

PAUL BOWLES / COMPOSER

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Bowles, Paul Frederic, b. Jamaica, N.Y., December 30, 1910.

Though Bowles has become even more famous as a novelist and short-story writer than as a composer, his music, most of it written in his earlier years, has elegance of style and a personalized profile. Both in literature and music he has often been influenced by his many visits to and research into the primitive folklore of Morocco and other exotic lands.

His childhood was lonely and unhappy, dominated by a dictatorial and often hostile father, a physician. Until Paul was five he never associated with children. "My idea of the world," he has written, "was a place inhabited exclusively by adults." His childhood and boyhood years were spent in such solitary occupations as drawing, writing, and reading; he made his first attempt at writing when he was four. "Very early I understood that I would always be kept from doing what I enjoyed and forced to that which I did not. The Bowles family took it for granted that pleasure was destructive whereas engaging in an unappealing activity aided in character formation."

His early academic schooling took place at the Jamaica Model School in New York (1917-24). At this time he heard his first music, a recording of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony his father had acquired. When Paul was seven, music study began at the Dunning School of Music, with a Miss Chase, who taught him piano, theory, solfeggio and ear training. At nine he tried to write an opera. He says the "music" that most interested him when he was very young were the sounds produced by spinning a musical top, or sliding a metal object up and down the German zither his grandfather had given him, or the creaking of a rusty door hinge. He reacted to them hypnotically. "They seemed to me the culmination of beauty, and always put me into a nonthinking state which lasted as long as I repeated the sounds."

Graduating from Jamaica Model School in January 1924, Bowles passed on first to Flushing High School (1924-25) and in September 1925 to Jamaica High School. By now he had become a voracious reader and a devotee to literature. He was made president of the school literary society and poetry editor of the school magazine. His musical interests were developed at the Saturday concerts of the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall where a performance of Stravinsky's *The Fire-Bird* proved such an exciting experience that on his way home he stopped off to buy a phonographic recording which he played endlessly on his own portable phonograph.

Upon graduating from Jamaica High School in January 1928 he enrolled in the School of Design and Liberal Arts in New York with some vague idea of trying to become an artist. That spring some of his poems were published in transition a Paris avant garde literary journal, which went a long way in convincing him that literature and not art was his forte. That fall he entered the University of Virginia, but after a single semester, and without informing his parents, he fled to Europe. In Paris, supporting himself by being employed as a telephone switchboard operator at the office of the Paris Herald Tribune, he attended performances of Russian operas at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées and of the Diaghilev Ballet. Back in New York in 1930 he rented a room in Greenwich Village and for a while worked as a clerk in a Fifth Avenue bookshop. Before long, however, on the urging of his father, he returned to the University of Virginia for his second freshman semester. That summer, through a letter of introduction from Henry Cowell, he met Aaron Copland, showed him his Sonata for Oboe and Clarinet (1930), which he had then just written, and was accepted by Copland for daily lessons in composition at Yaddo, in Saratoga N.Y.

By the fall of 1930, Bowles had had his fill of the stultifying routines of academic life and left college for good. He returned to Europe in Copland's company, with whom he continued to study composition in Berlin. Bowles paid a visit to Morocco, a place that had fascinated him from the time he had heard some Arabic music on recordings. During this visit he fell in love with the place. In ensuing years he returned to it frequently and eventually ended up by establishing his residence there; this first visit to Morocco was also the beginning of his lifelong fascination for Moroccan folk music and barbaric and primitive cultures.

In 1931 he was in Paris attending the École Normale de Musique, studying counterpoint with Nadia Boulanger. During 1932-33 he studied composition intermittently with Virgil Thomson. His music during this period had French refinement and grace, revealing traits reminiscent sometimes of Satie, sometimes of Poulenc, while many of his songs were in a quasi-impressionistic idiom. These compositions included his Piano Sonatina no.1 (1932); Sonata for Flute and Piano (1932); Scènes d'Anabase, five songs for tenor, oboe, and piano (1932); Six Songs (1932); and a cantata, Par le détroit, for soprano, male quartet and harmonium (1933). The Six Songs was introduced on April 30, 1932, by Ada MacLeish at the First Festival Contemporary Music at Yaddo in Saratoga, N.Y. John Kirkpatrick played the Sonatina no.1 at a concert of the League of Composers in New York in autumn 1933. Bowles's Flute Sonata was given its initial hearing by the Cincinnati Music Society in 1933. And the Scènes d'Anabase was featured at the Hartford Music Festival in 1936.

Back in the United States, and settled in New York, Bowles attended a class in harmony given by Roger Sessions. Commissioned by Lincoln Kirstein, director of the American Ballet Caravan, to provide the score of one of his productions, Bowles wrote Yankee Clipper (1936), given its initial performance in Philadelphia, with Alexander Smallens conducting, on July 19, 1937.

The year of 1936 also marked his beginnings as a composer of incidental music for the theater, a field in which he proved successful. That year he wrote music for two productions of the WPA Federal Theater, directed by Orson Welles; Dr. Faustus and Horse Eats Hat. In 1939, the Group Theater assigned him to write music for William Saroyan's play My Heart's in the Highlands. From this point on, he showed exceptional skill and imagination in capturing the mood, emotion, and ambience of each play to which he was assigned. "Here," as Bowles has explained, "one can with immunity write climaxless music, hypnotic music in one of the exact senses of the word, in that it makes its effect without the spectator being made aware of it." For the next few years, Bowles devoted a good deal of his time to the writing of functional scores for the stage. Among the famous plays in which his incidental music was heard were: Shakespeare's Twelfth Night starring Maurice Evans and Helen Hayes (1940); Lillian Hellman's Watch on the Rhine (1941); Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie (1944); Franz Werfel's Jacobowky and the Colonel (1944); and Tennessee Williams's Summer and Smoke (1946).

He did not neglect concert music. During these years he composed, among other works, *Melodia*, for nine instruments (1937); *Music for a Farce*, for clarinet, trumpet, piano, and percussion (1938); an opera, *Denmark Vesey* (1938), to a libretto by Charles Henri Ford; a ballet, *Pastorale* (1941), which toured South America; and a ballet written for the Ballet International, *Colloque sentimental* (1944), seen in New York in 1944. Together with these he produced a considerable number of songs, song cycles, and pieces for the piano. In much of this music, and in the music he would later write, Bowles's style assimilated some of the melodic, rhythmic, and other stylistic elements of African, Mexican, and Central American music. In 1949, on a Rockefeller Foundation grant, he made recordings of Moroccan folk songs, the tapes of which now repose in the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

On February 21, 1938, Bowles married Jane Sydney Auer. Since travel had by now become a passion with Bowles, they spent their honeymoon visiting Panama, Central America, ending up in Paris and the French Riviera. A Guggenheim Fellowship in 1941 enabled them to travel to Mexico. There Bowles worked on an opera, *The Wind Remains*, with a surrealist libretto by Federico Garcia Lorca. It was produced in New York in March 1943 with Leonard Bernstein conducting and Merce Cunningham doing the choreography.

Having for some time contributed articles on music to *Modern Music* and other journals, Bowles, in 1942, was appointed music critic of the *New York Herald Tribune*. He held this job for three years. In 1949, Bowles published his first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, set in Morocco. It enjoyed considerable critical acclaim. This was the real beginning of an eminent literary career, which has included the writing of other novels, books of short stories, travel books and books in translations. One of his books is an autobiography, *Without Stopping* (1972). By the mid-1950s, by which time Morocco had become his permanent home, Bowles's deep involvement with literature took precedence over his career as a composer. Several of his letters were used by Peggy Glanville-Hicks as the text for her composition *Letters from Morocco*, for tenor and orchestra (1952). In 1981 Bowles was elected to membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

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