

Six questions with Larry Polansky, editor of *The Music of American Folk Song and Selected Other Writings on American Folk Music*
American Music Center

Molly Sheridan: I'm first interested in talking a little bit about what first brought you to this project and how you ended up editing this monograph...

Larry Polansky: Well, I have been an advocate and scholar of Ruth Crawford Seeger's work for quite a long time, in fact for a good 20 years or so. In the '80s I did a major concert of her work at Mills College when I was teaching there, and I think it was one of the first such concerts of all of her work. So I've been involved with the estate and with her work in a number of ways for a long time, as an admirer of her music. There were a couple of things that I guess got me involved in this current project. One such was a project I did about 10 years ago to help revive the work of Johanna Beyer, another 1930s modernist American woman composer whose work was completely unknown, and who was actually a colleague of R.C.S.'s. John Kennedy of Essential Music and I dug the work up, made a catalog, started publishing it, performing it, things like that. This drew me to the attention of Judith Tick, who had known me through the previous R.C.S. work. Judith was the editor of the *Musical Quarterly* and that's where we published our large article on Beyer.

I'm a composer who does this kind of occasional musicology only when it helps other composers. I'm not a musicologist, but I think that composers do a certain form of musicology which is very important and related to what they do normally, which is to compose and to advocate other composer's work. Composers can be very good editors. I edit my own work so it's natural that I am able to edit other people's as well. It's something that composers have always done (think about Mendelssohn working on Bach, for example).

All my life I've been very actively involved in American folk music and traditional musics of all sorts, as a player. I have a deep and abiding passion for it, and informally, I know a lot about these musics. So Judith Tick, knowing this combination of interests of mine, recommended me to the estate (Mike and Peggy and Pete) as someone who would be a likely victim to take on this project. They had been thinking about it for a long time, and they were aware and concerned that this book was one of the great disappointments of R.C.S.'s life — to not have it published. She considered it to be her *magnum opus* in the field of folk music. I like to compare it to her string quartet. Imagine the tragedy of the string quartet never having been published and sitting, incomplete, unedited, in manuscript for 50 years. This was the equivalent in her scholarly guise, and the estate felt bad that this important work was lying in a drawer for so long. It wasn't at all clear, from their perspective, how to go about bringing it out. It was a formidable project and it needed somebody who could devote the time to it and could handle the huge complexity of the project. In that sense, I guess I kind of

fortuitously popped up as a likely candidate. I'm an academic, I'm a composer, I'm a folksong person, and I have a lot of editing and publishing experience. Another thing is that I think it was kind of a "first thing's first" situation—the biography really needed to come out first, and all of their energy was focused on helping Judith with that. Once that appeared (and it's a masterpiece of scholarship), *The Music of American Folk Song* was a logical next step. It was really the missing piece in the whole R.C.S. puzzle. I don't think I would have done it for any other composer, because I've got plenty of my own music and theory to write, but here was a kind of a unique chance to do a very unusual, and very nice thing. And I had no idea how huge a task it was, or how long it would take me.

Molly Sheridan: How long did it take you?

Larry Polansky: Four years. I'm slow, and can be extremely methodical, and I was constantly apologizing to Mike, Peggy and Judith about how long it took me. But they were all terrific, and it was such a great pleasure to work with Judith, Mike, Peggy, Pete, and the folks at the Library of Congress and the people at U. of Rochester Press. And of course it was an incredible pleasure and honor to be able to "collaborate" with one of my favorite composers, and get into her mind and see her working processes. It was a beautiful opportunity and I don't regret a minute of it.

Molly Sheridan: Well, I'm curious then because you did know so much about her before you walked into this particular project, what were some of the new things that you learned while you were working?

Larry Polansky: I didn't have any sense of just how brilliant a scholar she was. I knew her eloquence from reading the introductions to the children's books on music, and I knew a lot about the later period of her folk music scholarship, that is, from the mid-forties on. And I actually knew a great deal about the early work, because in the Mills concert we had drawn heavily from *American Folk Songs for Children* and *The American Songbag* and I've always been devoted to those arrangements. But I didn't know much about this period with the Lomaxes when she really dug into hardcore folksong scholarship. Judith's book has a beautiful couple of chapters about this work, so anyone can read that and gain a sense of what was going on, and what were the sociological and intellectual processes that influenced her to think in these ways. But I had never dealt directly with this material, because most of it had never been available. Some of it was in the Library of Congress, where I'd done some considerable amount of poking around, but the main body of the work was in the possession of the estate. Even when I'd seen the notes for this book in the L.O.C, I'd not really paid much attention — I didn't quite know what it was.

The depth of her understanding of folk and the prodigious vision and deep insight about what was needed to bring the discourse about American folk music

into a new age was very exciting to me. The natural comparison is to Bartók, who saw, some twenty years earlier, that Eastern European folk music was not being treated with the kind of respect and intellectual attention that he deeply felt it merited. He campaigned his whole life to try and bring music of different genres onto equal footing.

Molly Sheridan: You point out that R.C.S. was an avant-garde composer but she devoted so much of herself to these transcriptions. You write that it sometimes took hundreds of listens to her field recordings before she was satisfied with a particular transcription. What do you think fascinated her personally about this music? Did you get any sense of that?

Larry Polansky: I think that is related to what I was just saying in that she saw them as a “piece”. She didn't make a hard distinction between the music of Webern (or for her it might have been the music of Ruggles) and the music of a singer like Iron Head, one of the prisoners she'd been transcribing. That is, she felt music itself, any interesting music, would be as intrinsically interesting rich as any other. For her I don't think it was a difficult leap to make — I think it was obvious. I don't think it was obvious to many others at that time. But I think it was clear to her that there was just as much to think about, to talk about, to consider in one of these prison songs as there was in the music of Henry Cowell or any of the other composers that she would have been interested in.

She didn't see unnecessary distinctions, and by making that kind of intellectual leap she changed everyone's notion of how this music should be treated. Now, it's commonplace to grant this kind of intellectual integrity to music of other cultures, to what is mistakenly called “primitive musics” and things like that. But in 1940, I don't think this was the case. I think it was a giant paradigm shift on her part to see this in much the same way that Bartók did European music. In fact Bartók was a huge influence on her, and had similar problems getting his book published.

That was such a huge leap that it in a way it makes the details of what she actually says in *The Music of American Folk Song* slightly less important. In fact, because these ideas are 60 years old now, many other have come to similar conclusions in the intervening years. I think the book's main impact is to put R.C.S in her proper historical place as someone who completely redefined our notion of our own folk music.

Molly Sheridan: Well, that sort of answers my next question of why you thought this book was important for us today. Is it more for historical purposes or is it a skill that we still need to study? R.C.S. took such care and she put a lot of philosophical thought into how she transcribed things. Do you think that that very basic teaching element of this book is still important too?

Larry Polansky: I'm going to say something that may be a bit surprising. 60 years have passed, and so much work has been done in this field, and a lot of the things that she pioneered have been rediscovered more recently by others. Usually, these subsequent discoveries have been without attribution to her and not made thoughtfully, but still, similar. In this edition of *The Music of American Folk Song* I talk a lot about how other people have come to this notion of ideas like *song norm* — you have five versions of a song and they all have different melodies, which one is the melody of the song? She thought long and hard about that, and later folk music scholars of the 50s and 60s and 70s have considered it. It's crucially important for all of us that this manuscript existed and solved a lot of these problems first, and that her work is perhaps the real genesis of these (and many other) ideas. But I'm not sure, that purely in the realm of folk song scholarship, we desperately need refocusing on the origins of concepts. Maybe we do — I'm not a scholar in this field, and there's certainly a tremendous number of important insights in her book which will be fresh and innovative today.

But from my point of view, it's essential to have her work finally in its proper place. For example, I think it's amazing to see the kind of care she put into notation and the depth of thought she put into the process and what it really means. But over the last 60 years ethnomusicology and folksong scholarship has developed a lot of ideas about notation, many of which have come to similar conclusions.

I want to say something else about her notation. In 1941 there were no commercially available recordings of these songs, so publishing a book of folksongs had a very different societal impact then it does today. A few minutes ago I was listening to some of these recordings. They're out on Rounder CDs. I don't need her notation to teach me the song I was listening to, but in 1941 people did. That *was* the representation, there were no commercial recordings. So she was really responsible, not through this book so much, but rather through its companion, *Our Singing Country*, for exposing an entire country to its own heritage for the first time.

Molly Sheridan: You mention the Rounder discs. I've heard them as well. A lot of that coincides with her work?

Larry Polansky: A lot of it does. In my edition of her book, I point out each song that you could simply go to cdnow.com and buy, and they're still coming out pretty quickly, because they're all in the Lomax collection or the Library of Congress collection. And if one wants to one can listen to everything, even the songs that are not released commercially, by going to the L.O.C. and listening to a tape of any particular song in the archives. But in 1941, notation had a more popular function. There's the example of Mark Blitzstein looking *Our Singing Country* and learning the music directly from the notation. He couldn't have learned it from the recordings because they weren't available.

In a way, I'm not qualified to answer some of these questions about folk song scholarship, because as I said, it's not really my field. I don't teach folksong scholarship, and my primary motivation was R.C.S. and not the field of folksong scholarship itself. In a sense I was trying to simply *make The Music of American Folk Song* exist, not comment on it. I don't know how folklorists are going to consider it, or where it will go, or how it will be used, and happily, that's not my job. My job was to bring it into existence in order for these consideration to be made. I'm just a composer after all.