

## “New Music Quarterly” recordings (1934-1949)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Joel Sachs (guest post)\*



*Henry Cowell*

Although in 1925 performances of new music in New York were increasing, in Henry Cowell's native California they barely existed. Hoping to help his fellow composers, he founded the New Music Society of California, whose concerts he hoped would awaken listeners to the power of new music. It was quickly obvious, however, that the only beneficiaries would be small audiences; he decided that what composers really needed above all were publishers. Convinced that commercial publishers were not the answer, he started a subscription series called *New Music Quarterly*, each issue of which contained the scores of one or two new compositions, largely American. Thanks to an unexpected donor--Charles Ives--the project survived and later grew into a second series of orchestral scores called *New Music Editions*.

Henry soon had a new idea thanks to the attention he paid to advances in recording technology. The new media were vividly explored in a 1931 issue of the New York journal “*Modern Music*” devoted to innovative technologies--radio, recording, film, and electrical instruments--and their potential benefits and threats to musical life, the most recent of which was the destruction of cinema musicians' careers by the advent of sound films. While alert to the dangers, Henry also saw the potential of the technologies, having recorded for the player piano as it evolved into an instrument capable of nuanced reproduction. Then, when Western Electric developed electrical recording and the loudspeaker, manufacturers rushed to adopt the new technology. Now equipped to record any music with respectable fidelity, the industry transformed itself by marketing famous interpreters playing familiar music, leaving most performers and composers with very shaky futures.

Another possible danger was articulated in the “*Modern Music's*” technology issue--the possibility that listeners, growing used to the narrow spectrum of recorded sound, would lose their sensitivity to the beauty of live music. While perceiving other threats, such as the bankruptcies of piano factories as people decided that listening to recordings was better than attempting to play the music, Henry saw positive prospects, such as composers harnessing the distinctive tone colors of recorded instruments and manipulating balance with separate miking. (He also had not dismissed the prospects of the apparently dead player piano, such as using a new method of cutting player-piano rolls to produce the subtle rhythmic relationships that he had

described in his book “New Musical Resources,” a suggestion taken up by the young composer Conlon Nancarrow.) One of Henry’s ex-students explored a machine that allowed a composer to draw whatever “harmonic curves” were desired directly on a movie soundtrack, which would then be performed by running the film, producing a synthetic music unique to the medium and was unperformable live. Above all, Henry foresaw recording bringing new music to lightly populated areas where concerts were impractical. Of course, that is, if a commercial company ever showed interest.

In Berlin, where a Guggenheim Fellowship gave Henry a chance to study at the gigantic archive of cylinder recordings, a visit to the technology department of the Berlin Hochschule prompted Henry to imagine the New Music Society issuing recordings, the budget for which would be partly met by Charles Ives, who had become a close friend. To contain costs, he planned to record concerts live. With Ives’ support, he decided to use a performance of “Washington’s Birthday” for his first recording, following it with Riegger’s “Dichotomy” and his own “Polyphonica.” Ives’ gift, though, could only pay for masters, however; manufacture and distribution would have to wait. Then the musicians’ union derailed the plan.

Shortly thereafter, Lindstrom, the German recording giant, proposed a ten-record set of modern music comprising of six American and 14 European compositions. Since 78 rpm records could hold only about four to five minutes per 12-inch side, doses of modernity would be small, but better than nothing. European composers were to include Schoenberg, Hindemith, Bartók, what Henry called “the better Stravinsky,” and unnamed others. Based on Henry’s proposals, Lindstrom suggested that Ives and Cowell be two of the Americans. The sets, to be recorded by the Berlin Philharmonic under Hermann Scherchen, would be released in the United States by Columbia Records. Eventually, however, Henry decided that it would be cheaper and simpler if New Music marketed its own products. The need was becoming steadily more apparent. In “Modern Music’s” first issue of 1933, Irving Kolodin wrote about the expansion of recordings of living composers but the almost total absence of American music.

In New York, Henry rented a high-quality electrical recording machine, capable of producing superb, durable discs. Manufacturing a double-sided record with about ten minutes of music cost fifty cents. Furthermore, the manufacturer of the machine offered to help distribute the records. Henry also foresaw transferring world-music recordings that existed only on the old Edison rolls and duplicating rare records for which only one copy existed. He asked Ives to immediately help finance the \$125 purchase price, since a large record company was trying to buy out the manufacturer and stifle the competition. After quickly receiving \$50 from Ives, he announced the birth of New Music Recordings. He planned to make the first discs within a month. The New Music Society would pay for the equipment, hall, blank discs, and a fee for “young Seeger”--Charles’ 14 year-old son, Pete--to operate the recorder. At \$42 per side, the master was expensive for the New Music Society, but Henry did not want to wait until they had subscribers. Ives advanced \$320 to start work and involved himself energetically in the recordings. The timing was perfect: Lindstrom’s proposal died when the Nazis took power on January 30, 1933.

As usual, Henry kept his mind open about what to include. For the first two discs he proposed Weiss’ “Three Songs with String Quartet,” Ruggles’ “Angels,” the slow movement of Ruth Crawford’s String Quartet, and, for the fourth side, either songs by Ives or Henry’s own “Movement” (for string quartet). Henry wanted to capture Brant’s “Angels and Devils,” for 11 flutes, which was being rehearsed for a concert, but Ives suggested postponing it. Of Ruth Crawford’s extraordinary quartet movement he had nothing but praise, telling Ives that it is

“without question the best movement for quartet that any American has written, and I would rather hear it than almost anything I can think of.... I would like to make the record, if only to have you hear it!” Ives responded, expressing his preferences, accepting Henry’s ideas, but warning that his heavy losses in the stock market crash made him cautious about starting the recording series alongside the two music publishing series. But he promised to help, and would soon indicate how much he could contribute in the future.

At the end of 1933, Henry, driving his elderly car, took the recording machine to California, where he quickly learned that the New Music Society was extremely precarious financially, as was Henry himself, since a class he was to teach that would have generated crucial income had only one student registered and would probably be canceled. One can see Ives’ point about concentrating resources, but Henry, not to be deterred, proceeded with recording the Crawford and Weiss pieces for the first installment and deferred to Ives about waiting to record Henry Brant’s “Angels and Devils.” Alas, Henry’s first instinct about Brant was correct. Having missed this opportunity, they never were able to record it.

The recordings’ financial underpinnings remained insecure. Riegger suggested increasing the base of professional support by recording every piece available, if it met a basic standard and if the composer paid for it and contributed an additional ten dollars toward underwriting the recording of works by composers who could not afford to pay. The regular subscription series would only market music of which they were totally convinced, but all compositions would be listed in the catalogue of “New Music Quarterly Recordings.” Henry rejected the idea, which was clearly fraught with practical and diplomatic problems.

The first brochure lists an Executive Committee comprising Henry, Editor; Martha Beck, Treasurer; John Becker, Ruth Crawford, Wallingford Riegger, and Blanche Walton. In addition to Henry and Ives, the most active participants were Charles Seeger, Weiss, Riegger, Walton, and Beck. Riegger took charge of manufacturing the discs and oversaw recording, logistics, and marketing when Henry was in California, always deferring to Henry, who effectively was the proprietor of the project. Walton and Beck kept accounts and took care of mailing. For an Honorary Board of Endorsers, Henry recruited the cream of the international new-music world, from Poulenc, Nadia Boulanger, and Casella to Bartók, Berg, Schoenberg, and Webern. The Advisory Board of Composers was a cross-section of Americans and Cubans.

The recordings began as sluggishly as the national economic recovery. As of January 2, 1934, there were only 13 new subscribers in addition to Henry’s initial list. At a subscription price of \$5 per year, and singles at \$2, it was not cheap. The immaturity of the new electrical process caused technical problems: Crawford’s subtle string-quartet texture did not sound well on the average acoustic playback machine, and electric phonographs were still rare. Metal recordings were more durable than wax but had to be played with wooden needles, which were sometimes difficult to obtain. Carlos Salzedo, the harp virtuoso, worried about sales because the performers were not famous. Henry nevertheless radiated enthusiasm. Subscribers gradually increased, surprising Ives, who commented that he “didn’t imagine there were 70 people in the US still with \$5+ for a record. You certainly had the right idea.” Expenses later forced the subscription up to \$6.

Blanche Walton, who labored tirelessly packing and mailing recordings and sending out brochures and review copies around the world, feared that enthusiasm far surpassed orders and could not avoid feeling that the business was run poorly by herself and her helpers. Performance

quality also posed problems. Attempts to record live concerts faltered because of under-rehearsed performances. Editing was impossible. When Salzedo--just the star performer that he felt the recordings needed--wanted to record his harp solo "Inquietude," he got Lyon and Healey, the harp manufacturers, to provide funding. It was not in his repertory, however. When he began working on it, he realized that it was "hellishly difficult." He played it publicly but imperfectly, re-practiced, tried again, but never managed to record it. Weiss--now Schoenberg's assistant in Boston--suggested combining a first-class performance name and a famous composer by inviting Lydia Hoffman-Berendt, an impressive pianist whom he knew from Berlin, to record Schoenberg's Suite Op. 25, if Schoenberg would release the recording rights. Henry, however, felt that a Schoenberg recording should be handled by a standard company such as Columbia. Furthermore, he knew from experience that dealing with European copyrights could be a nightmare of endless quarterly accountings.

Around the end of 1934, the commercial labels finally began opening their doors to American composers. Walter Piston withdrew his Oboe Quartet from New Music Recordings when Columbia decided to issue it, and Roy Harris convinced Victor to record Ives' "The Housatonic at Stockbridge." Slonimsky advised Henry to make his own recording of the other two movements of "Three Places in New England" while the orchestra was assembled, but it probably was too costly.

The change of heart at Victor and Columbia had only marginal effects on the availability of American music, however, and "New Music Quarterly Recording's" continued, thanks to Ives' support. After lengthy negotiations, the Gramophone Shop in Manhattan took over managing the subscriptions, receiving a percentage as an incentive to publicize it. The correspondence of these years yields rich detail about the planning and financing of a seemingly impossible project in impossible times.

Then, in 1936, Cowell was sentenced to 15 years in San Quentin on morals charge to which he stupidly pleaded guilty. He could no longer run the company or sign contracts. New Music Quarterly and New Music Edition--the orchestral series--were placed in the hands of 28 year-old Gerald Strang, Dene Denny, and Martha Beck Carragan. Riegger agreed to curate "New Music Recordings."

Henry needed Otto Luening's help with managing the recordings, which had become disorganized. Just before going to prison Henry had signed a contract for Columbia Records to take it over. Then the artistic management of Columbia changed radically and never countersigned the papers. With Columbia currently not issuing modern American music, Henry believed that the mission of New Music Recordings was more important than ever. Riegger was unreliable; the volunteer successor to Blanche Walton dropped out, leaving no one to ship the records. Henry urged Luening to get Bennington College, where he taught, to do something, as Luening had once proposed for the publications. This he did, and the college's president suggested turning the whole thing over to its Cooperative Store, which Luening approved. That plan worked reasonably well: the recordings came out four times a year through 1939, after which they faltered and appeared only sporadically. The future of the California concerts darkened, however, when Adolph Weiss unexpectedly moved to New York and Henry could not think of a competent replacement. Unable to suppress his annoyance, all he could do was encourage Weiss to work with Luening and Riegger to raise the recordings to a very high level of compositions, performances, and distribution.

To Luening he offered one editorial suggestion, applicable to the periodical and the recording. “New Music” should continue to be “all-inclusive--favoring no one style or tendency in selections and avoiding any cliqueishness [sic].” He continued to interest himself in the details, offering suggestions whenever he could write and pushing Luening to visit record stores that might stock the records, as he himself had always done. When Luening reported that Bennington would have to skip a January recording, Henry strongly cautioned that skipping a scheduled release could cause the subscribers to lose faith in the project. Riegger was probably too tactful to tell Henry that he should consider himself lucky that Bennington agreed to take over the records under Luening's guidance, since no one else was prepared to help.

The new managers were able to issue regular recordings, and when Cowell was finally pardoned in 1942, with his civil rights restored, the recordings might have continued had the war not intervened. Even the immediate post-war period did not see a revival, however. The company had managed to issue a total of 20 compositions before Henry was imprisoned, another 24 or 25 while Henry could not play a role, and four more in 1949, when it came to an end. That it could look back on recording 49 new works largely during the Depression and the road to war was something of a miracle for the composers--mostly American--of those days.

While New Music Edition's publication of orchestral scores became much too expensive by 1950, New Music Quarterly continued to published chamber and solo music regularly for another ten years, wrapping up in 1958. With Henry's health declining precipitously, and with no successor possessing his persistence and ability to convince people that the projects were worthwhile despite their near impossibility, the time for their demise had arrived. It was, however, a good time to pack up. American publishers such as Schirmer, Edition Peters/New York, Peer Music, Presser, and others large and small, had finally taken on American composers in large numbers, and recording companies were starting to pay more attention to American composers. Substantial credit must go to Henry Cowell, Charles Ives, and their friends for paving the way. These projects had had a long run and served composers very well. Henry Cowell and his associates had a lot of which to be proud.

*Joel Sachs is the author of “Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.