

## PROGRAM NOTES

VPR Broadcast Thursday, August 27, 2020, 6:00 PM Eastern

### **HENRY COWELL (1897-1965)**

#### *Set of Five* (1952)

Unequivocally one of America's most innovative composers, Henry Cowell powerfully shaped the course of American music. Cowell was born in California in 1897, just as America's Progressive Era was beginning. By Cowell's twenty-third birthday, progressives had successfully enacted both prohibition and women's suffrage, and Cowell himself – something of a musical prodigy, despite growing up in poverty – had already written music that would enter the canon. Cowell's *The Tides of Manaunaun* (c. 1917) pioneered the use of tone clusters, chords comprised of close-knit seconds played with the fists and forearms. Cowell went on to use this technique so often that it was widely accepted as his own invention; famously, Bartok once wrote Cowell to ask permission to compose with clusters.

Cowell's prodigious gifts were discovered by stroke of luck. Cowell, forced to work odd jobs as a boy to support his ill, single mother, happened to be a subject in a study run by one of the developers of the modern IQ test, a professor at Stanford. The man quickly recognized Cowell's genius and arranged for Cowell to study English at Stanford and music at the University of California, Berkeley — all while he was only seventeen. Fortunately, Cowell's teacher at Berkeley was the brilliant Charles Seeger, who not only exposed him to European musical techniques but also compelled him to develop a theoretical framework for his ideas.

Cowell did so, and the result was his remarkable text *New Musical Resources* (1930). Undertaken when Cowell was only nineteen years old, the book predicts musical innovations, like tone clusters and chance procedures, that would become ubiquitous for generations of later composers. Cowell went on to found the periodical *New Music Quarterly* in 1927, serving as its editor until 1936. Through these and other endeavors, Cowell influenced a generation of American composers, including Colon Nancarrow, Lou Harrison, George Gershwin, and, perhaps most of all, John Cage.

One of the attitudes Cowell imparted to future generations of American composers was an open interest in non-Western music. Cowell voraciously studied world music throughout his life, eventually teaching courses on the subject at the New School for Social Research in New York and elsewhere. Cowell's *Set of Five* (1952) for violin, piano, and percussion is an exemplary piece that embodies Cowell's interest in world music: the idea of this work is to combine tuneful melodies and tonal harmonies with exotic, non-Western timbres.

*Set of Five's* opening movement, *Largo*, pairs engaging, quasi-Baroque figures in the piano and violin with an ever-present accompaniment of five muted gongs. The result reads almost like a movement

with a non-Western “continuo,” here played on gongs instead of the harpsichord. A scintillating *Allegro* movement follows, with fluttering tutti figures across all three instruments. The central *Andante* grounds the listener in direct, songlike music but adds a new non-Western element: here, the percussionist accompanies the others on Indian tablas (or, optionally, tom-toms). In the fourth movement *Presto*, Cowell recapitulates the fluttering material from the second movement *Allegro*, this time underscoring the musical action with the Indian Jalatarang, a set of porcelain bowls (here, as with the first movement’s gongs, comprising a set of five pitches). The fifth movement *Vigoroso* brings the work to a close, masterfully combining many of the hallmarks of Cowell’s mature idiom: tone clusters, harmonics on the piano strings, and non-Western percussion all animate and enrich this music.

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## **JOAN TOWER (b. 1938)**

### *White Granite* (2010)

*White Granite* was commissioned by St. Timothy’s Festival Summer Music Festival in Montana, Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival in Colorado, and LaJolla Music Society for SummerFest in California, and was given its world premiere in Georgetown Lake, Montana, on July 11th, 2010 by violinist Peter Zazofsky, violist William Fekenheuer, cellist Michael Reynolds, and pianist Michele Levin.

The 17-minute work is a piece that I enjoyed writing. As a pianist, having the piano present always gives me comfort. The piano, in fact, probably generates most of the background action in the piece — starting with the harmony in the first few measures and continuing with the different motoric ideas that are introduced gradually throughout the piece. In between, there are solos for the other instruments that involve either a falling line (which eventually becomes a rising line) or a “held in place” idea.

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## **WITOLD LUTOSLAWSKI (1913-1994)**

### Variations on a Theme by Paganini (1941)

During the German occupation of Poland Andrzej Panufnik and I played unofficial concerts of two-piano music in Warsaw. This was the origin of these Variations which we first performed in 1941. As a basis I took Paganini’s 24<sup>th</sup> Caprice for solo violin and my Variations closely follow his model. In each Variation I translate the violin line for the keyboard. Polyharmony often occurs between the two keyboards but tonality remains a clear force with frequent traditional dominant-tonic cadences.

In 1877, I was asked by the pianist Felicja Blumental for a composition and revised these Variations as a Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. It expands the piano-duo piece by repeating each section (apart from the theme itself and Variations 10 and 11), with the soloist and orchestra exchanging roles for the second playing of each Variation. Otherwise there is very little change in the musical substance. Blumental gave the first performance of the new version in Miami on 19 November 1979 with Brian Priestman conducting the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra.

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## **DAVID LUDWIG (b. 1974)**

### *Paganiniana* (2018)

The four music festivals that commissioned *Paganiniana* were all founded by terrific violin players, and that fact made me think immediately of Niccolò Paganini – that iconic virtuoso and the first truly *superstar* violinist. Reading about Paganini and his legendary (and very troubled) life moved me to write a piece inspired by his *Twenty-Four Caprices* for solo violin. At first, I considered a kind of musical “biopic,” that would end with a somber reflection of Paganini’s difficult final years. But then I realized that our collective memory of this extraordinary musician is of a flying acrobat — a daring figure skater that always hit his quintuple Lutz, and that’s the character I wanted to bring back into life.

The title *Paganiniana* is borrowed from Nathan Milstein’s piece of the same name where he stitches together individual caprices from Paganini’s collection to make a larger narrative. My ambitions are similar, though rather than use the material of the caprices directly, I am more interested in impressions of gestures, effects, and virtuosic figures reflected in my music. Still, there are a few quotations from Paganini’s caprices: some hidden, some in plain view and tongue-in-cheek—and all with a nod to the violinist-composer’s brilliance, charm, and virtuosity.

The idea of the “Caprice” itself, a lively, and spontaneous work without the pretense of classical formality, was further motivation for this piece. The concerto is set in a single movement, divided into three sections, and written as a fantasy that follows the path of each of Paganini’s Caprices, one after the next like a continuous set of variations on the entire collection, running parallel, two centuries apart.

My *Paganiniana* begins with a solo cadenza that merges violin techniques from these two centuries, interrupted in its middle for the ensemble to come in, then returning to finish later in the piece. The soloist is asked to explore most every aspect of virtuosity, from fast arpeggios to long, held melodic lines, and to extract a wide variety of strident sounds and colors from the violin through extended techniques. Throughout, the ensemble offers accompaniment and commentary to the violin’s constantly shifting and fluctuating part until the very end, where the music concludes in a familiar yet most *capricious* way.

*Paganiniana* was commissioned by the Lake Champlain Chamber Music Festival for its tenth anniversary, the Lake George Music Festival for its tenth anniversary, the Portland Chamber Music Festival for its twenty-fifth anniversary, and the Kingston Chamber Music Festival for its thirtieth anniversary. The piece was composed for soloists Soovin Kim, Barbora Kolarova, David McCarroll, and Jasmine Lin and runs about eighteen minutes.

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