

# A Review of *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Memoirs, Memories, Music* by Matilda Guame

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*We didn't realize until years afterward that those days when we just seemed to be wasting time we were really getting started on our second lives [1].*

*I don't think you have so many problems unless you have an overbearing husband who won't let you go out or do anything for yourself, but my father was never like that. He absolutely gloried in my mother's independence, and it was such a good relationship that you had the feeling that anything she wanted to do would meet with his approval. But the problems of a woman composer—I can really understand now what her problems were, because I've got three children. Time just doesn't exist for doing things on your own [2].*

Ruth Crawford Seeger died in 1953, and, shamefully, until now no biography or even extended study of her work has appeared. I say shamefully because Ruth Crawford Seeger is one of the most important American woman composers. Her music and ideas were far ahead of their time, but they have not been given the credit they deserve. Her work is not performed often enough, and very little has been written about her music.

Her life as a composer, folk song collector and transcriber, writer, teacher and mother of five children (some of them extraordinary musicians themselves) points out many of the most interesting problems (and glories) of American women composers. Her marriage to Charles Seeger was one of the most musically fertile relationships in history, and the way that she balanced her many talents, interests, activities and creative instincts holds important lessons for musicians everywhere.

Matilda Guame's book is the first comprehensive look at Ruth Crawford Seeger's life and work, and it is very welcome. Guame's historical scholarship is meticulous and exhaustive, and she provides excellent references, including a bibliography, discography and catalog of works. Guame makes good use of primary sources: letters, oral reminiscences and Crawford Seeger's own diaries. These are always interesting, often surprising, and Guame is a careful, judicious and creative editor of the many citations and quotations used in the book.

Although the book has obvious weaknesses, alongside its many strengths, scholarship on Ruth Crawford Seeger's work is so rare that this book's weaknesses do not significantly detract from its worth. The forgiving reader will not be impeded by the book's stylistic peculiarities. The writing is consistently muddy and confused, and the musical analyses lack insight. Guame often seems to have a naive,

wide-eyed, 'outsiders' view of what being a composer and artist is all about.

Guame's historical and biographical information is more important, however, than her musical analyses, and it is to her credit that she attempts the latter endeavor at all. She is not a composer or a theorist, but a very good biographer who saw the need to include a comprehensive discussion of the music. This biography provides a good foundation for other scholars, composers and theorists who wish to understand the extraordinary music of Ruth Crawford Seeger.

Ruth Crawford Seeger has achieved of late a kind of legendary status, for two reasons. First, her music is striking and original. Her work is considered important by many composers of later generations, particularly for the beautiful and challenging ways that nonpitch parameters, such as accent, timbre and dynamics, are used to structure large-scale forms. The most famous example of this structure is the third movement of her *String Quartet* (1931), in which dynamic and timbral gestures are used in place of harmonic or melodic ideas. The equally interesting *Piano Study In Mixed Accents* (1930) uses shifting rhythmic accents superimposed over a rapid atonal melody (played in octaves), in what might be called the first piece of American pattern music.

Second, very little has been known about Ruth Crawford Seeger's life until recently. After the early 1930s, she more or less gave up composition to actively collect and transcribe American folk music. Her many books, transcriptions and other writings in this area are important foundations for our knowledge of our own traditional music. With her husband, Charles Seeger, she investigated the role of folk music in the political life of the people and questioned the social relevance of so-called art music. Many of the fundamental problems of music's relationship to society that the Seegers

## ABSTRACT

Matilda Guame's biography of Ruth Crawford Seeger makes an important contribution to our understanding of the work of one of the most influential American composers of the twentieth century. The book's strengths are its historical accuracy and meticulous detail. Its weaknesses are the writing style and the discussion of Crawford Seeger's music.

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Received 7 November 1988.

(along with composers such as Hans Eisler and Henry Cowell) pointed out in the 1930s are still important concerns for artists today. When one listens to, for example, the recent work of Frederic Rzewski, Cornelius Cardew or Christian Wolff, Crawford Seeger's two songs *Sacco*, *Vanzetti* and *Chinaman*, *Laundryman* emerge as crucial early examples of what is now called political music.

As the unfortunately rather clichéd title of Guame's book states, the author attempts to combine discussions of music, biographical details and personal 'memoirs' into a complete picture of Ruth Crawford Seeger. The biographical details are accurate and enlightening, and the memoirs are fascinating, but the musical discussions are much less interesting and do not really get to the heart of what makes this music so important. To Guame's credit, she presents a perceptive picture of Ruth Crawford Seeger as a highly focused and determined young composer (because she really stopped composing in her early thirties, she was never anything but a young composer).

Crawford Seeger had a kind of intuitive sense of what needed to be done in music, and how to do it in a way consistent with her own emotional, musical and artistic predilections. The clarity and strength of her musical vision remind me of her contemporary friend Carl Ruggles. For example, when asked—"Do you really believe that your music is the future music of America? If so, then I pray for its deliverance"—her response was a succinct statement of the fundamental credo of American experimental music:

No, I do not. I believe, for one thing that the music of the future will have more content than this music has. But I do believe that this sort of work has very great value. New techniques must be worked out, experimented with, for a long time before the balance can be reached out of which what can be called a true American music can arise [3].

In addition to awkward writing, Guame's book is marred by minor convolutions of reason throughout. For example, Guame writes, "She had knowledge of and personal contact with several important American composers and most of the organizations involved in the performance of new and experimental music which gained some prominence after World War I. That she knew of the activities of such groups as the League of Composers and

the International Society for Contemporary Music is evident from the fact that these groups performed her violin and piano sonata" [4]. Yet just a few sentences later, Guame cites Crawford Seeger's Guggenheim application to state that she was actually a member of the International Society for Contemporary Music!

Guame often seems surprised at how easily Ruth Crawford Seeger was able to participate in the musical activities of Chicago and New York. This seems insensitive to the way that Ruth Crawford Seeger dealt with the omnipresent sexism of the time and her unusual role as a woman composer. She simply did her work, participated and did not usually question whether or not composition was a gender-specific act. Guame's occasional 'oh golly' tone is counterproductive to an understanding of the true impact of Ruth Crawford Seeger's life on the history of composition, by men and women, in America. Ruth Crawford Seeger was not in any way a helpless, naive composer from a musical backwater. Rather, she was a savvy, experimental, hardworking, energetic and focused artist—very much at the forefront of what was happening. Her publication and performance records, even before the age of 35, are astonishing. She was clearly capable of perceiving the musical and political dynamics of her environments and was able to achieve musical successes that many other composers (male or female) could not. Guame's perspective lacks empathy, perhaps because she herself is not a composer. She does not seem to have a real understanding of the evolution of the creative process (work very hard and have good ideas!). This is disappointing because this book could have illuminated the more subtle aspects of Crawford Seeger's life as a woman composer in America, a role in which she is often cast as archetype (mother, teacher, spouse, etc.). Clearly, this was not Crawford Seeger's own vision of herself, and it would be interesting to have a deeper understanding of the discrepancies.

A thorough editing job would have shortened this book for the better, by eliminating many of the more gratuitous statements, explanations and conclusions, as well as the often-inappropriate characterizations of the composer. For example, in the following description of one of Crawford Seeger's trips to Europe, the writing seems to be more appropriate to *Seventeen* magazine than of a book of this

importance, depicting the composer as a kind of artistic Nancy Drew: "No teacher went with her, no close friend, no family. She had to rely completely on her own ingenuity and personal resources to make the contacts and enjoy the experiences awaiting her. Ruth Crawford Seeger genuinely enjoyed meeting people who interested her" [5].

And after carefully documenting Crawford Seeger's landmark Guggenheim Fellowship, Guame's emphasis at the end of chapter 5 seems almost condescending to woman composers: "In retrospect, it becomes evident that she was a wise choice as recipient of the first Guggenheim Foundation fellowship granted to a woman in the field of musical composition" [6].

At the end of chapter 8, "Art Music", the chapter in which Guame documents and attempts to analyze Ruth Crawford Seeger's work, the author 'sums up' the work in a few paragraphs. For me, these paragraphs are among the worst in the book, and I wish that she had deleted this section entirely. Aside from the rather pedestrian (Guame might say 'slavish') adherence to the kind of writing style one learns in college freshman English classes, the last paragraph is a dismal effort at capturing in brief the work of one of the most visionary composers of this century. It is a good example of Guame's lack of understanding of how composers actually work and think:

She avoided slavish following of the models provided her by leading composers of the twentieth century. She was well acquainted with them all, but chose to work on paths she set for herself. She was a good composer and a highly original one—one who possessed and developed a very great talent, perhaps a touch of genius [7].

What composer worth her salt does not avoid "slavish following", is not "acquainted" with the music of her time and does not choose "to work on paths she set[s] for herself"? This is music appreciation nonsense, and the coyness of the last sentence ("perhaps a touch of genius") is just plain silly.

The writing often reads like a first draft. The following passage is indicative of the kind of stylistic problems that are common throughout the book:

It is hard to exaggerate the richness of Ruth Crawford Seeger's experiences during this year and the extent of her exposure to all the important trends in contemporary music, to say nothing of the tremendous expansion in Ruth Crawford Seeger's social outlook,

taking in stride the association with the many great and near-great names, all of which gave momentum to her ever-present efforts to combat her lack of self-confidence and to develop her self both personally and musically [8].

This is to say, one supposes, that her first year in New York was important, and she learned a lot!

Guame's writing about the Seegers' experiences with the Composers' Collective, an important leftist activist group in the early 1930s, seems equally peculiar in its attitude toward communism. Guame seems to write from a kind of post-Cold War perspective, failing to convey the complex and rapidly evolving political climate of the times.

The book is much more informative about Crawford Seeger's life than it is about her work. While constantly reminding us how clever, open-minded and hardworking Crawford Seeger was, the descriptions of the music itself are surprisingly nondescript. *String Quartet*, *Study in Mixed Accents*, the Sandburg settings, the two 'ricercari' (*Sacco, Vanzetti* and *Chinaman, Laundryman*), *Dia-phonics Suites* and other works are important pieces in the twentieth-century American repertoire. But Guame's discussions are more like liner notes, and not particularly insightful. She consistently underestimates Crawford Seeger's extraordinary experimentalism and unique musical integrity.

This lack of perspective on, and perhaps deep understanding of, the music misleads the reader. For example, Guame writes of the *Sonata for Violin and Piano*: "Ruth Crawford Seeger allows her naturally warm and frankly romantic nature to show in a brilliant technical display behind which are carefully worked out sound and effective musical ideas, couched in a highly dissonant fabric" [9]. What does that mean? What does it say about this important early work? The cursory description that follows this passage devotes a short paragraph to each of the work's three movements, with exemplary statements such as "In the piano part, left hand, Ruth Crawford Seeger makes use of the whipsnap pattern often found in her writing for piano" [10]. What is a "whipsnap pattern"? Guame later tells us this sonata "provides a good example of Ruth Crawford Seeger's constant striving for originality and her concern to preserve her artistic integrity" [11]. Even overlooking the inelegant writing, what is she saying about the music? Much less, unfortunately, than the music warrants.

Equally unsatisfactory is the follow-

ing description of *Five Preludes for Piano* (1924–1925): "No key signatures are used, conventional scales and triads are avoided, foot-tapping regular beats seldom appear, dynamic tempo changes abound, as do involved rhythmic patterns. The often chromatic, searching quality in the melody is generally non-lyric in character and the whole set is shot through with mild dissonances" [12].

Even ignoring the anachronistic and inappropriate pop language ("foot-tapping", "shot through with mild dissonances"), this is at best a naive description of a young experimental composer's music in 1924! One wonders at the scope of Guame's musical knowledge if she feels it is important to point out that "no key signatures are used" and "dynamic tempo changes abound". Granted, these are among Crawford Seeger's first serious works, but they are notable for much more than traits that had been common in music for many years previously!

Some of the musical descriptions are incomplete or misleading. For example, in the discussion of *Chinaman, Laundryman* and *Sacco, Vanzetti*, Guame states that

even though it is constructed with remarkable ingenuity, *Sacco, Vanzetti* fails to impress the imagination and stir the emotions as much as *Chinaman, Laundryman*, although it is a powerful, intense, song. Both songs use the same general vocal range and compositional techniques and the same highly patterned piano accompaniment and free vocal line; however, *Chinaman, Laundryman* seems more successful musically. The piano simulates the tinkling sound often associated with Oriental music as well as its ambiguous tonal and rhythmic qualities. Also, the ear accepts *Chinaman, Laundryman* more quickly, perhaps because the dissonances occur contrapuntally, rather than harmonically as they do in *Sacco, Vanzetti*.

The problems in this one paragraph are typical of the weaknesses of the musical discussions in general. Guame's perception and judgment of the two songs are superficial. The text for *Chinaman, Laundryman*, written by H. T. Tsiang, is much more direct than the elliptical and often self-contradictory (but extremely moving) text that Tsiang wrote for *Sacco, Vanzetti*. For example, note the clear social statement of *Chinaman, Laundryman* expressed in the following: "Why should I come to America to wash clothes? Do you think Chinamen wear no dresses?" Now compare that to the much subtler irony directed at one of

the heroes of *Sacco, Vanzetti*: "Oh, Sacco! You did say: 'Long live anarchy', but you should not forget, that when you climb up to heaven, You must use the ladder!" or "Oh, Vanzetti! You did say: 'I wish to forgive some people for what they are doing to me'. Certainly you can forgive them if you like, but you are the Wop, the fish peddler, and haven't anything in the bank. Isn't it a great insult to say 'forgive' to your honorable master?"

What Ruth Crawford Seeger does, I think, is mirror Tsiang's very different poetic styles for the two texts in the way she sets them musically. *Chinaman, Laundryman* is more "successful musically", especially at first hearing, in only the most superficial way. The directness of the social statement is mirrored in a simple, monophonic (in octaves) piano part. Guame's "contrapuntal dissonances" do not occur at all in the piano part, so we must believe that she is referring to the relationship between the piano part and the vocal line. The latter, however, is largely *sprechstimme*, and the tonal material is, arguably, not all that important, so it is not clear what she means by "counterpoint". Perhaps the ear accepts these "dissonances" more readily in *Chinaman, Laundryman* because they do not exist!

In *Sacco, Vanzetti*, the longer, more developed piece of the two, the dense, harmonically complex piano clusters suggest the ambiguous, more deeply tormented tone of the poem. In *Chinaman, Laundryman* the anger, like the accompaniment, is simple and clearly directed. In *Sacco, Vanzetti* the heroes and villains are less clearly defined, and the form of the piece and the piano accompaniment are more difficult to grasp at first listening (but are ultimately, I think, more rewarding). Although both songs are beautiful settings, *Sacco, Vanzetti* is the piece that, after repeated listenings and careful study, emerges as the little masterpiece, not *Chinaman, Laundryman*.

In addition, how can Guame seriously use phrases such as "the tinkling sound often associated with Oriental music as well as its ambiguous tonal and rhythmic qualities"? This kind of stereotyping of non-Western music is downright embarrassing, especially when one is writing about the colleague, collaborator and spouse of one of the founders of ethnomusicology in America!

It is a bit unfair to attack Guame on the basis of one analysis like this,

especially when I have, admittedly, extracted the particular textual examples I needed to make my points. Often, my disagreements with her musical discussions come down to somewhat unprovable matters of opinion. But I think the examples cited here show the way Guame tends to think about Crawford Seeger's music, and point to a major problem in the book.

Crawford Seeger's musical (not personal) influences are also given short shrift. Guame never really discusses, for example, the influence of the music of friends and contemporaries such as Dane Rudhyar, Henry Cowell, Carl Ruggles and Edgard Varese. Surely, compositional personalities as diverse and powerful as these must have had an important artistic impact on Crawford Seeger. For example, the palindromic aspect of many of her works might have been influenced by, or even could have influenced, the work of Carl Ruggles, whose great masterpiece *Sun Treader* (for orchestra) is a strict palindrome. In addition, the primacy of melodic line that one hears in Ruggles's music (e.g. *Portals*, for string orchestra) is very similar to the monophonic and systematically atonal technique Ruth Crawford Seeger uses in the last movement of *String Quartet*, *Study in Mixed Accents*, and *Diaphonic Suites*. It would be interesting to know the nature of the musical relationship here. Who influenced whom, and how? Henry Cowell's concise, monothematic piano works and Varese's concern with timbre as an organizational principle are also clearly connected to many of Crawford Seeger's primary musical concerns, but Guame tells us nothing about this.

Guame mentions that Ruth Crawford Seeger heard and was interested in Wallingford Riegger's *Study in Sonority for 10 Strings*, an important and visionary work in its single-minded exploration of unusual timbre (a kind of early 'Warsaw school' piece). But it does not seem to have occurred to Guame that perhaps the sonic experience of hearing Riegger's unique and powerful work found a later manifestation in *String Quartet*, even though this influence does not appear explicitly in the diaries and letters!

In addition, what is the reader to conclude regarding the connection between the Seegers and Hans Eisler, surely one of the twentieth century's most interesting and controversial musical minds? The Seegers were early members of the Composers' Collective with Eisler, and Ruth Crawford Seeger

shared a concert with him at the Composers' Forum Laboratory in New York in 1938 [13]. But there is no substantive discussion by Guame of how these two composers interacted.

Some sections of chapter 8 are excellent. Guame seems to have a particularly good understanding of vocal music (her discussion of *Chinaman*, *Laundryman* and *Sacco, Vanzetti* notwithstanding), and her discussions of the choral works and of the Sandburg settings are original and perceptive.

Chapter 9, "Folk Music Activities", describes Crawford Seeger's voluminous and influential work in the transcription and edition of traditional American vocal music. Her *American Folk Songs for Children*, *Animal Folk Songs for Children* and *American Folk Songs for Christmas* [14] are landmark works in primary school music education and are still widely used. During the 1930s and 1940s, Crawford Seeger wrote almost no art music, devoting her time and energy to folk music, raising her five children and teaching piano. Guame's book documents this period in detail for the first time.

I have always admired the subtle and elegant piano/vocal arrangements contained within the above-cited children's books. They are little musical masterpieces that never sacrifice their educational function. For example, in the song "By'm Bye" [15] a minimal piano accompaniment manages to imply a maximum of contrapuntal interest with just a few simple notes. In one of my favorites from the same collection, "It Rained a Mist", Crawford Seeger combines easy-to-play simple piano harmonies with a slightly displaced harmonic accent, as if these simple arrangements are palimpsests for the music she was longing to write during this period, but for which she could not find the time.

This chapter on Crawford Seeger's folk music activities is too short (15 pages) and therefore undervalues the importance and scope of the composer's work in this field. For example, Guame devotes only a few short sentences to the introductions to the three folk song collections mentioned above and thus belies their landmark status as texts on how to teach folk music to children. In addition, the texts sum up Crawford Seeger's deepest musical philosophies. She is practical, free-thinking (against censorship of any song on the basis of content, arguing that children would be better off encountering sensitive ideas in a song)

and poetic: "Do we want to sing about rain? Here is an old ballad heard in Virginia for generations ('It Rained a Mist'). Or just sit and count stars? ('By'm Bye')" [16].

Above all, Crawford Seeger's introductions to these folk song collections for children, perhaps more than any of her other writings, demonstrate the ways that she was able to balance the diverse aspects of her creative intelligence by focusing on the task at hand and always believing strongly in what she was doing. Indeed, a sense of Crawford Seeger as a person emerges most strongly from these writings on how to teach music to children. They are the product of a mature artist who has thought deeply and uniquely about life and music.

From a more strictly musical standpoint, I would have liked to learn more about Crawford's (prior to her marriage to Charles Seeger) contribution to the remarkable Carl Sandburg collection *The American Songbag* [17]. Again, Guame has little to say, only giving one brief example from Crawford's four wonderful arrangements, which are stylistically very different from the hundreds of others in the book. The fertile artistic scene around Sandburg in Chicago at that time is evident from some of the other composers who contributed arrangements, including Leo Sowerby and Arthur Farwell, the latter an experimental composer and early pioneer in contemporary music publishing in America. Another woman contributor, Hazel Felman, is responsible for some equally strange and wonderful arrangements in this book (e.g. "El-A-Noy" [18]). Guame does not say a word about whether Crawford ever met these composers, consulted with them about the difficult problem of arranging Sandburg's idiosyncratic folksong collection or whether Sandburg influenced her musical ideas.

Guame very rightly quotes a few measures from Crawford's lovely arrangement "Ten Thousand Miles Away from Home" as an example of Crawford's style at the time but says very little about the music itself. (Incidentally, the musical copy for this song, and for several others cited in chapter 9, is of very poor quality.) However, the two arrangements that seem to me to best show Crawford's astonishing musical intelligence and creativity, even at this very young age, are the powerful "Those Gambler's Blues", which seems to presage *Sacco, Vanzetti* in its rhythmi-

cally unrelenting dark, giant chords, and, surely one of the most beautiful folk song settings in American music, "Lonesome Road", in which Crawford takes a simple chord structure and imbues it with a harmonic complexity and beauty that is certainly more sophisticated and intricate than would have ever been expected in a simple folk song arrangement. Yet, as in her arrangements for children, the feeling and simplicity of the tune is enhanced, not overshadowed.

All of these disagreements and complaints aside, Guame's book is necessary and important, and long overdue. It opens an acquaintanceship with the music and work of Ruth Crawford Seeger. Guame must be applauded for the scope of her effort, and for the high

quality of her scholarly achievement. Anyone who is even remotely interested in American art music in the twentieth century should learn about the life and music of Ruth Crawford Seeger and, therefore, should read this book.

#### References and Notes

1. Charles Seeger, quoted in Matilda Guame, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Memoirs, Memories, Music* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986) p. 103.
2. Peggy Seeger (daughter of Ruth Crawford Seeger), quoted by Matilda Guame, "Ruth Crawford Seeger", in Judith Tick and Jane Bowers, eds., *Women Making Music* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986) p. 392.
3. Guame [1] p. 203, quoted from a question-and-answer session with Ruth Crawford Seeger at the Composers' Forum Laboratory in New York in 1938.
4. Guame [1] p. 50.
5. Guame [1] p. 75.
6. Guame [1] p. 89.
7. Guame [1] p. 172.
8. Guame [1] p. 72.
9. Guame [1] p. 141.
10. Guame [1] p. 141.
11. Guame [1] p. 141.
12. Guame [1] p. 137.
13. See [3].
14. *American Folk Songs for Children*, Ruth Crawford Seeger, ed. and comp. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948); *Animal Folk Songs for Children*, Ruth Crawford Seeger, ed. and comp. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1950); *American Folk Songs for Christmas*, Ruth Crawford Seeger, ed. and comp. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953).
15. See *American Folk Songs for Children* [14].
16. Ruth Crawford Seeger, "Introduction", in *American Folk Songs for Children* [14] p. 14.
17. Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927).
18. Sandburg [17] pp. 162-163.