

John Cowell

(1920-2007)

Excerpts from an autobiography

I was born on April 24, 1920, in Springhouse, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia. I was the seventh child in a family of three girls and four boys. My father was an optometrist and my mother a homemaker and a lover of music. I began studying the piano with her at age 3 and a half and organ with Dr. William T. Timmings, a product of the Royal College of Organists in London, England, at age thirteen.

After high school I auditioned for the “greatest living piano teacher of the time”, Madame Olga Samaroff-Stokowsky, a star teacher on the faculties of both the Juilliard School in New York City and the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music (where she taught on Mondays and Tuesdays). Her best students played in Sunday afternoon musical soirées in her fashionable apartment on Fifth Avenue across from the Metropolitan Museum, where I was sometimes included in the programs faced with a select audience of such famous people as Eugene Ormandy, Sol Hurok, Aaron Copland and others of that lofty reputation. I won a full scholarship. This included studying composition with the gifted composer and charismatic teacher Paul Nordoff (who had been one of Madame Samaroff’s star piano students at Juilliard several years before). My emphasis now shifted from the pipe organ to piano with great progress at the same time in composition. Early in my Philadelphia Conservatory years, a wonderful organ position opened up at St. James Methodist church in Philadelphia. Its choir director was Clyde Dengler, the head of the vocal department at the Conservatory. He directed a very serious and ambitious choral program which put on several special programs each year of great oratorios or cantatas or passions. I was amazed that I had won the position. I appealed to Dr. Timmings to help me master accompaniments to great complete sacred masterpieces which we performed over those years: *Elijah* by Mendelssohn, *St. Matthew Passion* of Bach, Masses and other works of Mozart and Haydn, part of the *German Requiem* of Brahms and the *Messiah* of Handel. Dr. Timmings helped me master those accompaniments which are all transcriptions of orchestral scores. His help was heroic, I realize now.

In June, 1942, I graduated *cum laude* with a Bachelor of Music degree in Piano and Composition from the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music. But, at the same time, I received my induction notice into the army in World War II. I was granted an appearance before my draft board with evidence in hand of my acceptance with scholarship to study under Aaron Copland at the Berkshire Music Festival of the Boston Symphony, called popularly by its location: “Tanglewood.” I went with a Philadelphia contingent of Romeo Cascarino as a scholarship composition student and Mario Lanza as a promising singer. Most of all I treasured the close association with Aaron Copland that summer as well as Leonard Bernstein whom I had gotten to know well in Philadelphia while Bernstein was studying conducting at the Curtis Institute (three blocks from my Conservatory) with the legendary conductor Fritz Reiner. The atmosphere all summer was like nothing else with so much association with great and future great musicians. I got two of my best larger compositions performed for a very knowledgeable audience.

I was duly inducted into the United States Army on September 15, 1942. Eventually, in the process of testing and searching for special abilities that the Army does in basic training, I became eligible for two very different new assignments. One was in the Army Band School in Ft. Myers, Virginia. The second was in the Corps of Engineers’ Officer Candidate School in Ft. Belvoir, Virginia. That decision was the occasion to consult my special piano playing friend from high school days, Eleanor Gellert. She urged me to discuss it with her father, N. Henry Gellert whom I held in great awe because of his worldliness and his knowledge as well as his high positions in business and public affairs. You see, Eleanor’s whole family had sort of adopted me as a regular household guest ever since high school days and continuing when Eleanor had gone off to college and I to the Conservatory. The whole family had come to St. James Methodist several times to hear me play the organ and enjoy our choir. When I talked to Mr. Gellert about my choices his response was immediate: He thought I had a rare opportunity to meet a kind of challenge that would never have arisen in the normal course of events for me. So I took his advice and went off to OCS while my Regiment was being shipped to San Francisco and ultimately to Guadalcanal where they were ambushed and annihilated by a superior force of Japanese. In OCS, I felt I was barely hanging on in that rigorous regimen plus the constant harassment of the “tactical” officers, whose job it was to weed out the weak candidates. But I made it into the fateful eighth week of entirely combat exercises in war-like conditions. I was part of an assault crossing of the Potomac River in the wee hours of the morning when simulated artillery and mortar fire was going off all around us. But the timing was off for one explosive which went off right under my assault boat. One of

my fellow candidates was killed on the spot and I was wounded in both legs, especially the right knee. There followed a long hospital stay with very demanding physical therapy and many visits from high ranking officers concerned that I not write my congressman or newspaper. Apparently I could have gotten out of the service right there. But I asked what it would take for me to go back and complete OCS.

The wonderful answer was a three weeks convalescent furlough during which I was to build up my stamina by increased daily running and exercises. I was invited to spend those three weeks at the Gellert's in their beautiful country estate setting north of Philadelphia in Meadowbrook. That turned out to be an ideal setting for my exercise regimen. Eleanor was able to live at home because as a Lieutenant, J.G. in the Waves, she was a communications watch officer in the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Toward the end of that magical three weeks of rehabilitation, much to everyone's amazement, we became engaged. Only such war time circumstances could have brought such a great boon to my entire future life and at so young an age. (We were both 23!) I know that my performance as an Officer Candidate in the Corps of Engineers made me much more acceptable son-in-law material and so much sooner than if I were merely a struggling though admittedly gifted musician for whom the Gellert's had all shown admiration.

After that idyllic three week's convalescent furlough, I returned to Ft. Belvoir, joining a new class in progress. I sailed through the remainder of the course. September 15, 1943, was the date of my commissioning for which Eleanor was able to get off from the Navy Yard and be in attendance. She pinned on my gold bars and we were off to a whirl-wind two week's leave. We were married only three days later in a beautiful simple Episcopal ceremony in the Gellert's little country parish church across the fields from their home.

I never knew whether the record of my accident in OCS affected my assignment, because I never got to go overseas into those dangerous and life-threatening encounters that so many of my fellow candidates faced. I believed that, in any case, my life was spared by my being assigned to the supply side of the Corps of Engineers, to a huge Army Services Depot in Columbus, Ohio which housed the world's largest spare parts depot of the Corps of Engineers servicing the needs of Engineer units world wide. A further miracle of our married life was Eleanor's managing to get assigned to the communications office of the Navy oversight unit at the Curtis-Wright aircraft factory also in Columbus, just across the Pennsylvania Railroad main line tracks from my depot. We got ourselves a cute little Ford two door, one seater coupe, a Steinway piano in our apartment (an upright model they called the Vertigrand), and my musical life could resume ahead of time. I did a lot of entertainment playing in Columbus and my fingers were returning to playing condition. The war ended. Eleanor was discharged a little early. She was pregnant.

I declared to Eleanor that what I most wanted to do next was to go to Yale and study composition and theory with Paul Hindemith, then a celebrated Professor in the Yale School of Music. Eleanor and her father (a Yale graduate) urged me to go for it. Hindemith immediately accepted me as a composition major beginning with winter semester in January 1946.

In May, 1946, our son John Jr. was born. In June, 1948, I earned both a Bachelor of Music and a Master of Music degree from Yale. Immediately thereafter, I accepted a position on the faculty of the School of Music of the College of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington (a scant 30 miles south of Seattle). The Seattle-Tacoma region was admittedly in the "minor leagues" musically, compared with the New York orbit we were so at home in. But it came to allow me to develop naturally as a composer and performer with freedom from the anxieties of the "big time" New York pressures. In 1951 a blessed event happened in the Cowell family in the birth of our daughter Edna Louise.

Thanks to an inheritance from Eleanor's father who died in 1959, we left the College of Puget Sound and embarked upon an effort to establish me as a concert pianist and composer. That involved a great many concerts in the U.S. climaxed by another at Town Hall in New York with more good reviews and then residence in Paris between 1959 and 1962. The result was a file of wonderful reviews in many major European cities and a wonderful life for the whole family in Paris and traveling in Europe. But, the best advice to me at that point was to get a Doctor's degree and a good University position to build a solid financial position for my family. So we returned to Seattle so that I could earn that doctorate at the University of Washington and where I could earn a living at the same time as a combination of, once again, Episcopal Organist-Choirmaster in a leading parish in Seattle plus being Dean of Music and on the Faculty of Cornish School of Music and Allied Arts in Seattle. Somehow I survived four years of arising at 4:00 A.M. and then I would be off to a combination of classes and earning a living. Then, by the time I earned my DMA in 1966, I had the position of Professor and Chairman of Music at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville.

That was both a perfect job for me and, at the same time, a terribly difficult one because of having to cope with a large faculty full of factions and old “fiefdoms” belonging to established old-timers each of whom thought his or her realm was the only important one and who tried to block everything I tried to do.

During the University of Arkansas period (1966-1985), a number of wonderful things happened. My dear friends from Yale and Tangelwood days, Helen and Howard Boatwright had developed a summer program for American graduate students in music at Vevey and Blonay, Switzerland under the aegis of Syracuse University where Howard was Dean of Music. They invited me to join them as faculty and performer in what they called the *Hindemith School and Concerts*. Paul Hindemith had left Yale only two years after Howard and I left. Paul and Gertrude Hindemith bought a beautiful and impressive hill top home in the village of Blonay directly overlooking Vevey and Lake Geneva. Eleanor and I spent three glorious summers there.

My University of Arkansas days ended with the normal retirement opportunity at age 65 in 1985. Eleanor said we must go back to Seattle and reenter life there. We did and developed a perfect living arrangement with our daughter Edna and son-in-law in a shared house that affords living for two separate establishments with our apartment and studio on the lower level, blessed with a grand unobstructed view of Puget Sound, Olympic Mountains, islands, busy ferry boats and shipping. Here I worked at putting my works in order and writing memorabilia, having known so many prominent and interesting people in the arts. I still played both the pipe organ and piano often in the region.

At this juncture in our lives, I was happy to be freed of the duties and worries associated with the positions of Chairman and Professor of Music with all its endless meetings and personalities. I was also glad to be free of those of the Organist-Choirmaster with all that entails in recruiting, planning, rehearsing and endless mechanical details. I then enjoyed being a guest organist in someone else’s workplace.

Full of life and active until the very last minute, John passed away on Sunday morning (while entering the church for a service), on March 5, 2007.

But, who *was* John Cowell?!

By Jon Gillock

As in most important events in life, I met John Cowell quite by accident. I had been an organ major at the University of Arkansas, receiving my Bachelor’s degree in the spring of 1966. In the following summer, I was “off to Europe” for the very first time with my college choir on a concert tour of about 8 weeks, an experience and transformation I’ll never forget.

When I returned to the University campus in August, a new Chairman of the Music Department had been named and had arrived – and I was to be his student (the regular organ professor was on a Sabbatical leave). For some reason, I was to study with the new Chairman while the other organ students were to study with the Classics Professor, who was an organ enthusiast who had studied with Marcel Dupré. I was disturbed that I was not to have the same teacher as the others and also a bit apprehensive to be the only organ student of the new “Chairman”. (My advisor told me it would look better on my transcript!)

Although I was returning to the University of Arkansas to work on a master’s degree, I was not totally convinced of my decision. It’s true that I was not happy under “the” Professor of Organ. During my senior year I auditioned at several graduate schools but found no place or teacher that really attracted me. Thus, I had decided to remain in Fayetteville and perhaps get my master’s degree in Music Theory.

Soon, it was evident why I had decided not to change schools. It was because I was destined to meet John Cowell, who totally changed my life, my way of perceiving music, my way of studying and listening to music, leading me to the path of becoming a *musician*.

John was a totally unpretentious, outgoing, relaxed, completely self-confident (and yet humble at the same time) when it came to making music. Perhaps just the opposite of me! He was excited about every little detail that a great piece of music presented, and he never held back his enthusiasm, able to express it in words and demonstrate at the instrument all that he heard and felt in every single phrase.

I’ll never forget my first lesson with him – on a piece I had learned completely on my own. Of course, I was nervous and wondering what he would find to “pick at” in my playing. (It’s also true that I could never please my former teacher who was on leave). Much to my surprise, John was full of enthusiastic

compliments. He said (and I do remember word for word), “That was a beautiful, mature performance...exciting in the ‘exciting places’ and sensitive in the ‘sensitive places’”. I have absolutely nothing else to say!”

I couldn’t believe my ears! What had happened to my playing during the three months I had just spent in Europe, not touching a keyboard for the whole three months. The answer is “nothing”. I was just being *myself*.

Then, I’ll also never forget my second lesson. I was preparing a concert to give somewhere away from school and was going to include Franck’s *B Minor Chorale*, one of my favorite pieces (still to this day). This time I played for John with a bit more confidence, hoping for the same kind of response I had had at my first lesson! Again, I will never forget John’s remarks (again word for word), “What a beautiful piece! But, there is so much to work on that we had better leave it just as it is if you are going to be performing it in a concert soon.”

You can imagine how disappointed I was! Yet, he said it in such a way that I was not discouraged. Baffled, yes, because I had played all the right notes and rhythms, but I had not the vaguest idea about what he meant. I thought about deleting the piece from the program, but, in the end, I played it anyway.

Oh! Was I let down! Of course, I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about at the time, and it took me many years before I discovered the great truth that was in those few words”. To this day that piece by Franck is still one of the most difficult pieces for me to play (I do play it well now, even if I do say so myself) because I had learned it in the wrong way to begin with.

John’s love of music was so contagious that I could hardly wait for my next lesson. There was always something new to learn about *music*, things I suppose I had felt but which no teacher had ever talked about. All of a sudden music had “meaning” - notes, phrases, dynamics, colors, ritardandos, accelerandos, tempos were there to communicate, to express emotions – from deep to whimsical. Thus, making music was not about playing the right notes with a metronome. It was discovering the meaning (concealed between the notes so cleverly by the composer) of the music and communicating it — through just the right musical gestures — that made a performance great.

Once my ears were opened to that concept, there was no going back. I would never be content to just play the right notes at the right time in the indicated dynamic. It was up to me, as an artist, to communicate the *meaning* of all those things! In a way, I had to transform myself into the music itself. And, in order to do that, I had to have experienced all the emotions human life has to offer to become a true artist.

It was John Cowell who truly set me on this path, on this way of thinking about music, on the path to becoming a musical artist. Needless to say, I quickly gave up all ideas of becoming a music theory major. John Cowell was the person whom I had been waiting to meet as a music student all my life. Studying with him was truly one of the most fulfilling and exhilarating things that ever happened to me in my whole life. The three years of I study I had with him were far too few (1966-1969), but what I learned from him made it possible for me to become the person I am today, musically, professionally, and personally.

Soon, Dean Kauffman, another organ student, joined me by studying with John. Our study with him together only strengthened our enthusiasm. John had a way of not putting his students into competition with one another, but rather put them in the position of helping each other. How many times Dean and I played and performed for one another, trying out every technique John had used in teaching us, to make our own playing and performing better and better. We learned to do so many things on our own, but John always had a better way — although he certainly supported us in our own efforts and was full of praise when praise was due, and was full of encouraging new ideas and new approaches when the musical goal had not been entirely met.

Those were magical years, years of transformation, years of maturation, years of beginning to find out who I was/am as a person.

I realize I am known today as a major interpreter of the music of Olivier Messiaen. Yet, John never taught me one note of Messiaen. I don’t believe I even studied one piece by a French composer with him! When I graduated from Juilliard in 1972 with my DMA, I knew no Messiaen. I had even gone to Washington, D.C., in 1972 to hear Messiaen himself give the world premiere of his *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*. I must confess that I understood nothing of what I heard!

Yet, when this piece was published two years later, I bought one of the first copies and decided — on the spot (because I was out of school and needed a project) — that I would give the New York premiere of this piece, simply believing it to be a great work of art. Where that belief came from I cannot tell you because, as I said before, I understood nothing when I heard Messiaen himself premiere this piece.

When the score arrived I could hardly wait to start to work on it. This would be the first major piece I had ever learned without a teacher. What a challenge. I looked at the first Meditation for about a month and could not make heads nor tails of it. I thought I was incapable of learning it, and I thought I had never heard anything as ugly in my whole life. At this point, I thought I was probably going to have to give up my project of the New York premiere.

Finally, I decided maybe I should move on to the second Meditation just to see if it was going to present the same insurmountable problems. Much to my surprise, it spoke to me immediately. Quickly, I moved on through Meditations III–IX, finally coming back to No. 1 which had given me so much trouble at the beginning. By then, I understood Messiaen and was able to now understand this truly very difficult movement!

It was that one New York performance that began my career as a concert organist. But, without John Cowell's unique way of teaching the real *essence* of music I would never have been able to have learned and played that piece. And, I believe it is because of this approach that I have such positive responses from my audiences when I perform Messiaen. When I performed for Messiaen himself, he was only full of praise.

This account is, of course, not a biography of John Cowell. But, I do believe it is a story that was repeated many, many times with probably every student John came in contact with. John was a *true* musician in every sense of the word. In his own playing, with an enormous imagination, he brought every human sensitivity into play. That he imparted to all his students. And, it is exactly that that I have tried to share, in turn, and give to my own students and bring to my own playing.

Teaching music is never trying to force your students to copy how you as a teacher performs nor even how the composer performs his own music. Teaching and learning music is discovering what you, as a performer, interpreter, artist, have in common with the composer whose music you are “interpreting” and sharing the fullness of that with all who are willing to listen and be moved. That was John Cowell's objective and great joy in teaching music and being a musician!

