

Quarter-Tone Composer & Pianist Mildred Couper

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Argentine-American Mildred Cooper Couper (1887-1974) was an early composer of quarter-tone music. She was born in Buenos Aires, educated in Europe, taught in New York, and eventually settled in Santa Barbara, California. She was a music theorist, pianist, teacher, and a member of Henry Cowell's New Music Society, which produced and published music in microtonal scales. This group of “ultra modernists” was strongly influenced by the alternate tone scales of Japan, China, Indonesia, and ancient Greece; often building new instruments, or tuning classical instruments in new scale configurations. The experimental works included explorations of atonality, polytonality, polyrhythms, overtones, and other non-Western modes. Mildred used a quarter-tone system of 24 notes to an octave in her microtonal works, achieved by re-tuning a second piano in a higher range. This biography includes concert notations from newspaper articles, a partial list of Couper’s works, and links to archives of her music scores and recordings,



Family Background

Mildred Couper was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on Avenida Pichincha 277, and spent her early childhood galloping on horseback over the Argentine pampas at her family’s cattle ranch in Lomas de Zamora. Her parents were Harriet and Reginald Cooper, who emigrated from England. Her mother was an opera singer, so Mildred was exposed to classical music at a young age, starting the piano at the age of five. Her father was a banker and helped build the railroad system in Argentina, and was a founder of St. John the Baptist Cathedral, located near the Casa Rosada. The cathedral was built in 1831, after a treaty between Great Britain and Argentina granting tolerance for the religion of British subjects, which was aided by a generous subsidy from the British government (“British Settlers”). The Anglican cathedral was possibly the first non-Roman Catholic place of worship in South America, when Buenos Aires was known as the “Paris of the Americas”. The exterior is neo-classical, the interior is Victorian, and it is now a national monument. Its classical front faces the city’s financial section. Couper’s father and relatives are buried in the English section of the Chacarita Cemetery.

Mildred’s older sister, Elinor Cooper, owned another cattle and sheep ranch named “Estancia San Guillermo” in Gualeguay, a city in the province of Entre Ríos, just north of Buenos Aires. Mildred was initially home-schooled by her mother, traveling often to Europe in the summers. When she was 13 she entered the Williams Conservatory of Music in Buenos Aires, but on the death of her father, she was taken to Europe for her education. The seventh of eight children, she studied music at the Baden Conservatory in Karlsruhe, studied music in Rome and Paris, and was married in the United States. She spoke five languages (English, Spanish, Italian, French, and German). Within the family she was affectionately called “Mimi”.

In Paris Couper studied piano with Moritz Moskowski, art at “La Grande Chaumiere,” and composition with Nadia Boulanger. She and her mother often spent summers in the artist colony of Pont-Aven, in Brittany, France, or returned to visit the family in Buenos Aires. Mildred met her husband, the American impressionist landscape painter Richard Hamilton Couper, at the art studio of Beronneau. As a newlywed she lived in Rome in the Palazzo Sonnino, studied piano with Sgambati, and gave concerts at the American Academy in Rome, under director Frederick Crowninshield. She and Richard had weekly showings of his landscape paintings, monotypes and etchings, where Mildred entertained the visitors with tea and a musical program. These events

were mentioned in Burnham's book *Rome: Then and Now*. The Coupers frequently hosted artist Julius Rolshoven, whom they called *Giulio*. He was a mentor to the couple. When their son Clive arrived, they found a larger apartment at 25 Via Della Lupa, off Via Condotti near the Spanish Steps. They usually spent summers on the island of Capri, or in Florence or Venice, where Richard painted landscapes. With the outbreak of World War I they had to return to the U.S., as conditions in Italy became hazardous. After a peaceful life in Italy it was difficult to adjust to the more strenuous life in New York City, and Richard died during the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1918. Mildred spent the next nine years teaching at the David Mannes Music School, working with pianist Alfred Cortot, and performing concerts in New York, Montclair, Nantucket, and neighboring cities.

After visiting Scottish-Argentine artist Malcolm Thurburn in California, Couper moved to Santa Barbara in 1927 with an invitation from Curtis Cate to teach at the Cate School and Crane School, and later she helped found the Music Academy of the West. The Drama Branch of the Community Arts Association, under the direction of Irving Pichel, produced a series of plays at the Lobero Theatre for which Couper composed the music (Harcourt). When Pichel decided to produce Eugene O'Neill's "Marco Millions" he asked Mildred to compose the music. Having heard quarter-tone music in a New York recital she decided that this system would be appropriate for the Oriental setting of the play. Her first work in this medium, the ballet *Xanadu*, premiered April 24-26, 1930, at the Lobero Theatre in Santa Barbara. In 1932 this program was repeated at the home of Thomas Ripley, in Mission Canyon, and at venues in San Francisco, Monterey, and Carmel. Often Couper and Thurburn discussed quarter-tone theory at the concerts, and the *Monterey Peninsula Herald* said that "New sensations arose to meet these new sounds. . . one easily understood the fascination which has kept composers experimenting with intervals smaller than standard half-tones" ("Quarter-Tone Music Concert"). After a concert at the Faulkner Memorial Gallery in Santa Barbara, The Pro-Arts Quartet invited Couper to perform the *Xanadu* ballet music in Brussels. In addition, Martha Graham asked her to compose a dance composition in quarter-tones. Mildred Couper continued to write incidental music for plays at the Lobero Theatre and also composed music for the dance-opera *And on Earth Peace*, in December 1930, to words by Malcolm Thurburn, which reflected the story of the Nativity ("Christmas Dance-Drama"). Another of her compositions for a play was "The Bluebird" for the Junior League ("Cosmopolitan").

Originally living at 505 Orena Avenue, in 1946 Mildred Couper bought a large Spanish estate in Mission Canyon from the Dreyfus Family, and named it Monteverde, after the 17th century composer, but also because there was a beautiful view of the mountains. She had musical afternoons and concerts in the central salon which held an audience of 80 to 90 people. The Santa Barbara Music Society had many concerts there, and Couper hosted many other groups including the Players Club, the Civic Music Association, the Alliance Francaise, and the Council of Arts. The stage at the north end of the studio held two pianos and had 18-foot high ceilings, so the acoustics were marvelous. She became known as "Mrs. Music" in Santa Barbara for her generosity, support of culture, and musical talents ("Players Club Member"). Couper often lectured on music topics, and ran the Music Study group at the Rockwood Womens Club in Mission Canyon, located just steps away from her estate. In addition to composing and performing, she was a music critic for the *Santa Barbara News-Press* for 16 years, and often wrote reviews for local art exhibits ("An Exhibition")

The Santa Barbara Cultural Community

When Mildred Couper bought her new home in Mission Canyon in 1946, the *Santa Barbara Daily News* reported on the purchase of the estate: "The real estate market maintained its six-figure level Wednesday because of the culmination of two sizable deals as \$115,000 for the day was seized from just 12 realty instruments. The largest deal filed with county recorder Yris Covarrumas was for a site on Mission Canyon Road, which was acquired by Mildred Couper, from the original builders Mr. and Mrs. Walter and Goldene Dreyfus. The property on the Dreyfus tract sold for \$28,000" ("Large Residential Property"). Mission Canyon had originally been settled by local tradesmen and farmers who supported the nearby mission staff; then by artists, authors, potters and craftsmen; and then by real estate developers Rogers, Gane, Dreyfus, and Williams,

who built large estates here in what then would have been considered very rural. Thus, an eclectic set of visionaries lived side by side with doctors, architects, and other professionals (Reetz).



Monteverde Estate in Mission Canyon

Couper was a good friend of musicians Harry Partch and Henry Eichheim, who worked with gamelan and microtonal music. Active in Santa Barbara as President of the Music Society, she was one of the founders of the Music Academy of the West, a faculty member of the Cate School in Carpinteria, worked with Henry Cowell, and often had concerts in her large Spanish-styled home with singers Nadia Boulanger, Lotte Lehmann, Madeleine De Bryas, cellist Gregor Piatigorsky, the Paganini Quartet with Henri Temianka, Charles Libove, David Schwarz, and Lucien Laporte. When Henry Eichheim went to Bali he was so fascinated by the music that he wrote a symphonic poem based on Balinese themes. This work was performed by Leopold Stokowski, conductor of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, and broadcast on the NBC Symphony. Eichheim brought back a set of painted Balinese drums for Couper. Mildred was very influenced by this ethnic genre, and later played one of her quarter-tone pieces for Stokowski when he visited Santa Barbara. He later purchased a weekend house in Mission Canyon. Eichheim lived nearby, in a house built for him by the Santa Barbara architect Lulah Riggs. It had a large music room where he and Mildred often played violin sonatas. Riggs built many residences in Santa Barbara and Montecito, including a beach house for Eichheim in Sandyland, Carpinteria, near where Couper also had a beach home (Gebhard). The Santa Barbara Art Museum has a room devoted to Henry Eichheim, with many of the instruments that he brought back from Bali. Experimental music composer Henry Partch was frequently out of work and camped along the California coastline, sometimes staying with Mildred Couper. While studying in the British Museum in 1935, Partch built a harmonium-like chromatic organ instrument using a mathematical monophonic ratio spectrum. He called this "Ptolemy", after the Greek theorist, and shipped this instrument to its "Godmother" Mildred Couper in Santa Barbara, but it arrived damaged and was never repaired or used (Kassell). Couper compared Partch's speech music with Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande* and said it represented the first step in a new musical development (Granade).

Hoping to establish a permanent music school in Santa Barbara to compete with East Coast schools, Mildred Couper opened "The New School of Music" in 1934 with former Smith College voice teacher soprano Marie Milliette, at 1936 Cleveland Avenue, near the mission ("School of Music", "The Alumnae Notes"). In addition to piano and voice, they taught music appreciation courses, and a compendium of French music. This school did not continue because Milliette relocated to the San Francisco area. But, this project initiated the concept for the Music Academy of the West, which was started with a larger group of musicians 13 years later.

Participating in the second "California Artists Series" in 1940 Mildred Couper partnered with cellist Philip Abbas for a concert at the Montecito Country Club. Reviews claimed the "cellist never played better than

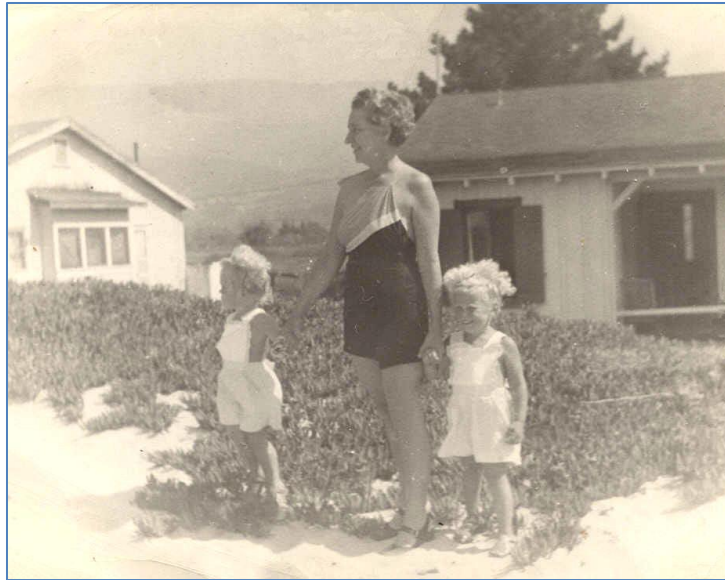
he did last night, and Mrs. Couper's sensitive and intelligent accompaniments greatly increased the enjoyments of the evening. They are a perfect team" (Linderman, "Mildred Couper and Philip Abbas"). This same pair performed the Cesar Franck Sonata at the Lobero Theatre "Hour of Music Series" to renewed acclaim by Linderman, "the preeminently intellectual approach of the one complementing the warmth and abounding spirits of the other. Mrs. Couper's purity of tone and beautiful restraint were most evident. . . and (for Abbas) the raptness and simple devotion to music and beauty that make this cellist a joy to the eye as to the ear". They also gave a concert of 18th c. music at the St. Anthony seminary.

Mildred taught piano to the daughter of the Sachs family in Montecito, and one day when she arrived to give a lesson, she found the whole group posing for a photograph in the patio. Igor Stravinsky was visiting the family and asked her to join them. This photograph also includes Nadia Boulanger with whom Couper had studied composition in Paris, and remained a close friend in the Santa Barbara community.



Sachs Family with Couper, Stravinsky, and Boulanger

In 1937 the *L'Annee Musicale*, published in France by W. L. Landowski, devoted a large chapter on Mildred Couper's music. "The technique . . . was not unknown to the ancient Greeks. . . the *Dirge* speaks of the flowering of sonorities through which one walks as through a virgin forest." ("French Musical Yearbook"). After Mildred Couper teamed up with cellist Philip Abbas in 1940 to perform his compositions at the Montecito Country Club ("Barbarenos Attend"), this duo repeated together again in a concert at the Art Museum in 1943 ("Concert at Art Museum"); and again at the Art Museum on March 18, 1945, playing pieces by Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Regarding Couper's composition the "Irish Washerwoman Variations" Russian pianist Shura Cherkassky stated that "Everywhere they're crazy about it!" after she played this at a concert in Bethlehem, PA (Personal correspondence Feb 3, 1943). In 1945 Werner Janssen's group performed Mildred Couper's "Irish Washerwoman" ("Monumental Reger Work"), a piece that he suggested she compose. The Los Angeles concert at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre was the first time the "Irish Washerwoman Variations" was arranged and performed for orchestra. In the summer of 1944 Janssen visited Mildred Couper at her Carpinteria beach house and said if she orchestrated it he would produce it! ("Werner Janssen Symphony"). The *News-Press* review stated: "The work has an exciting effect on an audience and it is not uncommon for people to shout enthusiastically after hearing it." Couper also wrote a piano quintet, and many songs set to Ogden Nash poems, often sung by Radiana Pazmor. Her beach house on Sandyland Road remains today, with the studio building behind, where music lessons were given in the summertime.



Carpinteria Beach House with granddaughters Lisa and Greta

The Music Academy of the West held its first summer festival at the Cate School in Carpinteria, on July 7, 1947. This was established in Santa Barbara to compete with the East coast schools of Juilliard, Eastman, and Curtis, and to offer West coast students an opportunity to show their talents. The beautiful location near the beach and mountains, in a community already noted for culture, was a strong draw for students. Founders included singers Lotte Lehmann and Lawrence Tibbett, as well as composer Ernest Bloch, conductor Richard Lert, violinist Roman Totenberg, pianists Harry Kaufman and Mildred Couper, diction advisor Margaret Curtis, and voice teacher tenor Richard Bonelli (Crawford). Bonelli had been a leading member of the Metropolitan Opera since 1932, and was formerly on the Curtis Institute faculty (“Nine Sign Up”). Mildred Couper was the only Santa Barbara resident to teach initially, and she held fundraisers at her Spanish estate “Monteverde” in Mission Canyon to help fund the inaugural year. The courses she taught included “Diatonic and Chromatic Harmony,” “Essentials of Music Theory,” and piano. Faculty in 1948 included Couper, Richard Lert, Madeleine Milhaud, Darius Milhaud, George Antheil, and Jan Chiapusso (“Some of the Members”). In 1949 Soulima Stravinsky (son of Igor) taught piano while Mildred Couper taught music theory (“Music Academy”). By 1951 the Academy had moved to “Miraflores,” the former estate of John Percival Jefferson, closer to the ocean (Christiansen). This home was a gift of Miss Helen Marso, in memory of the Jefferson family. The new executive director was John Charles Thomas. Among the faculty were Mildred Couper, Lotte Lehman, Soulima Stravinsky, Gabor Rejto, Maurice Faulkner, and Simon Kovar (“Music School Will Open”).

In 1954 an opera program was added, and Lehman along with Ganna Walska, of the Lotusland estate, donated many of their costumes. The Academy also gave lectures on composition, including a six week session with composer-in-residence Arnold Schoenberg (Crawford). In 1956 Mrs. Alfred Harcourt arranged for Mildred Couper and cellist Munya Cherniavski to perform in a concert at Monteverde (Curletti, “Musicians Honored”). Another 1957 concert at the Sutro Auditorium in Los Angeles included works by Homer Simmons, George Scharl, and Mildred Couper. Mr. and Mrs. Louis G. Dreyfus held a social party at their home and announced there would be a gourmet chef lecture at the second annual cooking school at the Music Academy of the West. Thus the Academy was host to more than just musical performances (O.H.).

Mildred Couper continued to host concerts at her woodland home “Monteverde,” in Mission Canyon, near the Santa Barbara Mission. She hosted singer Radiana Pazmor in her home, while Pazmor sang for various Channel City Concerts (“Singer Honored”). Other musicians included George Galvani. In 1950 she hosted a concert of the Paganini Quartet and Henri Temianka, with the support of Mrs. William Andrews Clarke of Bellosgarde (Curletti, “Music Event”). Another concert in 1950 presented her “Nightingale,” a musical

composition with narration based on Anderson's fairy tale. Instruments were flute, oboe, two violins, viola, and cello. Scofield described the music as "a brilliant translation into tonal art of an inspired poetic fantasy – use of lilting melody, harmonic impressionism, and intricate structural design" ("Second Local Concert").

The Southern California community of artists and musicians were often attracted to alternate philosophical ideas, as well as new music, including the theosophical community of the "Temple of the People" in Halcyon, in the Central Coast; the literary Dunites of Oceano; the Theosophical Society of Annie Besant in Los Angeles and Ojai; the Krishnamurti Society in Ojai; and the literary seekers in Big Sur. The decade of the 1930s was a time of new thinking and exploration in all cultural endeavors.

Quarter-Tone Music

Microtonal music refers to music which contains intervals smaller than the conventional Western semitones. In the 1910s through 1940s, quarter tones (24 equal pitches per octave) gained much attention from composers Charles Ives, Julián Carrillo, Alois Hába, Ivan Wyschnegradsky, and Mildred Couper. A quarter-tone is a pitch halfway between the usual notes of a chromatic scale, an interval about half as wide (aurally or logarithmically) as a semitone. The smallest interval on the piano is a half-tone, with 12 half-tones within the octave. In order to get 24 quarter-tones Couper used two pianos and had the tuner raise the second piano by a quarter-tone, so that a chromatic scale played alternately, note by note, from one piano to the other produced the ultra-chromatic scale. Her musical composition *Xanadu* for "Marco Millions" was well received in 1930. This encouraged her to write more music in this medium. The *Dirge* for two pianos, tuned a quarter-tone apart, was published by Henry Cowell in the *New Music Magazine* in 1937, and has been performed throughout the U.S. Prominent microtonal composers or researchers of the period included Adriaan Daniel Fokker (31 equal tones per octave), Harry Partch (with his handcrafted orchestra of microtonal instruments), and Eivind Groven.

Couper had three pianos in her music studio. The third piano was a small upright which was placed at right angles to a Steinway Grand and tuned a quarter-tone higher, so that she was able to experiment in this medium with a hand on each keyboard. She wrote many other works in the usual system, children's pieces, songs, chamber music, and symphonic works; and a piano suite in nine movements, one for each of the "Nine Muses" that was recorded by Peter Yazbeck. The "Irish Washerwoman Variations" has been played in its three versions: The original version, for piano solo, played by Shura Cherkassky; the second version, for two pianos, played by Marjorie and Wendell Nelson; and the final version, for orchestra, performed under the direction of Werner Janssen in Los Angeles. It was originally conceived in atonal variations for a dance recital for Isabel Keith Morrison (Linderman, "The Little Russian Pianist"). A fascinating aural phenomenon occurs in passages which feature rapid quarter-tones; a gliding or smearing effect is created (owing perhaps to the vibration of the close intervals). This impression has been realized in the quarter-tones of Couper's *Dirge*, for example (Thomas). Miller and Williams also noted the sound of these "sliding tones" in atonal music.

While teaching at the Music Academy in 1953 Couper spoke at a Composers Symposium on the topic of "Micro-tones in Music," which also included Schoenberg's 12-tone tempered system, and Darius Milhaud discussing contemporary music ("Symposium Topics," "American Art Quartet"). She stated that quarter-tones are only a primary step in freeing music from the chromatic scale, citing Harry Partch who divided the octave into 43 microtones and invented many instruments to play these intervals. Carrillo of Mexico also used quarter-tones, eighth-tones, and sixteenth-tones. Other quarter-tone composers included Aloys Hába, who wrote for strings, harmonium and piano, and a full opera; R.H. Stein of Germany, for piano and clarinet; Grecchi of Italy, an opera; Ivan Vischnegradsky of Paris who invented a quarter-tone piano; and Ernest Block and Bartok who have occasionally used quarter-tones in their music. Couper thought that the piano was the best instrument to showcase quarter-tone music without sounding out-of-tune. She felt this genre held great possibilities for enriching musical experiences (Scofield, "American Art Quartet").

In April 1940 music critic Couper wrote an article for the local newspaper after a visit to New York, comparing music to architecture: “A similar application of new materials to the art of ‘fluid architecture’ or music, is still in a much earlier phase of development. The newer musical instruments which have electrical generators and amplifiers have not yet been freed from imitation of the tonal color or timbre of the older instruments. . . Among the pioneers in the science of new musical color is Tom Adrian Cracraft, a forward looking musicologist (Couper, “Interest Growing”). Regarding American experimental music Saunders stated that we still need more detailed studies of significant figures including Mildred Couper, Zeena Parkins, Susie Ibarra, Anne LeBaron, and Cathy Berberian, among others. Women composers faced the challenge of finding patronage that supported experimental music in the 20th century.

Mildred Couper’s music was often performed along with the compositions of John Cage, Henry Cowell, Amadeo Roldan, and William Russell. The works of these composers were selected for a concert on December 9, 1939, at the Cornish School in Seattle; and again at Mills College, California, in 1941. Cowell commented with a note in the program “I honestly believe and formally predict that the immediate future of music lies in the bringing of percussion on one hand, and sliding tones on the other, to as great a state of perfection in construction of composition and flexibility of handling on instruments as older elements are now” (Williams 14). Thomas stated “since the music discussed here represents the early years of microtonal piano music, it is natural that it would concern itself with exploring the novelty of the new sounds available from the chosen tuning system. This may easily be observed in the works of Ives, Wyschnegradsky, and Couper. In other respects this early music seems conspicuously unusual. Its syntax and aesthetic are very much that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (80).

Performance Reviews

In 1928 Couper performed a concert of her music in the School of the Arts, in Santa Barbara (“Noted Pianist...”). She discussed how technique involves the clearing away of obstructions to permit the flow of force, use of rhythmical arm movements which correspond to the rhythmical phrase, dynamic intensity, and judicious arrangement of stress. Her performance of selected microtonal music in Eugene O’Neill’s *Marco Millions* at the Lobero Theatre in 1930, with stage settings by artist Malcolm Thurnburn, won rave reviews (Martin). This was followed by a large Christmas production of *And On Earth Peace* in December, 1930; another collaboration of Couper and Thurnburn, in which Mildred’s daughter Rosalind had a dance role (“Distinguished Musical Score”; “Yule Dance-Drama”). This was the fourth Lobero program for which Couper wrote music, the other three being “Marco Millions”, “The Bluebird”, and “Sancho Panza”. Thurnburn stated “Above a well-recognizable diatonic texture, [the music] makes excursions into the most novel harmonic regions, which never distress but are always delightful and surprising. . . The score is punctuated at intervals by children’s choruses, during which the action on the stage ‘freezes’, and a rosy light warms up the atmosphere. The score has parts for two pianos, a celesta, woodwinds, [and] many voices.” The music for *And on Earth Peace* was performed for The Music Lovers Society in San Francisco the following year.

The New Music Society presented a concert of quarter-tone music on two pianos and a demonstration of the new musical instrument Rhythmicon at the Y.W.C.A. in San Francisco, Sunday evening, May 15, 1932. The program included *Xanadu* by Mildred Couper (written as incidental music for Eugene O’Neill’s *Marco Millions*, for two pianos tuned a quarter tone apart.) performed by the composer and Malcolm Thurnburn. There was then a demonstration by Henry Cowell of his new instrument the Rhythmicon. “This was a new musical instrument for the production of rhythms of all types by the holding of keys on the keyboard. As long as the key was held, the corresponding rhythm will be sustained. Rhythmic harmonies produced by sounding several rhythms together are made easy and practical to perform. The rhythm is related to sound scientifically, so that a sonal harmony corresponding to the rhythm in vibration ratio is always heard. The sound and rhythm are both produced by a new principle of television, and are caused by the influence of light on a photo-electric cell” (Mead, “Revision”).

In 1932 Couper and Thurburn gave a concert at the home of Thomas Ripley in Mission Canyon, which included two pianos playing a quarter-tone music selection of *Xanadu* and other pieces, and a brief description of microtonal music (Linderman "Ovation Given"). The artists stated that quarter-tones are a stepping stone to a greater freedom from restrictions using the diatonic scale. They also mentioned that in 1863 the first instrument for quarter-tones was constructed in Moscow, tuned to a system of overtones. *Xanadu* was repeated that year in Carmel and San Francisco, with a special introduction by Henry Cowell ("Local Woman's Music"). Mildred Couper traveled to New York in 1933 to give several recitals of her quarter-tone music at her former employer the David Mannes School of Music. While there she was hosted at the studios of composer Aaron Copland, violinist Wolf Wolfensohn, and composer Aurelio Giorni; and visited with Juilliard teacher Frederick Jacobi who took great interest in her "sensitive and well-constructed compositions" (Linderman, "Notes").

In 1934 the Ripleys hosted another concert to support the purchase of a Thurburn painting, "The Poet in the Modern Age" to be placed permanently in the Santa Barbara Public Library. Mildred Couper played a number of pieces, including her *Gitanesca* and *Waltz* (Ellison). She was joined by violinist Roderick White, who played works by Bach and Falla, and pianist Grace Kaplun ("Prominent Musicians", "Thomas E. Ripley Home"). In the summer of 1934 Mildred taught music analysis at the Eidolon School of Fine Arts and Crafts in Santa Fe, New Mexico (Newhall). She presented a series of six lectures on "Listening to Music" which were illustrated at the piano and with recordings. The titles included Tone, Melody and Harmony, Tonality and Form, Pre-Symphony Forms, Development and Sonata Form, and The Symphony. Couper discussed the origin and construction of scales, Greek modes, overtones, instruments of the orchestra, the relationship of rhythm to poetry and movement, phrasing, and cross-rhythms. Radiana Pazmor assisted with a presentation interpreting French song literature ("Music Listeners to Hear").

Continuing the combination of recitals and lectures on quarter-tone music, Mildred Couper gave a special performance in Montclair, New Jersey, in 1939, at the home of Willard Church ("Quarter Tone Piano Recital..."). She was accompanied on the second piano by Dr. S. M. Holland, of New York. During the presentation she described the music as: "practically an infinite number of interrelated tones, limited chiefly by musical taste and occasional tonal conglomerations which descended into the realm of utter cacophony" (p. 11). She emphasized her preference for glissando effects and felt that the *Dirge* was her most important example of quarter-tone music. Couper stated that using two pianos to play quarter-tone music was preferable to using another instrument such as a violin, because the latter has a vibrato that gives each note a slightly variable tone, too broad to be used for quarter-tone music. She followed this concert with another at the David Mannes Music School in New York. Pieces performed were the *Rumba*, *Dirge*, *Xanadu*, and *Anacapa*; the last named for an Indian word meaning *mirage*, and given to an island off the coast of Santa Barbara.

In 1940 five Santa Barbara composers performed in a concert in Mission Canyon at the Rockwood Women's Club. The group included Mildred Couper, Dr. Neil M. Daniels, Hubert Klyne Headley, Antoni Van Der Voort, and Donald Pond. Couper presented a "Quintet" for oboe, violin, viola, cello and piano; and a piano composition called "Autumn Dialogue" The quintet was later performed in Hollywood at Homer Simmon's series "Music of America Today" in 1941, in the Frank Carroll Giffen Studio, that also included the Irish Washerwoman ("Simmons Group", "Works by Santa Barbara Composers"). The "Quintet for Piano and Winds" also drew acclaim at a concert in the Santa Barbara Art Museum that same year, as reviewed by the *Santa Barbara News Press*: "It was music to make an audience sit up and take notice for there was no opportunity here to float away on a melody. There were unusual rhythmic patterns. From the stirring dissonances of the first movement, labeled 'Andante-Allegro Agitato', the Quintet moved into an 'Allegretto' in which a playful themes on the woodwinds is answered in plaintive mood by the piano, this procedure later to be reversed by the instruments in an arresting development. The final 'Andante-Chorale' includes some glorious chords on the piano, which Mrs. Couper handled with her usual authority and beauty of tone" ("Woodwind Quartet"). Couper presented her quintet "And on Earth Peace" at the Santa Barbara School commencement in Carpinteria in 1950. In attendance were hosts Dr. and Mrs. Stanley Mulholland and Mr. and Mrs. H. Clyde

Headley; and musicians pianist Homer Simmons, violinists John Chicanzeff, Francis Forster, and Andrew Illiniki; and cellist Dorothea Matson. She hosted the musicians and hosts to dinner at her Mission Canyon home the night before, and gave them lunch at her Carpinteria beach house the next day as they headed south to Los Angeles (“Homer Simmons Group”).

In 1949 Couper composed a trio for her students called “Gitanesca,” arranged from her original piano score, to include violin and two pianos. This was performed to support the San Buenaventura Juniors (“Ventura Juniors Entertain”). The “Evenings on the Roof” concerts were a popular Los Angeles venue series performed atop the West Hollywood Auditorium on Monday evenings. In 1951 Mildred was asked to play quarter-tone music in one of the “Evenings on the Roof” concerts in Los Angeles, devoted to music by California composers (“Music by California Composers”) She and Ingolf Dahl played the Dirge and a new work, Rumba, using two pianos in the quarter-tone genre, received with mixed reviews as this genre had not fully been accepted. Later that year the Evening programs were repeated in Santa Barbara, three times at the Lobero Theatre and three times at Mildred Couper’s estate Monteverde (“Roof Artists”). Couper performed the Cesar Franck Quartet in 1950 with the Stradivarius Quartet. The reviewer stated: “The Franck begins on a questioning note, stated by the strings and taken up by the piano. By the end of the first movement the questioning gives place to tranquility and one seems lifted to another sphere.” (Linderman, “Mildred Couper, Stradivarius Quartet”). The *Santa Barbara News-Press* added “However, it was the Cesar Franck Quintet, with Mildred Couper at the piano, that really made the evening so eventful -- the vast third movement brings the satisfying conclusion, and last night found the audience stirred to the very depths. What a delightful surprise, when the season appears to be over, to hear a concert such as this.”

In 1953 Mildred Couper wrote a “Fantasy for Cello and Piano” for Adolphe Frezin, first cellist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which premiered at the Music Society that year, but Frezin was in New York and not able to perform it. Then, in 1956, he joined Couper in performing the Fantasy at the Lobero Theatre on Oct. 12, 1956 (“Couper Frezin Duet”). The local paper reported: “Mrs. Couper’s Fantasy is an engaging work which gives the soloist the chance to exploit his instrument with several large-scale bravura passages” (Ames). Couper often gave talks about music at the Red Room of El Paseo for the Players Club (“Players Club Member”).

In 1954 Couper debuted her new composition “Monteverde Suite” for piano and harpsichord at her home. This program included the harpsichordist Dr. John Gillespie, and was socially hosted by Mmes. Norman Wright, Henry Profant, and Robert Gale (“Mrs. Couper’s New Suite”). In 1955 Couper wrote a new Trio for piano, oboe, and violin, that premiered at The Afternoon Club (“New Works”). She also presented the Budapest String Quartet, and in 1956 she held a special reception at Monteverde for noted pianist John Browning (Curlletti 1955, 1956). The Santa Barbara Council of Arts produced an annual local composers concert. In 1957 Couper composed new pieces for this event, which included “Songs from Scrambled Fables” of Reynard, The Fox and the Crane, and The Grapes Were Sour. She also presented “The Nightingale” a piece for piano, flute, and narrator (“Composers Shirley Munger and Mildred Couper”). In 1960 this concert included works by Couper, Richard Ames, and Countess Madeleine de Bryas, held at Monteverde, and organized by president Harry McGuire (“Concert Set”). In 1961 this concert featured works by Mildred Couper, Lura Dolas, and Martha Woodhead, held at the Van Rensselaer Wilbur home in Montecito (“Concert Slated”).

An all Mozart concert in 1956, celebrating his 200th anniversary, highlighted pianists Mildred Couper and Shirley Munger, and was held at Montverde for members of the Music Society. In 1958 Couper premiered her First String Quartet in four movements, which reflected the four “ages” of childhood, youth, maturity, and serene old age. The melodic line was evocative of Brahms but with a modern feeling. The review stated “There was a feeling of tranquility in this quiet work. . . The first movement, Moderato, opened with a grave and sonorous statement by the viola and cello; the allegretto of the second movement was light and dancing with slight dissonance, enough to be suggestive of youth. The third movement, Allegro, brought forth a sustained melody with the cello and viola prominent. The final movement, Andante, was soaring and singing, with the

first violin taking the lead” (Willard). In 1959 the Music Society put on a concert at the Lobero Theatre highlighting the works of Couper, Gwendolyn Smith, Roger Chapman, William Beasley, John Hubbard, P. Sigurd Odegard, and Richard West (“Santa Barbara Music”).

Mildred was elected president of the Santa Barbara Music Society in 1960, and served with Countess de Bryas, Roger Clarke, and William R. Dorr (“Music Society Elects”). In 1962 at a Santa Barbara Music Society concert at her home, Mildred joined composers Madeleine de Bryas, Erick Ktz, Dorothy Westra, and Otto Bostelman (“Channel City Unit”). On May 8, 1962, Couper’s “Introduction and Scherzo for String Quartet” was performed at the University of California, Santa Barbara, by the Paganini Quartet, along with works by Mozart and Roy Harris. In 1964 Couper performed on the piano with Martha Woodhead Sperry (violin), in a duet concert of sonatas for the Santa Barbara Council of Arts (“Violin and Piano Sonatas”). Pianist Peter Yazbeck performed at a concert and recorded her “Nine Muses” on the piano in 1966.

Summary

Mildred Couper was a notable, creative, and energetic figure in the early experimental works of quarter-tone composers during the era 1920 to 1960, one of the few women who was accepted as part of this avant-garde group. Born in Argentina, schooled in Europe, working in New York, and eventually settling in Santa Barbara, California, she had musical contacts all over the world. But, facing the gender challenge of recognition, her works were often performed in venues that were dedicated to her male colleagues John Cage, Henry Cowell, Arnold Schoenberg, Harry Eichheim, and Harry Partch. To her credit, she helped put the Santa Barbara music colony on the map, establishing the Music Academy of the West, working with Henry Cowell and his “New Music Society”, and often performed in Los Angeles at the “Evenings on the Roof” Series. She had many community concerts and fundraisers at her Mission Canyon estate “Monteverde,” hosted other community cultural groups, gave music appreciation lectures at the nearby Rockwood Women’s Club, and continued to teach piano and composition both privately and at formal colleges throughout the United States during her life. She composed the music for many plays at the Lobero Theatre under Irving Pichel.

In more recent times, a long-overdue commercial recording of Couper's music has been completed by Innova Records, funded in part by the Copland Fund, and released in 2003. On March 9, 2004, the composition *Xanadu* was performed by the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), at the Music Academy of the West, featuring the music of Couper, Daniel Asa, and Grant Hungerford (“Last Minute Ideas”). The UCSB library archives contain musical scores, old disc records, and digital audio recordings of Couper’s works. Mildred Couper was one of the key pioneers in the field of new, experimental music, and her contributions to West coast music education, research, and performance were significant. Other recordings of her works can be found on YouTube. Her *Dirge* is often played at new music concerts. Couper’s works continue to gain in popularity as electronic instruments are able to duplicate earlier ethnic instruments, alternative microtones, and re-tuned classical instruments. Hopefully her forward thinking ideas of composition and alternate harmony will influence modern composers, and even inspire some to build their own new instruments for musical experimentation.

APPENDIX:

Links to Further Research

- Guide to the Mildred Couper Papers at the Online Archive of California (OAC):
<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt8489p1gp/>
- Innova Recordings “If Tigers were Clouds”:
<http://www.innova.mu/albums/zeitgeist/if-tigers-were-clouds>
- Photos and biography: <http://wingedsun.com/couper-m/>
- Mildred Couper mentioned with Henry Cowell and the Rhythmicon.
http://www.o-art.org/history/early/_CowellN.Mus./NewMusic/NMIXrhythmic.html
- University of California Santa Barbara Archives
<http://www.library.ucsb.edu/special-collections/performing-arts/pamss45>
- Newspaper Clippings may be found at the [Santa Barbara Historical Museum](#)

Partial List of Works by Mildred Couper

1927, *This is the Way the Farmers Ride*, piano solo for children
1928, *Tambourina*, piano solo for children
1928, *The Fawn in the Snow*, piano solo for children
1928, *Python*, piano solo for children
1930, *Xanadu*, for orchestra in “Marco Millions”, quarter-tone
1930, *And on Earth Peace*, dance-opera with two pianos, a celesta, woodwinds, voices, quarter-tone
1930, *The Bluebird*, music for a play
1930, *Sancho Panza*, music for a play
1932, *Rumba*, for two pianos, quarter-tone
1934, *Gitanesca*, for piano; in 1949 arranged for violin and two pianos
1934, *Waltz*
1937, *Dirge*, for two pianos, quarter-tone
1937, *Anacapa*, for two pianos, quarter-tone
1939, *Nine Muses*, for piano
1940, *Quintet* for oboe, violin, viola, cello and piano
1940, *Autumn Dialogue*, piano composition
1942, *The Irish Washerwoman Variations*. Three versions: For piano solo, for two pianos, and for orchestra
1950, *The Nightingale*, for piano, flute, oboe, two violins, viola, cello and narrator
1953, *Fantasy for Cello and Piano*
1954 *Monteverde Suite*, for piano and harpsichord
1957, *Songs from Scrambled Fables*: Reynard, The Fox and the Crane, and The Grapes Were Sour
1958, *Introduction and Scherzo for String Quartet*

Music Scores and some recordings are at the University of California, Santa Barbara, archives.

PIANO MUSIC

Anacapa & Prelude - 2 pianos, 5 pages
Anacapa transcribed - 9 pages
Childhood - piano, 3 pages
Consolation - piano, 2 pages
Dirge - 2 pianos, 1/4 tone, 12 pages, published

Dirge - violin and piano, 6 pages
Elegy - 2 scores, string quartet, 8 pages
Epithalaneum - 2 pianos, 1 page
Fantasy - cello and piano, 8 pages
Gitanesca - 2 pianos, 9 pages
Irish Washerwoman variations - piano, 7 pages
Irish Washerwoman variations - 2 pianos, 10 pages
Mirage - 2 pianos, 2 pages
The Nine Muses - 1 piano, recording only, no sheet music
Pan Pipes - 2 pianos, 4 pages
Prelude - piano, 1 page
Rumba, 2 pianos, 1/4 tone, 8 pages
Sherzo - 2 pianos, 5 pages
Suite for Piano and Harpsichord - 22 pages
Wedding Music - Piano and violin, 2 pages
Xanadu (for Marco Millions) - 2 pianos, 1/4 tone, 14 pages

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

The Days of Our Years - violin, oboe, piano - 30 pages, bound
(Psalm 90, Verse 10: Genesis, A Child in their Midst, Song of Songs, Proverbs, Revelation)
The Nightingale - flute, oboe, 4 strings, 23 pages
Passacaglia - 17 pages, bound; (piano only, 5 pages; piano, clarinet, strings, 17 pages; full orchestra, 18 pages)
Pippa Passes (ala R. Browning) - flute and strings, 33 pages, bound
Quintet - And on Earth peace - (piano and strings, 39 pages; voice, 24 pages)
Song of Hymen, 8 pages

CHILDRENS MUSIC

Barnyard Cogitations (ala Ogden Nash) - piano, 6 pages
B.G. (for Marion Baring-Gould) - piano, 2 pages
Fur and Feathers (ala Ogden Nash) - piano, 11 pages
Musical Puzzle - Morse Code (for Marion Sachs) - piano, 2 pages
The Ugly Duckling - piano, 12 pages
Arullo del Burrito - piano, 1 page
The Dancing Bears - piano, 1 page
The Vulture - piano, 1 page
Pee Wee - piano, 1 page
The Skating Lesson - piano, 1 page
The Tambourine - piano, 1 page
Waltzing Mice - piano, 1 page
We are Seven Little Pieces - piano, published

VOICE

The New Colossus - Statue of Liberty Inscription - 4 pages
Psalm - 1 page
Scrambled Fables (three versions)
Sea-Drift Cycle (ala Walt Whitman)
Seven Old French Carols

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