

HENRY COWELL (1897-1965)

Variations for Orchestra (1956)

POLISH NATIONAL RADIO ORCHESTRA

Recorded in Poland by Polskie Nagrania

"... if He please" (1954)

NORWEGIAN CHOIR OF SOLO SINGERS OSLO

PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Synchrony (1930)

POLISH NATIONAL RADIO ORCHESTRA

William Strickland, conductor

Simply by staying alive throughout the important formative years of modern American music, Henry Cowell (1897-1965) outlived the fad that originally made his name known. The "tone clusters" which he introduced as early as 1914, and his technique of brushing and strumming- the strings of the grand piano in the manner of a harpist, opened the ears of younger composers, who felt limited by the unchanging sounds of concert instruments, but the devices themselves live on as Cowell's flashes of genius.

Henry Cowell not only stayed alive, but also stayed creative throughout his life, and so not only outlived but also outgrew his notoriety. In his middle years he opened his consciousness to new sense-impressions that he found in exotic places, and in some of the buried periods of our own music, and he continued to develop to become known as one of America's outstanding composers.

Variations for Orchestra, which Cowell composed for Thor Johnson and the Cincinnati Orchestra, was completed in 1956 and revised for Leopold Stokowski, before he conducted it in Houston in 1959. It may be said to belong to Cowell's final "period," a period of esthetic retrenchment, of complete control of all the idioms which he had absorbed and digested for so many years.

Cowell said of the theme that, though it makes use of all twelve notes in the chromatic scale, it is not developed according to the row technique; he said, paradoxically, that it is "diatonic without following any particular mode," The harmonic language is equally eclectic, ranging freely, as he said, from simple triads to large secundal combinations and polychords — his own mature metamorphosis of the early tone clusters.

The theme is announced in unison, but this is the last nod the piece makes to conventional variations form. Ideas from the theme are freely used to create contrasting moods, and stated in diverse tempos and instrumentations. The variations feature in turn every type of instrument in the orchestra as a soloist, and subsequently each family of instruments is used as a solo group.

The title, "... if He please" is taken from the text of "The Preface," by the Puritan clergyman and poet, Edward Taylor (1645-1729). The poem is in praise of God Almighty:

*"His hand loath made this noble work which Stands
His glorious Handywork not made with hands,
Who spoke all words from Nothing and with ease
Can speak all things to Nothing if He please."*

The music synthesizes many elements from Cowell's earliest experimentation and exploration — including the segundal dissonances characteristic of his early tone cluster piano pieces (CRI 109) and the American colonial style of his hymn and fuguing tunes that he composed during the 1940s. The effect is of a majestic "ecumenical music" (to use Hugo Weisgall's phrase from his survey of Cowell's work in the October 1959 *Musical Quarterly*) that captures both the picturesque imagery and the sheer grandeur of Taylor's visionary poem.

Fanfares of acclamation by the orchestra precede the enunciation of the text. Quiet but grinding dissonances evoke the chaos of Nothing from which God created the world. The act of creation itself is accompanied by a relentless driving ostinato. The mighty hymn of praise that is built from earlier thematic elements is alloyed by warning shouts that the Lord who created all of this is also able to "take this Mighty World up in His Hands and shake it like a Squitchee or a Wand!"

The idea of setting the Taylor text was suggested by William Strickland when the New York Oratorio Society, of which he was then director, bestowed a commission on Cowell in 1954. This chorus, augmented by the boys' choirs of St. John the Divine and St. Thomas Church, premiered the work under Strickland's direction on February 29, 1956 in Carnegie Hall,

Synchrony was conceived as a collaborative effort between Cowell and the modern dancer, Martha Graham, in 1930. The title reflects the collaborators' thesis that the composition as a whole be a synthesis of the arts, with music, dance and "stylized lighting" making equal, though semi-autonomous, contributions toward the total effect.

The novelty of "Synchrony" was to be that instead of the music providing a "floor" for the dancers, upon which they would match their movements to the rhythms of the orchestra, the two elements were to perform in counterpoint and even in opposition to each other. In a program note written for a premiere that never took place, the creators stated their recognition of the age-old conflict between choreographer and composer for the attention of the audience, and then their solution: "Just as in a three-part polyphonic musical work one will find very often one of the three parts stationary while the other two move in contrary motion, so one finds in 'Synchrony' that, if the music is at its climax the dance is quiescent and vice versa . . . The attention of the auditor will not be diverted by trying to follow two climaxes at the same time."

The American premiere of the music was presented by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1932; the first performance anywhere had taken place at a concert of the Pan American Association of Composers in Paris, June 6, 1931. The orchestral version had been made, wrote the composer, "by eliminating the portions relating to the dance alone;" by this time he had decided that the title related to "the enmeshing of the musical elements contained in the work."

The long statement by solo trumpet that opens the work contains all the thematic elements later to be developed. The piece thereafter resembles the first movement of a symphony in structure, with two themes and a section of development.

- CARTER HARMAN

WILLIAM STRICKLAND began his public career as organist and choirmaster in St. Bartholomew's church in New York City. In 1946 he became the first conductor of the Nashville Symphony Orchestra and, since his duty with the Oratorio Society, has settled briefly in several foreign lands, serving as conductor in Tokyo, Manila, Oslo, Reykjavik, Helsinki and Warsaw.

THE OSLO PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA was established in 1871, with Edvard Grieg as one of the founders. With the help of municipal and state subsidies, it gives some 120 concerts a year, some of them in other countries and some in the hinterlands of Norway.

THE POLISH NATIONAL RADIO ORCHESTRA is renowned for its distinguished performances of the most difficult modern scores. It has appeared on CRI nos. 196, 203 and 206.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)