COMPOSERS SOMETIMES TAKE MORE THAN JUST INSPIRATION FROM PREDECESSORS THEY ADMIRE...

by Larry Polansky

ANALYSIS, SYNTHESIS, TRANSCRIPTION, COLLABORATION, ARRANGEMENT, COMPOSITION ... WHATEVER

“Each individual will have his own preferences in respect to what should be fast, modified, or preserved”—Ruth Crawford Seeger (All quotations are from The Music of American Folk Song)

Credit is a precarious necessity of composition, and the composing life. Notions of “my” and “piece” have evolved as poorly understood and tangential artifacts of our collective psyche. Without real insight or vision, battles of artistic possession are conducted with arguments and tactics that insult our intelligences. Art is viewed by some not as a post-mortem culture garden but as a post-mortem private virtual cash farm. By “creating,” we stake claims and raise the profits, entering historical “erences” as gladalators prepared to slay opponents of our artistic primary, at whatever cost to reason and collective well-being.

But best not to be too cranky about it. As composers, pretty much all we do is claim credit for our ecological riches—competing and matching music’s soil, tagging the harvest plants as our own. Arrangers, on the other hand, are tenant farmers: their skill is acknowledged and respected in the context of the owner’s success. If the beauty and joy of arranging is getting less credit than deserved, the world reality of composition is getting far more. Arranging is superfluous, dispensary, composition surreptitious arranging.

Collaboration is another way of collaboratively organizing the compositional form, and is an elegant vehicle for moving us into the corporeal lane on our daily commute. Improvising, composing, publishing, performing, making software together—collaboration nicely defers the onus of “mine.”

RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER’S WORK AND ME

With this short article, I am writing for the first time about a lifelong activity of mine: rewriting and arranging other music. This centennial year of one of our greatest composers and arrangers, Ruth Crawford Seeger, seems an appropriate time to describe a few of my pieces that use her work as a starting point.

“Arranging” has been an occasional but consistent activity for me, not clearly distinguished from other means of making music. As a composer, I sometimes re-compose pieces that interest me, a collaboration in which my collaborator often takes no part. It’s a musical act with no a priori rules.

Lots of composers have arranged the works of predecessors and contemporaries: Schoenberg / Brahms, Webern / Bach, Copland / Britten. In any musical idiom other than Western art music, this is not even odd. Hearing a song we like, we play it in our own way. At worst, the rewriting of “scores” does no harm. Bach’s music is a renewable resource, unchanged—except perhaps, to the ears of a really perceptive listener—by Webern’s arrangements. This kind of compositional recycling is a specialized form of what Pauline Oliveros calls “deep listening.” As composers, we can also focus on the musical ramifications of another’s work within the framework of our own experience and activity.

...With few exceptions, the singer sets the dramatic mood at the beginning of the song and maintains that mood throughout. The singer does not try to make the songs mean more, or less than what they are.... The tune makes no compromises, is not slower nor faster, nor louder. There is no climax—the song just stops.

—Ruth Crawford Seager

Over the years I’ve arranged the work of lots of other composers and musicians; from the Carter Family to James Tenney and Howard Snepett, from Shaker music to jazz standards, from Ron Naglestra to Durla Rodney. It’s fun, it’s fascinating, and it feels strongly necessary. For me it is an explicit acknowledgment of one of the reasons I became a musician in the first place—to experience the interconnectivity and relatedness of our community of ideas and our co-evolution as creative humans.

RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER

This year we give long overdue attention to Ruth Crawford Seeger (RCS), an artist whom I believe to be one of the twentieth century’s most interesting, visionary, and important composers. Fortunately, with a biography by Judith Theo (Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music), a book of musical analyses by Joseph Straus (The Music of Ruth Crawford Seager), and an ever-growing body of recordings and score publications, her work has become more available and knowable, although there are still some major lacunae.

I first encountered RCS’s music, as many of us did, in her String Quartet. I’m not sure, but I seem to remember standing in a cabaret line with James Tenney in Toronto, probably around 1976 or 1977 (for some reason I recall that we were both holding small containers of yogurt), and Jim telling me that I should check out that piece (he knew of my interest in United States music—I’d probably been ranting about Billings or Shape Note or something at the time). Hearing the quartet, I was immediately hooked, and resolved to learn as much about RCS and her work as I could. I’m still working on that project.

At that time, there were—aside from the String Quartet—few available recordings of her work (portions of the Preludes, the Study in Mixed Accents, a recording of the Sandburg Songs). What little information existed about her life was mostly inaccurate. Her work between 1935 and 1954, primarily with American folk music, was poorly understood, at best. I don’t think many people still really appreciate the impact, vision and variety of RCS’s work in her final twenty years, even though it is beautifully documented in Judith Tho’s recent biography. I was astonished when I first learned that such an amazingly experimental U.S. composer—a U.S. woman composer—had been so effectively excluded from history. I’m no longer so naive, but remain astonished, as I was when I undertook a large project to uncover the work of another important composer from the 1950s, Johanna Magdalena Seeger. In the last few years, there have been several festivals of Seeger’s work in the U.S., Europe, and Australia, and many single performances.

SACCO, VANZETTI

My fascination with and immersion in RCS’s work gave rise to a number of pieces in the ensuing years. My first arrangement—was Sacco, Vanzetti (for marble, mandola, mandocello, guitar, and echo)—arose from a need to create pieces for all ensemble I was working with in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1980s. A group of guitarists and mandolinists (myself, Paul Bilirakis, Doug Hensley, Dana Rath, and others) had formed, along with composer-pianist-harpist Alex Stanz, an ensemble called New Music for Plucked Strings. Working from the facsimile publication of RCS’s Two Atenases (sometimes called the “two political songs”) in an issue of Peter Garrett’s Soundings, Alex and I decided to each arrange one of the pieces. Alex’s work on RCS’s Chirman, Laramyndam is a lovely, faithful arrangement, in which the single-line piano part is holed through among the various instruments (mandolin, mandola, mandocello, troubadour harp). The voice part was left unchanged. I took a different approach in my version of RCS’s Secco. Vanzetti left the voice part intact but used the relentless idiolectic chords of the piano part as jumping-off points for modal and polyrhythmic instrumental ad-libbing. In my arrangement, some versions of the original’s downbeat chords is usually retained, but everything else in the long, complex, and difficult score is my own instrumental and musical fantasy.

"The accompaniment rarely stops from beginning to end of the song. It is like the busness of the accompanist(s) not only to keep going throughout each stanza, but to take up the notes during trouble points of phrase-end, and at times, to provide introducaries between stanzas. Most introducaries in the songs in this volume are fairly short, showing slight intradistinction in length."

—Ruth Crawford Seeger
The Casten Variation

The Casten Variation for ensemble or solo piano has an unusual history. Some years ago, while working in the computer music language HAILPS (co-written by Phil Bark, David Ross, and myself), I became interested in extracting data from existing music as a basis for a analysis, and then thinking about that data as a kind of primitive representation of the piece, perhaps for the purpose of musical analysis or new pieces.4

A confluence of interests and situations spontaneously created The Casten Variation. In 1993, I was teaching an advanced music theory class at Dartmouth, and we were engaged in a project of analysis, from serial theory to melody, from microtonal theory to music cognition tools. At the same time, I was reading with interest the works of the visual statistician Edward Tufte, which suggested to me that computer analysis might use the computer both as a mathematical-analytical and visualistica
tool.

In that same year of 1993, I was invited to give, at the Society for Music Theory’s annual meeting (in Toronto, as it was chambered), a response to a paper that Joseph Strous would be presenting there. Strous, professor of music theory at Queen’s University in New York, was presenting a paper that offered a clear and insightful set of algorithmic analyses of RCG’s work (he was working on what became the first analytical book on his music). The piece that Strous decided not to analyze was the Piano Study in Muted Accords, which, in my opinion, is not only one of the great and rare successes of RCG’s genius, but a wondrously lyzyorabous combination of crystal clear musical gesture and obscured theoretical plan. It is also monophonic (the piano part is in octaves throughout), and short (about six minutes), so it seemed particularly amenable to formal computer analyses. Another thing that attracted me to RCG’s own segmentations of the piece into clear phrases (abstracted anonymous groupings) and five sections (deli
cated by rests). Like much of his music—and that of some of his contemporaries, such as Ruggles—the Piano Study... is characterized by a use of palindromes (R) as well as a kind of statistical-probabilistic treatment of dissonance: wait a long time before you repeat a note. These were things that seemed to me to be quite complex and unexpected work from computer graphical analysis.

I input her score and began creating out a variety of sta
tistical analyses. The first thing I did was show the piece as a “line chart” to test what I had learned previously. RCG’s own scientific interests in automatic melody transcription. I ran lots of measurements, some of their simple ones (such as interval and rhythm), and some of my own (with less reproducibility, etc., see diagrams on pg. 35) and some complex (the analyses and with a series of multidimensional scaling charts of the successions under various modal properties of my own device (8)). I even had my students do an automatic set-class analysis of the phrase groupings (which didn’t seem to form up well). I looked at things by section and within the whole, and tried to find in as many ways to visualize the music as possible. The process was fun—I’d write some programs in HAILPS to plot out data, and then pipe those programs to Excel, SPSS, or other statistical graphics program, and simply show the analysis in the form of graphs, charts, etc. I wanted to envision the data, not describe it, avoiding conclusions but trying to take a multi-visual approach in providing the piece’s formal structure.

My response to Strous’s paper was a ten-minute pre
tentation of about forty pages of graphics, with almost no spoken commentary. Despite the title “How to Imagine The Casten Sawgrass: Seeger’s Piano Study in Muted Accords,” it was meant as a response not so much to Strous’s through (and hopefully coherent) analysis, but rather the concept of music theory itself. I was trying to elaborate, not conclude; to question and illuminate, not explain and obfuscate. I’ve since presented this analysis a number of times to classes, in guest lectures, and in other contexts. I’ve never published it. The intent was performative—a kick through the wilderness of biocentric concepts.

I am a theorist who uses theory in order to compose, or even just to ponder, but not to explain other composer’s works—which I’d rather waive. After having done my graphical analysis, I realized that somehow in the bowels of my software I had multiple descriptions not only of the Piano Study... but of an infinite number of unique pieces that were in some way the same as their “parent.” The data that entered my mind was a set of similarity measures of each phrase to every other phrase, in terms of several morpho
tological metrics which measured, in fairly complex ways, inter
tidal content and contour. I assumed that the work could be described completely by these distance measures, just as a city can be described in terms of all of the distances of each building to all the others. These distances were stored as a set of multidimensional scaling analyses. Multidimensional scaling, or MDS, is a common mathematici
computer technique used in a number of contexts to reduce a complex data set (usually neurologically derived) of paired similarities or (conclusions) to a simpler, usually two
dimensional representation. In a sense, it’s a way of not computing complex cosine, sines, and orthogonals, but of attempt
ing to visualize the similarity space that people perceive these things as inhabiting.

"At this point, the musician could join the work with the laboratory specialist. He is used to working with diagrams... though not with such accurate data."

—Ruth Crawford Seager

I know of no way to take multidimensional scaling data and recreate a specific original data set. However, the original data set were rougher (I didn’t have accurate data for the entire original set. I also had to make some approximations, such as not always keeping the hands in octaves). Although originally written for piano or any "ensemble": the ensemble version has some unique characteristics—only the piano version has been played. Sarah Cahill, a specialist in RCG’s work and in contemporary music of all kinds, has performed the piece more than any other pianist, and has recently recorded it. She often performs it on the same program with the Piano Study in Muted Accords (it was recently recorded for New American Records), and the juxtaposi
tion of the two pieces in the same concert is intriguing.

In other words, the computer tried to compose phrases without relationship (in terms of interval content and contour) to all the other phrases was more or less the same as in the original piece. "More or less," because I reduced the "similarity matrix" to ten "coordinates." Although these conditions alone long way towards a reverse engineering of the multidimensional scaling analyses. It is clear that they are not the same. In fact, there is no guarantee that there even exist new phrases which will satisfy the criteria within any reasonable measure of fitness.

Fitting each phrase to these three criteria was difficult. I used a number of computer algorithms that automatically relabeled the data, and I even forebore to count the number of computer phrases. Some of them were too far flung, and others were too close. The program worked by assigning each phrase a number, and then the program would try to sort it out. The metrics themselves were relatively weighted, and the weights were also optimized as the program tried to reconstruct the piece.

The new phrases were allowed to vary in note length somewhat, within certain constraints, which consists increased the note lengths of the original phrases. I made my piece the sec
tions long, and the first and last phrases of each of the sections are the same as the first and last of the sections in the original. The phrase length is approximated on my computer.

My work is about six times as long as the original, with intermediary phrases interpolated in between the similarity mea
sumes of the original melodic phrases.

"Some simplification is, of course, inevitable."

—Ruth Crawford Seager

The work, like the original, is difficult. It is a six times as long, and covers an even wider register than the original, pianist has to have the ability to play both notes within a single hand, often as not always keeping the hands in octaves). Although originally written for piano or "any ensemble"—the ensemble version has some unique characteristics—only the piano version has been played. Sarah Cahill, a specialist in RCG’s work and in recent recordings of all kinds, has performed the piece; she recorded it with another pianist, and has recently recorded it. She often performs it on the same program with the Piano Study in Muted Accords (it was recently recorded for New American Records), and the juxtaposi
tion of the two pieces in the same concert is intriguing.
A page from "Three Fiddle Tune Transcriptions ..."

THREE FIDDLER TUNES

The most recent piece I've made from Ruth Crawford Seeger's work is called "Three Fiddle Tune Transcriptions." This work is a collection of music arrangements that were developed from Crawford Seeger's own transcriptions of fiddle tunes. The book Our Singing Country (1941), while the third is, of necessity (as will be seen), more abstract, the three fiddle tunes are "Callahans," "Ryan's Part," and "Glory in the Meeting House.

Again, continuance of activity created this piece. For the last few years, with the cooperation of the Ruth Crawford Seeger Estate and the help of Judith Tick, I've been working on an edition of The Music of American Folk Song, RCS's key entry, never published or recorded American folk music, and its transcription. This monograph was originally intended to accompany 200 transcriptions for the 1945 Our Singing Country by the Louisiana. One of the remarkable things about the Louisiana's book (aside from RCS's exiled monograph, which is one of the most brilliant things I've ever read on the topic of folk music) is that there are only two instruments transcribed: "Callahans" and "Ryan's Part."—both solo fiddle tunes (performed by Luther String, and W. H. Stepp, respectively). In researching and reconstructing RCS's monographs, I found some of the transcriptions she made which were not included in Our Singing Country. One of these was a fragment of a third fiddle tune called "Glory in the Meeting House" (also performed by Strong). As a folk musician, I'm primarily a player (not a singer), so these three transcriptions held special interest. Also, spectrographic recordings and performances of RCS's work are available in some commercial form, though "Callahans," which is perhaps the most extraordinary, is hard to find. As I learned to play these tunes on mandolin and guitar, the transcendental virtuosity of both the players and the transcription became apparent. It bears mentioning that one of Amon Copeland's most famous works is his almost witheringly scorched of RCS's transcription of "Ryan's Part"—but we heard not a word about RCS in last year's Copeland centenary?

"An example of virtuosity in solo playing may be heard in Callahans, whose two simultaneous melodic lines are maintained by the one player at breakneck speed."—Ruth Crawford Seeger

"Callahans," in particular, fascinated me, the tempo is inhuman, and it's essentially a piece for two fiddles played by one person. I don't know how Shep did it. Fiddler friends who've heard this recording (and seen the unaccountable accuracy transcriptions) are usually mouth-droppingly awed. I believe it is simply a case of devotion. Two highly-driven electric guitar players of the twentieth century can more or less play what one Kentucky fiddler from the 1930s could. I transcribed all three tunes for electric guitar duet (along with Carl Rogers' Angel), for a series of concerts with Argentinean new-music guitarist Claudio Callen for last winter. But unlike my other work with RCS's compositions, the main point of this project was transcription itself, with the added aim of paying particular homage to her utterly unsuspec- tated and inscrutable thoughts on that activity. So, in two out of three of these pieces, I didn't change very much, just orchestrated carefully and, I hope, interestingly for two guitars. The third piece, "Glory," was never completed as a transcription, so I turned it into a kind of improvization on the fragment. We haven't performed these pieces yet ("Callahans" is still too fast!), but they're fun to play, having been devoted so much energy to RCS's work in the past five years in my disguise as a musician, I needed to reenlarge the composer I am.

As a composer, though, I find that this set of pieces is done, because with respect to RCS's work, there aren't any new forms of arrangement that I want to explore. But, who knows? My own surprise is part of my foolishness. I don't have the right audience to her proper place in our collective conception of twentieth century music. In any case, happily, there's a lot of other work to do, and it's time for me to move on.

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NOTES
1. Besides the many scores by RCS that are still either out of print, never in print, unreviewed, or problematic in their current editions (Phonola for Piano, Sonata for Violin and Piano), there is a lot of her folksinging work still unknown, out of print (some of the short articles, Let's Build a Railroad, difficult to find) (our friend on the Folklore, Folklore Internato de Santo Domingo), and—in the case of the important The Music of American Folk Song—never published. A first edition of the latter, edited by myself and Judith Tick, is forthcoming at the end of this year from University of Rochester Press, and will include a number of her short writings on folk music as well. The publication of this work (from 1941) will shed new light on RCS's musical ideas, with regard to both folk and art music.


3. During the year in Indonesia, I wrote a number of other works, a distinct contrast to Lonesome Road. Bidadara Sadra/Bidaya Guitar, for choir, gamelan, and soloists is another "arrangement," this time composed by computer. Two songs are used, one by Woody Guthrie, "Ragtime," the other written at my request by I Wayan Sadra. The score and an article about it are in Perspectives of New Music (1996), ironically, the composers, performers and frequent Musikwerke contributor Daniel Gould made his own arrangement of this piece, for solo clarinet, which he performs often (a recording of this version will be on my next CD, Charge, on Artifact Recordings). I like very much the way these ideas keep morphing.

4. My friend and frequent collaborator Nick Dodevski has also done some remarkable work in this regard, specifically with his statistical analysis and reconstruction of Schubert. Kranzke Baricz has also been a pioneer of this aesthetic and computer technique.

5. See Mark Nason's pioneering article on this piece: "In Pursuit of Charles Seeger's 'Heterophonic Idiom': Three Palatinor Werks by Ruth Crawford," in Musical Quarterly, 72(4), 1986. [A pioneering work on the Piano Study ... and Ruth Crawford Seeger's 'work in general']

6. For a complete theoretical description of this matrix and more on the analysis of the Piano Study ... see my article: "Morphological Matrices," Journal of Contemporary Music Research, 25(4), 1996.

7. One other piece, the third of my Essays for String Quartet (1969), uses an RCS source: her piano arrangement from Animal Folk Songs for Children of "Don't Ya Hear the Larks A-Crying," (a song that is almost the same as the Pavane of "Blood-Stained Benders" from Our Singing Country). Additionally, the Titus of my five-movement work for piccolo and wind quintet, Pillar (1998), is taken from a quote found in a letter to RCS.

...and one the same notation can be given such diverse readings by brilliant virtuosos as to throw considerable doubt upon the original intent of the composers.—Ruth Crawford Seeger

MORE...

No, I don't think so. Though I still have a couple of ideas (7). I am considering taking her beautiful strange piano arrangement of "Sweet Betsy from Pike" and doing a solo guitar version exclusively using the guitar technique of tapping, as well as solo guitar performances of Piano Study ... but who knows? I'll get to them. I'm still excited about advocating for RCS's work. To celebrate her birthday, this summer fall, Mary Ann Haag (one of the greatest performers of Shaker music), Dody Dam and I are performing Let's Build a Railroad a number of times (for kids, mostly).

"A great deal depends upon just how this bridge is built."—Ruth Crawford Seeger

Piano Study ... as time series (showing "periodicity ripples")

Piano Study ... number of notes without repeating pitch class (Time series representation: whole piece)
A LEGENDARY COMPOSER IN HIS DECLINING YEARS, WORKING AROUND HIS FAILING HEARING, HELPED AND WAS HELPED BY YOUNGER COLLEAGUES

Planes

A Reminiscence of Edgard Varèse in the 1960s

Edgard Varèse, 1965

Composers Andrés Lewin-Richter and Aleidos Lanuza in conversation

**REFERENCES**

Books and Articles

Diamond, Jody. 1990. “There is no they there.” in Musicworks 47.

Frog Peak Music. A Composers’ Collective. 1985. New Music for Plucked Strings. Oakland, California. [This book contains much of the repertoire for this ensemble, which did a number of concerts in and around the Bay Area in the early 1980s.]


**SONOGRAPHY**


Polansky, Larry. forthcoming. Change, Artifact CD. [This CD will contain a recording of The Casten Variation, Sarah Cahill, piano.]

**WEB**