



The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger

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the term *youth subculture* to point up its problematic nature and introduces the subsequent chapters as various perspectives on this issue. Epstein makes the often overlooked distinction between what is relevant to the experience of adolescents and what is important for the understanding of youth as a cultural category: "Youth, according to Weinstein (chapter two of this volume), was once considered a transitional category located between adult responsibilities and childhood dependencies. However, this is no longer the case. Youth has now become a floating signifier that marks out a specific way of being that is neither age-specific nor relevant for the adolescence it parodies. In this manner adolescents have become detached from 'youth'" (p. xxii).

The majority of the contributors are sociologists whose work on youth subcultures relies on demographics and case studies. As is the case with *Microphone Fiends*, few of the contributors allow the voices of youth to speak directly. Exemplary essays include "The Local Economy of Suburban Scenes," by Donna Gaines (who contributed to both publications); Deena Weinstein's "Expendable Youth: The Rise and Fall of Youth Culture"; and "The Postmodernization of Rock and Roll Music: The Case of Metallica," by Joseph A. Kotarba. These articles are clean and concise, a remarkably consistent feature throughout the collection.

In addition the volume includes a selected and annotated bibliography on recent theory and research in the sociology of popular music, which is helpful because, although there are only two journals dedicated solely to the study of popular music, a number of articles occur in various other sources. To make the bibliography easy to use, the compilers, Stephen B. Groce and Jonathon S. Epstein, have subdivided it into general categories such as "historical and critical analyses," "audiences," "women in popular music," and "analyses of song lyrics."

Both publications contain ground-breaking work in arenas musicologists have been reluctant to enter. Perhaps it is time to let these two young offspring demonstrate the validity of such study and the breadth of perspectives it can accommodate. The diversity of approaches contained in both books suggests that what is needed now is the inclusion of adolescents in the study of their own culture and an honest look at the music industry as a major, and not always altruistic, influence.

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The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger. By Joseph N. Straus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. ISBN 0-521-1646-9. Pp. xii, 260. \$59.95.

The evolution of Ruth Crawford scholarship has been, to some extent, a history of unavoidable ambivalence: scholars have had difficulty deciding whether to characterize her as a "major American composer" or a "major American woman composer." Her music is that of the former; her life, the latter. Not until recently, with works such as this superb theoretical study by Joseph Straus and David Nicholls's equally well-written *American Experimental Music, 1890-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), have

scholars and musicians been able to eschew the gender modifier when discussing this composer.

Charles Louis Seeger, in his essay on Crawford in Henry Cowell's *American Composers on American Music* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1933), described his wife ("Miss Crawford") as "Descended, as very few of our American composers are, from exclusively Anglo-Saxon stock." Seeger also described her visionary and skilled use of heterophony; this essay is the source of the following now-famous quotation: "Heterophony may be accidental, as, for instance, a radio-reception of Beethoven's 'Eroica' intruded upon by a phonograph record of a Javanese gamelan." He identified significant musical ideas in Crawford's work, such as "formal phrase structuring," and the methodical use of *grupetti* and *ostinati* as musical foreground in what others have seen as a precursor to American minimalism of the early 1960s. Calling attention to the "joyous play of the intellect" in Crawford's music, Seeger was eloquent on her role as a woman composer—in fact, as a kind of solitary example of one:

We are, then, in a fair way to be able to answer the common question regarding the occurrence among women composers of any who stand out beyond the rank and file of male epigones. Miss Crawford certainly does. In fact, one can find only a few men among American composers who are as uncompromisingly and successfully radical. Not the least refreshing thing about her work is the absence of pretense. Quite sure of the sort of stuff she wishes to write, she is wise in not attempting the grand, the pompous, and the showy. This indicates also a quality that will be taken for a weakness by many concert-goers in America as well as in Europe. Men composers have so accustomed us to musical rhetoric during the last century or so that it must take quite a little courage not to fall in with the honored traditions of fanfares and splurges of orchestral color, with a lot of orchestral players working hard and long. Her works are invariably shorter than one thinks they will be. (p. 116)

The image of Crawford as multiple icon—great composer, great woman composer, and perhaps (in Seeger's formulation) even *greater* composer because of her unique perspective as a woman—has pervaded consideration of her work. Writers have sometimes, seeking gender neutrality, tried to characterize her solely in terms of her major contributions to the history of music. Nevertheless her precipitous decision to stop writing concert music at a young age in favor of pursuing folk song scholarship, raising children, and working with children's education is difficult to overlook. Crawford wrote roughly as many pieces as did her much-discussed contemporaries Ruggles and Varèse (Straus mentions only fifteen of the best known, listing several sets of works as single pieces; there are others, however, such as the *Kaleidoscopic Variations* for solo piano, that may or may not be considered student works). Straus points out that these composers also "stopped composing for long periods" (p. 246)—perhaps a condition endemic to composers of experimental American music of the time. Except for the Suite for Wind Quintet, however, Crawford wrote everything before the age of thirty-three. Her "career change" was clearly related to having children (four) and to a joint de-

cision with Charles Seeger that "art" music was no longer the most important area to pursue. These are gender-relevant facts. How many male composers were primary care-givers to four children or young spouses of major, established, and influential scholar-colleagues like Seeger? Is it a surprise that Ruth Crawford resumed composing only after her children were grown?

Straus's book is the logical next step in Ruth Crawford scholarship. After sixty years of multifaceted discussion ("women composer" or "composer"?) there is finally a book by a major American theorist about the *music*, implicitly placing Crawford as simply a major American composer. The String Quartet, *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*, and *Diaphonic Suites* now take their place in the canon. It is fortunate that the author of the first broad theoretical analysis of Crawford's music is someone with Straus's insight, writing skill, and analytical sophistication. Along with Nicholls's *American Experimental Music*, *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger* is a critical and essential resource for the understanding of this body of work. When Judith Tick's biography eventually appears (it is listed in Straus's bibliography, but Straus was "unable to consult" it [p. 228]), there will finally be a full set of mutually complementary scholarly resources about Crawford.

The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger contains three sections: "Elements of a Style," "Six Analyses," and "Crawford's Music in Its Contexts." These are followed by extensive annotations, a highly selective list of works, and a comprehensive bibliography. The first section is the most important. Straus insightfully organizes Crawford music in terms of eight concepts: melody, register, large-scale designs, precompositional plans, counterpoint, harmony, rhythm, and dynamics. He clearly describes the relationship of Crawford's music to Charles Seeger's theoretical writings and teachings, particularly with regard to dissonant counterpoint and the "heterophonic ideal." He is detailed and convincing on the ways in which Crawford's music expanded on and gave musical life to Seeger's more abstract concepts (as did the music of Rugles and the early Johanna Beyer).

Straus is a meticulous scholar with virtuosic analytical skills. He seamlessly integrates previous writings on Crawford's music with his own ideas. He is clear and concise, avoiding a specific theoretical agenda in favor of understanding Crawford's singular formal achievements on their own terms. A traditional American iconoclast (like Cowell, Partch, Nancarrow, Tenney, and Ives), Crawford formulated her own rules. Her ideas of chromatic completion, palindromy, austere, mono-ideological formal procedures, and, of course, dissonant counterpoint distinguish her work from other schools of composition and form a personal compositional universe.

In the course of his general discussion of the music, Straus makes an important contribution to Crawford scholarship by giving serious analytical consideration to major but often overlooked works such as the Two Ricercare, the Nine Piano Preludes (which appear in the "List of Works" as two pieces, 1-5 and 6-9), and the Three Chants (for chorus). Straus does not discuss the musical styles of the folk song settings, such as the extraordinary harmonizations in the *American Songbag* or the equally astonishing off-kilter piano parts for the three books of children's' songs. Matilde Guame's book *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Memoirs, Memories, Music* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1986)

briefly describes Crawford Seeger's folk song work, but a full discussion of her accomplishments in that area is yet to appear.

In the second section Straus analyzes three works: "Rat Riddles" and "Prayers of Steel" from *Three Sandburg Songs*, the third and fourth movements of the String Quartet, and the first and third movement of the Suite for Wind Quintet. Although these three major works (but all Crawford's works are major) constitute some 20 percent of her known output, Straus's selection leaves room for future scholarship. His analyses are thorough and deliberate, although he tends to use the language of atonal theory more here than he does in the first section. He is careful, however, not to force the music to fit the analytic technique, and his descriptions truly elucidate the works. Although he picks one of Crawford's most-discussed works (the quartet) and one of her weakest (the suite, perhaps because of the extraordinary circumstances of its composition), Straus makes a new and strong case for the musical fecundity of these pieces. I hope and expect that these analyses will become standard texts in undergraduate curricula on Crawford's music.

The third section is perhaps the least satisfying. In some fourteen pages Straus discusses Crawford's music in "the context of her biography," "the context of the ultra-modern movement," and "the context of the history of women in music." Although thoughtful and well-written, these short discussions seem gratuitous after the preceding analyses, like a kind of ambivalent afterthought. In the absence of an authoritative biography of Crawford (Judith Tick's forthcoming work should fill that void), this third section completes the book for those with no other knowledge of Crawford or her work; nevertheless I think that this section would have perhaps best been published as an article on its own.

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