Experimentalism and the 'Whole World of Music'

by David W. Bernstein

Henry Cowell (1897–1965) believed that contemporary composers must learn "to live and to create" in the "whole world of music." With this goal in mind, Cowell challenged the hegemony of the Western musical canon and explored a wide variety of "new musical resources"—the title of his well-known treatise on twentieth century compositional techniques. After studies with the German ethnomusicologist **Erich von Hornbostel** in Berlin while on a Guggenheim fellowship in 1931–32, he wrote and taught extensively about the "Music of the Peoples of the World." Cowell had close ties to **Moses Asch**, the founder of Folkways Records. Under Asch's visionary leadership, Folkways sought to record and to document the entire world of sound. Its catalogue offers a wide range of World Music, including a series titled **"Music of the World's Peoples"** assembled from recordings that Cowell obtained in Berlin. Given Cowell's influence as well as Asch's open-minded aesthetic pluralism, it is not surprising that Folkways also has an impressive collection of experimental music.

John Cage (1912–92) used the term "experimental" to describe a specific repertory of contemporary music. "An experiment," he said, "is an act, the outcome of which is unknown." For some, defining a musical work as an experiment may seem puzzling or perhaps even objectionable, since it implies an emphasis upon the process of composing rather than its final result. Shouldn't a composer have the end clearly in sight? Yet working without preconceived notions about how music should sound creates an inclusive, rather than an exclusive aesthetic attitude allowing for virtually unlimited possibilities. This openness to new sounds allowed composers to forge a unique musical identity recognized today as the experimentalist tradition.

Folkways offers several seminal recordings of music by Cage and Cowell. In 1963 it released a recording of Cowell performing a selection of his tone-cluster pieces and several pieces for the "string piano" (playing inside the piano). Originally issued on the Circle label in 1956, **Piano Music** includes a track in which **Cowell discusses the pieces** in the order in which they appear. Cowell was a formidable virtuoso; although he was near the end of his career (some of the tracks were taken from an earlier recording) the performances are as good as it gets.

The Folkways box set featuring John Cage and David Tudor titled ***Indeterminacy: New Aspects of Form in Instrumental and Electronic Music*** first appeared in 1959. The recording consists of Cage reading ninety one-minute stories accompanied by Tudor performing music form Cage's ***Concert for Piano and Orchestra*** (1957-58) on the piano, whistles, and an amplified slinky, along with tracks from tapes containing Cage's ***Fontana Mix*** (1958). The number of words in each of the stories varied, so Cage had to read them at different speeds in order to insure a one-minute duration. The order of the stories was not planned, nor was the music coordinated with the text, save for its identical duration. In the **liner notes**, Cage eloquently explained that his intentions for putting these materials together in an unplanned way was "to suggest that all things, sounds, stories (and by extension beginnings) are related, and that this complexity is more evident when it is not over-simplified by an idea of relationship in one person's mind."

The Folkways collection includes several important recordings of music by **Charles Ives**, who arguably was the "father" of American Experimentalism. Two volumes of his songs released in 1965 feature tenor **Ted Puffer** accompanied by James Tenney and Philip Corner. Tenney, who at the time was working at Bell Labs developing the first computer music, was a staunch advocate of Ives's music and a virtuoso pianist known for his legendary performances of the Ives "Concord Sonata." He draws our attention to the significance of Ives' work in the **liner notes**:

> In the face of such an expansive and inclusive approach to music, the very word "style" begins to take on new meaning. His material was virtually the whole world of sound—all aspects of aural experience—and he worked with this broader range of materials in ways that not only anticipated but helped make possible many of the more recent extensions of the medium, such as those that have become possible in electronic music.

Folkways published an interesting collection of historical recordings of electronic music. For example, ***Highlights of Vortex: Electronic Experiments and Music*** contains tape music compositions featured at the Vortex concerts held at San Francisco's Morrison planetarium in the late 1950s. Created by Jordan Belson, a painter and filmmaker, and **Henry Jacobs**, a radio engineer and a composer of musique concrète, *Vortex* featured a light show projected up onto the planetarium's dome, accompanied by tape music disseminated spatially through more than three dozen speakers. The objective was to immerse the audience in a virtual whirlwind, a "vortex" of sound and light, a polysensorial environment, which anticipated the light shows and rock concerts during the 1960s.

Another historically noteworthy recording includes electronic music from the **University of Toronto's Electronic Music Studio (UTEMS)**. Established by Arnold Walter and Hugh Le Caine, UTEMS was among the first electronic music studios in North America. Originally trained as a physicist, Le Caine was a gifted instrument builder who invented an "electronic sackbut," the first voltage-controlled synthesizer. The recording includes Le Caine's "**Dripsody**"(1955), a tape piece made from a half inch of tape containing the sound a single drip of water, which he copied and spliced, and played at various speeds, creating interesting rhythmic and contrapuntal combinations. The collection also features a piece titled "**Pinball**" (1965) by Jean Eichelberger Ivey (who founded the Peabody Electronic Music Studio in 1967) made from recordings of pinball machines. In addition to splicing and changing tape speeds, Eichenberger employs filters, reverberation, and ring modulation. The results are stunning.

Although New York City experienced a difficult economic downturn during the 1970s, there existed a vibrant experimental music scene during the same period. Folkways' four-volume set titled ***New American Music: The New York Section Composers in the 1970s*** demonstrates the diversity of music created during that period. The **first volume** contains works by composer/performers active in the New York free jazz scene. Free jazz—experimental music with roots in African American culture—embraces spontaneous improvisation and focuses on exploring the unknown. Until recently, it has been largely overlooked in histories of experimental music. It is now the focus of more inclusive scholarship, such as George Lewis's path-breaking history on the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM). This Folkways recording was way ahead of its time. It features music by Mary Lou Williams, Sam Rivers, Sunny Murray, Milford Graves, and Gil Evans, now acknowledged leaders in the free jazz movement.

The four-volume set also includes Lucia Dlugoszewski's "**Angels of the Inmost Heaven**" written for two trumpets, two trombone's, and two French horns. Dlugoszewski studied composition with Felix Salzer and **Edgard Varèse** and was an instrument builder, who also developed new techniques for playing inside the piano, her so-called "timbre piano." She had a keen sense of timbre. As Virgil Thomson observed, Dlugoszewski wrote “far-out music of great delicacy, originality, and beauty of sound.” **Volume three** features three political songs by Frederic Rzewski, sung by baritone David Holloway. The first song, titled “**Struggle**”, is a setting of a text from a letter written by **Langston Hughes** accompanied by an ensemble with Anthony Braxton (alto sax), Karol Berger (vibraphone), and members of the Musicians’ Action Collective. This group comprised of forty New York musicians who sought to establish connections between their music and politics through benefit concerts that supported, for example, the **Attica** Defense Committee and the **United Farm Workers**. Another track with text setting by Hughes, “**Lullaby**”, is accompanied by Karol Berger on vibraphone and Anthony Braxton on clarinet. The third song, with Rzewski as piano accompanist, uses a poem titled “**Apolitical Intellectuals**” by the Guatemalan revolutionary poet Otto Castillo who died at the age of thirty-one after he was captured and tortured for four days by the Guatemalan authorities. The **fourth volume** of the ***New American Music*** set includes Gordon Mumma’s “**Cybersonic Cantilevers**” (1973), a work that employs electronic circuitry designed and built by the composer for live electronic processing of acoustic sounds that are fed back into the system and modified. In “**Cybersonic Cantilevers**” audience members participate in this interactivity. As Mumma explained, “the participants are audience members, who can bring their own primary sounds (on cassettes, or live through microphones) and have access to the system at control-stations.”

Two volumes of recordings titled ***Gamelan in the New World*** by the Gamelan Son of Lion demonstrate that combining musical traditions from opposite sides of the world can result in extraordinary music. The Gamelan Son of Lion is a chamber ensemble/collective that was founded by Barbara Benary (who built the Son of Lion instruments), Philip Corner, and Daniel Goode. It’s devoted to both traditional Javanese repertory and experimental music. Barbara Benary’s elegant piece titled “**Sleeping Braid**” employs a fourteen note “tone row” in counterpoint with a permutation of the row (emulating a technique used in traditional Javanese music). In Dika Newlin’s “**Machine Shop**”, the performers play gamelan instruments or other metallic instruments and are instructed to “feel like a worker in a machine shop concentrating only on the regular rhythm of your own machine. Tone quality is not important; a ‘clunky’ sound is permitted, even encouraged.” Daniel Goode’s “**40 Random Numbered Clangs**” is based on random number sequences. Each chord (clang) in the series is elaborated by a rhythmic improvisation followed by an arpeggio.

The recordings discussed here are only a small handful from Folkways’ wonderful collection of experimental music. As John Cage once wrote, in describing his mentor

Henry Cowell, Folkways is an "open sesame for new music in America." I enthusiastically urge readers to explore the riches of this amazing resource and to "live in the whole world of music." It is an invaluable cultural resource worthy of the vision and aspirations of its founders.

David W. Bernstein *is a professor of music at Mills College. His publications include* **The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde** *and* **Writings through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art**. *His essays have appeared in numerous edited volumes, including* **Cage & Consequences** *and* **The Cambridge Companion to John Cage**, *among others. He is presently writing a book on Pauline Oliveros for the University of Illinois Press.*