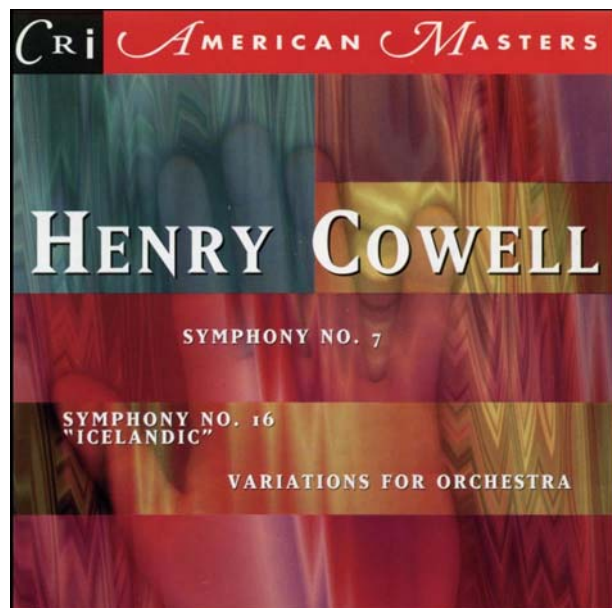


NWCR740

Henry Cowell

Orchestral Works



1. *Variations for Orchestra* (1956) (18:34)
Polish National Radio Orchestra
- Symphony No. 16* (“Icelandic”) (1962) (24:59)
2. I. Moderato con moto (3:47)
3. II. Allegro (4:19)
4. III. Adagio cantabile (7:29)
5. IV. Vivace (2:46)
6. V. Maestoso (7:40)
Iceland Symphony Orchestra
- Symphony No. 7* (1952) (25:58)
7. I. Maestoso (9:22)
8. II. Andante (6:52)
9. III. Presto (4:00)
10. IV. Maestoso (5:37)
The Vienna Symphony Orchestra
William Strickland, conductor

*mono

Total Playing Time: 68:41

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Notes

Henry Cowell (b Menlo Park, CA, 11 March 1897; d Shady, NY, 10 Dec 1965) once told his wife that he guessed he was “a man mostly music.” In a radio interview with Edward R. Murrow in the 1950s he said, “I believe in music: its humor, its power to penetrate to the basic fineness of every human being.” And, in a compositional career that spanned more than a half-century and spawned almost one thousand works, he was the very embodiment of his aim to “live in the whole world of music.”

Early in his career, Cowell gained notoriety as an experimental vanguardist. This reputation arose especially from his piano works of the 1920s and even earlier, which were astonishing for their unheard-of rhythmic complexity and their *tone clusters*—created by fist and forearm leaning or smashing on the keyboard. They marked him as an ultramodernist. By the early 1930s he was proclaiming Arnold Schoenberg to be the world’s greatest composer, and his own music reflected this sympathy in its contrapuntal integrity, its dissonant acidity, and its abstract instrumentalism. At about the same time, though, his early Pacific Coast experience of Asiatic musics was expanded through studies during a Guggenheim Fellowship in Berlin: there, he found fantastic resources for hearing recordings and playing instruments from all over the world in the Phonogramm-Archiv and Staatliche Instrumentensammlung. Soon, back in New York, Cowell was giving courses in “Music Systems of the World” and “Music of the World’s Peoples” at the progressive New School, and in his own music he began an attempt to synthesize the ultramodern style with his new ethnic contagions.

The economic and political impact of the Depression years led to a populist slant in Cowell’s work. Then, however, imprisonment in San Quentin for four years, on a flimsy morals

charge, virtually silenced him as a composer. Paroled in 1940 (and pardoned two years later), he married a remarkable woman, Sidney Robertson, who helped him back into productivity. Now, however, he turned to American folk hymnody as well as the traditional idioms of his Irish forbearers, and to a new simplicity and tonal accessibility—and also to an unprecedented output of large-scale orchestral works. To cite only one statistic: in the years from 1942 until his death in 1965, Cowell composed no fewer than eighteen symphonies.

This late “symphonic Cowell” is represented on this recording by two works of the 1950s and one of the 1960s. By then, the early modernist and the middle-period multiculturalist/populist had given way to an ecumenical “amalgamist” (to coin a word)—and a rather robust, if deceptively offhanded and easygoing master of orchestral textures and colors. Two sensitive, intelligent musicians, both of whom knew Cowell very well, had interesting takes on this later music. Virgil Thomson remarked: “His music is not complex, but it sings. It is not highly polished, but it has structure. It is not strikingly ambitious either, but it has presence. And never is it bogus or vulgar or stupid or falsely inspired.” And Richard Franko Goldman, speaking of the Fifteenth Symphony (1960), wrote:

“It is full of apparent contradictions. It seems both of our time and remote from it. Compared to the music being written on the advanced frontiers, it is curiously innocent and removed; yet compared with the more academic writing of the sixties, it seems as fresh as spring flowers. One would hesitate to call it a great work, and yet it is hard to see how anyone could deny that it is an interesting one ... [and that] no one else could have written it.”

Cowell’s *Variations for Orchestra* (L. 833), “written for [conductor] Thor Johnson and the Cincinnati Symphony

Orchestra,” was completed in August 1956; he revised the work in 1959, and it is the revised version we hear in this recording. (The “L” number is that assigned to the work in William Lichtenwanger’s *The Music of Henry Cowell: A Descriptive Catalog* [Brooklyn: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1986]).

The following is adapted from a note of the composer’s at the head of his manuscript score:

“The Variations are based upon a brief, simple, and melodious theme of twelve different tones (first announced in unison), but the work is not developed according to Schoenberg’s twelve-tone row technique. Neither is it in conventional theme-and-variations form: rather, each variation is a kind of independent mini-movement that develops ideas from the theme, freely used. Every orchestral instrument has a chance to show off in a solo, and each section of the orchestra has a chance to play as a solo unit, the percussion section having an unusually important role. There is no extramusical program.”

The brief Theme has a preliminary development leading into what I shall call “Variation 1” (Cowell neither numbers or names the successive variation “movements.”) This section is one of those perpetual-motion Allegros Cowell was fond of: xylophone leads off, and is followed successively by flute, clarinet, oboe, and pizzicato strings. “Variation 2”—slow-moving, lyrical—is melody-driven, an ever-fresh succession of continuous, sinuous melodic clauses, explored by instrument after instrument, which lasts for no fewer than four minutes. “Variation 3,” almost entirely for percussion (including piano and strings played *col legno*, that is, tapped “with the wood” of their bows), is by contrast rhythm-driven—a relentless pulsating counterpoint of rhythmic ostinatos unfolds under another perpetual-motion stream, a meandering melody (led by the piano, then xylophone, and again piano) that simply fades out to end the variation.

Tranquility follows in “Variation 4”: against a quietly oscillating background wash, one solo instrument after another projects an unpredictable, improvisatory, free-flowing modal melody. The scherzo-like “Variation 5” is a stop-and-go movement—or rather “go-and-stop”—the “go” passages being *prestissimo* soft-shoe shuffles that alternate with “stops” of slower-moving four-note figures or chords (deriving from the chromatic curves of the original theme). What turns out to be a Finale begins with a portentous chorale-like phrase that gives way to a vigorous march-like idea. Ultimately Cowell combines these two elements in a long crescendo to a climactic conclusion in which a dizzyingly dissonant full-orchestra chord slowly dissolves into a monumental six-octave A (the A to which an orchestra tunes, before a concert).

Cowell’s Symphony No. 16 (“Icelandic”) (L. 912) was commissioned by the government of Iceland for the dedicatory ceremonies of a new auditorium at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík, and was premiered in Reykjavík on March 21, 1963. The premier performance was (as on this recording) by the Iceland Symphony Orchestra conducted by William Strickland, for whom the work was written. The scoring is for a large orchestra, with special demands for percussion (“six different sized drums without snares,” “six pieces of ringing metal,” etc.). Cowell here drew on Icelandic traditional melody and an ancient Icelandic mode of singing—specifically, Lydian-mode melody and the “twin-song” (*tvisöngur*) or double-singing of such melody. Lydian-mode melody sounds like conventional do-re-mi-fa major-mode melody but with the fourth tone (the

fa) skewed a half-step high; in “twin-song,” the melody is doubled at a higher or lower pitch and sung in parallel motion with it, as in the earliest medieval polyphony (organum). In the course of working with these two features of Icelandic music, Cowell discovered that he could produce, in the most natural, unforced way, a sweetly dissonant—indeed, atonal—polyphonic music. This gives this symphony a character all its own and a massive unity of style that underlines the varied expressive qualities of its five movements.

Another exceptional aspect of the Icelandic Symphony is Cowell’s genial use of the hymn-and-fuguing-tune principle—“something slow [then] something fast”—to pair movements 1 and 2 (Moderato and Allegro) and 3 and 4 (Adagio and Vivace). Movement 5 then recalls, in new combinations and sequences, material from all four previous movements. The first movement itself has a hymnic first section (wholly concerned with its Lydian-mode theme), followed by a slightly faster and more rigorously contrapuntal (quasi-fugal) second section based on a variant of that theme. The bright and amiable second movement, sparked by a still-faster variant of the theme, also borrows the rhythmic features of another Icelandic melodic repertory, the *rimor* (rhyme-songs), which are characterized by a great variety of metric patterns—3 beats, 4, 2, and so on—in unpredictable patterns like those of ancient Icelandic bardic poetry. The third movement, gentle and lyrical, gives way to a perky scherzo, unpredictable in its kaleidoscopic switches of instrumental colors; its ending is similar to the “big exhalation” ending the scherzo of Symphony No. 7. The finale is a patchwork quilt of reminiscences of ideas from the preceding four movements, linked by skeins of chromatically colorful scales curling hither and yon, and culminating in an apotheosis of the hymn-like first-movement theme.

In 1952 Cowell succeeded Nicolas Nabokov as teacher of composition at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. There he found new and sympathetic colleagues, notably Hugo Weisgall, and there his extraordinary series of symphonies bloomed: following No. 6 of 1951 came five more by the end of 1953, Nos. 6 to 11, the Eleventh (Seven Rituals of Music) considered by many to be his greatest. Among these was Symphony No. 7 “for small orchestra” (L. 776), first performed in the Peabody Auditorium on November 25, 1952, by the Little Orchestra of Baltimore, conducted by Reginald Stewart.

The Seventh Symphony is built in a conventional symphonic structure of four movements. The first, weightiest of the four, is brightened by a perpetual-motion folk-fiddle tune that eventually takes center stage. (The more solemn first theme doesn’t join in the recapitulation: we must await the beginning of the fourth movement for that.) The second movement owes much to Indonesia—pentatonic scales, tick-tock rhythms (with ticky-tocky and tickety-tockety counter-rhythms), and bell-like sonorities; its rondo-like form (A B A C A D A)—however, is Euro American. Next comes a scherzo movement, one of Cowell’s Irish jigs, which soon starts surprising the ear in all kinds of ways. It is periodically interrupted by a drunken waltz, and the movement finally gives up in a big exhalation by the strings—a double run, both up and down, loud to soft. The last movement begins by recalling the first’s hymnic opening theme; that is soon challenged by a neo-Baroque tune that we just know will become a fugue subject—and it does, eventually—and the movement derives basically from Cowell’s hymn-and-fuguing-tune principle of bipartite form (“something slow followed by something fast,” as he put it).

—H. Wiley Hitchcock

Production Notes

Variations for Orchestra: Originally released in 1968; funded by the Alice M. Ditson Memorial Fund. (Issued previously on CRI SD 217.) *Symphony No. 16 ("Icelandic")*: Recorded May 1963. (Issued previously on CRI SD 179.) *Symphony No. 7*: Recorded at Bell Sound Studios, Inc., February 1961. (Issued previously on CRI SD 142.)

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