On the crest of every delightful knoll and around every beckoning corner, one encounters a different one of Stanford’s “faces,” each hued with unique and subtle nuances and yet each a shade of the same underlying essence. The whir of spinning bicycle wheels resonates against sandstone blocks of Spanish arches and slender trunks of palms marking the main quad. Light flows down sweeping glass curves and bounces off sleek steel railings of the Clark Center, dances through whispering leaves of trees in the Papua New Guinea Sculpture Garden, and directs flickering shadow screenplays on the ground below. Meanwhile, intellectual life boils within a flask as a reaction matures, floats on a powerful interpretation of a line of Shakespeare, and sings from a silent, still instrument suddenly infused with passion and vitality as skillful fingers depress and release black and white keys.

Focusing on this last image, one sees that it not only represents Stanford’s appreciation for and cultivation of talent and potential nor only a striving for purity and excellence in musical performance. Also, the image depicts the highest form of originality and diversity. Different performers inevitably possess varying views on how to interpret or understand a certain piece of music; thus, although each musician may wield mastery over piano technique, each one’s performance will possess his or her own individual style. Even when one performer’s repeated portrayal of a particular piece is observed, subtleties of expression and execution manifest themselves. Creativity—of approach, of interpretation—contributes to this room for difference, transforming a chance mistake into an opportunity for spontaneous improvisation. Additionally, the musical selection itself is a conglomeration of diverse components, ranging from different notes and motifs to flexibility in execution, to the evocation of various moods in the listener, to the composer’s intention, and to the background culture of the work.

Senior Jeffrey Treviño, a music major, expanded and applied the ideas delineated above to the diversity of musical traditions that he has observed on campus. In the course of exploring twentieth century piano music, he encountered composer Henry Cowell (1847-1965). Born in Menlo Park, Cowell grew up in the local area around Stanford and had many unusual and unconventional musical experiences throughout his life. Introduced to Iowa folk tunes and Irish songs and dances by his family, Cowell was also exposed to Gregorian chant and Cantonese opera in San Francisco and began violin studies at an early age. He never received formal piano training. However, in the spirit of experimentation, he was able to “generate sounds from [the instrument] that had never been intended by piano manufacturers.” Later, Cowell toured Europe, studied Oriental music in Berlin, and researched the musical traditions of Southern India, Japan, and Iran. He founded the New Music Quarterly (1927) to publish and disseminate the works of North and South American composers and the Pan American Association of Composers (1928) to promote and celebrate contemporary compositions.

Inspired by what he had learned about Cowell, Treviño began to examine his own environment at Stanford. He realized that Cowell’s life work in musical innovation, his collection and appropriation of eclectic multicultural and pluralist components into original composition, and later musical review, criticism, and pedagogy paralleled the Stanford community’s own inherently diverse musical backgrounds and identities. Yet, Treviño felt that something was lacking: “Although we [at Stanford] have a multitude of performance groups of various backgrounds—there isn’t really a way for people to discuss diverse musical traditions, approaches, experiences, ideas in an academic context,” he says.

This led him to formulate the idea for the Henry Cowell Lectures. Obtaining faculty support and funding through the music department, Treviño launched the project, selected Stanford undergraduate student presenters, and organized and executed the three-evening event (February 4-6, 2005). With free and open admission to the public, the “series hopes to present areas of music often left unexplored in academic

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Special Features

The Henry Cowell Student Lectures in Music:
Its Conception, Creation, Continuation and Connection with Community

Yu "Carol" Cao