

How Ireland Came to Shape Musical Modernism

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I must begin my paper today with a number of apologies. One is for the fact that I have let you hanging in the air about the exact subject of my presentation, something I have never done before, and I must thank the organising committee for its trust in accepting something so imprecise. You may have read in the abstract that I am going to talk about one man, but who is he? And how can I claim that, through him, “Ireland” came to shape musical modernism? Bear with me for a few more minutes, the veil is to be lifted soon.

Another apology is due, and this is again something I have never done before, for the fact that this is a presentation for which I have done almost no original research. The only achievement I can claim is that I have pieced together bits of research by others and deduced an interpretation from them which I think justifies my headline and *is somewhat* original. Of course you can choose not to follow me here, though.

A last apology: Compared to previous papers I have given at SMI forums this one has relatively few words from me and more recorded music examples. One reason is, as I said, that I haven't done much first-hand research and I won't claim the research of others as my own. Another reason is that I want to introduce somebody to you, a composer you should be aware of, if you aren't already, because he has something to say especially to Irish musicians. And this can best be done by playing some of his music.

Now, how has Ireland shaped modernism in music? Of course, what I am saying seems to contradict the general notion of Ireland being a country that has rather followed, and not lead, stylistic developments in modern art music. It is true that compositional trends generally arrived in Ireland with a certain delay which is in part due to the geographic position of the country and in part to the attitude of musicians and audiences to so-called ‘classical music’. So when I say that Ireland shaped musical modernism I don't mean the political, geographical or historical entity which we call Ireland. Rather I am speaking of a *concept* of Ireland that has developed in the human mind – not only the mind of the specific person I am going to talk about, but something that can be generalized and commonly understood by any Irish and musical community anywhere in the world.

The reason why I am bringing something home to where it has never really been is that I do think that here is a source for pride that may delight musicians and audiences alike – provided you like a certain dose of an avant-garde sound-world. It is here that this music should be performed, broadcast and enjoyed.

The name of the person I have in mind may be familiar to many of you, and once I have pronounced it you may say, “Oh, him!”. If you don't know him, it's time that you do. And if you do know him I would like to remind you of his Irish qualities. Maybe you were not aware of them, or you forgot. I am saying this remembering that I mentioned plans of this presentation to quite a number of people during the past year and nobody guessed who this person could be. Astonishingly, I heard many guesses of who this person could be, but no-one mentioned the name I have in mind. Which tells me that Ireland must have shaped musical

modernism in multiple ways, way beyond general knowledge and imagination. Let me finish my preliminary remarks by saying that although the title of my paper can be read with tongue-in-cheek, I am absolutely serious about it. But when I say “Ireland *came to shape*” and not “Ireland *shaped*” it implies the message that we are dealing with a certain degree of fortuity here.

Now, without further ado let me play a piece of music by this composer before I give you his name. This is a composition for solo piano, written around 1917, and performed here by the composer in a recording of 1963.

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| Ex. 1: <i>The Tides of Manaunaun</i> (c. 1917), performed by Henry Cowell (1963) (from: Smithsonian Folkways SF 40801) | <u>2'25</u> |
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I think what is very evident from this piece is the juxtaposition of somewhat unusual piano techniques with a melodic line that very clearly refers to Irish traditional music in its use of characteristic intervals and the ending of a phrase on two or three equal notes. And as you perhaps know by now, this piece with the title *The Tides of Manaunaun* was composed by:

Henry Cowell.

PPT 2

Let me quickly furnish you with the most important biographical details before I return to the Irish qualities of Cowell’s music.

Henry Cowell was born in Menlo Park, California, in 1897. He was the son of Harry Cowell, an immigrant Irishman, and the writer Clarissa Dixon Cowell. He grew up in a non-conformist social environment with a constant lack of financial resources. The talents of the widely read boy were discovered by two professors from Stanford University who enabled Cowell to take courses there (1914-1917) despite his lack of a formal education. Cowell’s first acknowledged compositions for the piano date from 1910, preceding his musical studies at Stanford with Charles Seeger.

PPT 3

Apart from his father’s influence, Cowell’s interest in Irish culture evolved from his association with John Varian, another immigrant Irishman from Dublin, who was a member of theosophist communities in both Dublin and Los Angeles, and a translator of Irish mythological verse. Some of Cowell’s early music was written to accompany Varian’s plays and were later arranged as concert pieces. Among them is *The Tides of Manaunaun* (c1917), the earliest piece involving his new technique of tone clusters – blocks of notes played simultaneously using the fist or the elbow.

Another of his inventions is the play on the open strings of the piano, by stroking or plucking the strings in combination with silently pressed down keys to change the sound spectrum. You will hear examples of this in a few minutes. These techniques aroused great attention in musical circles both in America and Europe where he gave many recitals and workshops between 1922 and 1932. Often his critics focused on the techniques only, describing his extraordinary style of playing with fists, elbows and stirring inside the body of the instrument, and ignored his actual music. However, Cowell’s book *New Musical Resources*, published in 1930 but written before 1917, confirmed his reputation as an innovative and highly individual thinker on contemporary art music. His creative ideas were admired by Bartók, Schönberg and other leading musical figures of his time.

Following a court case on moral misconduct to which he pleaded guilty, Cowell was imprisoned in St. Quentin's from 1936 to 1940. On his release he moved to White Plains, NY state, where he married the folklorist and photographer Sidney Hawkins Robertson in 1941. He made music broadcasts for the Office of War Information and later taught at Columbia University (1949-1965). He never stopped composition even in difficult circumstances, and his enormous work-list includes 21 symphonies, 34 stage works, 42 choral works, over 100 songs and hundreds of chamber music and solo instrumental pieces.

PPT 4

In his later years he was increasingly occupied by his other great musical interest, ethnological studies of Asian music, which resulted in a number of research travels, commissioned by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, to Iran, India and Japan. He survived seven strokes, a serious heart disease, and eventually died of cancer in New York in 1965.

Now, back to Cowell's Irish roots and his first compositions. While Cowell's influence on Bartók, Schönberg, and later on John Cage, Robert Crumb and others of that generation is without any doubt, it is noteworthy that the pianistic innovations by Cowell originally were not used to write music of a totally new nature. They came in combination with very recognisable Irish-style melodic lines and dance rhythms. That is to say, Cowell used his techniques initially for a desired effect and not as a technique in itself. The fact that he grew up in a family where he was frequently treated to Irish traditional music is only one explanation. The other is that the music you have just heard was originally the prelude to an opera called *The Building of Bamba* for solo voices, mixed chorus and piano, an opera to a text by John Varian, the Irish theosophist mentioned earlier. Varian's text explores aspects of Irish mythology, and in Celtic legend, Manaunaun was the son of Lir and the god of motion who was for a large part responsible for the creation of the world. Here is a quote in Henry Cowell's own words explaining the figure of Manaunaun as the idea behind the piece *The Tides of Manaunaun*:

PPT 5

Ex. 2: Cowell speaking about *The Tides of Manaunaun*
(from: Smithsonian Folkways SF 40801)

0'42

So, Cowell's invention of tone clusters as an independent structural feature in twentieth-century art music has a very Irish background. The pitch material of the clusters, while Cowell claimed they were derived from the sound of waves clashing against the Californian coast, is always carefully written out and not at all as arbitrary as they may sometimes seem. If the compass of a cluster extended beyond five keys on the piano, the pianist has to use the palm of his hand or part of his forearm, and the aural as well as visual effect of this created as much fascination as shock among his 1920s audiences.

PPT 6

How this technique combines with solo voice in its original operatic setting is nicely illustrated by this example called *Manaunaun's Birthing* which was published as an independent song in 1924.

Ex. 3: *Manaunaun's Birthing* (1924), performed by Robert Osborne (Bar) and Jeanne Golan (pf)
(from: Albany TROY 240)

2'25

PPT 7

Cowell is not only the inventor of the tone cluster but was also the first to write music for the strings of a grand piano. His first piece of this kind was *Aeolian Harp* of 1923, where the strings are being stroked while the sound spectrum changes with silently pressed down keys

so that only selected tones are sounded. His best known piece using this technique was again an Irish piece, *The Banshee* of 1925. In Irish fairy tales, the banshee is a figure who comes at the time of death to take the soul to an underground world, and the sound that Cowell creates for this figure reflects the distress a banshee feels in the world of mortals. Cowell uses two different kinds of playing on the strings, one is the rubbing of the coiled bass strings, and the other a modest use of plucking single strings for a certain amount of melodic content. This is again the composer performing.

Ex. 4: *The Banshee* (1925), performed by Henry Cowell (1963)
(from: Smithsonian Folkways SF 40801)

2'30

PPT 8

Cowell made the broadest use of quite a number of techniques of playing on the open strings of a piano in a piece called *The Leprechaun*, another Irish fairy figure. This actually works well in chamber music and with small orchestra, as Cowell demonstrated in an *Irish Suite* of 1929 which incorporated *The Leprechaun* in its second of three movements. If you have an idea what an 'Irish Suite' sounded like in Ireland around 1929, where many pieces of this kind were written at the time, you will understand the contribution of Henry Cowell to the development of twentieth-century music. And isn't it amazing to see that ideas like this were first developed in an Irish context?

Ex. 5: *The Leprechaun*, from *Irish Suite* (1929),
performed by Continuum Ensemble cond. by Joel Sachs
(from: Naxos 8.559192)

excerpt c. 2'30

Let me close by throwing a spotlight on Cowell's reception in Ireland. Cowell has been to Ireland several times, but he did not include Ireland in his 1920s and 30s concert tours. So it took a while until any note of Cowell's music was to be heard here. No performance or recording is listed in Richard Pine's book on music at RTÉ. The earliest reference of a public performance of Cowell's music I have found so far is a performance at the 1974 Kilkenny Arts Week of the *Three Irish Legends* for piano, a 1922 collective title for *The Tides of Manaunaun*, *The Hero Sun*, and *The Voice of Lir*, by a pianist called Richard Zimdars. In half a minute I will tell you how Cowell's music was heard here almost twenty years earlier in a non-public setting. But it seems that neither RTÉ nor any other institution in Ireland has explored Cowell's music to any recognisable extent.

Only one writer repeatedly and consequently claimed Henry Cowell for Ireland and did so with the composer's consent, and this was Charles Acton. He included him with a photograph in his 1978 booklet *Irish Music and Musicians* and wrote about him several times during his long tenure as music critic of the *Irish Times*, mostly in relation to LP reviews or articles on American music. And the reason why Acton was so conscious of Cowell's Irish roots was that he actually met him, here, in Ireland, in Dublin, in this building, in the Royal Irish Academy of Music, on the 5th of September 1956. And he wrote about it the next day in the *Irish Times* under the heading 'The Music of Modern America'.

PPT 9

PPT 10

Cowell had been invited by the Composers' Group of the Music Association of Ireland which comprised such members as Brian Boydell, Gerard Victory or the young Seóirse Bodley amongst a number of very less adventurous composers. Certainly, one cannot discover any trait of this event in the work-list of any Irish composer of this time. Yet, he obviously wasn't totally unknown here, as is clear from the invitation.

Acton explains that this event was a lecture-recital in which Cowell introduced the music of several American composers, including at least two works of his own. He writes:

“Perhaps the most interesting, because the most personal, were some of Dr. Cowells’s own works. In his youth he exploited the unthought-off effects of the piano – such as plucking and stroking the strings in his ‘Aeolian Harp,’ a piece of quite extraordinary charm; and ‘tone-clusters’ or groups of notes played with the palm or forearm which gave his ‘Tides of Mananaan,’ a most rich sonority.”

We don’t have the exact programme of this event nor do we know how many composers and who in particular were present. It seems, though, that Ireland has somehow lost track of this important voice in modern twentieth-century music, and one who could have served as a sympathetic role model for composition since he has gone.

Thank you.