

CRI 114

**HENRY COWELL:**

***“Persian Set”***

*Dedicated to His Excellency*

Mohamed Hejazi Matidowle

Four Movements for chamber orchestra:

Moderato; Allegretto; Lento; Rondo

“NO OTHER COMPOSER of our time has produced a body of work so radical and so normal, so penetrating and so comprehensive,” wrote Virgil Thomson of Henry Cowell, and his music embraces “a wider range in both expression and technique than that of any other living composer.”

In the fall of 1956, Henry Cowell and his wife, Sidney Robertson Cowell, set out on a world tour made possible through the cooperation of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Department of State, and the United States Information Agency. It was the intention of the Cowells to bring to people in other countries further knowledge of American music and to collect and study the music of other cultures as well. Starting at Ireland, they traveled through Germany and on to Turkey, the Near East and finally India and Japan.

At the special invitation of the government of Iran, the Cowells spent the winter in Tehran. Intrigued by the special qualities of the music he heard there, Cowell decided to compose a work which would express something of the characteristic quality of Persian or Iranian music. Though he has long been interested in the folk expression of other countries, Henry Cowell has never incorporated direct quotations into his works. After completing his *Persian Set*, which was written between November 18, 1956 and February 8, 1957, he sent the score to Leopold Stokowski who, like Cowell, has long been a student of the music of other cultures.

The composer writes of his score from Tokyo (May, 1957):

“This is a simple record of musical contagion, written at the end of a three-months’ stay in Iran, during which I listened for several hours nearly every day to the traditional classic music and the folk music of the country – at concerts, at private parties, at the National Conservatory for Traditional Iranian Music (where the instructors gave wonderful demonstrations of virtuosity for

my benefit), and at Radio Tehran. Tape recordings at the Department of Fine Arts were especially helpful in displaying the rich variety of music in regions too difficult to visit in mid-winter.

“Of course I made no attempt to shed my years of Western symphonic experience; nor have I used actual Iranian melodies or rhythms, nor have I imitated them exactly. Instead I have tried to develop some of the kinds of musical behavior that the two cultures have in common.

“The musical cultures of Asia have remained monodic in theory, but they are often polyphonic in actual performing practice. Attempts to combine the old classic melodic styles of the East with eighteenth and nineteenth century European harmony do not seem to me to be successful. But where a need is felt for the tonal variety of the Western orchestra, I think polyphony (based on the actual structure of the melodies used) is a natural direction for musical development to take in the East.

“The tonal coincidences in *Persian Set* were suggested by the polyphony actually heard from Iran’s three-to-five man ensembles. In one of the most commonly-heard musical styles the instruments (with or without a vocalist) and the drum take turns leading the melodic improvisation on one of the many inherited formal structures. A second melody instrument then follows the leader more or less in canon, at intervals varying according to his ability to keep up. Sometimes he will even take off in a parallel but different phrase of his own.

“At Radio Tehran, European and Iranian instruments are sometimes combined. *Persian Set* adds the *tar* to a small Western orchestral ensemble. This is a beautifully shaped, double-bellied, three-stringed Persian instrument of very elaborate technique, for which the mandolin is an approximate substitute. (A guitar is used as substitute in this recording.)

“Persian music is modal (usually tetrachordal) and its modes rather persistently take either the note C or the note D for their tonic, as I have done here. There are five tetrachords in customary use which Iranian musicians combine in a number of ways. Four of these are used in *Persian Set*. They correspond quite accurately to our tunings for (descending): C-B-A-G; C-B<sup>b</sup>-A-G; C-B-A<sup>b</sup>-G. The fifth tetrachordal form has the famous quarter-tone interval at one point, and it is used just as much as the others, but one hears many pieces without it. It corresponds to the Western C-B<sup>b</sup>-A<sup>half-b</sup>-G (not used in this composition).

“This quarter-tone is blamed by Iranian musicians for the difficulties in “modernizing” Iranian music by “harmonizing” it, but an even more basic trouble derives from the fact that it is not yet generally understood in Iran – what we in America have discovered only recently ourselves – that classic European harmony fits scales but not modes, whether the modes be those chosen for development in the Orient or in the Occident.

“One of the traditional musical styles heard in Iran today is a quiet, improvisatory one, a-rhythmical, like a prose invocation. Traditional Persian music was a great classic art which is said to have spread westward into many parts of the Arab-speaking world, reaching Greece about 600 B.C. In the 7th century A.D. the Arabs returned it to Persia in somewhat altered form as Islamic music. Moslem distaste for music had much less effect on the peoples of Iran than it did upon the Arabs, so that the practice of the art of music was never quenched in Persia after the Moslem Conquest. A few melodies surviving today are believed by Iranian students to be pre-Islamic, and certain types of mordents, and particularly the trill across a tone and a half, widespread today over the whole Middle East, are commonly called “Persian” by musicians of other countries. The elaborate Persian drumming techniques have been admired for generations, and even today in Cairo, Beirut and Istanbul most drummers will claim to be Persian – and sometimes are.”

#### **LOU HARRISON:**

##### ***“Suite for Violin, Piano and Small Orchestra”***

LOU HARRISON is today one of the most important of America’s Pacific Coast composers. Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1917, he studied with Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg. Like Cowell, he has drawn heavily from the culture and music of the East, and unlike Schoenberg, he has sought and achieved a simplicity and beauty in his music that is unique in our time. Harrison lives today in a California ranch-style house overlooking the Pacific, in the shadow of redwood trees that have been growing since the days of the Roman Empire. He has at times worked as a florist, a librarian, a music reviewer (for the New York Herald-Tribune), a teacher and even as a forest firefighter. He has been the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships, and like Cowell has been commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra under its Rockefeller grant, and was awarded a Twentieth Century Masterpiece Prize during the 1951 International Composers Conference in Rome.

Lou Harrison's Suite was commissioned by the Ajemian sisters in 1951. P. Glanville-Hicks has written, among notes describing this suite, that "the Harrison Suite is one of the most delicate and lovely American works of recent years. The sheer grace and joyousness of its style, reminiscent of India—both sacred and secular modes—cannot fail to charm all who hear it."

"Its opening Overture is an Allegro in a festive mood of rejoicing; the solo violin draws long, clean lines across a scintillating backdrop of piano, tack-piano, celesta, tam-tam and harp, playing in Gamelan style. Formally, this Overture—as indeed all six sections of the suite—is quantitative music rather than climactic, though high tension points are reached by exciting handling of the melodic curve or by elaboration, and sometimes sudden simplification of the instrumentation. Such devices take the place of the constructed climax of Western musical thought."

The succeeding movements alternate between elegiac pieces of hushed tranquility and more busy movements which Harrison calls "gamelans." The slow and quiet sections have been compared to the "acute stillness of high altitudes and their utter removal from time and place." The gamelans are brilliant with jangling sounds and suggestions of classic Indonesian and Balinese music. The six movements are labeled: Overture: Allegro; Elegy: Adagio; First Gamelan: Allegro; Aria: Lento espressivo; Second Gamelan: Allegro; Chorale: Andante.

—Notes by Oliver Daniel

The soloists in this recording are Maro Ajemian, pianist and Anahid Ajemian, violinist. Since 1948, when they first appeared together publicly, these talented sisters have earned the acclaim of critics throughout the United States, Canada and Europe. The New York Times has described their work most concisely with the phrase, "Virtuoso performers who consistently and cooperatively turn their technique to musical ends."

Without forsaking the classical masters, the Ajemians have also broadened the literature of their instruments by championing the work of contemporary composers. In 1952 they became the first instrumentalists to receive the Laurel Leaf Award of the American Composers Alliance, for meritorious service to American music.

The Ajemians have commissioned numerous Americans to compose works for them and have consistently featured contemporary music in their programs.

## LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI

has chosen to be a man of his time, and as such has usually been ahead of it. He has rarely been concerned with chronology, anniversaries, honors, lists of premieres, degrees or celebrations. Though he has received many degrees, he has never wanted to be addressed as Doctor, as many of his colleagues have. In short, he has preferred to think of making history rather than contemplating it. In so doing he has contributed mightily to the development of music in our time; he has effected significant advances in orchestral development; he has pioneered in the field of recording and broadcasting techniques; he has set standards for film backgrounds and foreshadowed present advances in binoral stereophonic transmission; he produced hi-fi records before the term was ever invented; and he has probably introduced more new music than any of his contemporaries.

But even if he had not enlivened all of these fields, Stokowski would still be esteemed for the inspired performances he has given of the great masterworks. For he is first and foremost a conductor, and it is as a conductor that he is entitled to be called one of the great in the annals of music. Few musicians have ever had a keener appreciation of the sense of sound than he.

In his book called *Music for All of Us*, Stokowski expressed something of his credo, saying: "I believe that music can be an inspirational force in all our lives—that its eloquence and the depth of its meaning are all-important, and that all personal considerations concerning musicians and public are relatively unimportant—that music comes from the heart and returns to the heart—that music is a spontaneous, impulsive expression—that its range is without limit—that music is forever growing—that music can be one element to help us build a new conception of life in which the madness and cruelty of wars will be replaced by a simple understanding of the brotherhood of man."

—OLIVER DANIEL

*(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)*