GUEST ARTIST CONCERT: JOEL SACHS
CHARLES IVES AND HIS CIRCLE
Thursday, November 16, 2023
8 p.m., von Kuster Hall
Joel Sachs, piano

Midday Thoughts (1944/1982)  Aaron Copland (1900-1990)
Night Thoughts (Homage to Ives) (1972)

Prelude No. 9 (1928)  Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953)
Study in Mixed Accents (1930)

Hymn, from Hymn and Fuguing Tune No. 6 (1946)  Henry Cowell (1897-1965)
Tiger (1927-29)

BRIEF INTERMISSION

Piano Sonata No. 1 (1901-1909)  Charles Ives (1874-1954)
I. Adagio con moto
IIa. 1st Verse – Allegro moderato
IIb. 2nd Verse – “In the Inn” [allegro]

III. Largo – Allegro-Largo

IVa. [no tempo indication]
IVb. Allegro

V. Andante Maestoso – meno mosso – Allegro – Andante maestoso

Join us tomorrow – Friday, November 17 – as Joel Sachs’ residency at Western continues.
10:30 am (Studio 242) - Masterclass with students in the Contemporary Music Studio
3:30 pm (Talbot College 101) - Graduate Colloquium Series: “Living It: A global life in new music”
All are welcome to attend.

Funding for this residency has been provided by the Don Wright Faculty of Music Undergraduate Gift Fund.
Tonight’s concert celebrates the pioneering modernists who first showed that American music could be more than popular songs, ragtime, marching-band music, and jazz, without mimicking European classics. They were truly a group. Ives, the oldest, became an inspiration and a financial mainstay. Cowell and Copland became crucial movers-and-shakers, creating new institutions and attracting new patronage. Ruth Crawford, who has inspired generations of gifted women, was launched by Cowell and Ives. Although the circle expanded and diversified rapidly, this concert will give a sense of how it all began.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Brooklyn-born Aaron Copland’s intensive education in German music ended up driving him to the French and Russian Modernists. Four years as a pupil of Nadia Boulanger at the new American Conservatory at Fontainebleau were decisive, securing his technique and bringing him into contact with the Paris-based progressives. Extensive travels exposed him to the latest music by central Europeans including Webern, Bartók, and Hindemith. Yet Europe both broadened his horizons and stimulated his desire to be “American.” Inspired by jazz and American rural song, Copland combined them with elements of contemporary European thinking. Many of his most “American” qualities are personal transformations of European modernism.

Although Copland remains a symbol of American music, he never identified himself as the founder or center of a “school,” expounded specific musical “truths,” or pandered to the public. He aspired to bridge the gulf between the inner inspiration of the artist and the needs and impulses of the broader audience. No intellectual snob, he established an “American sound” through his film and ballet scores. Later in life, having enjoyed phenomenal financial success, he founded and endowed the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, which supports new-music performance in New York.

Nevertheless, like so many composers, he is known through a handful of compositions that display the impress of Americana, such as Appalachian Spring (1944). Because his late compositions, like the last works of Stravinsky, tend to be more dissonant and abstract, they have been sidelined. The powerful Connotations (1962), composed for the opening of Lincoln Center’s Philharmonic [now Geffen] Hall, was derided as an attempt to burnish his credibility among postwar academic modernists. Unnoticed were underlying elements of the American rural tradition.

“Midday Thoughts” (1944-82); “Night Thoughts” (Homage to Ives) (1972)

Although Copland’s “Midday Thoughts” was published in 1984, it began life in an aborted project for a Ballade for piano and orchestra that he contemplated in 1944 while finishing “Appalachian Spring.” When his pianist-friend Bennett Lerner found the sketch for the Ballade’s slow movement he urged Copland to make it into a short lyric piece, which Copland, who liked the melody, agreed to. In November 1982 he converted the sketch into “Daytime Thoughts,” which Lerner premiered at the small Recital Hall in Carnegie Hall the following February. This sweet story, however, puzzled me. When I first met Copland in 1973, he had just stopped composing, complaining of serious problems with his short-term memory and power of concentration. About 10 years later, Alzheimer’s or a similar condition was diagnosed. In retrospect, the story of “Daytime Thoughts” seemed strange, especially since he had written nothing else for nearly 10 years. Then, in 1982 he revised his final piano piece, “Proclamation (1973).” Completing that may have given him confidence to make “Daytime Thoughts” out of that old sketch. Equally possibly, the sketch may not have required much work for conversion into a complete piece. It certainly retained its roots in “Appalachian Spring,” an iconic homage to rural American hymnody and popular music.

“Night Thoughts,” one of Copland’s last compositions, was commissioned as a set piece for the 1973 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. Rather than challenging virtuosity, it demanded imagination and control of pianistic color. In comparison with his film and ballet scores, its dissonance must have baffled the
young pianists. The extreme dissonance is representative of his later aesthetic, which he called his “laying down the law” music.

Ruth Crawford (Seeger) (1901-1953)

Ruth Crawford, one of the great talents of the early 20th century, was the first American woman to become a singular and enduring modernist composer. Born in Ohio and trained as a pianist in Florida, she studied composition from 1920 to 1929 in Chicago, where progressive music flourished thanks to her teacher Diane Lavoie-Herz and pianist Georgia Kober, a close friend of Henry Cowell. When Cowell met her, he was so impressed that he published her piano Preludes and arranged for her to study in New York with his former mentor, the brilliant theorist Charles Seeger. Although Seeger believed that women could not compose, he rapidly realized she was one of his best students ever. As the first woman awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition, she spent 1930-31 abroad, primarily in Berlin, where her horizons broadened further. Soon after returning, she and Seeger married. For a time, her music was included in many concerts in the US and abroad; the remarkable slow movement of her 1931 String Quartet was one of the earliest American modernist compositions to be recorded, on the first release of Cowell’s New Music Recordings. [See the note on Cowell.] Her rapid development was fortunate: her mature works were written between 1928 and 1932. She tried most of the era’s advanced techniques, including her own form of serialism, tone clusters, *Sprechstimme*, polyphonic textures with rhythmically independent voices, and spatial separation of performing groups. Then the Depression intervened because her husband could not get work and they had four children. Intensive studies of folk music, a focus of American culture during the Depression, led her to make simple, artistic settings of American folk music that brought her income and renown. But she was not composing, discouraged by the conservative turn of music in the 1930s. Finally embracing simplification as a tool to reach the public, she resumed composing in the late 1940s, but died at 52. She had reared 5 children, all of them singers. The most famous, Pete Seeger, was her stepson. He, Penny, and Mike, have died; Barbara in Las Vegas and Peggy in Oxford (UK) are still alive and active.

Prelude No. 9 (1928); Study in Mixed Accents (1930)

The last of her Preludes for piano is a stately exploration of dissonant counterpoint, which Charles Seeger and Cowell espoused as a tool for sustaining the dramatic tension of a piece. “Study in Mixed Accents” reflects her origins as a pianist. Barely a minute long, it bolts through a complex, irregularly accented melody played in unison by the two hands. At the high point it reverses, but the listener should not attempt to recognize the retrograding; changing accentuation gives the second half a completely different implied “harmonic” feeling. [Both pieces were published in Cowell’s *New Music Quarterly*. See below.]

Henry Cowell (1897-1965)

No novelist could have invented Henry Cowell! Born to a mother who was a brilliant philosophical-anarchist writer, and an Irish born poet-father in Menlo Park, California, he was home-schooled; discovered and nurtured by Stanford professors (including the inventor of the IQ test) who proclaimed him a genius, and, aided by other remarkable friends, financed his education. Although he had only a third-grade diploma from a rural midwestern primary school, he began studying with Charles Seeger at the University of California, Berkeley. Playing his own piano music, he quickly achieved international notoriety as an “ultra-modernist” who invented unconventional techniques including playing huge “tone clusters” with his forearms, palms, or fists; or plucking and strumming the piano strings, often to characterize Irish mythological tales. For years he toured the United States, and Europe. Phenomenal press coverage, often hilariously negative, made him an international icon. In 1929 he was the first American composer-performer invited to play in the Soviet Union just as freedom of thought was about to perish. Depression put a sudden end to his career, and he eked out a living teaching. His students included John Cage, Lou Harrison, and many famous dancers.

Determined to help other composers, he founded the New Music Society of California, which published *New Music Quarterly*, a journal of scores by modernists that was underwritten by Charles Ives. When electrical recording became available, they started a label for living composers. Cowell also helped establish the Pan-
American Association of Composers to promote the exchange of music between the Americas. For many years he divided his time between New York and California, tirelessly active in both new-music worlds. After 1940 he settled in New York, teaching at the New School and Columbia University. He composed constantly -- his catalog includes 952 entries. Although best remembered for his early piano music, he also wrote for a huge variety of ensembles and voices, eventually becoming one of the most-performed American symphonic composers. His music was always changing -- he did not believe a composer should aim for a single, recognizable style, since every composition poses new challenges. Cowell was probably the first to explore chance music, though his student Cage made it famous; he studied non-western music, promoted it widely, and was one of the first to incorporate the aesthetics, musical structures, and instruments of Asian music. From extreme modernism to broadly-defined post-modernism – it is all in his music.

**Tiger (1927-29): Hymn, from *Hymn and Fuguing Tune No. 6 (1946)***

Cowell at his most radical is represented tonight by “Tiger,” one of his first pieces to be published without subsidy, amazingly, by USSR’s State music publisher, which purchased it when he played in Moscow in 1929. Being paid astonished him: no Western publishers ever paid a young modernist. Although the title has long been associated with Blake’s “Tyger Tyger burning bright,” Mrs. Cowell was confident that he never read the poem. In fact, Cowell later explained that his all titles were fanciful. “Tiger” was simply a study in tone clusters. Actually, many of his “radical” piano pieces use unusual techniques to support lyrical material.

Cowell, like Copland, also steadily simplified his composing, but his “conservatism” was rarely what it seemed. His music almost always gave voice to some idea about which he was curious, in this case the relationship between America’s fetishizing of traditional European music and the uniquely American musical heritage that was being uncovered by many distinguished researchers including his wife, Sidney Robertson Cowell. A good example is the eighteen pieces called *Hymn and Fuguing Tune* scored for various instrumental and vocal solo or ensembles, written between 1944 and 1964, the year before Cowell died. The process began with Sidney, who wrote,

> [The rural hymns of William Billings, Lewis Edson, and William Walker] had been an interest of mine for several years before Mr. Cowell and I married. About 1942 I showed him a copy of my favorite collection of the shaped-note hymns, William Walker’s *Southern Harmony*, and he at once recognized in this collection the style, and some of the songs, that he had heard as a boy on visits to country relatives of his mother in Oklahoma.

> Cowell added,

> The style is not an attempt to imitate Billings or other ‘folk hymn’ composers, but is the author’s attempt to answer the question of what would have happened if Lowell Mason [a powerful nineteenth-century American church composer who campaigned against music that did not obey standard European rules] had not imposed thirds into chords, sopranos into melodies and rules against consecutive open intervals, and if instead, symphonic composers had developed a ‘shape-note’ style as a starting point for some of their works.

*Hymn and Fuguing Tune No. 6* was written to celebrate the Cowells’ fifth wedding anniversary, September 27, 1946. There is no record of the first public performance, but one can presume that Henry played it for Sidney on that day. For reasons of time, tonight we will hear only the Hymn.

**Charles Ives (1874-1954)**

Charles Ives, the greatest American composer of the early 20th century, was born in Danbury, Connecticut, a manufacturing town dominated by the Ives clan. His unconventional father had rejected the business world and became a professional musician with a remarkably experimental mind and ferocious self-discipline, a great role model for his son. Alas, when Charles was twenty and away at college, his father’s
sudden death deprived him of the only person sympathetic to his music. Horatio Parker, his conventional teacher at Yale, found his music insufferable. Soon Ives recognized that earning a living in music required compromising his musical vision. Hoping to serve vast numbers of people, he was drawn to the insurance industry, where he achieved financial success and wide admiration, which his employees attributed to an unfailing understanding of human nature. But grueling days in the office and long nights spent composing led to a massive heart attack in 1918. Weakened, he resumed his activities until 1926, when he said he could no longer compose and soon retired from business. Apart from his wife Harmony, Ives was almost completely isolated musically; most people dismissed his music as amateurish. He spent his time revising his scores and sketching a “Universe” symphony, but never completed another piece. The story might have ended then, but around 1926 he learned about Henry Cowell’s *New Music Quarterly* and committed to subsidizing it. Cowell, in return, persuaded Ives to permit him to publish some of his music, thereby making *New Music Quarterly* his first outlet to the world. Gradually the word spread. In the late 1930s John Kirkpatrick began playing the complete “Concord” Sonata, and in 1946, Lou Harrison conducted the premiere of his Third Symphony. Although Ives declined to attend for fear of being laughed at, the performance led to a Pulitzer Prize. The musical world was awakening to his significance just as Ives died in 1954.

A true visionary, Ives shared the Transcendentalists’ reverence for the beauty and power of the individual, and their faith in the one-ness of humanity and nature. Detesting the stale traditions that dominated the musical world, he dismissed "rules" unless they facilitated creativity. In this spirit he constantly found new compositional methods that anticipated the thinking of generations to come. He drew inspiration from ordinary mortals at worship, singing roughly and out of tune but from the soul. That love of spontaneous, untrained creativity led him to unprecedented feats of compositional virtuosity. Why should composed music be tyrannized by the conventions of having one key, one tempo, or one conductor at a time? He quoted popular and church music not to make the listener feel comfortable, but because they were in his bloodstream thanks to his father’s wind band and his own history as a church organist.

**Piano Sonata No. 1 (1901-1909)**

Many of these qualities are already present in the monumental Piano Sonata No. 1, composed right after his Second Symphony. Whereas Ives wrote the symphony in the lyric tradition of Tchaikovsky and Dvořák but using American melodic materials, in the first Piano Sonata he sought a successor to Beethoven’s sonatas but evoking American evangelical songs, marching band music, and ragtime. Far from amateurish, it is extraordinarily disciplined, inventive composing exhibiting his control of traditional tools such as harmony and counterpoint. The five movements are like chapters of a dramatic novel, and, as in so many great novels, are linked through recurring ideas and other subtle connections.

Satisfied with the piece, Ives commissioned an expert copyist to make a clean score, edited it thoroughly, and loaned it to a friend who apparently lost it. Devastated, he could not bring himself to try to recreate it. Then, in the late 1930s, Lou Harrison and the pianist William Masselos persuaded him to let them restore it from the manuscripts, some of which were barely legible. Having gotten Ives’s approval of the reconstruction, Masselos gave its world premiere in 1949. It has, however, somewhat languished in the shadow of the more radical second sonata, the “Concord.” To me, the first Sonata, with its brilliant links between the traditional sonata and American culture, is the most fascinating piano sonata after late Beethoven. The “Concord” Sonata was its logical child, and, to extend the analogy, the brilliant child of a brilliant parent.

Notes by Joel Sachs
BIOGRAPHY

Joel Sachs performs a vast range of traditional and contemporary music as conductor and pianist. As codirector of the internationally acclaimed new music ensemble Continuum, he has appeared in hundreds of performances in New York and elsewhere in the United States and throughout Europe, Asia, and Latin America. He has also conducted orchestras and ensembles in Austria, Brazil, Canada, China, El Salvador, Germany, Iceland, Mexico, Mongolia, Switzerland, and Ukraine and has held new-music residencies in Banff (Canada), Berlin, Curitiba (Brazil), Helsinki, Salzburg, Shanghai, and in Birmingham, Brighton, London, and Newcastle-Upon-Tyne (U.K.).

Although he has made most of his career in new music, in 2016 he played Brahms’ Piano Concerto No. 2 twice in New York and, in November 2017, in Horsham, England. In June 2017 he was in residence as pianist and conductor at the Brighton (U.K.) Fringe Festival, where his recital of American piano music featured Ives’ Sonata No. 1. In 2019 he played Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 3 in New York and Ives’s Sonata again at St. John’s Smith Square, London, on October 14 and at the University of Newcastle November 24, as well as in a faculty recital at Juilliard. Those were literally painful experiences; he had recently dislocated his shoulder. On Friday, March 13, 2020, he gave a recital at the University of Birmingham, which responded by locking down the following Monday in deference to Covid! Most recently he played tonight’s program in London for the festival celebrating the 900th anniversary of the church of St. Bartholomew the Great, the oldest church in London; and in Brookhaven, Massachusetts. He will play the Ives Sonata for the last time this year in Leipzig on November 28.

One of the most active presenters of today’s composers’ music in New York, in 1993 Dr. Sachs founded the New Juilliard Ensemble, which he conducted and directed until retirement in 2022. It became one of the most active of such ensembles in the United States, giving hundreds of premiers. He also produced and directs Juilliard’s annual Focus! Festival of post-traditional music from 1985 to 2022 and was artistic director of Juilliard’s summer concerts at the Museum of Modern Art from 1993 until the pandemic. A member of the Juilliard music history faculty for 52 years, he wrote biographies of J.N. Hummel – Beethoven’s chief rival – and of the American composer Henry Cowell (Oxford University Press, 2012), and many articles about subjects including music in the USSR. Dr. Sachs, who often appears on radio as a commentator on recent music, was the studio guest and performer on BBC Radio 3’s Composer of the Week series, which devoted five one-hour programs to Cowell. He received Columbia University’s Alice M. Ditson Award to a conductor for service to American Music; was made an honorary member of Phi Beta Kappa at Harvard for his work in support of new music; and was awarded the Gloria Artis Medal of the Polish Government for his service to Polish music.

He is now emeritus professor of music at The Juilliard School.

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