

QUARTET ROMANTIC

New World Records 80285

These notes have been adapted from NW 285 (Alfred Frankenstein) and NW 319 (Perry Goldstein).

Wallingford Riegger (1885-1961)

Wind Quintet

If John J. Becker is the most obscure composer on this record, Wallingford Riegger is the most difficult to get hold of stylistically. He wrote music in every manner there was in his time; he even published pop pieces under nine different pseudonyms. His career—as composer, cellist, conductor, theorist, and professor of composition at various universities—was as varied as his musical output.

Riegger's short, vigorous, peppery one-movement Quintet for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Horn, and Bassoon was published in 1952. Of all the major avant-garde Americans of his era, Riegger was the most interested in modern dance. He wrote much for Martha Graham, Erick Hawkins, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman and others, and the generally spare, severe, athletic style preferred by these dancers is clearly reflected in his music. The Quintet is full of Riegger's beloved canonic devices and sharp, reiterative Stravinskyan rhythms as well.

Henry Cowell (1897-1965)

Quartet Romantic

Unlike the other works on this record, Henry Cowell's *Quartet Romantic* is essentially a demonstration of theoretical principles, and some inkling of these principles is essential to understanding the music. Unfortunately, the principles are abstruse. Cowell wrote the better part of a book, *New Musical Resources*, to explain them, and then explained them all over again in a somewhat more condensed form as a preface to the published score. They are actually impossible to put into a few words, especially without examples in musical notation.

Basically, the idea, as set forth in the preface to the score, is to demonstrate the "physical identity between rhythm and harmony." This idea occurred to Cowell as a student as early as 1914, and in response to it he ultimately composed two works, the *Quartet Romantic* (1915-17), for two flutes, violin, and viola, and the *Quartet Euphometric* (1916-19), for the standard string quartet. Cowell calls them "rhythm-harmony quartets." The *Quartet Romantic* is in two movements and derives its title from the fact that "its musical intention was flowing and lyrical." Both quartets are atonal. As late as 1964, when both works were published, Cowell considered them unplayable, but the unplayable has a way of yielding its secrets with the passage of time.

In the preface to the score, Cowell provides an elementary demonstration that the overtones of a single musical sound can stack up to at least sixteen upper partials, all of which are simultaneously audible under certain conditions. Drawing a parallel between the overtone series and rhythmic relations, Cowell calls (in *New Musical Resources*) for fifth, sixth, eleventh, and fifteenth notes as well as the standard whole, half, quarter, eighth, and sixteenth, and for time signatures like 2/6 and 7/15. He actually does not go that far in the notation of the "rhythm-harmony quartets," since players would then be required to learn a totally new system of reading music; but by means of numerically indicated groupings, like those used for the triplet, quintuplet, and sextolet, he plays off 6 2/3 against 5 1/3 against 2 2/3 all in a

single measure. Sometimes the grouping changes within a single measure, so that the performers find themselves up against $7 \frac{1}{2}$ versus $2 \frac{4}{5}$ versus $3 \frac{1}{3}$ versus $3 \frac{3}{4}$ versus $2 \frac{1}{3}$, all in one bar.

This is not all there is to the theory and the problems of the "rhythm-harmony quartets," but that's enough so far as these notes are concerned. Cowell never returned to anything even remotely like the rhythmic complexity of these works.

Henry Cowell was the central figure in the American musical avant-garde of the period covered by this recording. And his efforts on behalf of others should be touched on here.

His quarterly, *New Music*, the only periodical in the world devoted entirely to the publication of music, made its first appearance on October 1, 1927. It lasted twenty-six years and put out a hundred and four issues containing approximately a hundred and eighty separate works. It sprouted additional publications as it went along: an orchestral series of about thirty-five works from 1932 to 1939, a "special" series of ten titles (1938 to 1947), and twenty-nine discs of forty-eight works, nearly all by American composers, from 1937 to 1949. Cowell did all the secretarial and managerial work connected with these ventures himself and, except for a little help from Charles Ives and one or two others, made up the deficits out of his own pocket. The records were issued from New York, the scores from San Francisco, in or near which Cowell lived for many years. The composers and works he published constitute a roster of everyone and everything that was important in modern American music in his time.

Seven Paragraphs

A meeting in 1927 between Cowell and Charles Ives marked an important event in the lives of both composers. Cowell became Ives's champion, disseminating the older composer's music worldwide, and Ives helped finance a number of Cowell's ambitious musical projects. The exposure that Ives received in the 1930s was due to Cowell's enthusiasm for his older colleague. Cowell lectured throughout his life on the music of Ives, and in 1955 collaborated with his wife to produce a biography entitled *Charles Ives and His Music*.

Self-taught in composition in his youth, Cowell was free of the influences of a traditional European program in composition. He assimilated music to which he was exposed in his childhood, from the Iowan folk songs heard in the family to the Chinese opera and children's tunes of San Francisco. Un-schooled in ideas about the "proper" materials for music, he came to regard all sound as part of the compositional palette. "From childhood on," writes David Ewen (in *American Composers: A Biographical Dictionary*), "he was sensitive to extra-musical sounds around him, which seemed to bring him a music all their own: the noises of the wind and sea, of moving trains, of unusual speech inflections and intonations."

In 1914 Cowell began studying composition with Charles Seeger, who encouraged him to organize his musical ideas in a coherent way, and who exposed him to the music of numerous other avant-garde composers.

As Charles Hamm has pointed out (New World 80203-2), "Henry Cowell continued Ives's tradition of eclecticism, but on a global scale." Indeed, in 1955 Cowell said (quoted in Ewen's book cited above), "I

want to live in the whole world of music." In his early works he included collections of dissonant intervals called tone clusters, and extended traditional piano techniques by banging his fists, palms, and forearms on the keyboard, by strumming strings inside the piano, and by placing objects between the strings to alter the instrument's timbral capabilities. Although he also composed tonal and traditionally oriented music during this early period, Cowell is mostly known for the radical experimentalism that marks his works until the 1930s, when his fascination with the music of other cultures reasserted itself. From that point until the 1950s, his music reveals a preoccupation with folk idioms—it is rhythmically more predictable, less dissonant, and generally tonal. From 1950 until his death, he attempted to synthesize the innovative techniques he had developed until 1935 with the later, ethnically influenced music.

A prolific composer whose output is estimated at 1,060 works (about a hundred of which are unfinished), Cowell was a leading spokesman for, and catalyst of, new music. His influence was pervasive, especially in its effect on two of his students, John Cage and Lou Harrison.

Seven Paragraphs, for string trio, was composed in 1925. It has a directness and clarity of structure; like most of Cowell's music, no matter how complex the generating ideas, it is clear in outline and straightforward in expression. In each paragraph, or movement, one motivic idea and one mood predominates.

The seven movements fall into two groups. Movements one, five, and seven unfold slowly, each musical line moving at a different time. These three movements share harmonic material and have a gentle, hymn-like quality. Movements two, three, four, and six serve as character-piece miniatures; all are rhythmically active and are composed of highly profiled material. Movement two has the character of a march gone awry, and movement three is sober, angular, and composed of canons and other repetitive counterpoint. In movement four, which has the quality of a scherzo, all the instruments participate in the continuous exposure of the main theme. Movement six is a purposeful and mechanical miniature built entirely of canons.

The eclecticism and freedom in Cowell's approach to composition are manifested in the materials and techniques of *Seven Paragraphs*. The distinct and unambiguous character of each movement is reminiscent of the Baroque doctrine of affects, while the strict use of canons and other imitative counterpoint has its roots in earlier compositional techniques. In addition, the occasional occurrence of harmonies from traditional tonal music demonstrates that Cowell was free of the kind of stylistic orthodoxy prominent in the works of composers later in this century.

Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953)

Suite No. 2 for Four Strings and Piano

Like Henry Cowell, Ruth Crawford Seeger was indebted to musicologist Charles Seeger (whom she married in 1931) for exposing her to a number of the avant-garde musical approaches of the day. She wrote: "He shared with me his conception of the aspects and as yet untried possibilities, both in form and content, of a new music . . ." (quoted in Ewen's book cited above). She was among the first composers outside of Schoenberg's circle to employ the twelve-tone method, and she was also in the vanguard in serializing musical dimensions other than pitch.

Her early study included piano and composition at the American Conservatory in Chicago, which she entered in 1920. In 1930, a year after she had begun studying composition with Seeger in New York, she was the first woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship, which enabled her to study in Berlin and Paris. She received further recognition in 1933 when her *Three Songs* were chosen to represent the United States in the prestigious festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music.

After 1930 her music became increasingly innovative and explored the possibilities of musical simultaneity. Her interest in and development of new compositional techniques made her one of the most advanced composers of the day. Her music is almost always intensely dissonant, taut, individual, and uncompromising. It embraces the attitude toward the composer's responsibility expressed by Charles Seeger in an early essay, "Ruth Crawford":

Without more adventurous and fundamental thinking, even feeling gets tangled, and stays tangled. Neo-classicism, neo-Romanticism, and other misnomers are mere conscience-quieters for workers in a pampered art who are at their wits' end for a compass, a course, and a hand at the helm.

(The above quote appears in *American Composers on American Music: A Symposium*, ed. Henry Cowell.)

Crawford Seeger's catalogue is small; her principal works number fewer than fifteen. Her musical career was divided among composing, teaching, and her great interest in American folk music. Between 1932 and 1941 she did virtually no composing but taught music to nursery-school children, incorporating American folk music into her teaching program. With her husband, she was indefatigable in collecting folk songs, making thousands of transcriptions from recordings in the Library of Congress, and composing accompaniments for approximately three hundred of them.

Despite the quality of the composition, Ruth Crawford Seeger's Suite No. 2 for Four Strings and Piano (1929) has never been published, and this is its first recording. Her works are infrequently recorded or performed, a neglect for which it is difficult to account. The answer may lie partly in the unostentatious way she assimilated some of the more radical twentieth-century compositional techniques. The resulting music—serious, uncompromising, often angular, and introspectively individual—may not have caught on partly because the arbiters of taste in the avant garde regarded the flashy and novel with greater interest than it did those pieces that refused to call attention to the boldness and newness of their conception.

The first movement of the Suite begins as a quiet, dark, brooding presence in which a slow, steady pulse in the piano accompanies the even rhythms of the strings. This gives way to a section for strings alone in which little motivic wisps of music weave contrapuntally in and out of the texture. The counterpoint is of a fastidiously minute kind; rhythms and pitches are slightly out of phase with each other, barely and unsettlingly out of focus. Climax is generated by a crescendo to unison rhythms in the strings (the contrast between counterpoint and unison is employed throughout the work to great effect). The movement closes with a return to the opening material.

The second movement is dominated by an ostinato, consisting of two groups of four notes each, clearly audible in the piano. Superimposed on these ostinatos is a motivic complex shared by the strings and characterized by a sighing descent from high pitch to low. Like the first movement, the

second concludes with a return to the Suite's opening measures. Throughout the movement the alternation of measures of six and five beats creates an off-balance quality.

After two movements in a mostly accompanimental capacity the piano bursts loose in the third movement to lead the strings in a comically grotesque elephantine procession. This energetic music is followed by a smoothly flowing andante tranquillo, which moves inexorably to a modified version of the A section's material, jazzed up by syncopation and jagged rhythms. The piece concludes with another return to the opening music of the first movement, which now reveals itself as a dark and somber ritornello.

Lou Harrison (b. 1917)

Trio for Violin, Viola, and Violoncello

Lou Harrison studied composition with Henry Cowell in the early 1930s. Exposure by Cowell to the music of Charles Ives and to his own music encouraged Harrison's eclecticism, which had been nurtured by an early love for Chinese and Persian art. It was also through Cowell that Harrison met Cage, who exerted an important influence on him as a friend and colleague. Cowell also encouraged both Harrison and Cage to study with Arnold Schoenberg, from whom both learned, and for a time adopted, the method of composition with twelve tones. Like Cage and Cowell, Harrison exerted an important influence on the American musical scene through his writings; during the 1940s he contributed to *View, Modern Music*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*. In addition to composing, writing on music and dance, and organizing concerts, he has also taught, notably at the Greenwich Settlement Music School in New York City, Black Mountain College in North Carolina (Cage also taught there), and San Jose State College in California.

The diversity of Harrison's activities has been paralleled by the diversity of his compositional approach. Like Cage and Cowell, Harrison believes that the composer is free to use virtually any sound in the environment, and this has led to an exploration of the artistic and philosophical sensibilities of the music of other cultures. Some of his work reveals the influence of Korean and Chinese music. Observing Harrison's energetic eclecticism, Carter Harman has written (NW 281):

Harrison's interest in Asian music and his use of exotic tunings, unusual instruments, and medieval compositional techniques suggest the range of his mind, which has extended to designing and constructing new instruments, inventing musical systems, writing plays, and constructing mobiles.

Lou Harrison's *Trio for Violin, Viola, and Violoncello* is in one movement marked *Poco lento*. The discrete phrases with which the work begins lend their impulse to the start-and-stop character of the entire work. The piece describes a process of increasing complexity: Phrases become longer, the melodic lines more active and involved, and the contrapuntal fabric more complex. The increasing activity generates a climax two-thirds of the way through, after which the music quickly subsides to a point of rest. The quiet opening of the work now reemerges, with alterations in the music of the lower two instruments adding intensity. This recapitulation eases into a slower passage in which a *stretto* of sighs alights on and intensifies the gestural character previously only implied but now fully realized.

John J. Becker (1886-1961)

The Abongo

"Laws are made for imitators. Creators make laws." So said John J. Becker in an essay of 1933 that is quoted in everybody's essays on Becker. It sounds iconoclastic, defiant, and individualistic in the highest extreme; and it was. But Becker did not know—nobody knew—that William Billings, the Boston composer of religious music, had said the same thing a hundred and sixty-three years earlier in the introduction to his *New England Psalm Singer*:

For my own Part, as I don't think myself confin'd to any Rules for composition, laid down by any that went before me, neither should I think (were I to pretend to lay down Rules) that any who came after me were in any ways obligated to adhere to them, any further than they should think proper; so in fact, I think it best for every *Composer* to be his own *Carver*.

Becker was decidedly his own carver, and his attitude is one of the things that led to the modern revival of Billings; indeed, one might suggest the existence of a Billings-to-Becker tradition that encompasses everything progressive in American music. But the laws that Becker as creator made for himself are no more specifically stated than those of his great predecessor. The literature on Becker, including the most extensive study so far, an article by Don Gillespie in *The Musical Quarterly* for April, 1976 deals almost exclusively with this composer's heroic efforts to foster the performance of modern music in the Middle West; Gillespie's title is "John Becker, Musical Crusader of St. Paul."

The Abongo (subtitled "A Primitive Dance"), composed in 1933, represents a moment in modern music when sounds of fixed pitch were largely abandoned in favor of sounds of indefinite pitch; it also represents a moment when fascination with African native expression, which began with certain paintings of Picasso's produced around 1907, had finally seeped down to American composers. Another feature of the score that is highly typical of its time is its use of instruments never dreamed of by professors of orchestration: small and large tin pans, small and large barrels, a water drum, two sets of hand clappers, three sets of timpani (very restricted in their range of pitches), small and large cymbals, gongs, tam-tams, snare drum, snareless drums of various sizes, and bass drum.

The Abongo is a rhythm piece; polyrhythm is what it is mainly about, though instrumental color and nuance are also of its substance. It also has a plot, one that will do nothing to enhance Becker's standing among women's liberationists. The plot has to do with the public humiliation and physical punishment of a defiant wife according to the laws of an African tribe. A few hints for balletic or pantomimic action appear in the score. After six measures of very quiet introduction, the water drum suddenly blasts off with repeated strokes *fff*; this is marked "signal for tribe to assemble. Natives begin to straggle in one by one and in groups." A few bars later, "by the time the end of this section is reached, the entire tribe should be assembled and they should begin to be hilariously noisy." There is a sudden silence: "Husband appears with big stick. A moment of silent expectancy as he drags his wife out by the hair." Eight pages later, "Chorus begins to dance." At the very end, as the music reaches its climactic conclusion, with all the instruments banging away on heavily accented notes, the dramatic indication, surprisingly, is "great laughter."

"The subject [of a poem] is the bit of meat the burglar brings along to keep the house dog quiet," said

T. S. Eliot, and the same thing may have been necessary for percussion music in 1933.

PRODUCER'S NOTE

by **Horace Grenell**

In order to record the *Quartet Romantic* the two flutes, violin, and viola were seated in a studio that looked like a space machine from the twenty-first century. Each performer wore headphones from which trailed cables leading into tape machines in the control room, where sat the engineer, two assistants, and the producer. Above the instrumentalists were several booms, each with an outstretched arm holding a microphone and with cables leading to the eight-track tape machine in the control room on which the master recording was being made.

If you look at the musical excerpt, you will see that no two instruments play together and that the rhythmic pulses in a measure add up to a different total for each instrument. Consequently, the performer will not know when to come in or how long to hold the notes; he will not even be able to hear what the other instruments are playing. It is much like trying to beat a different pulse simultaneously with each of your ten fingers.

When he completed the work, Henry Cowell wrote, "This piece is humanly impossible to play! However, if at some future time, through whatever new developments or electronic advances it should become possible to perform, this is how I want it to sound," and he left detailed instructions. What was impossible in 1915-16 becomes possible in 1978, although a concert performance (without all the equipment) may still not succeed.

Our practical solution was this: We provided each performer with a specially prepared click tape on which were recorded the basic beats of his own musical line and which he could hear through his ear-phones. But he could hear only his own beats, nothing of the other instruments. Using these beats as a guide, he knew precisely when to play. Similarly, each of the other performers would hear only his own click tape, nothing of what the other instruments were playing or of any of the other click tapes. We had one additional caution, to control the noise level of the clicks; if they were too loud, the sounds would leak through the phones into the studio and be picked up on the master tape in the control room.

During numerous rehearsals, we faced major musical performing problems. How, if the players could not hear each other, could they match tone quality, intonation, dynamic range, and nuance—how could they balance each other? After each recorded take we listened repeatedly in the control room to the master tape and noted all corrections required; we made the necessary changes in balance and levels and oversaw the general refining of phrasing and performance. With proper advice from the producer, who alone in the control room was hearing the complete performance, it was possible to make this ingenious undertaking an accurate, sensitive, subtly colored, and surprisingly romantic performance.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

John J. Becker

At Dieppe. Susan Narucki, soprano; Myron Romanul, piano. Koch International Classics KIC 7207.

Concerto arabesque. Anthony de Mare, piano; Monadnock Music Festival Orchestra, James Bolle conducting. Koch International Classics KIC 7207.

Sound Piece No. 1. Anthony de Mare, piano; Monadnock Music Festival Orchestra, James Bolle conducting. Koch International Classics KIC 7207.

Symphony No. 3 (*Symphonia Brevis*). Louisville Orchestra, Jorge Mester conducting. Albany TROY 027-2.

Henry Cowell

Aeolian Harp. Robert Miller, piano. New World 80203-2.

The Banshee. Robert Miller, piano. New World 80203-2.

Piano Piece (Paris 1924). Robert Miller, piano. New World 80203-2.

Pulse. New Music Consort. New World 80405-2.

Quartet Euphometric. The Emerson String Quartet. New World 80453-2.

Ruth Porter Crawford Seeger

Diaphonic Suite No.1, for oboe solo. James P Ostryniec, oboe. CRI CD 658.

Diaphonic Suite No.2, for bassoon and cello. Otto Eifert, bassoon; Roy Christensen, cello. Gasparo 108CX.

Movements for Chamber Orchestra. Boston Musica Viva, Richard Pittman conducting. Delos DCD 1012.

Study in Mixed Accents. Joseph Bloch, piano. CRI CD 658.

Suite for Wind Quintet. Lark Wind Quintet. CRI CD 658.

Lou Harrison

Concerto for Organ and Percussion Orchestra. David Craighead, organ; Los Angeles Percussion Ensemble, William Kraft conducting. Crystal CD 850.

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. Keith Jarrett, piano; New Japan Philharmonic, Naoto Otomo conducting. New World 80366-2.

Fugue for Percussion. New Albion NA 055.

Suite for Violin, Piano, and Small Orchestra. Lucy Stoltzman, violin; Keith Jarrett, piano; Robert Hughes conducting. New World 80366-2.

Wallingford Riegger

Blue Voyage. R. Salvatore, piano. Premier PRCD 1019.

Movement for Two Trumpets, Trombone, and Piano, Op. 66. National Orchestral Association Alumni, John Barnett conducting. CRI CD 572.

Music for Brass Choir, Op. 45. National Orchestral Association Alumni, John Barnett conducting. CRI CD 572.

Nonet for Brass, Op. 49. National Orchestral Association Alumni, John Barnett conducting. CRI CD 572.

Symphony No. 3. Eastman-Rochester Symphony Orchestra, Howard Hanson, conducting. CRI CD 572.

The New Jersey Percussion Ensemble: Anthony DeFalco and Louis Oddo, drums; Ernest Buongiorno, water drum; Doreen Holmes, tin pans; Ken Hosley, barrels; Mark Schipper, Tony Cinardo, Edmund Fay, timpani; Bruce Tatti, tamtams; Gary VanDyke, snare drum; Vincent Varcadipane, bass drum; Charles Descarfino, small cymbals; James Hurst, large gong & large cymbals; James Pugliese and Rick Sacks, hand clappers; Raymond DesRoches, director.

Producer: Horace Grenell (Wind Quintet, *Quartet Romantic*, *The Abongo*); Elizabeth Ostrow (*Seven Paragraphs*, Suite No. II, String Trio)

Engineer: Stan Tonkel (Wind Quintet, *Quartet Romantic*, *The Abongo*); Anthony Salvatore (*Seven Paragraphs*, Suite No. II, String Trio)

Tape editing: Don Van Gordon (Wind Quintet, *Quartet Romantic*, *The Abongo*); Kathryn King (*Seven Paragraphs*, Suite No. II, String Trio)

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QUARTET ROMANTIC 80285-2

WALLINGFORD RIEGGER (1885-1961)

1 Wind Quintet (6:40) (publ. Ars Viva Verlag, Mainz)

Paul Lustig Dunkel, flute; Stephen Taylor, oboe; Virgil Blackwell, clarinet; Frank Morelli, bassoon; Stewart Rose, horn

HENRY COWELL (1897-1965)

2 *Quartet Romantic* (17:06) (publ. C. F. Peters Corporation)
Paul Lustig Dunkel, flute; Susan Palma, flute; Rolf Schulte, violin;
John Graham, viola

3 *Seven Paragraphs* (6:52) (publ. C. F. Peters Corp.)
Evan Peris, violin; Lois Martin, viola; Madeleine Shapiro, cello

RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER (1901-1953)

4 Suite No. II (9:48) (unpubl.: © Estate of Ruth Crawford Seeger)
Linda Quan, Evan Paris, violins; Lois Martin, viola; Madeleine Shapiro, cello; Aleck Karis, piano

LOU HARRISON (b. 1917)

5 String Trio (4:49) (publ. C. F. Peters Corp.)
Linda Quan, violin; Lois Martin, viola; Madeleine Shapiro, cello

JOHN J. BECKER (1886-1961)

6 *The Abongo* (9:42) (publ. Philharmusica Corporation)
New Jersey Percussion Ensemble at William Paterson College, Raymond DesRoches, Director

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