Though its institutions remain rather strong and its roots are reasonably deep, the place of classical music in America has never been easy or certain. The country is simply too large — and too willfully diffuse in its cultural and religious sources — to allow for a dense notation-based style to wrap itself around the nation's musical identity. Our music has shown itself rather to be an unprecedented efflorescence of mostly nonwritten or half-written 'folk' styles tracing the social, political, commercial, and (of course) aesthetic desires of a changing and restless populace. Classical music cannot find its firm ethnic-European footing here, let alone claim cultural primacy; its canon is merely one constellation (with all the arbitrariness that implies) in a vast universe of musical possibility.

The field was especially open in California, where **HENRY COWELL**, the son of fairly unhappy visionary progressives in San Francisco, was born in 1897 and raised as a genius. On the one hand, his upbringing could be seen as intellectually curious and potentially positive: he was idealistically home-schooled on the fringes of the Berkeley campus, could allegedly engage in deep philosophical discourse as a teenager, and was locally regarded as something of a prodigy. On the other hand, he was notoriously unwashed, weirdly coddled as a 'natural' musical novelty, and had great difficulty with spelling. (Musically talented he certainly was; Felix Mendelssohn he certainly was not.)

The musical results of this upbringing were a strange combination of naive and radical. Cowell experimented with musical form at its very roots, introducing random and wandering ideas to his composition — he grew especially well-known as an avant-gardist in the 1920's for bringing 'tone clusters' to piano playing (this meant playing all the notes next to one another on a piano — 'pounding,' if you will). He also maintained a long-standing loyalty to the open and simple tonality of American Protestant 'hymning' songs. But perhaps his most enduring contribution was a spiritual and aesthetic openness to the 'whole world of music,' which he presented with indefatigable energy everywhere from Columbia University to San Quentin Prison to Buenos Aires. This openness, a Whitman-like will to contain multitudes, was a quality which, for better or worse, was infinitely more likely to arise in Berkeley than in Leipzig or Vienna. The consequences of this openness, of a bold sweet naivete brought up on the edge of Chinatown, are very purely audible in the charming 'Set of Five': in Eastern gongs against Western tonality; in quick exploratory pleasures over a breezily wandering landscape.

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART's "Kegelstatt" trio belongs to two peculiar genres: 1) works for clarinet, viola, and piano — a small genre which was inaugurated by this piece; and 2) works which acquire a memorable nickname for no good reason. A kegelstatt is a bowling alley, or a place where people play skittles; this piece has nothing to do with skittles, or bowling, or the Big Lebowski, for that matter. It's just a piece Mozart wrote for his piano student Franziska Jacquin and his friend the clarinetist Anton Stadler. Mozart liked to play the viola, and that made a trio. The clarinet was a fairly new concert instrument at this time, and Mozart wrote several pieces for Stadler to play on clarinet and/or basset horn: a concerto, a quintet, some fantastic arias in late operas, and a set of twelve duos (which he did allegedly write while playing skittles). These pieces helped establish the instrument for centuries to come. That said, the "kegelstatt" trio is not a particularly important piece — it is merely a beautiful one, written for friends in the friendly key of E-flat, for enjoyment at home, or at the bowling alley, or wherever one happens to want to play it.

From STEVEN MACKEY:
When I was a young composer in the mid-eighties the so-called Pierrot ensemble (flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, named after Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire) with or without added percussion, was the ubiquitous "mod-music" group. It has a certain economic appeal in that you get a little of everything but because of that, every concert you went to had pieces by students and teachers wrestling with this

Spartan orchestra in a post-Schoenbergian expressionist idiom. …[I] felt the need to transform the ensemble into something else, something more sympathetic to my background and interests, something more lively. In Micro-Concerto, the featured role of the percussionist playing a combination of toys, kitchen utensils and "legit" instruments makes the ensemble a little more playful. Also, a recurring strategy in the composition of the non-percussion parts is to have them occasionally get stuck on one or a couple of oddly articulated notes, bringing them closer to the spirit of percussion.

…

In an addition to providing a virtuoso vehicle for the percussionist, Micro-Concerto also explores a variety of more complex roles that the individual can play in relation to the ensemble. In "**Movement I**: Chords and Fangled Drum Set," the rhythm is front and center. I imagine that the piano chords harmonize the rhythm instead of the rhythm measuring the harmonies.

"**Movement II**: Interlude #1, Vibes solo" is a short, lyrical ballad.

In "**Movement III**: Clik, Clak, Clank," the percussionist is neither an accompanying rhythm section nor leading melody. I think of it as a contextualizing and interpreting narration spoken in some imaginary tongue-clicking language.

In "**Movement IV**: Interlude #2, marimba and cello," the two instruments are completely co-dependent; the story is told only by their interplay. In some sense they are a single instrument with timbres no more disparate than the clickers and samba whistle that are part of the percussionist's instrument in Movement III. This movement flows without pause into "**Movement V**: Tune in Seven." In the first half of the movement the percussionist is one of six players tossing around a set of variations on the Tune. Toward the end, the percussionist returns to the "fangled drum set" and shifts the focus back to what must be (along with singing) the most fundamental form of musical expression — hitting things in time.

The two interludes are played on big, standard pieces of percussion "furniture," but the main movements focus on small moves and subtle distinctions. They are full of fussy descriptions of how to play some hand-held "toy" just so. This micro-management of small muscle groups, and the fact that the concerto soloist is accompanied by the smallest orchestra imaginable, suggested the title.

Micro-Concerto was commissioned by a Meet the Composer grant and premiered by the New York New Music Ensemble in 1999.

Having an orchestra around is pleasant enough, but hiring one is rarely the most convenient thing to do. The logistical issues around getting 40 or 50 or 100 or more people to the same place to do the same thing at the same time are steep enough; fitting them into your living room adds a whole new dimension to the problem. So there is a long tradition of reducing large orchestral works to fit a small ensemble — a tradition which was very important for the transmission of music before the age of reduction through recording. It was how music got into the house.

This reduction of **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART**'s Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor, K. 466 by Carl Czerny (a student of Beethoven) has a paradoxical quality. Any concerto, with its virtuosic largeness, is suited best to a public forum and dramatic presentation, and this particular concerto has an unusually large dynamic and emotional scope — it is an entire mature drama, with a cold wind blowing through it. And Mozart, writing for himself at the piano, found in this particular concerto ways to foreshadow (in the first movement) the ambiguous dark forces in Don Giovanni; to extend (as in the second movement) moods from simple Romance to something terrifying in the middle; and to remove almost all celebration (as in the last movement) from the usual rondo finale. The D minor is an enormous piece, not only in itself, but in its expansion and exploration of what musical forces a concerto could contain. By Czerny's hand it is drastically reduced. But the essential largeness of it remains, and the concerto can still show itself fiercely, even if sometimes only in relief. Though the woodwind section is gone, the sound of the wind remains in the sound of the flute; the harmony retains its strength in the forces of the orchestra-quintet and none of the piano part — not a note — is in any way altered.