

HOW JOHANNA BEYER SPENT HER DAYS

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Essay Draft  
2007; rev. 2011

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To cite this document, please use the following format:

Amy C. Beal, "How Johanna Beyer Spent Her Days," web-published essay draft (2007; rev. 2011): 1-46; <http://music.ucsc.edu/faculty/amy-beal>

Some of the material presented here was originally published in:

Amy C. Beal, "Her Whimsy and Originality Really Amount To Genius: New Biographical Research on Johanna Beyer," American Music Review Vol. 38, No. 1 (fall 2008): 1, 4-5, 12-13.

## HOW JOHANNA BEYER SPENT HER DAYS

Amy C. Beal

“May the future be kind to all composers . . .”  
(Letter from Johanna Beyer to Henry Cowell, 22 March 1941)

In the fifteen years since John Kennedy’s and Larry Polansky’s pioneering research on the German-American composer Johanna Magdalena Beyer (1888-1944) appeared in The Musical Quarterly, only a handful of people, most of them composers themselves, have carried on the work that their biographical sketch, compositional catalog, and source guide implied needed to be continued.<sup>1</sup> Since then, with the assistance of some twenty volunteer editors and copyists, the Frog Peak/Johanna Beyer Project has independently published twenty-two (to date) inexpensive yet elegant editions of her compositions—solo, chamber, percussion, and choral music—all complete with scrupulous editorial notes and facsimile reproductions of the handwritten

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Thanks to George Boziwick, Rob Collins, Ralf Dietrich, Melissa de Graaf, Michael Hicks, Cordula Jasper, Rebecca McCallum, Christopher Shultis, and Richard Teitelbaum. I am especially grateful to Larry Polansky, who began transcribing Beyer’s letters to Cowell in 2003, and who encouraged me to research Beyer’s biography and to write this article.

Note on sources: All citations of primary sources from the Henry Cowell Papers held in the Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are abbreviated “NYPL” in the notes. Additional primary source material from the Serge Koussevitzky Papers, Fabien Sevitzy Papers, Percy Grainger Papers, and Nicolas Slonimsky Papers (archived at the Library of Congress) were made available by Larry Polansky.

<sup>1</sup> John Kennedy and Larry Polansky, “‘Total Eclipse’: The Music of Johanna Magdalena Beyer: An Introduction and Preliminary Annotated Checklist,” The Musical Quarterly 80/4 (Winter 1996): 719-778. Composer Charles Amirkhanian discovered Beyer’s manuscript collection at the American Music Center in 1965. John Kennedy’s landmark essay on Beyer (“Total Eclipse: The Life of Johanna Magdalena Beyer,” program notes for Essential Music concerts on 10 and 15 November 1988) deserves much credit as the first serious effort to reintroduce Beyer to the musical world, and that essay served as a springboard for his and Polansky’s Musical Quarterly article. The present article aims to complement, not reiterate, their biographical sketch, comprehensive annotated catalog of Beyer’s music, and “preliminary Beyer resource list.” See also Amy C. Beal, “Her Whimsy and Originality Really Amount To Genius: New Biographical Research on Johanna Beyer,” American Music Review Vol. 38, No. 1 (fall 2008): 1, 4-5, 12-13.

manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> This consequential flurry of editorial work has made possible many performances and first recordings of Beyer's largely unknown music.<sup>3</sup> The most noteworthy historical research to discover anything significant about Beyer in recent years has been carried forth by the musicologist Melissa de Graaf, whose discoveries in the Federal Music Project papers held at the National Archives regarding the New York Composers' Forum events during the second half of the 1930s have allowed us to gain new insights into Beyer's professional public persona during what was most likely the highpoint of her career as a composer.<sup>4</sup> A variety of publications now acknowledge Beyer's presence in the world of the "ultramodernists";<sup>5</sup> some place her even more tenuously in narratives about women composers or even electronic music.<sup>6</sup> Yet beyond de Graaf's work, we know almost nothing more than we did in 1996. In the meantime, most scholars engaged with twentieth-century music now know Beyer's name—she might rightly be considered among other famous unknowns. (Admittedly, several gaping holes remain: her life in

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Frog Peak/Johanna Beyer Project (co-directed by Polansky and Jody Diamond) and a list of available editions, see <http://www.frogpeak.org/fpartists/beyer.lists.html>. Editors and copyists who have worked on the series include Dennis Barthory-Kitsz, Kim Bastin, Marguerite Boland, Margaret Fisher, David Fuqua, Daniel Goode, Beth Griffiths, Lou Harrison, John Kennedy, Drew Krause, Margaret Lancaster, William Matthews, Larry Polansky, Paul Schick, Carter Scholz, Charles Shere, Thomas Smetryns, J.B. Smith, and Mark Warhol. In March 2010, I completed an edition of Beyer's *Clusters* suite for piano (with editorial assistance from Polansky and Dennis Bathory-Kitsz; see Frog Peak/Johanna Beyer Project Number 20). Additional Beyer-related resources are available at [http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/misc\\_writings/talks/beyer.index.html](http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/misc_writings/talks/beyer.index.html) and at <http://mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de/Beyer/>

<sup>3</sup> Individuals and ensembles particularly active in promoting Beyer's work include John Kennedy and the ensemble Essential Music; John McCaughey and the Astra Choir/Chamber Music Society; Daniel Goode and the Downtown Ensemble; pianists Sarah Cahill and Deborah Richards; percussionist Doug Perkins; and bassist Robert Black. Recent recordings include "Ruth Crawford and Johanna Beyer" (Sarah Cahill; New Albion 114); "Works for Violin" (Miwako Abe; New World Records 80641, 2006); and "Sticky Melodies: Choral and Chamber Music of Johanna Beyer" (Astra Chamber Music Society; New World Records 80678, 2008); "Restless, Endless, Tactless: Johanna Beyer and the Birth of American Percussion Music" (Meehan/Perkins Duo and the Baylor Percussion Group; New World Records 80711, 2011). Polansky's liner notes for "Sticky Melodies" and John Kennedy's notes for "Restless, Endless, Tactless" provide informed and detailed discussions of the music included on these important recording releases.

<sup>4</sup> See Melissa J. de Graaf, "Intersection of Gender and Modernism in the Music of Johanna Beyer," *Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter* 33/2 (Spring 2004): 8-9, 15; and de Graaf, "Documenting Music in the New Deal: The New York Composers' Forum Concerts, 1935-40," Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Kyle Gann, *American Music in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Schirmer, 1997; Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Hinckle-Turner, *Women Composers and Music Technology in the United States*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2006. In recent years, several other scholars have begun writing on Beyer, including Marguerite Boland, Kirsten Reese, Meg Schedel, and others.

Germany before emigration, and her first decade in the United States.) The Henry Cowell Papers in the Music Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, accessible for scholars since June 2000, allow us to construct a more complete picture of her life between February 1935, when her correspondence with Cowell began, and mid-1941, when their relationship indelibly and unceremoniously ended.

Through a close reading of Beyer's and Cowell's professional and personal relationship, and through a consideration of the sometimes mundane, sometimes profound daily details that Beyer's letters reveal about life in New York City for a musician and composer in the Depression years leading up to WWII, this essay aims to paint a richer portrait of an intelligent, passionate, diligent, humorous, and deeply-troubled woman whose recreational reading ranged from Friedrich Hölderlin's late-eighteenth-century epistolary novel Hyperion ("his language is so beautiful, like music" she wrote) to Aldous Huxley's "Fashions in Love" (1929); from Richard B. Gregg's The Power of Non-Violence (1935) to Clarence Day's idiosyncratic view of humanity called This Simian World (1920). Her letters to Cowell liberally mix dry professional arrangements ("send me two copies of Country Set by Tuesday for Philadelphia") with intimate, sometimes painfully desperate love letters ("may friends touch each other?"), alongside the working details of daily life ("Rudi is playing the Bach beautifully"; "they say it is good once in a while to eat . . ."). Beyond these occasional non-sequiturs, Beyer's letters offer vivid impressions of a piano teacher's exhausting weekly commutes between Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island, and New Jersey, and allow us to witness her bravely suffering a crippling, degenerative illness (Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis [ALS], or Lou Gehrig's disease). They exist in the gray areas of the immigrant experience, and reveal an almost operatically tragic love story.

Beyer's correspondence is far too voluminous, and far too rich with personal and professional details, to be adequately summarized here. But in the process of digesting the content and tone of these letters (and others, held at the Library of Congress and elsewhere), possible answers to several important questions start to emerge: Why did Beyer's work remain so little known during her lifetime? Why do so many details of her life remain unknown now? Why did she die alone in total obscurity? How did her compositional mind operate? Why were compelling, well-crafted, effective works like her Cluster Suite receive so little attention from the modern music community? Why did she work so faithfully for Cowell and his music? How did she balance her efforts to promote his music with her efforts to promote her own? What exactly were the terms and conditions of their friendship? To what degree was her life's path permanently altered by Cowell's arrest in California on 21 May 1936, exactly one day after an important public presentation of her work in New York City? What can her life and work tell us about the musical networks of the time during which she was most active? How did she spend her days?

## BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Certain archival materials help to fill some gaps in Beyer's biography.<sup>7</sup> Citizens' registry papers held at the Leipzig (Germany) city archive describe Beyer as "correspondent, teacher, and music student," and document her living at four different Leipzig addresses between 1905 and 1915. She also lived in Dessau, Elgershausen, and Gießen between 1909 and 1915.<sup>8</sup> A Works Progress Administration (WPA) concert program from 1937 includes a biographical sketch that says that she sang for three years in the Leipziger Singakademie. Beyer's curriculum vitae (held

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<sup>7</sup> The major events of Beyer's biography are outlined in Kennedy and Polansky, "Total Eclipse," 719-725.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Anett Müller, Stadtarchiv, Stadt Leipzig to Cordula Jasper (Berlin), 19 August 1997. This and other documents pertaining to Beyer's early life were made available by Polansky.

in the Koussevitzky Papers at the Library of Congress) tell us that she graduated from a German music conservatory in September 1923.

Ellis Island arrival records listing passenger information reveal that Beyer entered the United States on two occasions before the period in question. After leaving her “last place of residence” in Gießen (a university town near Frankfurt, where she had been living for approximately two years) on a ship called the S.S. George Washington, which departed from the northern German port city of Bremen, she arrived in New York on 24 April 1911. She was twenty-two years old. According to the passenger ship manifest, she had paid her own second-class passage, and had at least \$50 in her pocket. As her final destination she listed an uncle named Henry [Birch? partially illegible], who lived at 661 Columbus Avenue. It is unknown what she did in the United States after her arrival, but apparently she stayed for over three years. Leipzig city archive records document her arrival back in Germany on 21 June 1914, and further, a move to Dessau on 26 April 1915. The second time she sailed to the U.S., again leaving from Bremen (on a ship called the S.S. Munich), she listed the town of Essen as her last place of residence. She arrived at Ellis Island on 14 November 1923, and this was presumably the occasion of her formal immigration. (Her departure from Germany coincided roughly with the so-called “Beer Hall Putsch”—Adolf Hitler’s failed attempt to overthrow the German government—in Munich, 8-9 November 1923.) Again she paid her own passage, but this time she claimed possessing only \$25. (Her record also indicated that she had never before been to the United States, but this is clearly not the case.) She listed her “nearest relative or friend” back home as her mother: Mrs. [Maria Richter] Beyer, in the Leipzig district of Schleußig (Oeserstraße 5). As a final destination she indicated a “friend” named Miss Marie Brueck, at 77 South Munn Street in East Orange, New Jersey. (The name Mary [sic] Brueck also appeared on

Beyer's 1911 ship manifest record—perhaps she was the wife of Beyer's uncle, who had, perhaps, since died.) At the time of her immigration in late 1923, Beyer was five-foot-six, had brown hair and brown eyes, and was neither a polygamist nor an anarchist (the ship manifest questionnaire explicitly asked these questions).

Beyer's arrival in the U.S. in late 1923 placed her on the threshold of a particularly exciting year for new music in New York City. In 1924 the eccentric young pianist Henry Cowell gave his Carnegie Hall debut concert on 4 February; the Paul Whiteman Orchestra premiered George Gershwin's jazz-infused piano concerto Rhapsody in Blue in a concert billed as "An Experiment in Modern Music" at Aeolian Hall on 12 February; Aaron Copland returned to New York after three years in France and took up a post as a lecturer on contemporary music at the New School for Social Research; and in October, Louis Armstrong joined the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra at the midtown Roseland Ballroom. Beyer also arrived on the brink of a wave of institutional activity and important personal connections in modern American music.<sup>9</sup> During the year of her immigration, the League of Composers had split from the International Composers Guild. By 1924 Blanche Walton's apartment at Central Park West and West 68<sup>th</sup> Street had become a popular meeting place for modernist musicians; one year later Cowell and Ruth Crawford met in Chicago.<sup>10</sup> Cowell began his New Music Society of California in 1925; in 1926 Carl Sandburg's American Songbag, including arrangements by Crawford, was first published in a limited edition. In May 1928, Beyer might have heard pianist Richard Buhlig play works by Crawford at a Copland-Sessions concert. Regrettably, we currently have no way of knowing what concerts Beyer might have heard or which developments in musical modernism

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<sup>9</sup> For more details on the modern music scene in New York City during the mid-1920s, see Judith Tick, Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Carol Oja, Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> On Blanche Walton's role in this scene and her patronage of musical modernism during the 1920s and 1930s, see Oja, Making Music Modern, 210-14.

she might have encountered during the 1920s. We might assume, however, that the year 1924, and the rest of the Roaring Twenties in New York City, must have been an eye-opening time for a curious, ambitious music student who had been born during the same decade as Bartók, Berg, Furtwängler, Villa-Lobos, and Stravinsky. In the early years following her arrival in New York City, Beyer earned two degrees from the David Mannes School of Music: a “diploma for solfege” (May 1927) and a teacher’s certificate (May 1928). She took additional classes at Mannes through 1929.

According to a 1930 Census report from Queens County, by that time Beyer was living at 39-61 43<sup>rd</sup> Street in Long Island City with her niece, a twenty-five-year old German-born woman named Frieda Kastner. (Beyer was still living at this address some six years later, before she moved to 40 Jane Street in Greenwich Village.) Ellis Island records indicate that Kastner had entered the United States on 6 December 1922. Kastner’s last place of residence was listed as Königsbad (Baden), and she left Germany from Hamburg. She was fifteen years old at the time, and it is noteworthy that she apparently arrived nearly a year before Beyer. The S.S. Mongolia’s passenger manifest shows that Kastner’s fare was paid for by her father, that she was in possession of \$25 when she arrived in New York, and that she intended to join an aunt named Caroline Unger who lived at 333 East 34<sup>th</sup> Street. She had never before been to the United States.

The 1930 Queens County census report lists Beyer as the head of the household. Her occupation is entered as “teacher” in the “industry” of music. (Kastner is described as a clerk in the fountain pen industry.) The document reports that Beyer indeed immigrated in 1923, and Kastner, curiously, in 1925. The document also indicates that Beyer was naturalized in Queens County some time before 1930.<sup>11</sup> What Beyer experienced from the mid-1920s on, between

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<sup>11</sup> I located online records that indicated that Beyer had been naturalized in Queens County (Bundle Vol. 98, Petition No. 26778, Soundex B600), however, the Naturalization Records department in the Queens County (NY)



finishing school, providing a home for her niece, establishing herself as a piano teacher in the large German immigrant community of greater New York City, and studying composition with several leading modernist American composers, remains mostly unclear. Her resume provides a few leads, telling us that she had a scholarship for the New School for Social Research from 1934-35, she “taught one year at the Federal Music Project,” and that she “studied composition” with Dane Rudhyar, Ruth Crawford, Charles Seeger, and Henry Cowell.<sup>12</sup> Few details have surfaced regarding these activities, or her life in general between her immigration and the start of her close association with Cowell. But beginning around 1935, we can start to piece together a more comprehensive picture of how Johanna Beyer spent her days.

#### CORRESPONDENCE AND COMPOSITION (GENERAL)

First and foremost, Beyer’s letters—115 of them in the Cowell Papers alone—reveal that she spent a good portion of her days just writing those letters themselves. When one considers the extent of her professional correspondence, it is baffling to absorb how thoroughly she disappeared from history, given the degree to which she was connected in some way or another to nearly every major east coast composer, conductor, or institution of the time.<sup>13</sup> During the

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Clerk’s Office has no record of Beyer’s naturalization having occurred between 1906 and 1941; letter from Gloria D’Amico (Clerk of the County of Queens) to the author, 11 June 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Beyer may have first come into contact with Seeger at the New School, during Cowell’s Guggenheim year (1931-32), which he spent in Berlin. Judith Tick implies that Beyer studied with Ruth Crawford at some point during the early 1930s (most likely between the summer of 1931, when Crawford returned from Berlin, and the end of 1935, when the Seegers moved to Washington, D.C.). See Tick, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 227. Beyer supposedly also taught at the Greenwich House Music School, but their records never list her as “associate piano faculty” (The composer Marion Bauer, however, is listed as a member of the piano department in early 1939). Greenwich House Music School records reveal that in October 1938, piano teachers earned somewhere between \$1.00 to \$2.70 per hour, which may indicate approximately what Beyer earned as a freelance piano teacher during the late 1930s.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Leta E. Miller and Rob Collins, “The Cowell-Ives Relationship: A New Look at Cowell’s Prison Years,” American Music 23/4 (winter 2005): 473-92. Most of the correspondence supporting Cowell by prominent figures like Alvin Johnson, Nicolas Slonimsky, Aaron Copland, Wallingford Riegger, Alfred Frankenstein, William Grant Still, Charles Seeger, and others (cited by Miller and Collins, primarily on pages 475-76 and 486) resulted directly from Beyer’s constant solicitation of letters in support of Cowell’s pardon or parole during his four years in San Quentin. Furthermore, Beyer was not included in the publication Some Twentieth Century American

period in question she had regular contact with Aaron Copland, Ruth Crawford, Edwin A. Fleisher, Martha Graham, Percy Grainger, Harrison Kerr, Otto Luening, Ashley Pettis, Joseph Schillinger, Charles Seeger, Nicolas Slonimsky, Leopold Stokowski, and Gerald Strang. She also communicated with radio pioneer and conductor Howard Barlow (who became the music director at CBS from 1927-43), Arthur Cohn (organizer of the Philadelphia Free Library's Music Copying Project), Walter Fischer (director of Carl Fischer Music Publishing after 1923), Hanya Holm (German dancer who immigrated to the U.S. in 1931), the choreographer Doris Humphrey, Alvin Johnson (director of the New School for Social Research since 1922), Hedi Katz (Hungarian immigrant, founder and first director of the Henry Street Settlement School), Hans Kindler (conductor, founder of the National Symphony Orchestra in 1931), the New York Public Library music librarian Dorothy Lawton, the clarinetist Rosario Mazzeo, Harry Allen Overstreet (Chair of Philosophy at the City College of New York) and his wife, poet Bonaro Wilkerson Overstreet (who wrote the text that Beyer would use in her Ballad of the Star Eater), Bertha Reynolds (psychiatrist on the faculty at Smith College), the modernist pianist and composer Carol Robinson, the Russian-Jewish composer Lazare Saminsky, Fabien Sevitzy (Koussevitzky's nephew and one-time principle bassist for Stokowski; conductor of the Indianapolis orchestra from 1937-56), the Hungarian violinist (and Bartók collaborator) Joseph Szigeti, conductor and cellist Alfred Wallenstein, the New York patroness Blanche Walton, and

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Composers: A Selective Bibliography, Volume 2, Edmunds and Boelzner, eds. (New York: New York Public Library, 1960), in which appeared an appendix listing "composers not listed in standard reference works"—Beyer does not appear on the list of nearly 160 relatively obscure composers. Beyer is also not mentioned in Michael Hicks, "The Imprisonment of Henry Cowell," Journal of the American Musicological Society 44/1 (spring 1991): 92-119. This is understandable, however, since the Cowell Papers were still sealed during the years of Hicks's research.

In publications where she is mentioned at all, Beyer tends to be downgraded to merely a helper to Cowell: some literature refers to her as Cowell's "assistant" (see Kyle Gann, "Subversive Prophet: Henry Cowell as Theorist and Critic," in The Whole World of Music, ed. David Nicholls [Harwood, 1997], 208); Kennedy and Polansky (and others) call her Cowell's "secretary," but they also point out that she referred to herself on at least one occasion as an "agent for Henry Cowell" (letter from Beyer to Olga Naoumoff, secretary to Koussevitzky, 16 May 1938).

many more.<sup>14</sup> Beyer considered several of these people, including Reynolds, Robinson, the Overstreets, and the Seegers, to be close personal friends.

Despite her connections, we might wonder if her obscurity as a composer might not partly be due to the fact that only a portion of her many letters included direct promotions of her own music. She relentlessly urged conductors to look at Cowell's work and to program it on their concerts, especially after his release from prison in 1940—conductors including those listed above, but also Carlos Chavez, Eugene Goossens, Howard Hanson, Otto Klemperer, Serge Koussevitzky, Karl Krueger, Hans Lange, Fritz Mahler (nephew of Gustav Mahler), Pierre Monteux, and Artur Rodzinski. It is not clear if she had given up on her own music by then, either out of frustration, fatigue, the steady progression of her disease, or despair over Cowell's disinterest in both her romantic affection and her compositional career. We do know that she continued composing until at least June 1943 (less than a year before her death). But in the years prior, she occasionally made efforts at promoting herself by mentioning her own work when corresponding with conductors on behalf of Cowell. (Sidney Robertson Cowell, in her notes for a planned biography of her late husband, spoke of this tendency, writing that Beyer "earned Henry's gratitude by sending scores around to conductors while he was in [San Quentin]; only later did he find that she always sent a score of her own too!")<sup>15</sup>

During Beyer's lifetime only one of her works was published and only one work was recorded; she was not without ambition, however, especially in the area of large-scale forms,

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<sup>14</sup> Several historical and recent sources provide background information on some of the people in Beyer's circle and on the institutional context of the time during which they worked. See, for example, Ashley Pettis, "The WPA and the American Composer," *Musical Quarterly* 26/1 (January 1940): 101-12; Carol June Bradley, "Notes of Some Pioneers: America's First Music Librarians," *Notes* (December 1986): 272-91; Glenda Dawn Goss, "George Antheil, Carol Robinson, and the Moderns," *American Music* 10/4 (winter 1992): 468-85; and Goss, *Music and the Moderns: The Life and Work of Carol Robinson* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Document titled "Sidney Cowell book on Henry Cowell [1944] chapter headings, footnotes [12/19/1975]." The quoted section (above) is found on a typed page marked "7/11 -5-a—" : "Footnote 7"; box 75, folder 22, NYPL.

which were nearly unheard of by women composers even by the mid-1930s.<sup>16</sup> While vacationing at a friend's house on Long Island during the summer of 1937, she wrote to conductor Serge Koussevitzky on her own behalf, proudly announcing the completion of her first symphony, which she hoped he would allow her to send. She added that she had enjoyed the following performances of her own work: "Two at the New School for Social Research, one at the University of California, one in London, England, two at the Composers Forum-Laboratory New York, one in Boston; it was January 1936 when Mr. Rosario Mazzeo, clarinetist of your orchestra, played some of my compositions." All currently available evidence indicates that this modest list of performances had not grown by the time of her death—six and a half years later.

#### MEETING COWELL

It is unclear when and where Beyer met Henry Cowell, the composer onto whom she would project many personal and professional desires during a period of at least six years. She could have heard him perform in Germany before she left the country in early November 1923—during his first European tour Cowell performed in Munich on 11 October 1923, and in Leipzig (where Beyer's mother still lived) on 15 October 1923. She also might have attended Cowell's 1924 Carnegie Hall debut concert, which occurred shortly after her arrival in New York. Or she might have attended a piano recital he gave at the New School on 31 March 1931. Perhaps she first met Cowell through the Seegers, after Cowell returned from his Guggenheim year in Berlin (1931-32).

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<sup>16</sup> Her percussion nonet IV was published by the New Music Orchestra Series (New Music Editions) in 1936; the second and fourth movements of her Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon were recorded for the New Music Quarterly Recordings in 1938. Kennedy and Polansky list 53 works by Beyer, composed between 1931 and 1941, but in a letter to Cowell (postmarked 4 June 1941; quoted later in this article) Beyer writes that she had written over 100 compositions including six symphonic works. According to Tick, by 1929, Amy Beach was the only American woman to have composed a symphonic work. Ruth Crawford composed a chamber orchestra work, Music for Small Orchestra, in 1926, and a four-minute "American Fantasy for Orchestra" called Rissolty Rossolty, in 1939. See Tick, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 100.

A pocket calendar of Cowell's from 1933, the year that witnessed the first publication of his American Composers on American Music, mentions Beyer's name twice. The first instance is on the date of 25 October:

Vanessa 5:00  
Class 5:30  
come early Beyer rehearse  
after Samaroff NS [New School]

The second entry is simply Beyer's Long Island City address and phone number, at the back of the pocket calendar in the address book section. (Her contact information appeared on the same page as Marion Bauer, Henry Brant, Aaron Copland, Wallingford Riegger, and Joseph Schillinger.)<sup>17</sup> Clearly by early 1934 Cowell was aware of Beyer as a composer, as her *Lentement* (from the Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon) had been included in a New Music Society concert in San Francisco on 15 February. In the fall of that year, the same year Cowell began his New Music recording series, Beyer enrolled in his class at the New School; her name appears on a list of registered students for Cowell's course titled "Creative Music Today" (course no. 81), which consisted of twelve lectures on Wednesday evenings from 8:20-10 p.m., beginning on the third of October. The fee for the course was ten dollars. All of the students registered for this course were women except for composer Wallingford Riegger. On the class roster Beyer's occupation was given as "musician." Sidney Cowell recalled first meeting Beyer "in the course in rhythm Henry gave at the New School in 1935-36" (the rosters for that course, "Theory and Practice of Rhythm," taught during the fall of 1935, listed "Mrs. Sidney H. Roberston" as a registered student—but not Beyer, who very well may have audited that and other courses at the

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<sup>17</sup> The 25 October entry is a particularly problematic source in dating Cowell and Beyer's early contact, because most of the calendar was used by Cowell simply as a (quite disorganized) address book. It is therefore unclear whether the scheduling entries in the second half of the book were actually made in 1933.

New School). Beyer might have continued auditing Cowell's classes from this point on, until he returned to California shortly before his arrest in May 1936.

The earliest currently available dated letter from Beyer to Cowell was written on 12 February 1935. Writing from her Long Island City apartment, she addressed him formally as Mr. Cowell and signed her name as it would appear on all of her scores: J.M. Beyer. The letter primarily provides an impersonal but colorful description of a pedagogical method book she was composing at the time, a collection of short teaching compositions she called the "Piano-Book."<sup>18</sup> Only the close of the letter struck a slightly flirtatious tone: "But now I am getting rather hungry, must have a bite, do you want to join me for breakfast? Better hurry over before it gets cold." The next dated letter in the collection, written on 29 October of the same year, is more overtly suggestive. Addressed "dear Henry," the letter consisted almost entirely of an undeniably romantic poem by Thomas Chalmers Robertson, which concluded with these lines:

For there each heart that beats is yours or mine,  
and no voice can speak but it is ours,  
till having each alone we shall not pine  
for loss of the world, its prizes and powers.  
Love, let me take our days into my arms,  
and keep them close, to fend them from all harms.

"Do you like it?" she asked, before signing the letter, mysteriously, as "Persephone."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The undated (and yet unpublished) Piano-Book, "Classic—Romantic—Modern" is catalogued as K32/NY2, 20, 25.

<sup>19</sup> According to Kennedy's and Polansky's description of Beyer's String Quartet No. 2 (1936), the name "Persephone" is crossed out on the front page of the score. Beyer's letters frequently eluded to the myths of Persephone and Prometheus, and she often mentioned a place she cryptically referred to as "Sunny Hades," a place where she apparently spent some time herself before 1936. Her first three letters to Cowell are all addressed to Sunny Hades. Even after Cowell's arrest she often addressed his letters to Sunny Hades (those letters would end up at the Sheriff's office in Redwood City, CA), until Alvin Johnson strongly advised her to stop doing so (see letter from Beyer to Olive Cowell, 19 September 1936). Several letters to Olive Cowell were also addressed to Sunny Hades.

The next extant letter to Cowell, written 17 December 1935, reveals Beyer's first impressions of his music and of hearing him play the piano on several occasions, some, apparently, before they met (though it is unclear if she had already started studying composition):

I must start with the experience I had with your music from the very beginning. There was a time, when I went every week to the 58th [Street] music library to get modern music. It was there that I came upon one of your piano pieces. I had never seen written down anything of this kind and found it rather difficult to get [illegible], but by the end of the week I could manage a little and found out that there was someone who had the courage of writing down something similar to what I had come [?] sometimes, when improvising, or just wasting time on the piano. I just liked to listen to the sounds it made.

When I heard you play the first time at the New School, I watched too much the mechanical part and I heard only 2 or 3 pieces. It was last year at the Irish Festival, when you played in the dim light, that it touched me for the first time, shortly afterwards you played again on the end of your course. I was just about to fall in the old habit of watching, when you said, it should not be watched. I obediently closed my eyes and felt for the first time to be able to shut out all prejudiced [sic] conceptions of all times before, I felt that here was a music, which must be listened to differently and old terms could not be applied.

She went on to describe her reactions to a Saturday evening Town Hall concert during which Cowell played a number of his piano pieces (Tides, Advertisement, March). His String Quartet was also performed, as well as a work by Schoenberg, and other pieces. After her description of her response to the music, she admitted that she was wondering what type of music she herself would write next, now that she had come so strongly under Cowell's influence: "You certainly have opened a wide field for me, you have taken the blindfold off my eyes and said: "see, hear!" I am a lucky creature and certainly shall be grateful to you forever and ever, amen (I am smiling) but I think you would like the smile, it's a good smile." She closed her letter with the proclamation: "I dare to be your proud friend."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This letter, which included season's greetings for Cowell, bore Beyer's drawing of a pine branch with colored berries, a candle and small pinecones. After the drawing she added: "von Hornbostel haunts me, he liked and understood your music fully."

THE CLUSTER SUITE

Because of the myriad gaps in Beyer's biography, we are left without a clear impression of how or when she might have "stumbled into herself" as a composer, to borrow a description of Ruth Crawford's compositional self-awakening—although Beyer's mentioning of "improvising, just wasting time at the piano" (in her 17 December 1935 letter to Cowell) suggest how her stumbling might have begun.<sup>21</sup> According to Kennedy and Polansky, Beyer's earliest works, the two suites for solo clarinet, were completed in 1932—probably around the time she studied with the Seegers and became involved with activities at the New School.<sup>22</sup> But in fact, her earliest known work, dated 1931, is a 72-bar solo piano piece, the first in a set of four short pieces she would eventually call The Cluster Suite. She performed this piece (or sections of it) on 20 May 1936, as part of "excerpts from piano suites, 1930-35," in a WPA Federal Music Project Composers' Forum-Laboratory concert in the auditorium of the Federal Music Project Headquarters at 110 West 48<sup>th</sup> Street. Several other pieces were also performed (including Beyer's Movement for Two Pianos, which the composer played with Jessie Baetz) and discussed by the composer and audience in an open conversation following the Forum.<sup>23</sup> During the post-concert discussion, Beyer claimed that she was "not influenced by or imitating Henry Cowell at all." In an uncanny coincidence that would dramatically impact the trajectory of Beyer's compositional career, Cowell was arrested in Menlo Park, California, the very next day.

Beyer's "excerpts from piano suites" seem to have been a combination of her collection called Dissonant Counterpoint and a set of four pieces she grouped as The Cluster Suite. Beyer's

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<sup>21</sup> See Tick, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Both of the clarinet suites have been published in Frog Peak editions; the first edited by Daniel Goode, the second edited by Marguerite Boland. I prepared an edition of Clusters, which includes detailed notes regarding the many different manuscript versions of these pieces.

<sup>23</sup> For a description and interpretation of Beyer's Forum event, see de Graaf, "Documenting Music in the New Deal," chapters 3 and 4.



program notes for the WPA event refer directly to the 1931 piece, which she “satirically” called a “waltz”: “Doris Humphrey called it once ‘architectural.’ After an introduction of nine measures the theme enters and stays on the scene almost unchanged, only its environment changes. It was danced by Dorsha [Hayes] in 1930-31.”

On 19 May 1937 Beyer again played “excerpts from piano suites (1930-36)” in another WPA concert.<sup>24</sup> Her program notes for that performance referred directly to a piece she at one time called the “Original New York Waltz,” which eventually became the third piece in The Cluster Suite:

A group of chords is gradually interpolated, finally running off in dissonant contrapuntal passages only to be summoned again. Organized rests, rests within the measure, whole measure rests, 1, 2, 3 measure rests, tonally and rhythmically undergo all kinds of crab forms. Throughout, the tone “F” is reiterated. Around it, tones are grouped singly, becoming more substantial; chord clusters part again, to stay on singly but one or two groups of tone clusters get acquainted with a single melody. A struggle for dominance between group and individual seems to overpower the latter; yet there is an amiable ending.

During the question-and-answer period after the concert, an audience member asked: “Please identify the numbers from the Piano Suite which you played. The third movement was strange and remarkably moving.” Beyer simply responded: “I have no names to my music. I have just numbers.”

The Cluster Suite exhibits traits typical of dissonant counterpoint; they also reveal Beyer’s ability to write strong melodies, rhythmically driving motives, and non-thematic material that exploits the power and range of her instrument. Two of the pieces in the suite are set in triple meter (the above-mentioned 1931 waltz and “the original New York waltz”), and these two are also most suggestive of a sense of tonal gravity. The second piece in the set is in 9/8; the fourth is in 7/8. The “original New York waltz” is almost entirely monophonic and

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<sup>24</sup> The program for this concert is reproduced in Kennedy and Polansky, “Total Eclipse,” 724.

pianissimo; the piece that precedes it features five and six-octave clusters played in the fortissimo range. The four short pieces, running between 37 and 134 measures, are connected by a five-bar “starting motive,” which was meant to be played at the start, between each piece, and at the end, thus giving the suite a sense of formal coherence. This “starting motive” consists entirely of two-octave-wide forearm clusters. Throughout the four pieces, Beyer makes extensive use of fist, wrist, and forearm clusters. Though the manuscript of The Cluster Suite bears no named dedicatee, Beyer’s composition strongly suggests an homage to the celebrated inventor of the cluster technique, the same man who “opened a wide field” for her music: Henry Cowell.

Beyer’s public appearances during which she performed her Cluster Suite might have served to promote her identity as a budding composer-performer in the ultra-modernist tradition, but they apparently raised little new interest in her music. Why were Beyer’s works not embraced by performers, audiences, critics, and others after she appeared in prominent events like the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory events of 1936 and 1937? Without reviews we cannot construct a reception history. Were her compositions considered inferior in quality to similar works of the time? Did her earnest, enigmatic persona during the discussions serve only to further alienate her audiences, and perhaps also her potential colleagues? Did her reputation suffer because of her German heritage during a time of swaggering patriotism in the United States? Perhaps during the second half of the Depression decade, her music of the early-to-mid 1930s (like The Cluster Suite) was seen to be increasingly at odds with the mass political shift to the left, as Cowell, the Seegers, Blitzstein, Harris, Copland, and others became concerned with the “common man,” proletarian music, revolutionary songs, and socialist ideology.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps her music suffered from an underlying assumption that her style of abstract modernism was

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<sup>25</sup> For more information on the similarities and differences between the 1920s and the 1930s in New York’s modern music scene, see Oja, Making Music Modern, 363.

irrelevant in the Depression-era artistic community, and was not central to or useful for their extra-musical concerns. In her biography of Ruth Crawford Seeger, Judith Tick reports: “As for the cause of ‘dissonant music,’ [Ruth] and Charles [Seeger] believed that by 1933, it was virtually dead.”<sup>26</sup> This attitude on the part of two major musical thinkers in Beyer’s circle—the very composers who, along with Cowell, had led her down the path of dissonant counterpoint so self-consciously expressed in The Cluster Suite—might have isolated her compositionally to a point of no return.

#### HOW BEYER SPENT COWELL’S PRISON YEARS

One week after Cowell’s arrest in Menlo Park, CA, on 21 May 1936, he wrote to Beyer from the San Mateo County Sheriff’s Office in Redwood City, alluding to but not fully disclosing the circumstances of his situation. On 7 June, she wrote back: “Someone dropped in and mentioned that you are in trouble. Now I can understand your letter fully.” She concluded the letter with the remark: “Oh, I cannot bear the idea of Prometheus being bound!” and signed: “Much love, Hanna.”<sup>27</sup> Beyer’s desperation regarding Cowell’s situation might have inspired her, some six months after his arrest, to write the text for her song “Have Faith!” The text, probably not coincidentally, expressed optimism about the future and alluded to a deep affection, as told in these lines: “But essential is, that you and I/and all the other things have faith/have faith in things to come/in things that passed, and are/and we must try to understand/and love and help each other.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Tick, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 198.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 7 June 1936; NYPL.

<sup>28</sup> The manuscript of “Have Faith” is dated December 1936 and January 1937. The piece was first recorded by Margaret Lancaster and released on her recording “Io” (New World Records 80655, 2009).

A few months after Cowell's incarceration, Beyer announced in a letter to Cowell's stepmother Olive that she would soon be "tearing myself away from my house which I owned for 10 years" and moving to Greenwich Village, to 40 Jane Street (apartment number 6).<sup>29</sup> Around the same time, Beyer's 86-year-old mother was injured in a fall and then suffered a stroke; Beyer deeply regretted being so far from home when her mother's death seemed imminent ("I have been crying all day," she told Olive in the same letter). Evidence further suggests that Beyer's own health started to falter sometime soon after Cowell's imprisonment; she mentioned to Cowell that she had—or had had—cancer. Amazingly, her String Quartet No. 2, which Kennedy and Polansky call an "extremely important and interesting piece," was completed the following month. "There is no getting around it," she wrote Cowell, "my mind is constantly with you, no possibility for work . . . a good thing I had finished my new String Quartet, but I have not started copying it and there is not the least sign of ambition."<sup>30</sup> According to Beyer's death certificate, her ALS disease had its first onset a few years later, in 1938. In spite of her own personal battles during these years, between the summer of 1936 when Cowell was jailed and the summer of 1940 when he was released from prison, Beyer handled a large majority of his business affairs and lobbied for an early parole.

Beyer had first contacted Cowell's parents around the time he entered San Quentin (8 July 1936), offering to help in any way she could ("he is one of the finest beings that ever walked the earth," she added).<sup>31</sup> In the months and years to come, she frequently corresponded with

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<sup>29</sup> Letter from Beyer to Olive Cowell, 22 September 1936; NYPL. Beyer's three-story Greek Revival building, built in 1845 as a block of several residential and commercial buildings at the intersection of Jane Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, had greatly deteriorated by the late 1960s, was nearly destroyed by a fire in 1972 and then demolished. Soon after, the Jane Street Block Association turned the site into a garden. At some point during the 1930s the composer/painter Jessie Baetz (who might have studied piano and/or composition with Beyer, and who performed the Movement for Two Pianos with Beyer during the 1936 Composers' Forum Laboratory concert) also lived at 40 Jane Street.

<sup>30</sup> ". . . especially since my cancer," Beyer wrote to Cowell on 24 June 1936, with no further information. Beyer announced the completion of her quartet to Cowell in a letter written on 9 June 1936; NYPL.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Beyer to Olive and Harry Cowell, 13 July 1936.

Olive Cowell about Cowell's case and activities in New York. Expecting Cowell to be released soon, Beyer met frequently with Alvin Johnson, director of the New School, and tried to arrange high-enrollment classes for upon his return.<sup>32</sup> Much of Beyer's conversations with both Olive and Johnson centered on strategic psychiatric appeals in Henry's case (involving the psychiatrist Ernst Wolff), and the general public's hysterical views of homosexuality at the time.<sup>33</sup>

Olive informed Beyer of Cowell's official sentence in August 1937, while Beyer was spending the summer at a friend's house at 3947 48<sup>th</sup> Street in Long Island (just a few blocks from where she had lived before moving to Jane Street one year prior).<sup>34</sup> Olive wrote: "Well, the worst has happened that can happen," and then explained that he had been given "the maximum sentence of fifteen years with parole denied until half the sentence is served." She then enlisted Beyer in a cause that in fact already dominated her work and would continue to shape her next three years: "I am beginning to organize all those interested, and to get as many persons as possible working on his behalf," Olive wrote, adding: "With much appreciation for all your efforts and as soon as plans are matured, I shall let you know what you can do in New York."<sup>35</sup> When Beyer received Olive's letter, she already knew the details of the sentencing. Some ten days prior, Cowell himself had written, assuring his loyal friend that he was trying to maintain a positive attitude and to continue working, though he admitted to fears that his friends in New York would forget him over time. He encouraged Beyer to continue copying parts for her new orchestral composition for Koussevitzky (who had agreed to look at the work), and expressed his

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<sup>32</sup> Letters from Beyer to Olive Cowell during the second half of 1936; letter from Beyer to Dr. Alvin Johnson, 30 August 1936; NYPL.

<sup>33</sup> Beyer mentioned that Alvin Johnson blamed Cowell's heavy sentence on the "public hysteria over sex-crimes out there" in a letter to Olive Cowell, 30 August 1937; NYPL.

<sup>34</sup> Beyer gave Olive Cowell the address of a friend's house, at 3947 48<sup>th</sup> Street in Long Island City (announcing "I still have my New York apartment, I just stay here for the summer months"). She told Koussevitzky that she would be returning to Jane Street on 16 September 1937.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Olive Cowell to Beyer, 24 August 1937; copy provided by Polansky.

enthusiasm over the possibility that the great conductor might eventually perform the piece.

Regarding their personal relationship, he wrote:

You have been wonderful in writing so often, and I enjoy every letter from you greatly. If you wish to continue writing them, I shall be delighted. But if you find, that it is upsetting to you, to continue, I shall understand this perfectly. Sometimes I feel, that part of you is being imprisoned, because of the closeness of the contact in letters, and perhaps you would be setting yourself free by breaking off the contact. That you will know better than I.<sup>36</sup>

Beyer did not break off contact with Cowell. To the contrary, her devotion seems to have deepened as she took on more and more administrative responsibilities. She corresponded frequently with Olive about various financial issues pertaining to Beyer's promotion of Cowell's music—getting scores copied and bound; paying his American Composers' Alliance membership dues; etc. Toward these ends, Olive regularly put money in an account of Cowell's to which Beyer had access. For her part, Beyer kept Olive informed of her hard work on Henry's behalf. In September 1939, for example, Beyer told Olive that “this is one of the most busiest months.” She added:

I am writing to all the conductors I can think of, send scores and get parts ready and so on. Had a fine letter from Stokowsky, he wants Henry's scores in Philadelphia in October and Nicolas Slonimsky just called up, he spoke of the possibility of having Henry recorded with the Columbia Phonograph Co. I have to get in touch with them Monday and see what I can do to help it along. And so on . . .<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the activities recorded in Beyer's letters to Cowell and to Olive (and others), Cowell's own San Quentin-era letters to Olive reveal to what degree Beyer had taken charge of matters: he reported to Olive that Beyer wrote to him frequently about radio broadcasts of his work; her coordination with Blanche Walton regarding the copying of scores and parts for orchestral engagements; negotiating fees for performances and recordings; and meetings and

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<sup>36</sup> Letter from Cowell to Beyer, 15 August 1937; copy provided by Polansky.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Beyer to Olive Cowell, 16 September 1939; box 124, folder 3, NYPL. Many other letters from this period document Beyer's management of Cowell's financial affairs while he was in prison.

communications she undertook on his behalf with many people listed earlier, and also Izler Solomon, Harwood Simmons, the Columbia Phonograph Company, the Columbia Broadcasting System, and many others.<sup>38</sup> Though Cowell took pains to avoid further emotional commitment with Beyer, he clearly recognized and deeply appreciated her indefatigable devotion to promoting his work. In February 1938 (just a few weeks after Beyer had apparently participated in the founding of the American Composers' Alliance), he responded to Walton's evidently negative opinion of Beyer, significantly referring to her as a "friend" rather than as a former student or his "agent" or "secretary":

I am sorry that [Beyer] did not make a favorable impression on you. She has done such a lot for me—has gone to endless pains, taken endless time, made so many calls on my behalf, that I am greatly indebted [*sic*] to her. She was not one of my best acquaintances; yet she is the only one in NY who remains there steadily who seemed to be willing and offered to do all these things. [. . .] It would seem that among my friends she is the only one who was in a position to do it, and also wished to. And I am very grateful indeed to her. Her faithfulness and tirelessness have been a matter of wonder to me. I do wish that she was just the right person in your estimation!<sup>39</sup>

On another occasion a year later, when Cowell thought Beyer was coming west on tour with "a Chinese dancer," Cowell wrote to his father: "I hope you can show her a bit of hospitality while she is here [. . .]. She has done more errands for me, and ungrateful tasks such as copying orchestra parts, than anyone else, almost at least in the east."<sup>40</sup> In 1940, Cowell again

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<sup>38</sup> This portion of Cowell's prison correspondence is contained in box 126. Beyer arranged to have a Columbia recording of his "American Suite" (Old American Set?) broadcast on WABC on 28 February 1940 and obtained for Cowell a performance fee of \$37.50. Letters from Cowell to Olive Cowell, 16 February 1940; Cowell to Slonimsky, 1 October 1939; Cowell to Olive Cowell, 24 September 1939; box 126, folders 17, 18, and 20, NYPL. In a letter to Olive Cowell, written on 19 September 1936, Beyer describes a bizarre conversation she had with Dorothy Lawton during which Lawton apparently suggested that Cowell was Jewish, and that "race prejudice" had entered his case; Beyer wrote: "It seems a general belief that Henry is Jewish," adding that "William Russell thought so too . . . Mrs. Baetz told me once, that Henrietta Cowell [*illegible*] had stated: we are Jewish, meaning herself and Henry."

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Cowell to Blanche Walton, 1 February 1938; box 126, folder 10, NYPL. Regarding Beyer's presence at the American Composers' Alliance meeting, see Kennedy and Polansky, "Total Eclipse," 765.

<sup>40</sup> Letter from Cowell to Harry Cowell, 1 February 1939; box 126, folder 15, NYPL.

acknowledged his gratitude, writing to his friend John Becker: “I have had a flurry of performances lately—Johanna Beyer’s efforts for my music have borne fruit.”<sup>41</sup>

When she wasn’t pounding the pavement for Cowell, Beyer pursued her own career. In the fall of 1937, while corresponding with Koussevitzky about Cowell’s work and her own *Symphonic Suite*, she asked him to act as a reference for a Guggenheim Foundation grant for which she planned to apply.<sup>42</sup> She sent Koussevitzky an annotated resume that included descriptions of work she had done at the Dorsha Theater, the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, the Federal Music Project, the Central Manhattan Music Center, and with a dancer named Mara Mara “at a Persian exhibition.” She listed performances of her work from 1931 through 1937, including an additional performance of “excerpts from piano suites” (most likely including *The Cluster Suite*; see above) at the Society of Women Musicians in London on 13 July 1935 (though it is not clear that Beyer played them herself in London). The “work plan” she provided Koussevitzky, basically a draft of the Guggenheim project proposal, outlined her ideas regarding a four-act, twelve-scene opera called *Status Quo* “that will be modern both in theme and musical form,” she explained.<sup>43</sup> She wished to spend a year on the composition (“which, in combination with various forms of pantomimes, dances, as well as speech, exclamations, songs, would seem to express our modern life”), and explained her aims with conviction: “The traditional themes of the opera are outworn and of little significance for our time. Likewise the musical form of the opera, which related itself to these older themes, is quite inadequate for the musical consciousness of our present world.” In August 1938 she wrote to composer Percy

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<sup>41</sup> Letter from Cowell to Becker, 31 March 1940; box 126, folder 21, NYPL. Cowell was acknowledging several radio broadcast performances of his work during March 1940, which Beyer had arranged with Wallenstein, Sevitzsky, and Solomon.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Beyer to Koussevitzky, 11 October 1937.

<sup>43</sup> Beyer, “Work Plan” for Guggenheim Foundation grant proposal, 1937; copy provided by Larry Polansky. See also Kennedy and Polansky, “Total Eclipse,” 750-51, for Beyer’s description and a reproduction of her synopsis of the opera.



Grainger: “I have finished my Status Quo, a pageant to music [. . . ], but I have only finished a short-hand score. The real copying work has to start in now.”<sup>44</sup> Beyer submitted her Guggenheim grant application for Status Quo in late 1938; her proposal was rejected in early 1939.<sup>45</sup>

Beyer’s correspondence with Grainger seems to have begun in November 1937, after Cowell gave her Grainger’s address. As she introduced herself to Grainger she remarked that she had heard him conduct a piece of Cowell’s (“Reel”) at Interlaken [sic] in August 1937. She added: “And being also a composer, I know your works of course.” She enlisted his help in her efforts to promote Cowell’s “melody book” (“The Nature of Melody,” written during his early months in prison), for which Beyer actively sought support through publishing companies and funding agencies like Fischer, Knopf, and the Guggenheim Foundation, and for which she had “been checking up examples and the like.”<sup>46</sup> But Beyer’s and Grainger’s correspondence was only partially regarding their efforts to help Cowell. Soon Grainger became an important channel through which Beyer could talk about her own music over a period of several critical years; clearly she was in desperate need of contact with other composers and hungered for feedback and mentoring. She enjoyed discussing with Grainger the daily tedium of copying parts, obtaining and comparing various types of manuscript paper, and other mundane composers’ trade details.<sup>47</sup> She also shared small triumphs—both for their mutual friend and for herself—with her new ally; in late November 1937 she announced to Grainger:

There is a surprise for [Henry] in store, as the Suite he wrote this summer for Oboe and Piano for Robert Mc Bride at Bennington, is going to be on one side of the new records and one of my Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon, that is, just two movements of it, will be on the other side, played by members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. I am all excited about it.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Letter from Beyer to Grainger, 14 August 1938.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Kiffer (Guggenheim Foundation), correspondence with the author, 12 September 2007. Only two sections of Status Quo seem to have survived in manuscript form: “Music of the Spheres,” and “Dance for Full Orchestra.”

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Beyer to Grainger, 15 November 1937.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Beyer to Grainger, 22 April 1939.

<sup>48</sup> Letter from Beyer to Grainger, 28 November 1937.

Grainger also encouraged Beyer's interest in exploring new compositional idioms, and he supported her efforts to write for concert band and wind ensemble by critiquing her efforts in this direction and by conducting her compositions in rehearsals.<sup>49</sup> At the same time she worked to make practical arrangements for Cowell's parents, who planned to visit New York City in mid-March, and who, in a seemingly exploitive move, asked her to arrange accommodations and to set up meetings with Henry's friends. For the occasion of their visit, Beyer arranged a concert through Lilly Popper at the Downtown Music School (at 68 East 12<sup>th</sup> Street), and created the advertising for the event herself.<sup>50</sup> In 1939 Cowell wrote to Grainger about Beyer's reaction to seeing Grainger conduct a rehearsal of her concert band and wind ensemble pieces Reverence and Elation: "She was speechless with pleasure over having had the opportunity to hear her own work rehearsed—her own statement is that she was deeply thrilled, but tried not to show it!"<sup>51</sup> Beyer herself shared her significant enthusiasm with Grainger: "I really felt very grateful to you for taking all this trouble, it was really a thrill despite! [. . .] It was a fine experience for me, and the best lesson I could possibly have."<sup>52</sup> Despite these minor triumphs, Beyer's enthusiasm was often quelled by ongoing indifference on the part of those she tried to interest in her work. By May of 1938 it had become clear to her that Koussevitzky had no intention of performing her Symphonic Suite.<sup>53</sup>

All the while Beyer worked tirelessly as a pianist to promote Cowell's newest work. She recorded his Tocanta for Hanya Holm who wanted to use the work in a dance. Beyer sent Olive the bill with the announcement that "I have to meet Fabien Sevitzy tomorrow on account of the

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<sup>49</sup> See Kennedy and Polansky for further details on the Beyer-Grainger-Goldman Band connection, and for longer excerpts from the Beyer-Grainger correspondence in general.

<sup>50</sup> See Beyer's "invitation" for the event, reproduced in Kennedy and Polansky, "Total Eclipse," 722.

<sup>51</sup> Cowell to Grainger, 16 May 1939; box 126, folder 16, NYPL.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Beyer to Grainger, 16 May 1939.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Beyer to Olga Naoumoff, Secretary to Dr. Koussevitzky, 16 May 1938.

March 28<sup>th</sup> performance over the radio.”<sup>54</sup> On 11 February 1940, several months before his release, Beyer performed Cowell’s Rhythmicana at an all-Cowell Composers’ Forum-Laboratory concert in New York. Later that month, Beyer listened to the results of her efforts in the form of a performance of Cowell’s Old American Country Set by Sevitzyk and the Indianapolis Symphony. She wrote to the conductor in a manner symptomatic of her fervent reaction to music:

I had hoped to be able to stay here and listen in quietly to be closer to composer-music-conductor, but it so happened that I had to share it with friends in a different place. Three of us were sitting on a sofa, the Old American Set score on my lap. I am used to be alone, other people disturb me in listening as I like to, yet, the moment the music started, I felt your great personality. I seemed to see and feel every one of your moves. You conduct with heart and soul and I hardly think anyone could ever go to sleep while you conduct, there is always that striking vitality, stirring. And I felt Henry and was deeply touched by his delightful, sweet, lovely dance-music—my heart ached that it had to be over so quickly, I could have listened on and on. It is wonderful to know you!<sup>55</sup>

In what appears to be the last recorded attempt of Beyer to promote her own work, she wrote to Sevitzyk a few months later, asking if he would look at some of her works, namely what she called “Symphonic Movement I” (1939) and “Symphonic Opus 5” (1940). She informed him that “The Symphonic Movement was selected by Dr. Hans Kindler, Washington, among the best incoming works, so was one of Henry Cowell’s, however we both did not get played there after all!”<sup>56</sup> Sevitzyk’s secretary responded some ten days later that the conductor would be happy to see her work, but not before the fall season had begun.<sup>57</sup> In the end, Sevitzyk never played any of Beyer’s orchestral compositions, adding insult to injury after Koussevitzky had failed to take up her music just a few years before.

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<sup>54</sup> Letter from Beyer to Olive Cowell, 12 February 1940; box 124, folder 3, NYPL.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from Beyer to Sevitzyk, 29 February 1940.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Beyer to Sevitzyk, 17 April 1941.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Sevitzyk’s office staff (copy unsigned) to Beyer, 26 April 1941.

Before Cowell's sentencing was reconsidered in April 1940, Beyer yet again solicited letters of support from a vast array of people in the musical world. She asked them to write letters on official letterhead paper to the Board of Prison Terms and Paroles, San Quentin, California, and requested that the letters be sent directly to her so she could deliver them collectively to San Quentin "so that they may be at hand at the psychological moment."<sup>58</sup> On 24 March, she wrote, exasperatedly, to Grainger: "The case is postponed to the first week in May and I am supposed to send off all the letters directly to the Board on April 25<sup>th</sup>. If I had the time and strength I would copy these many letters, for they all came open, except the one from Ives; alas, I might as well give up."<sup>59</sup> In a letter to Sevitzy shortly before Cowell's case was reviewed, Beyer declared: "I have over forty letters from prominent people all over the country."<sup>60</sup> A few weeks later, in a hastily hand-scribbled note, she told him: "Henry Cowell is coming back in a short time!—we have been successful at last!"<sup>61</sup>

As Cowell began to arrange his life after his June 1940 release from prison and his move to the Grainger's house in White Plains, New York (where, as a condition of his parole, he would work as Grainger's secretary), Beyer was among a very small group of people besides Grainger and his parents—"a few very trusted friends"—who were kept constantly informed of his travel plans and his whereabouts.<sup>62</sup> Beyer was already seriously ill by this time, but according to Cowell, "she [was] quite willing to act as a buffer in receiving letters and calls, etc., instead of their going to White Plains."<sup>63</sup> Beyer's efforts on Cowell's behalf—both musically and personally—finally paid off: he would return to New York, and presumably would become an

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, letters from Beyer to Koussevitzky, Sevitzy, and Alvin Johnson, all written on 10 March 1940.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Beyer to Grainger, 24 March 1940.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Beyer to Sevitzy, 12 April 1940.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Beyer to Sevitzy, 14 May 1940.

<sup>62</sup> Cowell to Grainger, 16 May 1940; letter to Grainger, 5 June 1940; Cowell to Grainger, 29 June 1940; box 126, folders 22 and 23, NYPL.

<sup>63</sup> Cowell to Grainger, 5 June 1940; box 126, folder 23, NYPL.

integral part of her daily life. It is worth noting that during Cowell's four years in prison, Beyer completed something close to thirty new compositions.

#### SUMMER 1940; COWELL'S BREAK WITH BEYER

The summer of 1940 was a busy time for Beyer. She taught piano in a variety of schools and homes around the greater New York region and continued working on behalf of Cowell while battling her intensifying illness. She also visited Cowell in White Plains after he had settled at the Grainger's house.<sup>64</sup> She spent much of July at 146 Bryant Avenue in Grant City, Staten Island, house-sitting for the family of her gifted ten-year-old piano student Roland Leitner, to whom she was particularly close (and to whom she dedicated one of her last works, the four-movement *Sonatina in C*, in 1943). While his family was away she watered their plants and took care of Roland's house pets (a bird, fish, and a turtle), though somewhat reluctantly, since she was at odds with the idea of beings being caged. That July, for her birthday, Roland presented his piano teacher with \$10 and a poem he had written himself; he was particularly eager for her to join the family on their vacation to the Catskills. She would sometimes spend the night at their house after piano lessons for Roland and his brother.<sup>65</sup> (Around this time she also seems to have been close to a family for whom she taught piano lessons in Harrington Park, New Jersey, where she also occasionally spent the night after lessons.) After housesitting for the Leitners, she subsequently spent much of August with friends at 1007 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in the sleepy seaside vacation town of West Belmar, New Jersey. Beyer, who loved to swim, reported to Cowell that "the ocean baths have strengthened me and made me hungry . . . I eat about 10 times

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from Cowell to Olive and Harry Cowell ("A few friends have been out here to see me including [. . .] Hanna Beyer [. . .]"), 10 July 1940; box 20, folder 2, NYPL.

<sup>65</sup> Beyer often wrote in great detail about her piano students; see, for example, letter to Cowell, 29 January 1941; NYPL.

as much as I used to!”<sup>66</sup> That summer she dabbled cheerfully with several instruments, including trumpet, violin, and mouth organ (harmonica). During the months while she was away, Cowell occasionally visited New York on business and stayed at her Jane Street apartment, which they apparently considered a shared office space.

One of the more pleasant parts of Beyer’s life in Greenwich Village after returning from her summer travels included sitting in the noonday sun in Abingdon Square on Thursdays—her day off—or relaxing on a Hudson River pier in a Saturday afternoon summer breeze. It was from here, on 24 August 1940, that Beyer wrote Cowell a particularly revealing and prophetic letter:

I walked over to the river; it is lovely sunny and airy, I have to hold on to the paper, I am sitting close to the water. The sun has been so good to me this morning at my sun sessions. Yesterday, after writing to you, I forced myself to eat a little, then rested and slept some. Then I wrote out the entire melody for my first movement after playing some Chopin etc. Later I managed [?] myself over to the river, with the melody and your Spitzbuben-Gesicht [“boyish face”] accompanying me. Coming home, I started the Stenographie outline of the first movement happily. I also ate another bit and so today I find myself quite strong again. Today it came to me, that I had forgotten something in the way of financial status quo report. If all goes well I might someday get a bit of money, I shall tell you the details when you come. I was rather absent-minded last Thursday [ . . . ]

Perhaps it will be better to be absolutely frank with you in the case of my friends and relatives [ . . . ] Now they have all expected that you will marry me as soon as you are able. Having said that you are not the marrying kind, they concluded that you are a homo-sexual. [ . . . ] One day [Beyer’s friend; name unclear] surprised me by stating: “Henry and his friends want to get rid of you, mark my word, and when they are ready for it, they will offer you something for the work you have done.” I said: “Ausgeschlossen” [out of the question], and if they would, I would certainly not accept it, not a penny! [ . . . ] After telling you all this, you might not care to meet any of the bunch, I couldn’t blame you. [Beyer’s friends] said one day, before you were free, about marriage. I answered: Who wants to marry an old sick woman? They said, you are neither old nor sick, in decent circumstances you will soon be alright again, such devotion of yours counts. [ . . . ]

It is still strangely exciting to meet you and to find over and over again how much we have in common! I am not entirely free yet and myself at these meetings, I don’t know what I may be allowed to do and what not! My friends touch each other?

Though only partially excerpted here, this particular letter, while typical in its tone, is remarkable in several respects. Beyer had admitted her feelings for Cowell quite openly years before, yet her uncertainty about his affection (rightly) lingered. Her letter “from a Hudson pier”—written during perhaps her last contented, hopeful moments before her illness escalated

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<sup>66</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 7 August 1940; NYPL. In June 1938, while spending the summer on Long Island, she had written to Grainger: “Friends of mine take me to Jones Beach now and then, I love to swim! If it wasn’t for the guards’ whistles, I would take it up to swim the ocean, the longing is always there!”). Still on Long Island in August, she wrote: “I have not been traveling for quite a while but now and then I have a chance to drown my sorrows in the ocean, I love to swim!”; Letters from Beyer to Grainger, 28 June 1938 and 14 August 1938.

and before Cowell began ending their friendship—suggests how charmed she still was by Cowell, to what degree she was under pressure from family and friends to marry the man to whom she had been so devoted, and how socially active she actually was—a picture that contradicts a general impression of Beyer as an anti-social recluse.

Cowell clearly trusted Beyer and continued to depend on her professionally, but from the moment he was released in the summer of 1940 he began making attempts to separate himself emotionally from his most devoted supporter. These efforts might have been intensified due to pressure from Olive, who had never felt that the older Beyer could possibly be a suitable match for Henry. His attempts to break off his acquaintance with Beyer might also have become increasingly urgent because he began to envision a partnership with Sidney, with whom he had developed a deeper friendship during his San Quentin years.

Cowell had several serious relationships with women before prison. The first was with a girl he knew in California named Edna Smith. According to a draft of Sidney's "Memoir" (chapter 9), Cowell and Smith "fell blindingly in love" in 1919. There are indications that Smith paid \$1000 for the publication of Cowell's early piano pieces (published by Boosey and Hawkes in 1922); she was killed in a traffic accident in April 1922.<sup>67</sup> Soon thereafter, Cowell began a relationship with an older German woman named Elsa Schmolke, the innkeeper of the Pension Schmolke, where Cowell and many other American artists stayed during the 1920s, on the Nürnbergerstraße in Berlin. Sidney speculates that Cowell and Schmolke met in June 1923 (during the tour when Beyer might have first encountered him before her emigration), or at the latest by 1926 when he returned. Later, Schmolke visited Cowell in the United States for several

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<sup>67</sup> This information about Edna Smith comes from a draft of Sidney's Memoir (chapter IX); box 79, folder 3, NYPL. Edna L. Smith was the dedicatee for one Cowell's early piano works. Curiously, a pianist named Edna Smith played in a League of Composers concert in New York City on 19 November 1926; see Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 373, 381, 396.

months, between approximately August and October of 1934.<sup>68</sup> Schmolke, who obviously loved Cowell very much, became distraught when he failed to write to her regularly after her visit to the States.<sup>69</sup> While he was in prison he enlisted the assistance of Grete Williams to write to Schmolke to try end the affair. He wrote:

I have nothing but the warmest regard for her, and hope that our friendship may continue to be everlasting, but one in which there are no regrets. Perhaps you will be able to convey the idea that I feel that there is futility in writing often, because it stirs up the whole matter again.<sup>70</sup>

He also explained the affair with Schmolke to psychiatrist Ernst Wolff, and asked him as well to write her a “frank letter”: “I do not feel that it is best for me to write to her, and I do not wish to have her continue to worry over the matter,” Cowell pleaded.<sup>71</sup> Several years earlier Cowell had told Dr. Wolff that he had been very close to becoming involved with a married woman right before he was arrested.<sup>72</sup>

It is unclear what Beyer might have known about Cowell’s prior relationships with other women. After his arrest, Beyer declared the purity of her love, and offered to marry him, or at least to claim that they had been engaged, in order to reduce his sentence. On several occasions she alluded to the fact that she felt guilty about his situation, writing: “I might have been able to prevent your present trouble.”<sup>73</sup> While Cowell was still held at the Sheriff’s office in Redwood City, she talked openly about her feelings for him, and about her wish to help him:

I do not love your body, that is secondary to me, I love you, it is a very fine thing and I am happy in it. [. . .] You shall always find a true friend in me, no matter how your outcome; loving you, means to serve the idea. But at the same time I am a temperamental full-blooded type, perfectly normal, yet I live chaste, despite all the chances of the world. Fortunately I find an outlet in my work and once in a while I make a slip, by writing a love letter to you. A great crime in your eyes, not in mine. [. . .] In case of need, I would stand up for you, marry you, if you are willing, but with this understanding that you should be always as free as before, for I am a couple of years older and

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<sup>68</sup> Letters from Cowell to “Charlie” [Seeger? Ives?], 18 August 1934; Cowell to Olive Cowell, 1 October 1934; box 19 [no folder number in my notes?], NYPL.

<sup>69</sup> Letter from Schmolke to Cowell, 27 February 1935; box 14, folder 6, NYPL.

<sup>70</sup> Letter from Cowell to Grete [someone penciled in “Williams?”], 1 November 1936; box 126, folder 3, NYPL.

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Cowell to Dr. Ernst Wolff, 9 March 1940; box 126, folder 21, NYPL.

<sup>72</sup> Letter from Cowell to Wolff, 28 March 1938; box 126, folder 11, NYPL.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 12 June 1936; NYPL.



have no right to spoil your life. If you fall in love with somebody you are free to go and leave entirely. [. . .] I hope you don't mind my frankness. I do hope you will grow to trust me.<sup>74</sup>

A few months later, Beyer also confessed her feelings about Cowell to Olive:

I wish you would tell Henry for me that I shall always love him deeply, but he must not get disturbed over it and think I am trying to tie him down, on the contrary. I should be very happy if he should find a younger woman and the right one, my love is not of a possessive type, I would never accept anything which would not be given spontaneously. To be allowed to be his friend is a great privilege to me and makes me very happy. I shall be there if he needs me, if he does not need me, I shall stay away. Don't think this attitude comes from an old heart, no, it is only too very, very young. But I have trained myself all my life, for I have seen life in all its phases. I have seen life as it is.<sup>75</sup>

Following Cowell's sentencing in the summer of 1937, Beyer suggested to Olive that Henry had tried to seduce her, and that she and Henry had, in fact, been engaged, and that this information (or perhaps its fabrication) might help his case. In this confusing, contradictory letter, Beyer seemed to argue for a sacrifice—her own:

I might be wrong, but I still feel, that if the authorities are informed of the engagement to marry between Henry and myself, which was prior to his confinement at S. Qu., the case might be looked upon from a different angle. I hope I don't shock you with these statements. They are true, they are not true, just the way you look upon it. There has been some sort of a tie between Henry and myself since years. [. . .] Henry has wanted to know me closer, I have definite proof that he is not a confirmed homo-sexual, if one at all. But, because I am a very proud girl, and a few years older than he, I have not responded to his shy, yet insistent pleas. Had I known, what the future was to bring, I would have encouraged him. That is, where I feel guilty! At times, it is bearing down heavily on me.

The first test of reaction to Henry's case from "civilized society" resulted in the offer to stand up for Henry, marry him, if he is willing, but with the understanding, that he was to be free as before. And if, in the cause of time, he should fall in love with a younger woman, he should be entirely free. I entrusted a friend with all this, it was not meant to get direct to Henry. But I started to write some sort of love-letters to Henry (this was necessary in the plan) and Henry began to worry. This resulted again in my frank letter to Henry about my offer. I never even expected an answer from him, despite that, he was deeply aroused and we were to discuss matters—marriage, or a possible meeting. How much Henry has told you of this, I do not know. Of course, after his confinement to S. Qu. he asked me not to count on him in the future, as we could not make plans for so many years ahead.

Now, please, don't think for a moment, that I want to tie Henry. It is my most sincere wish now as always: to be of help. If there should be a possibility of saying: Henry is engaged (one does not need to give the exact time of engagement) marriage has been detained only by prison walls—if therein should lie a chance to get him free, why, please, do [take] steps towards it. Henry does not fear me, he trusts me entirely, and I wish, you would too. If there is somebody else to do that for him, why I would be glad if it would be somebody more fitting to fill the place of "understanding action." But for this understanding, I fear, it must be somebody with life-experience.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 24 June 1936; NYPL.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Beyer to Olive Cowell, 22 September 1936; NYPL.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Beyer to Olive Cowell, 30 August 1937; NYPL. See also Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian*, 127-28, 158-63, regarding a similar plan during Cowell's sentencing involving a possible engagement to Elsa Schmolke.

Despite Beyer's devotion, her insistence that her love letters were merely part of a "plan," and her adamancy about not wishing to "tie" him down, Cowell had been trying to clear up misunderstandings regarding their relationship since at least 1937. In May of that year, he wrote to Olive from San Quentin: "Miss Beyer writes that she wishes to come to California this summer, and retire somewhere quietly to do creative work. I hope that she is not coming specially on my account. Although perhaps it would help to clear up the whole matter if she does come."<sup>77</sup> His casual use of the phrase "the whole matter" to describe Beyer's emotional bond to him recalls his efforts to dismiss Schmolke as well. Sidney later explained Cowell's coldness toward Beyer in this way:

He was used to having people like Blanche Walton do an immense amount for him, and the difference between Blanche's financial and emotional resources and those of this lady [Beyer] will have gone entirely unnoticed by Henry. Also he was never able to cope with demands made on him by others, esp. women, and he just closed his mind in the matter, when he did not rather resent it. He certainly resented Frau Schmolke's appeal to him for help after the war.<sup>78</sup>

Sidney also indirectly degraded the work Beyer did for Cowell by describing him (and her own working relationship with him) in this way: "People say you have always done so much for Henry, I have never really believed this, because I never felt that Henry was a person for whom one could do very much." Perhaps with Beyer in mind, she added: "Practical work, yes, typing letters, yes, running around doing errands yes, but he had a kind of force in himself."<sup>79</sup> In early August 1940 Olive callously addressed Henry's ongoing situation with Beyer:

I was a bit amused that you again had to get your status with Miss Beyer clear. I tried to do it for you, but that did not mean finality, evidently! I simply cannot conceive of your being attracted to her. [. . .] She is so blind in her devotion that she cannot see what you would like, beyond her! [. . .] But at least you are getting experience in refusing women!<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Cowell to Olive Cowell, 29 May 1937; box 126, folder 6, NYPL.

<sup>78</sup> On typed page marked 7/11 -5-a—, "footnote 7; Johanna Beyer"; in folder labeled "Sidney Cowell book on Henry Cowell [1944] chapter headings, footnotes [12/19/1975]"; box 75, folder 22, NYPL. In this section Sidney goes on to briefly describe Schmolke's appeals to Cowell, and her situation in general, after the war.

<sup>79</sup> Sidney's tape (transcribed), 18 October 1974; box 82, folder 23, NYPL.

<sup>80</sup> Olive Cowell to Cowell, 8 August 1940; box 5 [no folder number in my notes?], NYPL.

As the above excerpt suggests, by this time Cowell had become firmly committed to meeting eligible women for possible marriage, and for that purpose he made serious efforts to finally distance himself, emotionally, from Beyer.<sup>81</sup> Around this time he included her in a list of composers in his Modern Music article “Drums Along the Pacific,” but strangely, he referred to her as “J.M. Beyer, formerly of New York.”<sup>82</sup> (She responded bewilderedly: “What does that mean [ . . . ] does it mean now of Staten Island, Harrington Park, and Brooklyn?”)<sup>83</sup> Despite his growing indifference, she continued to write to him extensively about work she was doing for him—negotiating performances (with a long list of prominent conductors), recordings, and lectures gigs. At the end of the year he complained again to Olive and Harry:

I have been having trouble in my relationship with Hanna Beyer. I had to tell her bluntly that I would never be in love with her [ . . . ] It is very hard to withdraw from her smoothly and slowly, which I have been trying to do, as I sense that there is no future to this relationship (she cannot be a friend) and so it may have to come to an open and definite break. I don't wish this, and am still trying to avoid it.<sup>84</sup>

In early January 1941, Cowell paid Beyer a personal visit and proposed a certain formal arrangement between the two of them, one in which he would pay her for work she had done, so as to eliminate an unspoken situation in which he owed her something. Beyer was opposed to the idea, but seems to have been searching for other ways to both continue and end their relationship. After his visit, she wrote a letter that typically mixed deep feelings with level-headedness, personal and compositional details, and a touching kind of optimism regarding the future of both her music and their relationship:

You left a little while ago, I had supper and went out shopping, all the while our experience went through my mind. And now I still feel exactly the same way about it as when you came out with your proposal. I did not stress it while you were here, I wanted to think it over calmly alone for a while and feel direction for the right thing for us to do. When I wrote you the other day not to come again, I felt immediately afterwards the mistake. I felt this would put up walls between us, which would only do us harm in the long run. [ . . . ] You seem to have

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<sup>81</sup> This is evident from letters to his parents written on 3 August 1940, 9 August 1940, and 30 August 1940; box 20, folder 2, NYPL.

<sup>82</sup> Cowell, “Drums Along the Pacific,” Modern Music 18/1 (Nov.-Dec. 1940), 46-49.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 5 December 1940; NYPL.

<sup>84</sup> Cowell to Olive and Harry Cowell, 20 December 1940; box 20, folder 6, NYPL.

misunderstood my intentions today. I wanted to close up a certain chapter, but before daring so, I wanted to make sure, that nothing was left undone, and that even the smallest item was clear between us. I wrote a movement for winds this afternoon before you came and I was naturally very happy about the Kindler letter for both of us. And it seems to me, for me the worst is over: he thought that nobody will ever play my works. I wanted to show you my four movements for strings today, and I have been planning all sorts of works in my mind which I intent to work on this summer. I am counting definitely to come to your courses, for I must learn more to be a real good teacher. And the keys are still in the place you put them, you must pick them up again! I shall not touch them!<sup>85</sup>

She added a P.S.: “I wrote to Cohn and Krueger.” A few days later, she wrote:

I shall give you a few facts today. The dissonant note on which you closed our last experience calls forth these facts: I am sick in bed, bleeding. My condition is worse than we both have been wanting to believe. I have been trying frantically to keep out of the hospital. The city would not help me, because they accuse me of having worked for you while I should have stayed in bed and taken care of my health.<sup>86</sup>

It is impossible to adequately address to what degree Beyer’s suffering increased her anxiety about losing Cowell (or vice versa), or alternately, to what degree she might have overstated her symptoms with the aim of manipulating his emotions, stirring his sympathies. She went on to describe the circumstances of several job offers, one of which required her to play the piano extensively, which she was incapable of doing, since she had been copying parts for Cowell for months instead of practicing her instrument. She then discussed the nature of her feelings for him, and his fears that she wanted something more, claiming, not for the first time, that her “love is not the possessive kind.” Taking on an increasingly bitter, almost sarcastic tone, she added: “It is so fortunate that just at this lowest point things begin to happen with my works. It seems to be God’s help, he might believe in my work as composer, as human being, as do the friends who know me. I should think that you would be happy too to think that somebody worthwhile had come into your life.”<sup>87</sup> Over the next few weeks she continued to implore Cowell

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<sup>85</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 4 January 1941; box 2, folder 3, NYPL. The two compositions she mentions in this letter—the “movement for winds” and “four movements for strings”—are most likely the Trio for Woodwinds (K 19/NY52; undated in Kennedy-Polansky) and String Quartet No. 4 (K 23/NY34; undated in Kennedy and Polansky)

<sup>86</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 7[?] January 1941; box 2, folder 3, NYPL.

<sup>87</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 7 [?] January 1941; NYPL. The friends she alludes to are Bertha Reynolds and the Overstreets (mentioned earlier in the letter). It is not clear what she means by “things begin to happen to my works.”

to escort her to various events (a screening of the Disney film Fantasia with Stokowski, a Martha Graham performance, a Gorshefsky recital).<sup>88</sup>

A few weeks later Cowell wrote Beyer a detailed letter which more emphatically outlined his proposed business arrangement between them, one in which his prior method of “taking care of the office overhead [was] to discontinue.”<sup>89</sup> He formally suggested two courses of action for streamlining their professional contact. First, he would pay her union rates for all the copying work she had done on his compositions (Tocanta, Anthropos, others), and thereby would have no further financial obligation toward her for work she had done in the past. Second, he suggested that they split all lecture/performance/recording fees, fifty-fifty, for all engagements that resulted directly from her work and contacts. He made clear that he would no longer pay her work-related expenses (like the telephone) but that she would be expected to pay those herself with the fifty percent she received of his fees. In a detached, yet fair and reasonable manner, he expressed concern about her financial situation, and said that he would try to send pupils her way, and that he would talk with her friends, including Bertha Reynolds, about other ways to stabilize her financial situation.<sup>90</sup> Upon his insistence, on 9 February, Beyer reluctantly sent Cowell a “bill” listing all the scores (and how many pages) she have copied for him: 145 pages at the union rate of forty cents a page. (Cowell’s financial records show that he sent her a check for \$12.50 in

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<sup>88</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 14 January 1941 and postcard from Beyer to Cowell, postmarked 17 January 1941; box 2, folder 3, NYPL.

<sup>89</sup> Letter from Cowell to Beyer, 15 January 1941; box 20, folder 9, NYPL.

<sup>90</sup> It is unclear how Beyer and Reynolds met (Beyer claims they met in 1927), but Beyer had tried to get her friend involved in Cowell’s prison case from June 1936 on. Reynolds showed great concern regarding Beyer’s faltering health and poverty around 1940, and even corresponded with Cowell regarding the fifty-percent arrangement on 22 January 1941: “The fact that it is my profession to listen to people in trouble and to keep confidences has resulted in my knowing more about her affairs than anyone else probably [. . .] I have been worried about her health and yet she is undoubtedly right that to stop now for hospital care would probably destroy the slender chance she has of building up a living in teaching. Undoubtedly she has less that she needs in food and warmth and rest from heavy physical work. At one time I was able to help her but am now able to earn only enough to meet my own obligations. I am afraid it would be difficult for her to get back on Home Relief because of her resistance to answering some of their questions about the work she was doing for you at the time she dropped out. She has, therefore, no security as far as I can see, except the chance she may have of earning. I hope that you will do all you can to put opportunities in her way, and we must all desire earnestly that she may recover her health.”

January 1941 [half the fee for a lecture she arranged for him at Columbia University], and another check for \$58 in February, for music copying.)<sup>91</sup>

In the same letter, he addressed the lingering emotional situation between them. He made it clear that he wished to marry, but did not wish to marry her: “I am not in love with you, and cannot feel that a marriage between us would prove a happy one.” He took great pains to explain that he wished to limit his social contact with Beyer, since he wished to meet eligible women at parties and concerts, and felt that Beyer would jeopardize his chances, and his reputation, if he was frequently seen with her in public (“there have already been some misunderstandings through our being seen so much together,” he wrote). He said that he would only see her in large groups, and would no longer come alone to her apartment, “since I can no longer consider it as my place of business as well as yours.” He insisted that “I would do anything I could to avoid hurting you, but there is no use avoiding the truth, and I am deeply sorry that the truth is painful,” and he signed the letter “as always your friend.” On 15 January, the same day Beyer received this letter, her increasingly existential desperation spiked:

May I beg you today, to reconsider our friendship. To forget, what has happened so far, and begin anew, entirely anew. There is a fierce fight within me and it threatens to wreck my body and mind completely. I am too weak to be able to check it. Bertha [Reynolds] is worried about me, she asked me, would I go to a hospital if she finds one for me, that was last weekend. Since then, things have grown worse again. I told Bertha that I would fight desperately to be able to hold through till summer when pupils stop anyway, that, if I stop now, I will loose [sic] my chance to ever make a living again. Henry, please don't be hard now, when I am so weakened.<sup>92</sup>

A few weeks later Cowell wrote to Sidney about the new fifty-percent arrangement with Beyer. He announced “Hanna has been writing me, but the tone of the letters is a great deal more sensible, and I think it may come thru with no entire unfriendly break.” But he added: “I am fully prepared to break entirely if this half and half won't work.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Cowell's financial records, check stubs; box 113, folder 3, NYPL.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 15 January 1941; box 2, folder 3, NYPL.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Cowell to Sidney Robinson, 25 January 1941; box 20, folder 9, NYPL.

Despite Cowell's threats to abandon their friendship completely, Beyer continued to wish nothing but the best for him: "Sorry you have to work so hard," she wrote, "wish we had a society where a man with your qualities were provided for so he could serve his art, and so with continuity" (at the same time she admitted "I seem to be sinking lower each week, am in bad shape . . . but I managed to finish the score for Stokowski").<sup>94</sup> Just a few days before Cowell had announced to Sidney his willingness to "break entirely," on 21 January 1941 Beyer said that she was going to stay with her current doctor until "about June" and then would submit herself to a thorough examination and "perhaps to hospital." In March, she seemed resigned to her situation, as she told Cowell "there is not much hope for me, unless I give in, and rest completely and then it will be a slow recovery, having waited so long to do something about it: I must undergo an examination." She began to accept a future in which she could no longer play a crucial role in Cowell's life: "Therefore we have to face the facts and I must give up work for you."<sup>95</sup>

During the spring of 1941, Beyer's increasingly grueling work schedule included teaching in Harrington Park, NJ on Tuesdays, in Brooklyn on Wednesdays, and in Staten Island on Fridays.<sup>96</sup> As her illness rapidly progressed, she described the details to Cowell: her inability to leave her apartment except for her teaching duties, her frequent inability to eat or to rise from her bed, and her lack of strength to work on her music. She also described the conditions of her blood loss and crippled leg in painfully romantic terms: "My leg has become thinner and shorter steadily, something radical has to be done. But what worries me more is the piercing pains through my heart (caused by our friendship). These pains seem to pierce right through to the spine and cause paralyzing of both legs at times."<sup>97</sup> The deterioration of her leg made it difficult

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<sup>94</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 5 February 1941; NYPL. It is unclear which score she was preparing for Stokowski.

<sup>95</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 22 March 1941; NYPL.

<sup>96</sup> Her work schedule is outlined in a letter to Cowell, 3 April 1941; NYPL.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, undated; NYPL.

for her to mount her Jane Street apartment stairs. She told Cowell how some neighbors in her building anonymously helped her (“doing things secretly for me”) by bringing up her mail, for example. She wrote: “You see, they were used to my ‘dancing’ up and down and now I have to pull myself up with my arms and rest in between. I never see them watching me, but they hear me.” She assured him: “All this sounds bad and I shall not speak of it again. Perhaps the sun, the rest, and the double amount of pills will help.”<sup>98</sup> Though she was greatly incapacitated, there is ample indication that Beyer’s increasing isolation was directly related to Cowell’s rejection, and that she felt ostracized from the community she had striven to become a part of. In March 1941 she wrote, elliptically: “With practically all communications broken off—being banned from all what amounts to the musical life of New York—with my soul dragged to the market . . .”<sup>99</sup> She added, after again discussing her illness: “I tell you all this only so you will realize the cause of my move: to give up work for you, for me.” Even after this point, she continued writing to Cowell about her own music, and her work for him, and asking him, again and again, to escort her to cultural events (she repeatedly expressed her desire to see Fantasia, for example).

Cowell’s 1941 datebook contains a few brief references to Beyer. The first is just her name at the end of a “to-do” list, on Monday, 10 March. The other is written on 24 March: “45 cents to Hanna.”<sup>100</sup> In the end, Cowell broke completely with Beyer. In June 1941, around the time when he took an apartment on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue in preparation for his move back to New York City, he told her that he believed “that it is best for us to discontinue contact altogether.”<sup>101</sup> He

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<sup>98</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 3 April 1941; NYPL.

<sup>99</sup> Postcard from Beyer to Cowell, 18 March 1941; NYPL.

<sup>100</sup> Cowell’s datebooks (pocket calendars); box 93, folder 15, NYPL. Two days prior, Beyer had written to Cowell: “Please don’t attempt to give [the 45cts] back, I shall not accept it.” Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 22 March 1941; NYPL.

<sup>101</sup> Cowell to Beyer, 3 June 1941; box 20, folder 14, NYPL.



announced he would return her “Indian record” (about which she had pestered him on many occasions) and her copy of Maestoso.

One day after Cowell made his final “break,” Beyer’s bitterness about his indifference toward her music erupted in an uncharacteristically angry letter:

Aggravations:

When I visited you in White Plains you showed me a letter by you to the League of Composers, in which you recommended new composers to be played. In vain did I look for my name—I did not say one word. You went to Yaddo, Rochester, WPA, Mahler—I had also works in all these places—you never mentioned anything, I took it silent. There was a possibility with Sevitzyk. Did it ever occur to you to say a word for me? You may have, I don’t know, you never mentioned anything. When I asked you about the American Music Festival, in a strange way you said, no, you did not know anything about it, but it wasn’t a good festival because Riegger was not on. That same evening Richard told me, that it was through your recommendation that he was being played at the festival, that he was not even a member of the League. [ . . . ] Then there was that New Music and also recording business. Once you made a lot of fun about the lovely song I had written and that you would see to be one of the jury and that I would win the prize because nobody else could write such a song. Well, not so long ago you had the chance to make that come true, unfortunately somebody informed me about it too late. Once you wrote about the originality, the bare beauty, humor, wit, and what not in my new things, but when you presented me at the New School, I was rather stunned by your remarks but instead of responding (not to speak of aggravation) to your attitude, I tried to master the whole situation and to quiet down the commotion in the audience. It was not only that one woman. Different people in the audience spoke to me afterwards and Schillinger gave me some sound advice. [ . . . ] There was the big chance for me with Stokowski. I wrote the work with enthusiasm and dedicated it to him. It is on the score: To Leopold Stokowski and already in this version [at] the Philadelphia library. The work has not been sent back nor have I heard a word and you tell me today casually, it is put aside till next year. That would mean, I cannot do anything with it until then. I really must have advice about it; please: where can I reach Stokowski directly? Or will you ask him what I should do with that work? I surely have made a fool of myself with Mahler through his Stokowski affair of which I wrote you in detail. As you remember, he said he could play my work after the middle of June. However, so far, he has not asked for parts. He has here 3 works of mine: Symphonic Movements I and II and Symphonic opus 5. I am sure that if you expressed interest directly to Mahler now, I might get a chance there. Above all, I ought to hear at least one work once. With all these festivals and goings on and I belonging to two composers organizations since years etc. etc. and having written over 100 works anyway, 6 symphonic works and no chance to hear one of them! Tell them some of my forefathers fought in the Civil War of America, some are English [men?], and that I have alive native close Irish-English relatives walking around in Washington today. My own father lived for a number of years in France and England, his [?] back to Germany was merely accidental! Why do I mention this now? Perhaps because you brought out the 100 % American once too often. All these percentages make me laugh!<sup>102</sup>

The last available dated correspondence from Beyer to Cowell, written on 8 June 1941, is an all-business postcard about a check from the Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra. But several other undated letters clearly written around this time further express Beyer’s deep disappointment.<sup>103</sup> There is no evidence that Cowell ever responded to Beyer’s accusations of

<sup>102</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, postmarked 4 June 1941, emphasis mine; NYPL.

<sup>103</sup> In an undated letter to Cowell, Beyer expressed similar frustrations: “I might as well be frank. In our correspondence in years gone by I had expressed my disappointment, that New Music had never done anything for

neglect. Less than a month later, on 3 July, his civil rights were restored, and on 27 September 1941 he and Sidney married in Thurmont, Maryland. It is uncertain whether Cowell and Beyer had any contact after that point. Sidney later claimed (inaccurately) that due to Cowell's rejection, Beyer "had some sort of a breakdown, following which she killed herself."<sup>104</sup>

After her friendship with Cowell ended, Beyer disappeared almost completely from the historical record, and left almost no further traces of herself. For a historian or biographer, this is the frustrating moment when nearly all threads are lost. According to the title page of her *Sonatina in C* dedicated to her piano student Roland Leitner, in June 1943 Beyer was still living in Greenwich Village; at some point between June 1941 and June 1943 she moved from Jane Street to 303 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street, just three blocks to the south, a brick apartment building that now houses sixteen separate residences near the corner of 8th Avenue across the street from the famous White Horse Tavern. Her death certificate gives this location as her "usual residence," though it is unclear when exactly, or why (or indeed, how, given her condition) she moved. At some point in mid-1943 she entered the House of the Holy Comforter in the Bronx. Five days after Beyer's death on 9 January 1944, her niece Frieda Kastner informed Arthur Cohn at the Philadelphia Free Library of her aunt's passing.<sup>105</sup> Not one other record of anyone taking note of her death has been located.

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me. You wrote that you wanted to but others were against it, and being powerless at the moment, you had to give in. In other correspondence you stressed the fact that you would try to do something for my music, you also repeated this since you are back. When nothing at all happened, I brought the matter up when you were coming here frequently. I spoke of the [history?] of my First String Quartet and my Songs. I asked you whether you had copies here. You said, no, all this would be with your parents. And you said that you would have to have copies to submit to the board. I said that I could send you my Song copy and my String Quartet was with ISCM. With the next chance I sent you a song copy, you did not even mention the arrival! You also know that I have written a new String Quartet and a Woodwind Trio. But at no time had you any suggestion to make. If I had a friend who had done so much for my works, I would certainly have tried to do something for this friend in return, without being reminded of it. I would have sought a chance at the first possibility."

<sup>104</sup> On typed page marked 7/11 -5-a—, "footnote 7; Johanna Beyer"; in folder labeled "Sidney Cowell book on Henry Cowell [1944] chapter headings, footnotes [12/19/1975]"; box 75, folder 22, NYPL.

<sup>105</sup> At the time of Beyer's death in 1944, according to the letter from Kastner to Cohn (written on 16 January 1944), Kastner was living at 160 Dongan Hills, Staten Island (I am grateful to Christopher Shultis for bringing this letter to

## RECONSTRUCTING AN ALMOST LOST PERSONALITY

So who was Johanna Magdalena Beyer? Was the face she showed the world different from the voice she cultivated in her epistolary life? In the end, it would appear that those who remembered her as “extremely quiet, almost painfully shy,” “not close to many in the New York City music scene,” having “no family” and “not maintain[ing] ties to relatives in Germany” fell short of an accurate characterization of this apparently social, well-connected, and family-oriented woman.<sup>106</sup>

Furthermore, though she obviously moved comfortably in German immigrant circles, Beyer clearly identified herself, and tried to assert herself, as an American composer—“my forefathers fought in the Civil War of America!” she proclaimed—during a time when asserting a national identity was on the forefront of many artists’ agendas (“the vast stretches of our land, many-fold races, vast cities, the rhythm, pulse of our life must ultimately bring an objective, synthetic style about, to be authentic American music,” she wrote on one occasion).<sup>107</sup> At the same time, she had an idiosyncratically poetic sensibility about music (she once referred to her melodies for Status Quo as “sticky,” in an undated letter to Cowell: “People will be surprised what I can do!” she added). After hearing a performance by Grainger, she once wrote him: “It seemed like the wind, the waterfall, the rustle of leaves, the hum of the bee, the mystic sounds of the night, every varying.”<sup>108</sup> Despite the flowery language, which might seem to downplay her ability to comprehend music in analytical ways, Beyer’s musicality was apparently never

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my attention). Another address for Kastner (appearing in ancestry.com library edition accessed at the New York Historical Society) appears in the US Public Records Index (record number 524533603) as 153 Stiles Street, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

<sup>106</sup> See Kennedy and Polansky, “Total Eclipse,” 72.

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Beyer to Dr. Alvin Johnson, 30 August 1936; NYPL. Emphasis mine. In an undated letter referring to a contest, she wrote Cowell: “I made a mistake asking whether it was open only to natives. I shall write again from New York and simply ignore my being born in Germany.”

<sup>108</sup> Letter from Beyer to Grainger, 23 February 1940.

questioned by those who knew her. Cowell once commented: “[Pianist Georgia Kober] is a better player [than Beyer], but probably not the musician that Beyer is.” He added: “I, of course, like composer-players better as a rule, and I remember Beyer’s playing as having the composer’s intelligence behind it.”<sup>109</sup> Beyer’s “composer’s intelligence” is sometimes revealed spontaneously in letters about music other than her own. About Cowell’s United Quartet, “a rare piece,” Beyer wrote:

The March must be played exactly as indicated, then it is a wonder of gathering forces marching on to ever higher vistas! I heard it once fairly well done and once without any understanding. It must start very slow and mystic. I forgot myself, I better stop talking before losing [sic] myself further.<sup>110</sup>

What else do Beyer’s letters tell us about her, and about her days? Most obviously, we know she was a voluminous correspondent, uninhibited in revealing her reactions to the life she lived (her passion for Bach, or swimming, for example), and that she often wrote to Cowell late at night when she couldn’t sleep, or when she arrived home after a musical event that had excited her. She apparently enjoyed social contact with people outside the metropolitan music world, and planned to have “school friends from abroad” visit her in the summers, expected a variety of relatives to visit her during August 1940, received invitations for holidays in the country, and complained when half a dozen friends went on summer vacation and “left poor me all alone.”<sup>111</sup> She accepted invitation to parties by “university people,” and once attended a reception for Paul Hindemith during which she met Marion Bauer.<sup>112</sup> Above all, amidst the many social circles in which she functioned, she seems to have lived in the practical spaces of everyday life, inviting Cowell for a traditional German Christmas Gänsebraten (roast goose) cooked by her niece, or carefully planning meals for his much anticipated Jane Street visits: “If it is hot, perhaps just

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<sup>109</sup> Letter from Cowell to Olive and Harry Cowell, 9 March 1938; box 126, folder 11, NYPL.

<sup>110</sup> Letter from Beyer to Sevitzy, 22 May 1940.

<sup>111</sup> Letter from Beyer to Cowell, 9 June 1936; 20 July 1940, and others.

<sup>112</sup> Beyer outlines many of her social engagements in letters to Olive Cowell ca. 1937; NYPL.

berries and milk, some crackers; if it should be cool, I could make some chops and vegetables.”<sup>113</sup>

In these daily human details, and through the musical work with which she spent her days, Johanna Magdalena Beyer lived a life precariously balanced between radiance and “total eclipse.”

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