss émigré Ernest Bloch (1880–1959), the composer of the popular *Schelomo* (1915–1916) for cello and orchestra, who had come to America in 1916. In 1922 Antheil set off, like Cowell, on a European piano tour, living in Berlin and Paris until 1933. In Berlin he became friends with Stravinsky; the most obvious influences on Antheil's modernist works, *Ballet Mécanique* included, are Stravinsky's *Les Noces* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*. He next became involved in Paris's heady literary and artistic life, befriended by James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and Pablo Picasso and championed by Ezra Pound. The machinelike dissonance of Antheil's piano works shocked audiences.

Antheil's most notorious work—in fact, almost the entire basis of his reputation—is his *Ballet Mécanique* of 1924–1925, which represented, as he later wrote, “the anti-expressive, anti-romantic, coldly mechanistic aesthetic of the early twenties.”¹³ The work was scored for two pianos, player piano, three xylophones, drums, wood and steel airplane propellers, electric bells, siren, and other percussion. The work's jangling, perpetual motion is drawn from variations of a tiny number of figures, subjected to constant displacements of accent à la Stravinsky, as audible in the opening measures (example 2.11, pianos only). In its attempt to “out-Stravinsky Stravinsky,” the *Ballet* not only extended the Russian



EXAMPLE 2.11 George Antheil, *Ballet Mécanique*.

master's work with short, interchangeable modules and repeating ostinatos and imitated the instrumentation of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, but anticipated the minimalist works of the 1960s, especially in Antheil's description:

Some time in the future we will have forms which will not last a half hour, nor an hour, but eight hours, sixteen hours, or two days. This is not romancing. The reason lies in the fact that we have discovered the new and true dimension of music and its basic principles which insure larger and almost endless forms.¹⁴

And, anticipating John Cage, Antheil included long silences in which "time itself acts as music." In his musical evocation of the dynamic, inhuman precision of machines, Antheil was preceded, though not influenced, by the Italian futurists Francesco Balilla Pratella and Luigi Russolo.

The premiere of *Ballet Mécanique*, June 19, 1926, was a well-prepared riot, the audience shouting, whistling, and opening umbrellas as Pound stood and yelled "Vous êtes tous des imbéciles!"¹⁵ In 1927, however, Antheil's overheated career took a nosedive. Paris found his works after the *Ballet* (such as the *Symphonie en Fa* and Piano Concerto) neo-classic and derivative of Stravinsky, while the *Ballet* itself had a disastrous, overhyped, error-ridden New York premiere at Carnegie Hall, prompting the newspaper headline "Mountain of Noise Out of an Antheil."

Suddenly out of fashion, and finding that worldwide economic difficulties had disintegrated Paris's vivacious milieu, Antheil turned to operas on American subjects (*Transatlantic*, *Helen Retires*, *Volpone*) and then film scores, living out the remainder of his life in Hollywood. His greatest subsequent success was his Symphony No. 4 (1942), written in the patriotic style of the 1940s, one of the many symphonies inspired by the horrors of World War II (including Shostakovich's Seventh and Harris's Sixth). Antheil's later life is an amazing hodgepodge of unrelated ventures: besides film music, he wrote a syndicated column of advice to the lovelorn, wrote articles for *Esquire*, developed a patented torpedo with the actress Hedy Lamarr, and contributed to the field of glandular criminology.

Another, less eccentric enfant terrible who did not sustain his career was Leo Ornstein (b. 1892). He made a splash starting in 1915 with his concerts of modernistic works employing tone clusters, such as *Three Moods* and *Suicide in an Airplane*, and his name was associated with Cowell, whom he met in New York. In 1920, however, he retired from the concert stage, and he disappeared from public view around 1930. Thereafter, until 1953 he ran the Ornstein School of Music in Philadelphia with his wife. Like Antheil, he turned his back on the progressivity of his early music and assumed a more romantic idiom.

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Like Cowell, Colin McPhee (1901–1964) represented American music's turn toward Asian rather than European sources for new techniques. He was, in fact, the first American whose aesthetic was formed by his experience with Balinese music; there have been many more in recent decades. Born in Montreal, McPhee graduated from Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory, studied in Paris (with Paul LeFlem), and settled in New York. Around 1929 he chanced to hear a rare recording of a gamelan, the Balinese orchestra consisting of gongs, suling flutes, and metallic mallet instruments played in hypnotic repeating cycles. Fascinated, he realized that Balinese rhythms and melodic patterns represented a new direction his early neoclassic music (such as his Concerto for Piano and his Wind Octet of 1929) had been pointing in anyway. He embarked for Bali in 1934 and stayed for most of the next six years.

McPhee's Balinese studies culminated in the composition of his most famous work, *Tabuh-Tabuhan* for two pianos and orchestra (1936). The title is from the Balinese word *tabuh*, meaning a percussion mallet, or by extension a rhythmic beating. The piece's mallet-percussion textures, exotically modal melodies, and static permutation of pitch cells mark the first (and an engaging) example of Balinese rhythmic cycles applied to the Western orchestra, an anticipation of minimalism more than three decades early. However, he wrote little else besides a *Nocturne* for chamber orchestra (1958) and Second Symphony (1957).

The music of Peggy Glanville-Hicks (1912–1990) also evinces ethnomusicological influences. Born in Melbourne, Australia, she studied with Vaughan Williams and Boulanger, but in 1939 she became an American citizen, and she served under Virgil Thomson on the remarkable critical staff of the *New York Herald-Tribune*. She used aspects of Hindu music in her 1953 opera *The Transposed Heads*. Her *Etruscan Concerto* (1954) for piano and orchestra shares with *Tabuh-Tabuhan* a delightful and highly original exoticism.

Notes

1. Aaron Copland, *The New Music 1900–1960* (London: MacDonald, 1968), p. 102.
2. Quoted in Linda Whitesitt, *The Life and Music of George Antheil* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983), p. 9.
3. Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (New York: Something Else Press, 1969), pp. xvi–xvii.
4. Philip Hale, "Mr. Slonimsky in Paris," *Boston Herald*, July 7, 1931, p. 14.
5. Nicolas Slonimsky, admittedly one of Cowell's closest friends but also a meticulous historian, writes that Cowell was arrested "on largely contrived and falsified evidence, on charges of homosexuality (then a heinous offense in California) involving the impairment of the morals of a minor.

- Lulled by the deceptive promises of a wily district attorney of a brief confinement in a sanatorium, Cowell pleaded guilty to a limited offense, but he was vengefully given a maximum sentence of imprisonment, up to 15 years." From *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, seventh edition (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988), p. 368.
6. Interview with Cowell, recorded on *Henry Cowell: Piano Music*, Smithsonian Folkways CD SF40801.
 7. Frank R. Rossiter, *Charles Ives and His America* (New York: Liveright, 1975), p. 254.
 8. Virgil Thomson, *American Music Since 1910* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), p. 44.
 9. Ernest Newman, *New York Evening Post*, March 2, 1925.
 10. Milton Babbitt, in "For Edgard Varèse on the Celebration of his 80th Year," Carnegie Hall program, March 31, 1965, p. 14.
 11. Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: A Life Story* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 138.
 12. Matilda Gaume, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Memoires, Memories, Music* (Metuchen, N.J., and London: Scarecrow Press, 1986), p. 83.
 13. Quoted in Whitesitt, *The Life and Music of George Antheil*, p. 12.
 14. Antheil, Letter to Ezra Pound, Yale University; quoted in Whitesitt, *The Life and Music of George Antheil*, 1983), p. 104.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Other things ebb and flow in an era of free jazz. In 1929 the streets of the 1920s, Cowell and other great pianists were abandoned. As money dried up, the musical life of the American social issues Quartet and

No longer turned their backs on the massive influence of Marc Blitzstein, and the Spanish Civil War as part of the musical organization. Charles Seeger and Wolpe (for example) hand with sonorance and audience.

Parallel to these are full of eschew "dissonance" to a wide audience and for Khachaturian