



Ensemble Pi plays 'notorious' Cowell

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NEW YORK -- With this year marking the 50th anniversary of Charles Ives' death, a spate of high-profile events has commemorated his formative influence on American composition. Yet the American Composers Alliance Festival took care to mark an anniversary of another native pioneer, the more often overlooked Henry Cowell.

You don't hear Cowell's music on record or in concert nearly as much as that of Ives; and it's true that, despite their historic innovations, Cowell's compositions just don't resonate with the staying power of those by the elder Yankee. At its best, though, Cowell's music stimulates with a juxtaposition of the playful and the poetic.

At the tiny Flea Theater in Lower Manhattan on Friday, members of Ensemble Pi and various guests performed solo, chamber and vocal scores by Cowell to mark the 80th anniversary of the Californian's New York debut. Pianist Idith Meshulam, leader of Ensemble Pi, was the evening's workhorse, starting with a string of solo pieces that showcased the innovations that earned Cowell notoriety in the 1920s.

Cowell's solo piano scores often ask the performer to play with his or her elbows to create chordal "tone clusters," as well as reach inside the lid to pluck and stroke the strings of the instrument. Eerie or humorous, these pieces show a composer seeking to break sonic boundaries that later musicians would find easier with the use of electronics.

"The Banshee" was aptly spectral, all half tones and sotto voce glissandi. Another piece, "Aeolian Harp," was appealingly atmospheric, despite Meshulam being flustered at times (as, interestingly, the pianist rehearsed on a Steinway with a different interior layout than the Fazioli she encountered on stage). "Exultation" and "Amiable Conversation" were more ironic works; the first sees the composer taking rhythmic advantage of his Irish inheritance, while the latter is one of many Cowell scores showing an Asian influence.

The program's two most emotionally potent works were the solo cello feature "Gravely and Vigorously" and the Suite for Violin and Piano. Cowell wrote the cello piece as a memorial for John F. Kennedy; young cellist Loren Dempster performed both the initial lament and secondary salute with equal flair and concentrated emotion.

Composer-violinist Philip Wharton was joined by Meshulam for Cowell's Suite for Violin and Piano, the most European-sounding work on the program. With its mix of Gallic elegance and Russian emotiveness, it could've been composed in early 20th-century Paris or St. Petersburg. Wharton played wonderfully, as he did again later in Virgil Thomson's "Four Portraits."

Thomson's starkly, archaically ceremonial "Five Phrases From the Song of Solomon" was the only other non-Cowell work performed, with vocalist Haleh Abghari accompanying herself on percussion. It was a game performance, although -- as with Cowell's "Vocalise" later on --

Abghari's talents were more alluring than the actual music.

Another ambitious performance that didn't quite work featured a sequence of solo piano pieces that Cowell dubbed "Six Ings," including "Floating," "Frisking" and "Fleeting." Evoking Satie in one piece and Cecil Taylor in the next, this was involving music, expressively played by Meshulam. Yves Musard's dance accompaniment, though, seemingly spontaneously choreographed, was a distraction.

Some of Cowell's best-known music is his series of Americana "Hymn and Fuguing Tunes," the 12th of which was a lovely discovery in a setting for three French horns, played sonorously by Susan Babcock, Sean Yancer and Karl Kramer.

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