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Honors Thesis

Performance Practices for Four Avante-garde Piano Pieces by Henry Cowell

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1 April 2011

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ABSTRACT

Using a traditional approach or technique to perform nontraditional works may lead to a deviance in the way the pianist plays the music. This research hypothesis is to demonstrate how applying an understanding about Henry Cowell's life and Irish heritage, while practicing and eventually in the performance, can lead to a more meaningful and accurate presentation of his works. Instructions of practice techniques are provided with each piece to help facilitate the desired effect. Henry Cowell's works were chosen because they are relatively unknown to most music students, in addition to a personal interest in 20th-century music of this genre.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	5
Methodology.....	7
Analysis and Results.....	10
Extended Piano Techniques: Tone Clusters.....	12
<i>Tides of Maunaunaun</i>	13
Practice Guide.....	13
Possible Sources.....	16
<i>The Voice of Lir</i>	17
Practice Guide.....	18
Possible Sources.....	20
Extended Piano Techniques: String Piano.....	21
<i>Aeolian Harp</i>	22
Practice Guide.....	22
Possible Sources.....	23
<i>The Banshee</i>	24
Practice Guide.....	25

Possible Sources.....	27
Conclusion.....	28
Bibliography.....	30

INTRODUCTION

In July of 2003, I was a part of Northwestern University's National High School Music Institute: a summer program designed to give high school students from around the world a chance to experience music at a College and professional level. During my time there, the director of the piano program, Mr. Kuang-Hao Huang, introduced the pianists to 20th-century piano music and composers, such as John Cage, George Crumb, and Henry Cowell. At the end of the session there was a piano recital, where Mr. Huang allowed us to perform a 20th-century work of our choice—I chose Cowell's *The Voice of Lir*,¹ a piece that required me to play with my forearm as well as my fingers.

I practiced this piece excitedly thinking how fun it would be to act like a little child banging on the keys, but this time under the directions of a composer written into a score. When I brought it to my teacher, who happened to be Mr. Huang, I was greatly surprised when he told me to put more weight into my arms—bang on the keys with my arm. I was stunned. To sit at a Steinway & Sons grand piano and strike the keys in an almost careless fashion seemed musically sacrilegious since most pianists revere pianos produced by this world-renowned company. Still, I trusted Mr. Huang, after all, he was the one who introduced me to this strange music, and even specializes in 20th-century music; therefore, he knew what he was talking about. I did not misplace my trust—fun did not begin to describe the experience I had playing this piece. I could almost see the world take shape, feel a sense of order come from the chaos, and yet know that not everything there was as it was intended to be. At the end of July, when I performed this piece, I felt satisfied knowing that I had portrayed the story to the best of my ability, and that

¹ Henry Cowell, *Three Irish Legends: The Voice of Lir* (Boca Raton: Masters Music Publications, 1920.) This piece had a brief story connected with the music that appeared before the title in the score. While the complete story will come later in my thesis, Lir is a god who created the universe.

even the audience had been impressed—in my sixteen-year-old eyes it could not have been played better than I had that evening.

Seven years later, I again chose not only to play *The Voice of Lir* for my senior recital, but also to learn and perform three more works by Cowell. I did some research on the pieces to provide program notes, and even listened to a recording of the composer performing them, to help me give a clearer understanding of the music to the audience. As I listened to him perform, I noticed some major differences in how he played them versus my own interpretation, and thought that it was rather absurd. I observed that the tempo fluctuated too much, there were wrong notes that he resolved as if he had intended to do that in the first place, and the pieces did not feel as if they had a sense of order that classical music tends to have in which the performer tries to be as true to the music on the page as humanly possible.²

These discrepancies became the catalyst for the subject of my Honors Project; however, it was not until I read Michael Hicks' very detailed biography on Henry Cowell,³ that I began to understand the composer, his music, and a very important fact about them both. The standards placed by centuries of musical rules and concepts neither controlled nor influence Cowell and his compositions.⁴ Furthermore, there is also an inherent freedom in his music and this ought to be portrayed if the performer is going to give Cowell's pieces the same amount of justice he or she would give to that of Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart. This revelation became the source for my thesis—to find out how an understanding of Henry Cowell's life and Irish heritage, and how

² In classical music, the performer tries to play at a steady tempo until the composer gives instructions that might cause the music fluctuate at the performer's discretion. While wrong notes are avoided as much as possible, most human beings cannot play without making mistakes in some way. At times, Cowell's performance felt more improvisatory than intentional.

³Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002). It is the most up-to-date and non-biased writing on Cowell.

⁴ While there are too many to name here, the concepts that were most visibly broken were that of how the piano, as a musical instrument, was used. I will discuss this later on in the thesis.

applying them in a practice room and eventually in a performance, can lead to a more meaningful presentation of his works.

My thesis goes beyond other writings on Cowell's music because my goal is to do more than provide instructions on properly playing the music. I also intend to give a deeper understanding of the objectives of the new techniques, in addition to demonstrating how the music and new skills are based on the influences in his life and the effects these impacts had on his music.

METHODOLOGY

I investigated Cowell's upbringing and education, the use of Irish mythology in his music, and how these extra-musical factors shaped these four compositions as well as the influences these aspects can have on the performance.

My sources on Cowell's life came primarily from reading Michael Hicks' biography on Cowell, and using Joscelyn Godwin's dissertation about Cowell to supplement my readings in Hicks' book.⁵ Hick's work is where most of my biographical information on Cowell came from, about the influential years of his youth. The focus of Hick's investigation mainly takes place during the years of Cowell's childhood to becoming a young adult; it is during this time that he composed his early piano pieces. In his introduction he mentions,

I launch this book, essentially a study of Cowell's life and work though the mid-1920s, with a look at his later years though the lens of the earlier. The earlier years are the most important of Cowell's career, the formative years, the years that produced virtually all of the novelties for which he became known, the years in which he doggedly chased the artistic vision that his California upbringing had given him, and the years in which he

⁵Joscelyn Roland Godwin. "The Music of Henry Cowell." Ph. D. diss., Cornell University, 1970.

built a dynasty of “ultra-modern” music that has shaped the spirit of many younger composers around the world.⁶

I read articles about Cowell or his techniques and found that while they were helpful and informative, they did not look at his music in the direction I desired to research. Hick’s article, not presented in his book, looked at Cowell’s tone clusters from the standpoint of, “how he arrived at them, how he exploited them, and how he transformed them from ‘elbow music’ to ‘secundal harmony’”.⁷ Steven Johnson’s article, “Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon,”⁸ proved invaluable as he specifically focused on Varian’s impact on Cowell. Johnson states, “although several eccentric individuals and bohemian environments nurtured Henry Cowell’s youthful iconoclastic spirit, none exerted greater influence than John Osborne Varian and Halcyon, the theosophical colony to which Varian belonged.”⁹

Of the dissertations I studied, aside from the one by Godwin, Laurie Hudicek’s “Off Key: A Comprehensive Guide to Unconventional Piano Techniques,”¹⁰ was very thorough in providing me with more knowledge about extended piano techniques and concepts to consider when playing string piano.¹¹ As with the articles about Cowell, most of the dissertations on him looked at helpful ways to play his music, or how he was as a teacher, mentor, and a composer. None of the authors sought to bring a connection between the influences in his life and their manifestation within his music.

⁶ Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 4.

⁷ Michael Hicks, “Cowell’s Clusters,” *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 428.

⁸ Steven Johnson, “Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon,” *American Music* 11, no. 1 (Spring, 1993).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ Laurie Marie Hudicek, “Off Key: A Comprehensive Guide to Unconventional Piano Techniques,” D.M.A. diss., University of Maryland, 2002.

¹¹ While I will explain this term in greater detail later in my thesis, in this style of playing the pianist will perform not on the keyboard, but on the strings of piano.

By listening to Cowell's performance and audio commentary on the compact disk of his works, I was able to gather more insight into the overall goal of these four works.¹² Here is where I noticed the major differences between my style and his, that maybe I had missed some essential concept as I learned his music. Furthermore, I found his explanations at the end of the compact disk to be priceless because they gave the composers' thoughts and intent directly, as well as the story behind the music.

The final part of my research for sources was to look at websites¹³ to read and learn more about Irish gods, mythological creatures, and symbols in order to gain a deeper understanding of the stories that Cowell used as subjects for his compositions and, possibly, as inspiration.¹⁴

After this, I isolated the extended piano techniques in Cowell's early piano pieces, *The Tides of Maunaunaun*, *The Voice of Lir*, *Aeolian Harp*, and *The Banshee*, which bring up questions about their performance because they are nontraditional.¹⁵ I focused on the main concept or goal in each work, and demonstrated the possible connections between events, people, and places in his life and the music he composed.

¹²Henry Cowell, "Piano Music," Smithsonian Folkways, CD, 1993.

¹³ Steve Eddy and Claire Hamilton. "Celtic Myths: The Harp of Dagda." Steve Eddy. <http://www.livingmyths.com/Celticmyth.htm#Dagda> (accessed February 17, 2011).

Ciara O'Brien, "Irish Mythology: The Banshee," Irish Celtic Jewels Blog, entry posted April 27, 2010, <http://www.irishcelticjewels.com/celtic-wedding/2010/04/irish-mythology-the-banshee/> (accessed February 17, 2011).

¹⁴ All of Cowell's works I researched use Irish mythology or emblems. I will explain their importance and why they ought to be understood later.

¹⁵ Henry Cowell, *Three Irish Legends: The Tides of Manaunaun* (Boca Raton: Masters Music Publications, 1912); *Aeolian Harp* (Los Angeles: W. A. Quincke & Company, 1923); *The Banshee* (Los Angeles: W. A. Quincke & Company, 1925).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Henry Cowell (March 11, 1897- December 10, 1965) was destined to stand out, even before his birth. His Irish father and American mother were both poets who surrounded themselves with a social circle of Californians who viewed each other as “progressive intellectuals who ... hoped to usher in the new century with new ideas, to create a foundation of progress for the dawning of the second millennium.”¹⁶ Harry and Clara Cowell lived the bohemian lifestyle of not following the traditions and standards set by the society, and passed this spirit of freedom to their son. In fact, while young Henry Cowell was a bright and intelligent boy, he did not receive the formal education most children received at that time.¹⁷

Even his musical training, in its early stages, was very limited. Cowell, received his first official music lesson at the age of five when he took violin lessons from Sylvia Holmes. Her father, however, ended up teaching Cowell when an injury prevented her from teaching. These lessons, under Mr. Holmes, would be short-lived when Cowell upset Mr. Holmes during a lesson and the irate teacher told him not to return for any more instruction.¹⁸ Almost ten years would pass before Cowell ventured to explore music again, this time using the piano as his uncharted territory while attempting to take music lessons.

Cowell must have proved a difficult student as a teenager too since he was unable to have the same piano teacher for more than a few weeks. During this time, he had begun to compose his music in his own way, instead of following the trend of traditional music writing taking place in Europe, or the interest in folk music, which spread across the United States from the East

¹⁶ Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 15.

¹⁷ Clara, his mother, believed that “public schools were crushing all children into a shapeless, pulpous mass and then pouring them into molds, like hot tallow, from which it was the delight of educators to see them issue all alike.” *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

Coast. By 1914, his compositions brought Cowell to the attention of famous American composer and teacher Charles Seeger who had a strong interest in developing American folk music. At the age of seventeen, by means of an education fund, Henry Cowell enrolled as a “special student” at the University of California at Berkeley, and finally received formal music instruction.¹⁹

Out of all these determining factors in Cowell’s life, the most influential would be John Varian. Like Cowell’s father, Varian immigrated from Ireland to the U.S. and made his new home in the San Francisco region where he was “an ardent Theosophist, prominent among the sect known as The Temple of the People.”²⁰ Cowell and Varian had a strong friendship, and Varian often asked Cowell to provide musical settings for poems and stories he wrote about Irish mythology. It is most likely that Cowell, who was half-Irish, saw this as a chance to get more in touch with his Irish roots since his parents divorced when he was young. While he did not have the opportunity, however, to spend much time with his Irish father, he remembered his father teaching him Irish songs.²¹

During these early years, from 1912 to 1926, Cowell composed many pieces for piano. However, it was not the novelty of them that sent him on the road to fame, but the new techniques he developed that expanded the ways the piano could be played. These new methods or Extended Piano Techniques,²² tone clusters and string piano, as Cowell named these techniques himself, maybe explained as the result of his peculiar lifestyle and education. Where the piano so far had been a keyboard instrument that one could only perform on by pressing

¹⁹ Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 64-69.

²⁰ Steven Johnson, *Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon*, 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²² Because there is no official term for playing the piano by any unconventional means, this paper will use the term extended piano techniques to categorize these methods.

down the keys with fingers, Cowell extended its playing abilities to include the palm of the hand, fist and forearm, and required the performer to play on the strings as one would a guitar or harp to create a new, American genre.

The first of these techniques are tone clusters. To visualize how they might look in a performance, simply imagine a child, with no musical training, running up to the piano only to slam his tiny hands on the keys. This is essentially a cluster, however Cowell does not use his clusters with child-like curiosity or intentions, instead he takes this sound and transforms it to represent a theme within the music.

Extended Piano Technique: Tone Clusters

By definition, tone clusters are “a highly dissonant, closely spaced collection of pitches sounded simultaneously, at the piano usually by striking a large number of keys with the hand or arm.”²³ As Hicks mentions, “none of Henry Cowell’s innovations was more praised or more vilified than his ‘tone clusters’ History and theory texts alike celebrate them.”²⁴ The two pieces that incorporate this technique are *The Tides of Maunaunaun* and *The Voice of Lir*.

In spite of the praise they received, the question remains as to their source. There is no satisfactory answer to this—even the composer varied in his response to their origins.²⁵ One possible reason is that the first instrument he played was a very old, out-of-tune zither brought

²³ *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 4th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), s.v. “Tone clusters”

²⁴ Michael Hicks, “Cowell’s Clusters,” 428.

²⁵ In his article, Hicks states: “Concerning the origins of clusters, only one fact is certain: throughout his life Cowell vacillated about why and how he began using them. His most frequent explanation during the earlier part of his career was that clusters began as sounds he imagined and later transcribed to the keyboard.” *Ibid.*, 428.

out of an attic, even before he owned a violin. Apparently, striking one of the strings would cause the pitches that were close to that string to sound, thus creating a sort of cluster.²⁶

Another probable influence would be the time Cowell and his mother spent living in Chinatown, formally called the Oriental district, a part of San Francisco. The Chinese immigrants brought with them their music and instruments, and these sounds appear to have affected Cowell's music. He mentions, "the Chinese found out many centuries ago that ... banging noises have musical value and enjoyment-giving possibilities."²⁷ Cowell's appreciation for such sounds is quite evident in many of his works, but history shows that clusters are not something that were originally and solely used by Cowell.²⁸

Cowell received credit for his clusters because of the magnitude at which he expanded their use. In his hands, tone clusters grew from a small set of notes occasionally employed at the composer's discretion, and emerged to have the same amount of authority and importance as the melody that presents itself in the music.

While the thought of "banging" on the keys might bring child-like excitement and joy to the performer looking to try something new, the performance aspect of the tone cluster pieces does come with some concerns. I will focus on the problem of interpreting the clusters. When presenting these pieces, the pianist cannot simply sit at the piano and hit the keys in whatever way he or she chooses. He or she must understand the context of the music because each work has a different story and purpose, therefore, the clusters vary not just between the pieces, but also within them.

²⁶ Ibid., 429.

²⁷ Ibid., 429.

²⁸ Although on a smaller scale, Charles Ives also used them in his piano music. There appears to be, however, no relation between Ives and Cowell's clusters. Ives did not use clusters as frequently or as extensively as Cowell did. Ives' clusters were usually made up of no more than four or five notes grouped together.

The Tides of Maunaunaun

This piece is based on a story as told by John Varian about the Irish god Maunaunaun, who

*“was the god of motion, and long before the creation, he sent forth tremendous tides, which swept to and fro through the universe, and rhythmically moved the particles and materials of which the gods were later to make the suns and worlds.”*²⁹

In this story, there are key words the performer ought to think about as he or she practices and eventually performs this work. The ideas of “tremendous tides”, “swept to and fro”, and “moved particles and material” should clue the musician that the clusters are used in this piece to create waves. To take this concept a step further, we must remember that waves vary in size and intensity, and Cowell applies these differences in this piece.

Practice Guide

Figure 1. *Tides of Maunaunaun*, measures 1-5.

The musical score is for measures 1-5 of 'Tides of Maunaunaun'. It is written for piano in a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and a common time signature (C). The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Largo, with rhythm'. The score consists of two staves: a right-hand staff and a left-hand staff. The right-hand staff begins with a whole rest in measure 1, followed by a series of chords in measures 2-5. The left-hand staff features a continuous pattern of chords, starting with a *pp* dynamic and marked 'smooth, full tone'. A *Basso 16va with pedal* instruction is written below the left-hand staff, indicating that the left hand should play an octave below the written notes with the sustain pedal. Dynamics include *pp* in the left hand, *mpp* in the right hand, and *p* in the right hand for the final measure. The piece concludes with a dotted line at the end of the fifth measure.

Cowell starts with clusters most likely representing small ripples, as one would see in a pool of water. Using the flat of the left hand, the performer presses down all of the keys, black

²⁹ Henry Cowell, *Three Irish Legends: The Tides of Manaunaun*, 4.

and white, within the octave boundary at the lowest register of the piano, to create the waves. The dynamic volume is pianissimo and the clusters are slow and heavy each having the rhythmic value of a half note and appear, barely, to be able to push the melody along, which taking place in the right hand, happens to be in the style of an Irish jig. By measure 12, the waves/clusters have grown to two octaves, using the entire left forearm to create the sound, and still encompass both the black and white keys.

Figure 2. *Tides of Maunaunaun*, measures 12 and 13.



The clusters are louder now—forte—and are growing louder, being able to move the melody better than before. The beginning of the climatic section—now fortissimo (*fff*)—occurs in measures 22 and 23, where the waves move in a quicker succession, the clusters add harmony, and mimic the quarter-note triplet figure in the right hand.

Figure 3. *Tides of Maunaunaun*, measures 22 and 23.



Here the pianist should use the side of his or her arm, with the pinky finger curved yet slightly extended, bringing out the notes at the top of the clusters. At measures 24 and 25, the clusters are arpeggiated and move forcefully—*ffff*—almost like a tsunami.

Figure 4. *Tides of Maunaunau*, measures 24 and 25.



In this part, the arm should move like a wave, and, starting with the elbow, should allow the cluster to increase in size from the bottom up.

Possible Sources for Cowell's use of cluster technique

John Varian had a strong impact on the way the composer interpreted the story; according to Hicks, “Cowell needed to depict Manaunaun, the god of waters, with, in Varian’s words, ‘calm, ponderous, leisurely thundering waves [and] rumbling drumming accompaniment.’”³⁰ This could explain why he chose to set the tempo at *Largo, with rhythm*. The performer needs to keep in mind that, even though the music will move slowly, a pulse must be felt internally as well as be conveyed to the audience, to allow all those involved to sense the ebb and flow of the piece.

On the other hand, credit should be given to his unconventional musical upbringing. Typically, if a composer desires to represent water, he or she would use scales or arpeggios. A

³⁰ Michael Hicks, “Cowell’s Clusters,” 441.

musician brought up on a standard repertoire of works by composers like Bach, Beethoven, and Chopin, most likely would have found this traditional sound to his or her satisfaction. For Cowell, even when he finally received a formal musical education, this would not be enough. “[He] tried octaves and then various chords, but rejected all of them because they ‘made the universe sound as though it were already in pretty tidy order.’ Finally, he came upon the idea of using all the notes in the lowest octave of the piano.”³¹ Upon hearing his composition, one can hardly disagree that his waves of clusters in conjunction with the melody truly paints a mental picture of a dense, dark universe moving about in waves stirred by none other than a god of water.

The Voice of Lir

It is rather evident that Irish mythology fascinated Cowell because for a time, Irish gods and legends were the subject for a large number of his piano works.³² Lir, a favorite of both Cowell and Varian, was no exception.³³

*Lir of the half tongue was the father of the gods, and of the universe. When he gave the orders for creation, the gods who executed his commands understood but half of what he said, owing to his having only half a tongue; with the result that for everything that has been created there is an unexpressed and concealed counterpart, which is the other half of Lir's plan of creation.*³⁴

Here the clusters serve a different purpose than they did in *The Tides of Maunaunaun*. They can be thought of as an enigma, where their goal is to hide the instructions, or melody, handed out by Lir.³⁵ The phrases to focus on are “understood, but half” and “an unexpressed and

³¹ Idem, 431.

³² Idem, 441.

³³ Idem, 441. Hicks mentions specifically this in his article.

³⁴ Henry Cowell. *Three Irish Legends: The Voice of Lir*, 9.

³⁵ Michael Hicks, “Cowell’s Clusters,” 442: “The simple tunes and harmonies represented the understood; clusters the incomprehensible mystery.”

concealed counterpart”. In fact, it seems like the more detailed Lir’s orders are, the more the other gods following his orders misunderstand him.

Practice Guide

Cowell begins this piece in a similar fashion to *The Tides*, in which the clusters—again in the left hand—precede the melody, this time in a three-note ostinato figure.

Figure 5. *The Voice of Lir*, measures 1 through 6.

The musical score for Figure 5 is for measures 1 through 6 of *The Voice of Lir*. It is marked *Largo* and begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and the instruction *smoothly*. The score is written for two staves, both in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and a common time signature (C). The right hand starts with a whole rest in measure 1, then enters in measure 3 with a single line of music. The left hand plays a three-note ostinato figure (G2, B-flat2, D3) in measure 1, which evolves into chords in subsequent measures. The instruction *Basso gva sempre* is written below the left hand.

The theme enters as a single line in the third measure, light and simple, and develops into octaves that Cowell fills to become chords, while the accompanying clusters remain the same. At measure fifteen, octaves finally take their cues from the resulting chords and become more complicated.

Figure 6. *The Voice of Lir*, measures 15 through 18.

The musical score for Figure 6 is for measures 15 through 18 of *The Voice of Lir*. It is marked *f* and *ff*. The score is written for three staves: a treble clef staff and two bass clef staves. The treble staff features a melodic line with a dynamic of *f* in measure 15, which becomes *ff* by measure 18. The middle bass staff is marked *loco* and *Basso gva*, and the bottom bass staff is also marked *loco* and *Basso gva*. The music shows the development of the theme into more complex chordal structures.

The ostinato grows larger, from three notes to four, and octaves encase the clusters. These clusters, on the other hand, are very short-lived—they are articulated as staccato eighth notes. Later, Cowell places them an octave lower to make them darker and heavier as they cover the melodic instructions. The best way to play this is to have the hand do push-ups, where the pinky and thumb anchor the hand on the octave, and then flatten the palm on the keys to create the wall of sound, and push off quickly to achieve the staccato articulation.

Figure 7. *The Voice of Lir*, measures 19 and 20.



The complexity of the clusters does not stop here. Almost foreshadowing the work to come, mm. 19 and 20 have the left hand playing a countermelody near the middle of the keyboard, the right hand plays chords an octave above this line, while the lower part of the forearm brings out quarter-note, staccato clusters. Measure 21 begins the climactic section.

Figure 8. *The Voice of Lir*, measures 21 through 23.

Here, the hands are of the same mind, playing the tune in the upper register of the piano while both arms add double clusters—a set of clusters per arm—in the lower register.³⁶ After these dramatic clusters, the piece calms down to a similar mood as in the beginning, even slowing down, to signify that the work is done, while the clusters remain to remind us that something is still missing and that we will never know exactly what it is.

Possible Sources for Cowell’s use of the cluster technique

While Varian is the supplier of this story, Cowell’s imagination seems to spring from not following musical standards and regulations. He does not make do with scales, chords, and some ornamentation, but takes all the notes at once to create his idea of chaos. This, nonetheless, does not mean that he refuses to use any sort of order in this piece. In fact, as Hicks quotes, “Cowell chooses musical elements that well suit his programmatic scenario: the well-defined, ‘legible’ right-hand modal material depicts Lir’s clearly understood orders, whereas the low clusters represent the ‘concealed counterpart’ to those orders.”³⁷

³⁶ While this might look a bit overwhelming in the score, a pianist who has performed Rachmaninoff’s *Prelude in C-sharp minor Op. 3, no.2*, might find such a technique reminiscent of the last page of this prelude.

³⁷ Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 102.

Furthermore, the strange character of the piece would appeal to the part of him that reflected how his parents raised him, who as Hicks mentioned, "... had taught him to prize exoticism." We must remember that for a time Cowell lived in Chinatown where he often heard Chinese music. According to Hicks, "in place of traditional repertoire in which he had been immersed, Henry began to appreciate the strange scales of Asian melodies, the boom of ceremonial drums, and the resonance of gongs."³⁸ There is a correlation between the larger percussive sounds in *The Voice of Lir* and what he experienced living in the Chinese section of San Francisco.

Extended Piano Technique: String Piano

For those unacquainted with this term, a composition for string piano is "any work that requires the pianist to play primarily on the strings of the piano with the hand or objects".³⁹ The idea of playing on the strings is not completely credited to Cowell. The concept had been around for many years before he was born.⁴⁰ Cowell's notoriety, nonetheless, comes from going beyond instructions, to playing on the strings, to extensively exploring the sounds. He developed a system that explains exactly what symbols mean in addition to informing the pianist where he or she should stand at the piano and how he/she should play on the strings with the various parts of the hands, to aid with the performance of his compositions.

While playing on the strings sounds simple, it is easier said than done. Cowell developed a system for notating exactly how he wants the performer to play on the strings.^{41 42}

³⁸ Ibid., 20.

³⁹ Laurie Marie Hudicek, "Off Key," 5.

⁴⁰ Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 110. In fact, "the first 'serious' composer to write for piano strings was probably Percy Grainger: at the close of the third movement of his *In a Nutshell* suite (1916), he directs the pianist to play on several bass strings with a yarn-covered mallet."

⁴¹ Before the pianist can move his or her fingers over the strings, he/she must prepare him/herself in advance.

My focus, however, will be on the interpretation because each piece has a concept that is important to the overall performance of the work.

Aeolian Harp

There is no specific story to go along with this piece, however, the harp as an instrument is important to Ireland's heritage. In fact, the Aeolian harp is not Irish—it is Greek—but it is used in Irish mythology. "*Dagda, chief of the gods, always carried with him a magical, decorative harp.*"⁴³

The concept here is that the Aeolian harp, known as the wind harp, is played by the wind. Hicks mentions, "*Aeolian Harp* clearly takes the ancient idea of harps being played by the wind."⁴⁴ Thus, the piece should be performed as if the wind were causing the strings to vibrate. This can be done by measuring how slowly one strums the strings.

Practice Guide

Cowell is very specific in how he wants the piece played, hence, it is prudent that the performer becomes well acquainted with the "Explanation of Symbols". This is because the timbre of the notes notably changes depending on where he or she will play on the strings, the use the tip of the of finger or the back of the nail, and the composer's instructions to play some

⁴² Brigham Young University. "Prepared Piano Policy." Brigham Young University. <http://music.byu.edu/index.php?id=1310> (accessed February 17, 2010). The website gives a word of attention/warning: Before touching the strings, the performer must wash his or her hands before performance of works because oil from his or her hands can tarnish the strings. Also, the pianist should cut his/her nails to avoid breaking them on the strings. When marking the piano, apply non-adhesive stickers to raised dampers or agraffes to mark notes; furthermore, depending on design of piano use chalk only on steel strings.

⁴³ Steve Eddy, "Celtic Myths: The Harp of Dagda" <http://www.livingmyths.com/Celticmyth.htm#Dagda> (accessed February 17, 2011).

⁴⁴ Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 112.

notes pizzicato.⁴⁵ Both the pianist and the audience should notice tones that are gentle and warm, shimmery, bright, or metallic.

Aeolian Harp, even though it is a string piano piece, differs from the works of the same category because Cowell still uses the keyboard to manipulate the sound. He instructs, “all of the notes ... should be pressed down on the keys, without sounding, at the same time being played on the open strings of the piano with the other hand.”⁴⁶ Given the nature of the piano, though, the dampers would not allow the strings, once the pianist strums them, to vibrate long enough to let the sound linger. Thus, Cowell requests, “except where indicated, the pedal must NEVER BE DOWN while the strings are being swept; as soon as the sweep is made, the pedal should be put down, and held until the time is ready to begin a new sweep, when it must be released.”⁴⁷

Possible Sources for Cowell’s use of the string piano technique

It appears as if Cowell’s experience playing string instruments, although very limited, inspired him to explore the stringed side of the piano. “Cowell,” writes Hicks, “used the piano like a zither;”⁴⁸ this is a tribute to his ability to go beyond what the world deems as the standard, setting and exploring his own expectations. Here it seems important to mention Cowell’s upbringing, which encouraged him not to conform to society’s expectations and played a major part in enabling him to transcend these traditions as well as liberate and popularize certain techniques, which other composers only used briefly and rarely. Other music writers might have seen any experimentation to play on the strings as detrimental to the instrument, yet, if Cowell

⁴⁵Cowell, *Aeolian Harp*. Los Angeles: W. A. Quincke & Company, 1923.

⁴⁶Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 112.

⁴⁷Cowell, *Aeolian Harp*. The composer provides instructions at the top of the score above the music.

⁴⁸Ibid., 112.

felt that same way he let his curiosity get the best of him. As a child, he grew up as he pleased because his parents, particularly his mother with whom he lived with most of the time, believed that one should “live for yourself and let your children do likewise.”⁴⁹ This freedom set the stage for him to create music uninhibitedly while not confining himself only to the keys on the piano but to use the strings as well.

Some people, on the other hand, might see Varian as the catalyst for Cowell’s genius since he also lived his life by his own rules and desired to create new instruments as well. When he attempted to build a harp with a keyboard⁵⁰ attached to it—he was not successful—he kept Cowell abreast with his ideas, “usually describing some technical aspect of its strings or tuning system or complaining about his inability to finance its completion.”⁵¹ Still, Varian’s ideas were a little farfetched, whereas Cowell’s were more feasible.

Even though *Aeolian Harp* was a milestone in his career, in many ways it was only a stepping-stone to Cowell’s more adventurous composition. This next work would go away from warm, inviting tones and explore a cold, haunting sound.

The Banshee

The banshee is a creature common in Celtic mythology. According to Ciara O’Brien, “traditionally, the Banshee is depicted as a female ghost or spirit, in keeping with the Irish penchant for faeries, leprechauns, and other magical creatures The banshee cries her

⁴⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰ “It is more likely that the harp led Cowell’s conception of the string piano—a reversal of means and ends, since Varian sought unusual sounds by applying a keyboard to unconventional objects, whereas Cowell created unusual sounds on a conventional piano by keyboard.” Ibid., 12.

⁵¹ Johnson, “*Henry Cowell, John Varian, and Halcyon*,” 11.

frightening, haunting cries to warn human beings of impending death. To hear her doleful voice is to *know* that someone will soon pass to the other side.”⁵²

The intent here is to reproduce the shrieking, frightening sound of the banshee’s voice. Here Cowell deeply explores the inner workings of the piano. While the concept of having wailing sessions for loved ones who have passed away does not appear to be a part of Ireland’s culture, telling haunting stories is essential to their heritage. This piece must show, through sound, the coming, arriving, and leaving of a banshee.

Practice Guide

As with *Aeolian Harp*, the pianist must know and memorize the symbols assigned to certain sections of the work. Before the musician begins to learn the piece, he or she must find a person who is able to practice and perform with him or her—*The Banshee* requires two people to be at the piano, “himself [herself], standing in the crook of the piano, and an assistant who sat and worked the pedals.”⁵³

Once the pianist acquires his or her assistant, they must take their time in both the practice room and performance hall to allow the sound to grow, in addition to creating the haunting atmosphere needed to invoke the sound of the banshee: groaning, growling, crying, wailing, shrieking, and screaming. Cowell implies this with his instructions to play at “tempo rubato,” which allows the musician to perform at a leisurely speed even though he changes the pace later on. At the beginning of the music, the piano mostly moans and groans, but it begins to growl at measure 9 and cry at mm. 21.

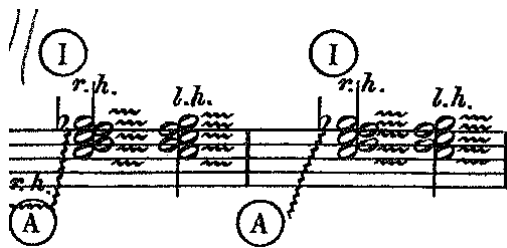
⁵² Ciara O’Brien. “Irish Mythology: The Banshee,” 27, 2010, <http://www.irishcelticjewels.com/celtic-wedding/2010/04/irish-mythology-the-banshee/> (accessed February 17, 2011).

⁵³ Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 115.

Figure 9. *The Banshee*, measures 9 and 10.



Figure 10. *The Banshee*, measures 21 and 22



At measure 25, Cowell specifies, “Faster” in that he wants the pianist to begin shrieking briefly before arriving at measure 26 when he demands to play “Presto,” which is significantly faster, for the next three measures afterwards.

Figure 11. *The Banshee*, 25 through 28.



Here is where the piano truly screams, although it is only for a brief moment in the song. The instruction to sweep lengthwise along the string with the back of the fingernails of both hands to cover all the notes between the boundaries given in the score, creates this sound.⁵⁴

Possible Sources for Cowell's use of the string piano technique

As I mentioned before, the banshee is an Irish mythological creature and a popular source for stories, as those about faeries and leprechauns. Furthermore, it was Varian who fostered Cowell's interest in Irish mythology, who provoked this work. "John Varian had recently asked him to set his poem *The Ban Shee* to music, using a piano and high-pitched soprano. Cowell agreed to do so, then decided to drop Varian's text and simply evoke the actual cries of the legendary Irish spirit by using what Seeger had called 'inarticulate pitch'—sliding tones that could evoke primitivistic 'wailing'."⁵⁵

Another probable inspiration for utilizing the strings that can be attributed to John Varian, also an amateur musician, was his desire to build a large harp. He nurtured this idea to create a harp while he was deep in the throes of creating modern music to set ancient Irish stories. Hicks writes, "it was to be a replica of the Harp of Life in Irish mythology." This thought joined with Varian's intentions of "attaching a keyboard to a harp was matched by his ideas for attaching other things to a piano."⁵⁶ As Cowell wrote music for Varian's settings, he was also privy to many of Varian's other interests, which included his ideas for the keyboard and the harp. The

⁵⁴Henry Cowell, *The Banshee*, Los Angeles: W. A. Quincke & Company, 1925.

⁵⁵ Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian*: 115.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

Aeolian Harp and *The Banshee*, therefore, had to emerge from Cowell's adventurous mind to make their home within the piano repertoire in ways the world had yet to experience.

CONCLUSION

Cowell's mind had already stretched itself quite a bit for his previous compositions. *The Tides of Maunaunaun* and *The Voice of Lir* took the concept of meshing together as many notes as possible and applying them to produce waves of motion in addition to mystery while showing a world being built. Even though he still used the keyboard in *Aeolian Harp*, he incorporated the use of the piano strings to change the timbre of the instrument while at the same time representing the wind. However, *The Banshee* seems to have pushed it even farther, such as to place him on a different pedestal, beyond what his contemporaries, and even the world, could have expected. Hicks writes, "with his clusters and string piano Cowell had distanced himself from both precursors and peers. Around the world he had achieved a kind of freakish notoriety."⁵⁷

The knowledge of the immediate context of these pieces shaped my performance in terms of a greater flexibility in the use of time. There were times when I practiced, that my rigidity with the tempo brought about a tameness and predictability in the music that Cowell was trying to avoid. Oftentimes, it seemed that if I did not let go of being overly self-conscious that I was only trapping myself, but taking Cowell's music with me as a hostage. Nevertheless, in the performance I was able to put away my feelings of self-awareness, and gave into the character of the pieces. I focused on the Maunaunaun's waves, hid half of Lir's instructions, imitated the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 16.

wind for the *Aeolian Harp*, and portrayed the banshee's screams to the best of my abilities and at my own pace.

It is possible that someone like Cowell, whose entire life was based on total freedom—not just in how he made his music, but even in how he lived his life—might not approve of performing the pieces in a manner that would allow them to be heard the same way twice. By performing at a slower pace, or his “tempo rubato,” the atmosphere and picture the music intends to portray have time to develop and to remain in the ears and minds of both the performer and the members of the audience. Taking time to build this picture was important to Cowell as well.

Hicks writes,

This music was not written according to rules, and it did not come about through study, but through direct interest. And since it was written without reference to rules, it can hardly be said that the rules were broken by it He [Cowell] would later declare, “I do not compose according to any set scheme. I do not compose while either in an emotional or intellectual fever I do not follow any formula I do not try to follow the style of any composer old or new.”⁵⁸

To play these works with a sort of unrestricted tempo will not only liberate the performer and the music, but it will allow for the free-spirited nature, found in Henry Cowell, to live on.

⁵⁸ Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 90.

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