

Henry Cowell

HOMAGE TO IRAN (1959)

Leopold Avakian violin

Mitchell Andrews piano

Basil Bahar Persian drum

THREE STRING QUARTETS

Quartet No. 3: Mosaic (1935)

Quartet No. 2: Movement for String Quartet (1934)

Quartet No. 4: United Quartet (1936)

BEAUX ARTS STRING QUARTET

Gerald Tarack and Alan Martin violins

Jacob Glick viola

Bruce Rogers violoncello

The music on this, the sixth disc in the CRI catalog devoted in whole or in part to Henry Cowell's music, offers a score in the Near Eastern manner commissioned by the Iranian virtuoso Leopold Avakian in 1959, and three string quartets from the mid-1930's.

In 1956-57 Cowell and his wife spent 14 months in Asia under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation, USIA and the US Department of State. For some months Cowell acted as consultant for music at the Teheran radio, and at that time he wrote a piece, the *Persian Set*, for the 12-man orchestra of the radio station which combined Western and Persian instruments, most of whose members were little accustomed to playing from notation. Leopold Stokowski recorded the piece with his orchestra almost immediately (CRI:114); and its first public performance was given by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra under Antal Dorati, in Teheran on December 8, 1958.

By that time Cowell had begun a somewhat more elaborately-developed piece in the same style, the four-movement *Homage to Iran* for violin and piano recorded here by Leopold Avakian. On July 3, 1959, Mr. Avakian performed the work at Gulestan Palace before His Imperial Majesty the Shah of Iran; later he took the piece to London and Paris with great success.

Homage to Iran is not cast in the 5-movement form traditional in Persia for long works, but is rather conceived in the widespread 2-movement Middle Eastern form, used twice. (This is the same general form that Cowell appropriated for his hymn—and fuguing tune series, based on early Anglo-American folk hymnody.)

The first and third movements of *Homage to Iran* are both marked *Tempo rubato* and they share the character of an intense improvisatory chant for the violin, over a hypnotic *ostinato* from the drum. Piano and violin are equal partners in the second movement, *Interlude*, which is a brilliant running toccata, *Presto*, in 2/4. The last movement, *Con spirito*, begins as a set of dance variations in which

7/8 alternates with 9/8. The drum is heard only briefly, during a slower middle episode, 12/8-13/8. The piece ends with a return of the dance variations with which the fourth movement began, and a spirited coda.

A note in the published score requires the pianist to produce the sonority of a Persian drum in the first and third movements, an effect obtained by muting the piano strings with one finger, “pressing the strings of the indicated notes near the bridge while playing the keys.” However, since Mr. Avakian was able to add an actual Persian drum player for the recording (as well as for most of his concert performances) the muted piano strings are heard only for a few measures midway in the first movement, where it is not feasible for the drum to play the notation.

The *Movement for String Quartet*, or String Quartet No. 2, was actually the first of Cowell’s works for four strings playable under conventional circumstances, its predecessor’s rhythms having been so tightly organized around its harmonic ratios that it was humanly unplayable in those pre-electronic days (1915).

The *Movement* was written at the request of Alphonse Onnou, and its premiere was given by the famed Pro Arte Quartet during the summer of 1934 at Mills College. At the time its then-extreme dissonance provoked controversy because dissonant counterpoint was automatically associated with ultra-chromaticism and its atonal consequences; on the other hand, the atonalists strongly disapproved of dissonance based on diatonicism. In the context of the 1960’s however, the idiom is so familiar that one can hardly imagine any longer the sense of shock with which most hearers first reacted to this piece. Today its diatonic dissonant counterpoint is the obvious precursor of the treatment afforded the hymn sections of Cowell’s later hymn-and-fuguing-time pieces. It is one of the much-admired, solidly-constructed “abstract” works by Cowell, of which the Sinfonietta and the 6th, 11th and 12th Symphonies are more familiar examples. These are among some dozen works which use in a highly concentrated form the dissonant secundal counterpoint—whether diatonic, chromatic or atonal—which Cowell devised for himself from his early tone-cluster piano pieces.

A year later,—and nearly a generation before the now *chic* aleatorists,—Cowell was pondering ways to give performers a freer hand with the music written for them. Hence the *Mosaic Quartet*, the order of whose five brief movements is left to the discretion of the players so that they can create the form of the work themselves. “The *Mosaic Quartet*,” reads a note at the end of the privately-printed score, “is to be played, alternating the movements at the desire of the performers, treating each movement as a unit to build the mosaic pattern of the form.”

The first movement of the *Mosaic* is chorale-like, the second a *pizzicato ostinato*; the third is a *rubato* cello recitative under a continual slow *glissando* from the other strings; the fourth movement suggests a “*valse oubliée*” (but in 5/8 instead of 3/4) and the fifth movement is a closely-woven conversation among the players. The Beaux Arts Quartet has chosen to play the movements in the order I-II-IV-III-IV-V.

The present performance was taped as a 63rd birthday gift to Cowell from several friends, following brilliant public performances of the work by the Beaux Arts Quartet.

Cowell’s Fifteenth Symphony (*Thesis*), one of 20 works commissioned by Broadcast Music, Inc. to celebrate its 20th anniversary in 1960, (subsequently recorded by the Louisville Orchestra under Robert Whitney), is an expansion of material from the *Mosaic Quartet*, made at the suggestion of Oliver Daniel.

Cowell's *United Quartet* (1936) was his most elaborate attempt, up to that time, to integrate musical materials and techniques of whose stylistic disparity he was entirely aware, but of whose relationship in terms of pure music he was convinced. This preoccupation was not new with him, but the *United Quartet* uses more different kinds of ideas together, combined in a rather more obvious way, than before. This was Cowell's response to the music-for-the-people movement then prevalent. He was trying in his own way to widen the appeal of contemporary music, broadening the sources of his materials by using types of musical patterns common to many people; but he was trying also to avoid the trap inherent in "popular" music, which deliberately produces only familiar types of music as far as it can.

When the *United Quartet* was first printed, a statement written by the composer in a spirit of some exasperation was included. His *avant-garde* colleagues had begun to be shocked by the increasingly listenable quality of much of his music, while the average concert-goer found too much that was startling still. So he undertook to set both parties straight about his intention, in the first articulate expression of his concern about music meaningful to many kinds of hearers.

"The *United Quartet* is an attempt toward a more universal music style," the composer begins. "Although it is unique in form, style and content, it is easy to understand because of its use of fundamental elements as a basis, because of repetitions which enable the auditor to become accustomed to these elements, because of the clarity and simplicity of its form, and because of the unity of form, rhythm and melody.

"There are in it elements suggested from many places and periods. For example, the classical feeling is represented not by the employment of a familiar classic form, but in building up a new form, carefully planned. . . . Primitive music is represented, not by imitating it, nor by taking a specific melody or rhythm from some tribe, but by using a three-tone scale, and exhausting all the different ways the three tones can appear, which is a procedure of some primitive music. . . . The Oriental is represented by modes which are constructed as Oriental modes are constructed, without being actual modes used in particular cultures. . . . The modern is represented by the use of unresolved discords, by free intervals in two-part counterpoint, and," concludes the composer with triumphant logic, "by the fact that the whole result is something new,—and all that is new is modern!"

The *United Quartet* demonstrates another early interest of Cowell's, one that is widespread today: the tightening of the musical relationship in a work by applying a single basic formula to all possible elements of a piece. Here, for instance, the foundation rhythm of five (— — . — .) is repeated in the dynamic pattern, (since successive movements begin loud, loud, soft, loud, soft), and in the ground tones of the movements, (which run C, C, G. C, G).

-NOTES BY DAVID HALL

LEOPOLD AVAKIAN, Iranian-born violinist for whom Henry Cowell composed *Homage to Iran*, was born in Tabriz, and gave his first public performance at the age of six. His musical studies were pursued first in Teheran, then at the Juilliard School of Music in New York. He made his American debut at Carnegie Hall in 1957 and has since performed widely in the U.S.A., Europe, and in his native Iran where he gave a recital at the Royal Palace at the invitation of His Imperial Majesty the Shah of Iran.

MITCHELL ANDREWS, well-known New York concert pianist and teacher, has been heard extensively as soloist, accompanist, and chamber ensemble player. Early study in his home town of Iowa City was followed by work with Olga Samaroff in Philadelphia, with Carl Friedberg in New York, and five years of scholarship study with Rosina Lhevinne at the Juilliard School of Music. Since 1956 Mr. Andrews has been a member of the piano faculty of the Juilliard Preparatory Division.

BASIL BAHAR comes naturally by his knowledge of Near Eastern percussion technique, being a native of Baghdad, Iraq. His recent musical activities have brought him to New York City, prior to which he had played in England, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium.

THE BEAUX ARTS STRING QUARTET, one of the foremost young chamber ensembles on the current musical scene, came into being in 1956 in Hancock, Maine, at the summer music school of Pierre Monteux. Now resident quartet at Brooklyn College, the group has won particular renown for its espousal of the best in new American chamber music. Besides the LP of Henry Cowell's Fifth Quartet for Columbia and the Haydn Op. 9 quartets for Washington, the Beaux Arts Quartet is represented on two other CRI discs—CRI 126 (Quartets by Ezra Laderman and Hall Overton) and CR1 148 (the George Perle String Quintet with Walter Trampler, viola).

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)