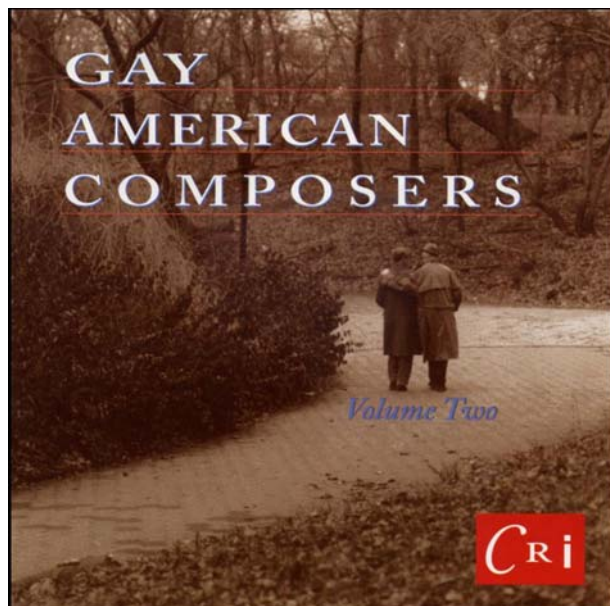


# Gay American Composers



Henry Cowell (1897–1965)

1. *Aeolian Harp* (1923) ..... (1:32)
2. *The Banshee* (1925) ..... (1:42)
3. *The Lilt of the Reel* (1925) ..... (1:58)  
Henry Cowell, piano; (Recorded 1956, New York City)

Harry Partch (1901–1974)

4. *Ulysses at the Edge of the World* (1960) ..... (6:37)  
The Gate Five Ensemble of the University of Illinois: David Reid, voice, baritone saxophone; Dick Schleppe, alto saxophone; Danlee Mitchell, bamboo marimba, cloud-chamber bowls; Harry Partch, diamond marimba, cloud-chamber bowls; (Recorded 1958 in Evanston, Illinois)

Samuel Barber (1910–1981)

- Excursions for Piano* (1945) ..... (11:46)
5. I. Un poco allegro ..... (3:16)
  6. II. In slow blues tempo ..... (3:42)
  7. III. Allegretto ..... (2:40)
  8. IV. Allegro molto ..... (2:09)  
Zola Shaulis, piano ; (Recorded 1972, New York City)

Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964)

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (1931)

9. I. Moderato molto ..... (10:50)  
Michael Barrett, piano; Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra; Lukas Foss, conductor; (Recorded 1986, New York City)

Aaron Copland (1900–1990)

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1943)

10. I. Moderate tempo ..... (7:25)  
Carroll Glenn, violin; Hilde Somer, piano; (Recorded 1963, New York City)

Virgil Thomson (1890–1989)

- Symphony No. 3* (1972)..... (8:05)
11. I. Allegro moderato ..... (3:50)
  12. II. Tempo di valzer ..... (4:11)  
New Hampshire Symphony Orchestra; James Bolle, conductor; (Recorded 1979, Boston)

Ben Weber (1916–1979)

13. *String Quartet No. 2, Op. 35* (1951) ..... (10:40)  
New Music Quartet: Broadus Earle, violin; Matthew Raimondi, violin; Walter Trapler, viola; Claus Adam, cello; (Recorded 1961, New York City)

John Cage (1912–1992)

14. *Ryoanji* (1983–1985) (excerpt) ..... (3:07)  
Jeffrey Krieger, electronic cello; (Recorded 1994, Glastonbury, Connecticut)

Alwin Nikolais (1910–1993)

Electronic Dance Music

15. *Frail Demons: Dance 1* (1984) ..... (2:52)
16. *Tribe: Dance 2* (1975) ..... (2:57)

John Cage (1912–1992)

17. *Sonata XIII* ..... (4:00)  
From *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1946–1948)  
Maro Ajemian, piano; (Recorded 1950, New York City)

Total playing time: 74:09

© 1972, 1976, 1980, 1988, 1993, 1995, 1997 & © 1997,  
Composers Recordings, Inc.  
© 2007 Anthology of Recorded Music, Inc.

## Notes

In the relatively short history of American classical music, it is a curious and extraordinary phenomenon that so many important composers were also homosexuals. But only in the last few years have musical historians and theorists begun to explore the facts and implications of the sexuality of these figures.

It is known that all of the composers in this collection were homosexual men. Admittedly, the majority of them were never identified as “gay composers” during their lives. Only recently, with the wider acceptance of out homosexuals in society, has the word “gay” been regularly used as an adjective—gay lifestyles, gay rights, gay

marketing. Though it may not be uncommon, it is still difficult to link the word to artistic matters.

In "Gay American Composers, Volume 1," which featured the work of mostly living composers, the artists wrote their own fascinating and revealing liner notes. While proudly and frankly acknowledging their sexuality, many of them expressed concern about identifying their *music* as gay. Volume 2 focuses on deceased composers, many of whom were the most widely acclaimed composers of their time. The intent is not to label their music as gay, but rather to acknowledge that they were gay men and to present characteristic samplings of their work as evidence of the wonderful diversity of American music itself.

It is our hope that this collection will help new audiences and new generations to recognize the important gay thread within the marvelous history of American music, and therefore to recognize also that American music has become a part of gay history.

**Henry Cowell** (b Menlo Park, CA, 11 March 1897; d Shady, NY, 10 Dec 1965) was a pioneer of many important trends in American music, as well as in the business of music in America. He wrote more than one thousand compositions—including "ultramodern" works for standard instruments, as well as twenty symphonies—and he was the first American composer to draw on the exotic sounds of other cultures. He was among the earliest exponents of the work of Charles Ives, and in the 1920s he founded a concert society, publishing house, and record label. His many students included John Cage and Lou Harrison.

The most unfortunate period in Cowell's life involved his arrest in 1936 for homosexual activity in his hometown of Menlo Park, California. He was imprisoned for four years in San Quentin. While many of the circumstances around this episode have still not been made public, it is known that Cowell continued to compose and lead a musical life while serving time. It is also documented that Charles Ives, who was indebted to Cowell for much important exposure of his works and who was the principle underwriter of Cowell's business enterprises, shunned Cowell during these years. Shortly after Cowell's release in June 1940, the momentum of his career resumed with important commissions and orchestral engagements. In September 1941, he married the musicologist Sidney Roberts and in April 1942 he reconciled with Ives.

As displayed in the three works here, the young Cowell's extraordinary approach to the piano was an attention-grabber. The late composer Lester Trimble, writing in 1957, said of Cowell's international infamy: "In 1923, when he was playing his own compositions in Leipzig, reaction in the audience grew so excited that fighting broke out and the police had to be called. In London, piano manufacturers were congratulated on building instruments capable of taking such a beating. And, in New York, the bout between "Kid Knabe" and "Battling Cowell" was covered for the newspapers by a *sports* critic. At the same time, and on the more serious side, such perceptive and knowledgeable people as Artur Schnabel, Bela Bartok, and the painter Kandinsky ranged themselves behind Cowell. Controversy certainly occurred in his career. But respect, enjoyment, and acceptance followed apace. Cowell, like most composers, approached his work with disarming naturalness. "I do not see at all," Cowell himself remarked, "why a composer's choice should be limited to the musical materials used in Europe for the past 350 years alone. What interests me is music itself as organized sound, its forms, and all the

possibilities of a musical idea, [and] to write as beautifully, as warmly, and as interestingly as I can."

**Harry Partch** (b Oakland, CA, 24 June 1901; d San Diego, 3 Sept 1974) was a solitary man whose approach to music was as unique as his approach to life. During the depression, he lived as a hobo and traveled cross-country on freight trains. Later, though his music began to earn him respect and followers, he didn't stay in any one place for too long. He never held an official teaching position, but did have residencies at universities in Wisconsin, Illinois, and California.

Partch was a composer, instrument builder, performer, and visionary. His concern for the physical or "corporeal" aspect of music resulted in the majority of his forty compositions being theatrical in some manner. Any live performance of Partch's music is always a dramatic affair because of the extraordinary family of instruments he built to realize his unusual tuning method that divides the octave into forty-three pitches. The instruments include the Cloud-Chamber Bowls (originally made from twelve-gallon Pyrex carboys, used in cloud-chamber experiments), the Marimba Eroica, and the Bloboy. With an ensemble of disciples, Partch recorded the majority of his compositions for his own label, Gate 5 Recordings, from which CRI's many reissues are drawn.

The original scoring of *Ulysses* was for trumpet and percussion. Partch wrote it for jazz trumpeter Chet Baker when the two were both living in California and knew each other through a mutual friend. The composer recalled: "Baker liked the idea but did not perform the piece due to his busy schedule of performances and my subsequent departure for Illinois a few months later. ... At the time I was writing it, the feeling of my hobo years was strong. As a wanderer myself (like Ulysses) I had often been asked the question 'Have you ever been arrested before?' and it struck me as very humorous to be able to ask another wanderer the same question."

**Samuel Barber** (b West Chester, PA, 9 March 1910; d New York, 23 Jan 1981) may be the most widely performed of American composers. His lush Adagio for Strings has become part of the rarefied cannon of orchestral masterpieces. His concertos for violin, cello, and piano are widely performed by major soloists because of their lyrical appeal and as audience-friendly nods to American music. Barber wrote six stage works, including the full-length opera *Vanessa* (1956–1957) and the one-act *A Hand of Bridge* (1953), both with librettos by Gian Carlo Menotti, the Italian-American opera composer and director with whom Barber lived. *Vanessa* and the Piano Concerto won Pulitzer Prizes in 1958 and 1962 respectively. His last work for the stage, *Antony and Cleopatra*, was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera for the opening of its new house at Lincoln Center. The premiere in 1966 was widely judged as a failure, at least in part because of the grand and clumsy production by Franco Zeffirelli, who also wrote the libretto. Menotti reshaped the libretto for a new production at the Juilliard School in 1975.

*Excursions* shows Barber working in small-scale form with easy-going treatments of American folk styles. The four-movement suite was premiered in 1945 by Horowitz who also premiered the more demanding Piano Sonata in 1949.

**Marc Blitzstein** (b Philadelphia, 2 March 1905; d Fort-de-France, Martinique, 22 Jan 1964) was a politically motivated composer of many songs, a few concert works, and more than a dozen pieces for the stage. He was close to Bernstein

and Copland and others of the New York gay musical milieu of the mid-century, such as David Diamond and Ned Rorem. From 1942 to 1945 he served in the Army Air Force during which time he wrote *The Airborne Symphony* for male chorus and orchestra (1943–1946), which was commissioned by the Army and twice recorded by Bernstein. Of his more than two-dozen scores for Broadway and operatic stages, surely his best-known work is *The Cradle Will Rock* (1936–1937) a depression-era musical about union organizing in Steeltown, USA, originally produced by John Houseman and directed by Orson Welles. *Cradle* was dedicated to the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, whose socially conscious theater served as a model for many of the composer's other less-successful efforts. Blitzstein also translated and adapted *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht's collaboration with German-American composer Kurt Weill. His most successful operatic effort was *Kegina* (1946–1949), a collaboration with Lillian Hellman based on her play *The Little Foxes*.

In his breezy book *The Vinyl Closet*, Boze Hadleigh offers some Blitzstein tidbits: “[He] was a liberal activist during a period when ‘it was more dangerous than genteel.’ ... He created Broadway successes, and performers like Bea Arthur, Carol Channing, and Evelyn Lear got their big breaks in Blitzstein shows. ... Blitzstein was always drawn to rough trade. ... [He was a] devotee of bars, bath houses, and quickie relationships.”

As for an account of Blitzstein's “headline-making” death in 1964 on the island of Martinique, let us turn to Eric Gordon, whose 1990 book *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* was the first major biography of a significant American composer to frankly and fully incorporate the subject's homosexuality. Gordon recounts that after dinner with friends, Blitzstein “decided to check out the scene down at the waterfront bars where the sailors and merchant seamen liked to drink. Shortly before midnight, he fell in with three such types, two Portuguese and a native Martinique, and together they toured several of the low-class dives around the Place de Stalingrad. As they drank, Blitzstein fished for bills from his wallet, revealing the tidy sum he was carrying. After two or three hours, en route to the next bar, Blitzstein and one of his three companions slipped into a nearby alleyway, the lure of sex in the air. The other two followed. Then suddenly, all three set upon him. They beat him severely, robbed him of his valuables, and left him there in the alley.” He died from the contusions the next day in a Martinique hospital.

It was at age twenty-five that Blitzstein wrote his Piano Concerto, one of his only purely instrumental works. It was performed during his lifetime only in a two-piano version. The present performers gave the world premiere of the original scoring in 1988. Blitzstein wrote that the concerto “follows the nineteenth century model, except that it begins with an extended prelude for the solo instrument.”

**Aaron Copland** (b Brooklyn, NY, 14 Nov 1900; d North Tarrytown, NY, 2 Dec 1990) was known as the “Dean of American music”—a designation that properly reflected his collegiality with composers of all stylistic persuasions. Today, Copland's orchestral settings of American folk tunes and cowboy songs have become the sound of America, imitated and quoted in numerous films, commercials, and presidential inauguration ceremonies. Ironic, considering Copland was a Jewish homosexual with leftist political leanings!

Copland received the Pulitzer Prize in 1945 for his score written for Martha Graham's dance *Appalachian Spring*.

This and a handful of other American-themed works, including two other ballet scores, *Rodeo* (1942) and *Billy The Kid* (1938), as well as *Lincoln Portrait* (1942) and *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942), accomplished the composer's goal of creating a recognizably American idiom in concert music. But Copland also wrote many works in more modernist styles, especially early and late in his career, among them *Connotations* for Orchestra (1962), which Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic debuted at the opening of Lincoln Center.

Copland's close friendship with the younger Bernstein is well known. Though no Copland biography to date addresses (or even acknowledges) his homosexuality, recent biographies of Bernstein deal openly with the homosexuality of these legendary men. In his authorized biography *Leonard Bernstein*, Humphrey Burton writes: “Copland's personality remains something of an enigma. He never flaunted his homosexuality in the way certain of his friends did. ... He managed his emotional affairs with discretion, enjoying throughout his life a sometimes-bewildering series of personal relationships with younger men; the longest was with Victor Kraft, whom he described in 1932 as ‘a young violinist who is a pupil, companion, secretary, and friend.’ ”

Copland's Violin Sonata draws on simple melodic themes and open harmonies. The composer gave the premiere of the work (at the keyboard) in a concert in Buenos Aires, in October 1941. Copland wrote: “The Sonata is a work of absolute music and is divided into three sections. ... The opening Allegro is closely allied to the usual *allegro* form of the sonata. This begins in the key of B-flat minor, while the customary slow material is in G minor. The development section is somewhat free in character and is climaxed by the first thematic material in the original key and in a grandiose statement.”

**Virgil Thomson** (b Kansas City, MO, 25 Nov 1896; d New York, 30 Sept 1989), like Copland, created his own American sound by drawing on folk songs and hymn tunes and cadences—but with very different results. Beneath Thomson's simple textures there is often a worldly sophistication, and sometimes a sense of satire, even sarcasm. His vocal writing was always a model of setting the English language to music. His finest works are the two operas written in collaborations with Gertrude Stein, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947), which continue to be regarded as two of the best American operas.

As a composer and teacher, and the chief music critic for the *New York Herald-Tribune* from 1940 to 1954, Thomson had an enormous influence over the classical music scene in New York City. In his memoir *Knowing When To Stop*, the composer Ned Rorem, a former student and assistant of Thomson, recalls: “Manhattan during the war and up through the early 1950s was governed by Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson, the father and mother of American music. Young composers joined one faction or the other, there was no third. Both were from France through Nadia Boulanger, but Copland's camp was Stravinsky-French and contained a now-vanished breed of neoclassicist like Alexei Haieff and Harold Shapero, while Thomson's camp was Satie-French and contained a still-vital breed of neo-Catholic like Lou Harrison and John Cage.”

Thomson was an ever-efficient recycler of both words and music. His Symphony No. 3 is a 1972 orchestral version of his String Quartet No.2 composed in 1932. Thus, it can be considered both an early and a late work and reflects the

consistency of Thomson's style over his long career. The work was premiered (as a string quartet) at the home of the great American architect Philip Johnson.

**Ben Weber** (b St Louis, 23 July 1916; d New York, 16 June 1979) was a respected composer whose major works included a Piano Concerto premiered in 1961 by William Masselos and the New York Philharmonic under Bernstein. A dependable musical citizen, he served as president of the American Composers Alliance in 1959 and regularly supplemented his income as a music engraver and copyist. A largely self-taught musician and composer, he employed the twelve-tone technique in his works from 1938 onward. Among the serialist composers of his generation, who include George Perle, Milton Babbitt, and Elliott Carter, Weber is the only homosexual.

A letter to the editor, written in response to K. Robert Schwarz's landmark 1994 *New York Times* feature article on gay composers, recounted the following anecdote: When Virgil Thomson met Ben Weber for the first time, he remarked, "I understand that you are a serialist composer." "Yes," replied Weber. "And I understand that you are a homosexual," Thomson continued. "Yes," Weber again replied. "Well," Thomson sniffed, "which is it, because you can't be both."

In 1976, Weber wrote the following note for the original release on CRI of his String Quartet No. 2: "The structure of the piece is, briefly, an opening thematic amalgam of two distinct sections; the first part serves as a slow introduction, quickly followed by a second part (*scherzando*), which leads directly into a series of three separate variations played without pause that close the whole first main section of the piece. These lead immediately into a development section, during which the material of the three variations is developed more elaborately, followed by a reprise of the opening of the quartet, presented in a more evanescent manner, and leading this time to a full development of the *scherzando* portion. This developed *scherzando*, much greater in length than in its original presentation, forms the rhythmically excited coda of the whole work. So in a way it is a work that could easily make the claim to be in a very elaborate sonata form in one movement."

**John Cage** (b Los Angeles, 5 Sept 1912; d New York, 12 Aug 1992) was a composer and writer whose highly original approaches to sound continue to inspire new generations of composers and freethinkers. The son of an inventor, he studied composition with the experimentalist Henry Cowell and the creator of serialism, Arnold Schoenberg. In 1938, while working as a composer/accompanist for dance classes in Seattle, he met the young dancer Merce Cunningham. The two soon began a series of artistic collaborations and formed a spousal relationship that continued until Cage's death in 1992.

Cage's ideas and devices—emphasis on percussion, alternative uses of standard instruments, graphic scoring, silence, indeterminacy—are often thought to be more important than his actual compositions. But in recent years, his music has earned new respect among performers and listeners and he has become the most recorded of American composers. The two excerpts of Cage works included herein come from early and late in his catalogue, yet both display his unceasing innovations.

*Ryoanji* was the name of a series of compositions from 1983–1985 that Cage wrote for solo instruments (accompanied by percussion). In the notes to CRI's original release, Mark Swed writes: "Named after a Zen temple in Kyoto and inspired by its famous rock garden, *Ryoanji* is, to quote Cage, a 'garden' of sounds. The solo part consists of stone tracings, which the player interprets as a music of glissandi. The percussion part, representing the raked sand around the stones, is comprised of unspecified sounds played in unison in chance-determined patterns that the mind will not readily analyze."

The *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1946–1948) are considered Cage's first masterpiece. They are the culmination of a decade of writing for the prepared piano—a new instrument he invented by placing nuts, bolts, screws, and other attachments onto the strings of a grand piano. The resulting gamelan-like effects have led many performers to overemphasize the percussive quality of the writing. Yet in CRI's premiere recording from 1951, pianist Maro Ajemian, for whom the works were written, accentuates their melodic and lyrical nature—which is especially present in the lullaby-like Sonata XIII.

**Alwin Nikolais** (b 25 November 1910, Southington, CT; d New York City, 8 May 1993) was a lifelong composer and musician who worked largely apart from the musical world traveled in by the other composers on this disc—though he did know Cage, often consulted with other electronic composers of his era, and briefly worked at staging a work by Parth. Best remembered as a choreographer who excelled in all theater forms, Nikolais created the choreography, lighting, costumes, and music for dozens of original productions by his company, the Nikolais Dance Theatre. His prodigious use of props, projections, and sound earned him a reputation as the father of mixed media.

Nikolais's lifelong companion (from 1949 until Nikolais's death in 1993) was his principle soloist and frequent collaborator, the dancer and choreographer Murray Louis. Louis, who is now artistic director of Nikolais-Murray Louis Dance, wrote the following for CRI's compact disc collection of Nikolais's electronic dance scores: "For his first dances, which involved his new ... [conception] of dance as both a visual and kinetic art, he used live percussion scores in which he directed his dancers to play instruments of all [kinds]. ... Once he installed his own tape-recording machines, he quickly ... [expanded] the limited range these instruments provided by slowing and increasing speed and reversing sound. He also made the sounds adhere to the choreographic structure (not the other way around), thereby giving the dance its independence from the musical phrasing."

During the 1960s, Nikolais was introduced to Robert Moog, creator of the famous synthesizer that bore his name. Nikolais made numerous important suggestions to Moog and came to own the first Moog synthesizer, on which he created the sounds for many of his most famous dances, including *Tent* (1968), *Echo* (1969), and *Crossfade* (1974). From the mid-1970s onward, Nikolais utilized the Emulator synthesizer for all his major works. The pieces in this collection are excerpts from the larger dance works *Frail Demons* (1984) and *Tribe* (1975).

—Joseph R. Dalton

---

## Production Notes

Conceived and produced by Joseph R. Dalton

Mastering by Joseph R. Dalton and Robert Wolff, engineer, at Sony Music Studios, New York City.

Publishing: Cowell: Associated Music Publishing (BMI); Partch: Harry Partch Foundation (BMI); Barber: Boosey and Hawkes (ASCAP); Aaron Copland: Boosey and Hawkes (ASCAP); Virgil Thomson: Boosey and Hawkes (ASCAP); Ben Weber; Cage (*Ryoanji*): C. F. Peters, Corp. (ASCAP); Cage (*Sonatas*): Henmar Press (ASCAP); Alwin Nikolais: Pro Arts International (BMI).