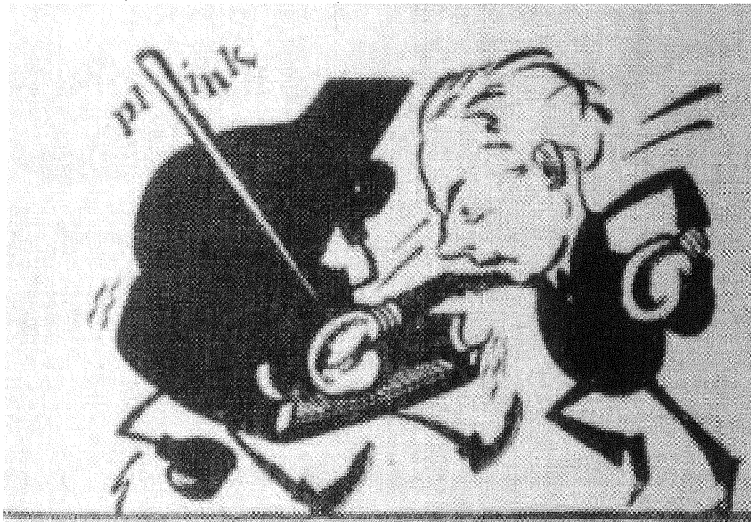


**“Cowell in Cartoon:
A Pugilistic Pianist’s Impact on Pop Culture”**



Gary Galván (ggalvan@ufl.edu)

University of Florida

Gainesville, FL, USA 32611-7900

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Maverick American composer and pianist Henry Cowell (1897-1965) embarked on several highly acclaimed and controversial concert tours through Europe and the U.S. in the 1920s and 1930s and attained worldwide fame and notoriety with his percussive pianism. Controversy surrounding Cowell's techniques quickly manifested in the visual culture. First appearing in printed media along with written criticism, Cowell's characteristic clubbing soon became a standard, if surprisingly tacit, part of animated cartoon sight gags.



Cowell demonstrating his "tone clusters"

Raised in poverty by philosophical anarchists, largely self-taught, and steeped in Irish, Japanese, and Chinese folk music in the San Francisco Bay area, Cowell began experimenting with sound and delved quite literally into the piano. Reviews of Cowell's performances, which ranged from invective to accolades, invariably focused on his

unconventional and characteristic tone clusters – combinations of notes achieved by depressing immediately adjacent notes on the piano with an open hand, closed fist or entire forearm.

An early and favorable *New York Times* report from 1922 offers a glimpse into Cowell's biography and noteworthy social circle:¹

Greenwich, Conn. July 12 – All musical and fashionable Greenwich was present this afternoon at a musical causerie given at the home of Mrs. Ernest Thompson Seton for the benefit of the Anna Howard Shaw Memorial.² In illustration of a brilliant lecture on "Modern Tendencies in

¹ "New Work in Music/Given at Mrs. Ernest Thompson Seton's Home in Greenwich/Special to the New York Times," *New York Times*, 13 July 1922, p. 9

² Née Grace Gallatin (1872-1959), Mrs. Seton served as president of the Connecticut Women's Suffrage League, organizer of a woman's mobile relief unit in France during World War I, author of seven travel autobiographies, and president of the National League of American Pen Women. In 1896 she married the English-born Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946) who established his reputation with animal stories and played a pivotal

Music” by Miss Jeanne de Mare, a musical composition of a completely revolutionary character, providing a new idiom in music, called “The Tides of Manannann [*recte* Manaunaun],” by a young Western composer, was given in public for the first time.

This composer is Henry Cowell, born in Menlo Park, Cal., in 1898 [*recte* 1897]. He played the violin in public at six years of age but his health breaking down, had to abandon music until his sixteenth year. From twelve years of age he supported his mother by selling flowers in the street, at last obtaining a job as a gardener to a musician in exchange for lessons. He was heard playing his own composition by a San Francisco musician, who was so impressed that he obtained a scholarship for him at Stanford University.

“The Tides of Mannannan” [*recte* Manaunaun] is the first part of an Irish trilogy founded on an Irish myth discovered a year ago, and dating back to Druidical times. It is a series of remarkable clusters of tones and overtones and the bass is played entirely with the whole forearm, the elbow end playing the low notes of the bass harmony, and the fingers the high notes forming melodies in counterpoint. The theme is played with the right hand in a steady rhythmic flow which, in conjunction with the great “tone clusters” composed of the higher harmonics from the eleventh up in units, gives a magnificent stirring whole which is entirely new on every point. The work was played by Mme. Margaret Nikoloric, who is the only pianist, save Mr. Cowell himself, who has been able to master its technical difficulties.³ Mme. Nikoloric was recalled many times, and finally consented to play the piece over again.

Two days after Cowell’s debut at Aeolian Hall in London on December 10, 1923, the *Glasgow Evening Times* accompanied a sarcastically slanted stab at Cowell’s unusual technique with the image of a pianist banging away at a keyboard with his elbows. One cannot help but notice the performer appears as if he were trying to hold his ears as well. The unnamed critic offers a titular promise of “Brighter piano recitals”:

role in the formation of the Boy Scouts of America. Their divorce became final in 1935. They’re only daughter, Anya Seton, authored historical novels. Mr. Seton married the much younger Julie Moss Buttree in 1935.

The Rev. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw (1847-1919), America’s first female ordained Methodist minister (1880) physician, and associate of Susan B. Anthony, supported women’s suffrage. She served as a member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (1904-1915), and published her autobiography, *The Story of a Pioneer*, in 1915. At the lead of the Women’s Council of National Defense during WWI, She stands out as the first woman to receive the Distinguished Service Medal for her dedication to world peace.

³ Nikoloric produced at least eight Welte-Mignon Reproducing Piano Rolls including HC’s “Three Irish Legends” – No. 1 The Tides of Manaunaun, An Albert M. Petrak, a classical radio announcer from Cleveland Ohio, has produced an extensive list of piano rolls.

A distinguished pianist having set the example of playing the piano with his elbows as well as his fingers, someone will no doubt try to improve on his method ... It will, however, be a novelty ... to see on the concert platform a pianist in immaculate evening dress thus use his feet on the keyboard. He might even go further and employ not only his feet and elbow but also his nose or chin.



Over the next year, reviews continued to present written and drawn depictions of Cowell battling pianos. A French critic for *Paris Qui Chant* compared Cowell's skills displayed at the London premiere to those of American boxer Jack Dempsey.⁴ *New York Telegraph* critic Ben Deacon wrote up his review of a Carnegie Hall recital as a boxing match and reported that "Despite a steady rain of lefts and short-arm jabs which [Henry] Fortissimo [Cowell] showered upon him throughout the whole twenty rounds, Kid Knabe was on his feet at the finish."⁵ Deacon's inspiration did not end there, as he included a quatrain:

⁴ "Musique ultra-futuriste," *Paris Qui Chante*, 15 February 1924. [in French] [Cowell Collection]: "Blanches ou noires, les touches en voient de dures lorsqu'il en assomme une douzaine d'un coup de poing digne de Dempsey." (Author's translation: White or black, the keys see abuse when he strikes them with a dozen blows of the fist worthy of Dempsey.)

Jack Dempsey (1895-1983), a.k.a. "the Manassa Mauler," held the rank of world heavyweight champion from 1919 to 1926. Dempsey established his reputation in his first title fight by sending Jess Willard "the Pottawatomie Giant" (1881-1968) to the mat seven times in the first three minutes of the match. After losing his title to Gene Tunney (1898-1978) in 1926, Dempsey reclaimed the prize in a rematch with a legendary 14-second 'long count.'

⁵ Ben Deacon, "Kid Knabe takes heavy punishment, but is on his feet at end of bout," *New York telegraph*, 12 February 1924.

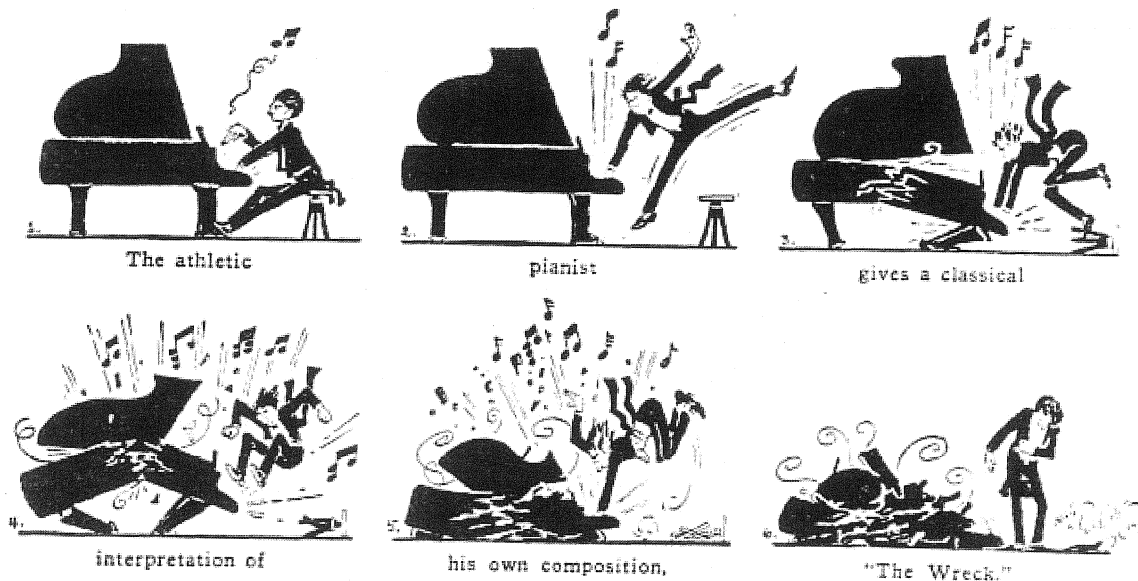
Knabe pianos reached their pinnacle of fame as the official piano of the Metropolitan Opera in 1926.

“The New Piano Art”

If the world adopts tone clusters
And departs from old traditions,
Then our best piano busters
Will become our best musicians

Indeed, even Cowell’s friend and conductor of Cowell’s orchestral music, the legendary music lexicographer Nicolas Slonimsky, labeled the young composer a “pugilistic pianist.”

Nate Collier (1883-1961), an illustrator for *Life*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and Will Rogers’s 1924 book, *The Illiterate Digest*, opened the door for tacit references to Cowell in a cartoon which ran in the weekly satirical *Judge* on July 18, 1924. George Jean Nathan (1882-1958) resurrected Collier’s drawing to accompany a review of the 1923-24 theatrical season in *American Mercury* – a monthly Nathan had founded with erudite arts critic H. L. Mencken (1880-1956). While neither publication specifically identifies Cowell by name, the association is clear. Cowell’s compositional and performance techniques had grabbed enough headlines in such prominent newspapers as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *San Francisco Examiner*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* – as well as myriad other papers both in the U.S. and abroad – for him to be commonly linked with any image of a performer pummeling a piano.



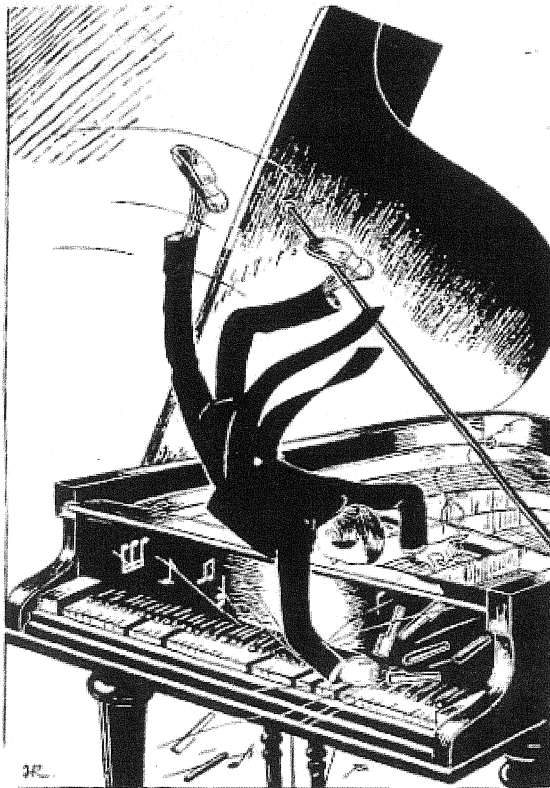
While Marion Todd handled Cowell with kid gloves in her 1925 *Collier's* article, “He Thumps His Way to Fame,” an unnamed illustrator would treat the accompanying image of Cowell with boxing gloves:

To-day Cowell is giving the musical world something to think about. His “technique” is something new. What he beats or caresses out of a piano isn’t easy to classify; but the great throbbing sounds – the tones, overtones and weird harmonies – that he evolves unquestionably have unique beauty.



Cowell’s connection to critical commentary in print carried on well past his concertizing career. Indeed, in the Soviet Union, Cowell’s maverick piano playing echoed well into the late 1940s. Two years after the Central Committee of the Soviet Party launched its assault on “decadent bourgeois culture” in 1946 and threatened the livelihood and safety of Soviet

composers such as Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) and Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), *Sovetskaya Muzyka* published a cartoon of Cowell launching his own assault on a grand piano and exemplifying everything wrong with music.⁶ In 1949, Vladimir Nabokov's cousin Nicolas addressed an enduring universal concept of Cowell in the *Partisan Review* along with a translation of the two Cyrillic quatrains beneath the drawing:



Востанет Ковелл злою,
Грохотъ вънъ зрюю!
И стучитъ кулакомъ въ
Клавиръ на шибко злою

Худъ онъ грубо и жестоко,
Плюетъ кулакомъ жестоко,
Тамъ ударитъ кулакомъ въ Клавиръ
И плутокъ злою кулакомъ!

In the U.S.A., the main offenders, according to the Soviet press, are Gian-Carlo Menotti [b. 1911] and Henry Cowell ... The July, 1948, issue of *Sovietskaya Muzyka* carried a cartoon of Mr. Cowell, his feet swimming in air, beating the keyboard of a piano with his right fist and at the same time plucking the strings with his left hand.⁷ The reference, of course, is to certain experiments with “note-clusters” conducted by Mr. Cowell twenty-five and more years ago, some of which were published at that time, I believe, by the Soviet State Music Press. Below the cartoon is a rhyme which says, “Cowell bangs it (the piano). Hop-la! Look out, or I’ll kill you. The listener sits silent, afraid for his life. Look at the brute! He is a hysteric, and about to collapse ... All this is good business in

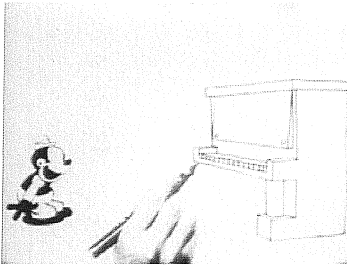
America, where music is used to make money.”

⁶ Other “first offenders against the mores of Soviet music” included Aram Khachaturian (1903-1968), Vissarion Shebalin (1902-1963), Gavril Popov (1904-1972), and Nikolai Miaskovsky (1881-1950).

⁷ Sexual orientation remains a valid point to ponder as a catalyst for caustic critique. Menotti maintained a lifelong and intimate relationship with American composer Samuel Barber (1910-1981), and the grave plot next to Barber's has been reserved for Menotti's mortal remains. Despite an ill-fated engagement (his fiancée died in a train accident), Cowell had served nearly four years in prison for a homosexual encounter with a 17-year-old neighbor. Shortly after his parole and subsequent pardon, Cowell married ethnomusicologist Sidney Robertson (1903-1995).

While Cowell established a picture perfect reputation in contemporary classical music culture, pioneers such as Hugh Harman, Rudolf Ising and Dave Fleischer endeavored to create their own legacies in American animated art. Looking for substance beyond simple sight gags, these directors and others like them turned to commentary on contemporary culture, which included apparent – if tacit – allusions to Cowell.⁸

In 1929, former Disney animators Harman and Ising teamed up to produce a pilot reel, *Bosko the Talk-ink Kid*. In a marriage of live action and drawn animation, Bosko emerged from

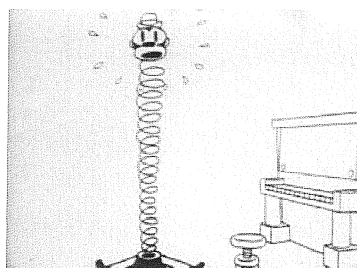
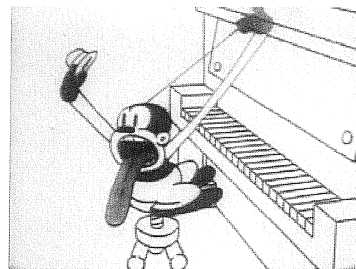


Ising's inkbottle to interact with his creator and become the first cartoon character to actually speak dialogue in primitive lip sync.

Ising pens an upright piano for Bosko and the derbied

vaudevillian blackface caricature launches into song and dance

before returning to the bottle. Antics include a bit of tongue wagging that requires Bosko to retract his glossal organ by pulling a hair, and an unproductive encounter with the piano stool that leaves Bosko a bit unwound. Although he participates in no piano pounding, *The Talk-ink Kid* sets the stage for playful Cowellisms to come.

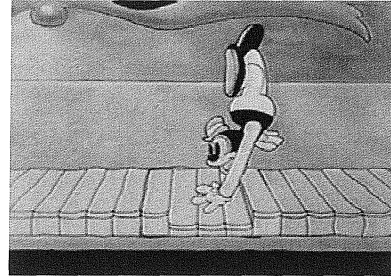


Warners picked up the Harman-Ising production in 1930 and Bosko became a series under the Looney Tunes label. Each episode invariably featured music and turned to such popular tunes of the day as *Walking My Baby Back Home* by Maurice Chevalier

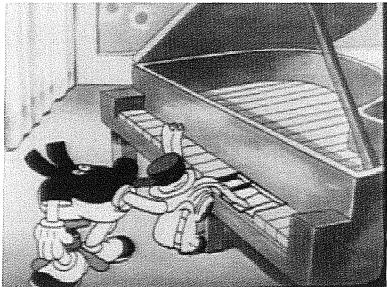
⁸ Perhaps the strangest manifestation of a contemporary political figure reference comes in three Harman and Ising productions, *Goopy Geer* (1932), *Wake up the Gypsy in Me* (1933), and *I Love a Parade* (1939). Eastern Indian pacifist Gandhi appears briefly in each – most notably as a laughing alcohol-induced hallucination in *Goopy Geer*. Enigmatically, the early images come in the wake of Gandhi's 1930 Salt March.

(1888-1972) and *Chinnin' and Chattin' with May*.⁹ One of the 13 theatrical releases that year, *Big Man from the North*, contained a barroom scene in which a pianist punches the keyboard during a performance.

Bosko's Woodland Daze (1932) offers an uncanny foreshadowing to the 1948 *Sovetskaya Muzyk* image as Bosko's fantastic dance on a giant keyboard includes a handstand.



Characteristically Cowell-like piano techniques turn up in the repertoire of several other Warner Brothers characters. For example, *Goopy Geer* (1932) introduced a long-legged



showman of the same name. Sporting top hat and tails, Goopy performs at the piano and sings, “I have not studied music. I do not know my notes. I’m just a slave to music. No time to sow my oats (not much).”

Coincidentally, aside from brief studies in counterpoint and composition at the University of California at Berkeley and the Institute of Musical Arts in New York with no terminal



degrees, Cowell stands out as an autodidact, and despite two honorary doctorates, Cowell only ever completed third grade. In true Cowell style, Goopy twice strikes the instrument to launch keys into the air. Goopy even plays “by ear” and when an inebriated fire-breathing horse destroys the piano, continues

playing the harp-like structure with strings exposed.

⁹ Written by B. Fields and F. Simmons, several bands recorded this hit in 1930 alone and include Bubber Miley and his Mileage Makers, Jessie Stafford and his Orchestra, and Harry Reser and his Orchestra.

Piano playing continues to play a prominent role in Bosko cartoons throughout the 1930s, but commercially available copies are relatively rare.¹⁰ Moreover, in descriptive tomes such as Friedwald's comprehensive annotated list, clear cameos of prominent personalities ranging from Jimmy Durante to Franklin Roosevelt generally overshadow any subtler allusions to the classically controversial Cowell.¹¹ Much as the sarcastic writer for the *Glasgow Evening Times* had idealized over a decade earlier, animators expanded comedic playing techniques to regularly include a variety of body parts, as comedic cacophony eclipsed credit to Cowell. For example, in *Porky the Giant Killer* (1936), our hero leans on a celesta-like piano, and a 1938 Walter Lantz cartoon, *Boy Meets Dog*, depicts a performer attacking the keyboard with feet and beard.

One cartoon in particular, however, clearly characterizes Cowell in an allegorical parallel to the composer's controversial role in 20th century classical art music – *The Spinach Overture* (1935) from Adolph Zukor's (1873-1976) Paramount studios and featuring Popeye.¹²

Directed by Max Fleischer (1883-1972), the action opens on a rehearsal hall nestled in an unappreciative neighborhood – as evidenced by the prominent “For Sale” and “To Let” signs. Popeye conducts an ensemble in which Olive Oyl plays harp and Wimpy performs on drum kit. Reinforced with flute and trombone, Olive occasionally plucks strings with her feet, and Wimpy cooks a hamburger over a sterno-heated cymbal as Popeye interjects tap-dancing to snippets of the *Sailor's Hornpipe*.

¹⁰ Aside from two rather poor quality collections – *Uncensored Bosko, No. 1 (1929)*. (Image Entertainment, 2000), and *Uncensored Bosko No. 2 (1931)*. (Image Entertainment, 2000) – Bosko cartoons exist scattered haphazardly on DVDs such as *Attack of the 30's Characters (1930)* (Thunderbean Animation, 2005) or rare VHS tapes which each generally contain only a few episodes.

¹¹ Will Friedwald and Jerry Beck. *The Warner Brothers Cartoons* (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1981).

¹² In 1935, a survey of schoolchildren in the U.S. discovered Popeye's star outshone Mickey Mouse's – a fact much lamented by writer/director/producer William de Mille (1878-1955) who deemed this a sign of “definite degeneration of domestic ideals” in a 1935 essay entitled “Mickey versus Popeye.”

From a neighboring room, Bluto and his orchestra mock the amateurish musicianship, and Bluto – a black-haired version of legendary conductor Leopold Stokowski – barges in to announce, “Let me show ya how.”

Bluto (Blutowski?) performs with virtuosity on violin while backed by Popeye’s musicians. Popeye attempts to answer the challenge and fumbles through his passage only to end in a twisted heap with broken strings. Bluto then turns to the piano. Once again, Popeye’s competitive performance pales in comparison with an arrhythmic effort filled with wrong notes.

Popeye’s musicians desert him as a tuxedoed Bluto invites them to, “C’mon and join a good band.” In an era when Europeans and European-trained musicians dominated the American classical music scene, the image was all too familiar. American-born composers and musicians trained in the U.S. had considerable difficulty gaining stage time domestically.¹³



When Popeye naturally resorts to his trademark spinach, he launches into an acrobatic piano solo. Our protagonist punctuates rapid improvisatory playing with a smack that sends keys flying into the air and with a flourish of tinkling with his toes. The clear Cowellism arrives as

Popeye pounds out the tune with his elbows. Wrapping up with a scat, Popeye sets out to challenge Bluto with a retaliatory, “Now let *me* show ya how.” With a punch, Popeye dons the Stokowski coif and proceeds to conduct an ensemble through an adventurous rendition of *Poet*

¹³ Russian-born Sergey Koussevitzky (1874-1951) ranks as one of the very few pioneering conductors of American classical music. A contemporary of Stokowski, Koussevitzky took over the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1924 and would premiere over 70 works by U.S. composers during his reign.

and Peasant by Franz Suppé (1819-1895). As the musicians pound out the beat, Popeye beats up on Bluto.

Henry Cowell continues to gain recognition in contemporary scholarship for his pivotal role in American music history. His activities range from controversial composer to adventurous academic. Operatic composer Hugo Weisgall (1912-1997) aptly deemed Cowell a “champion of new music, impresario, performer, lecturer, critic, editor, teacher, and sponsor of the young,” and John Cage (1912-1992) called him the “open sesame of new American music.”¹⁴

Cowell’s unique piano style in the early 20th century challenged the staunch formality of European traditions, and like the spinach-scoffing sailor, Cowell the piano punching performer clearly left an indelible impression on American visual culture – an impression in which he simply offers, “I yam what I yam.”



¹⁴ Hugo Weisgall. “The Music of Henry Cowell,” *Musical Quarterly*. 45, no. 4. October 1959, pp. 484-507. Born in Moravia, Weisgall (1912-1997) emigrated to the U.S.A. with his family in 1920. He is best-known as a composer of 11 operas which utilize atonality. He died March 11, 1997 – the centennial of Cowell’s birth.

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