The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger, by Joseph Straus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Review by Martha Hyde

Ruth Crawford Seeger enjoyed an influential position among early American experimentalist composers. She was a protégée of Henry Cowell, a student (and later wife) of Charles Seeger, and a close associate of Carl Ruggles, Dane Rudhyar, and Edgard Varèse. Referring to themselves as the "ultra-modernists," these composers sought to establish an independent school of American music by rejecting the traditional forms and sonorities of European art music. As a group they explored new sound combinations, new means of sound production, new techniques for structuring polyphonic textures, new ways of structuring rhythm and timbre, and new ways of integrating these dimensions with pitch structure. In his recent book, *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*, Joseph Straus offers detailed analyses seeking to demonstrate the expressive power of Crawford's music and to persuade us that she "anticipated, and opened the way for, the achievements of subsequent generations of American composers" (p. 1).

Straus takes into account Crawford's erratic development as a composer. He is less interested with her early works, those composed prior to her composition studies with Seeger, because he believes they lack the expressive power of the works composed after 1929. Because Crawford had abandoned composition by the early 1930s, choosing instead to collect American folk music, the number of works Straus considers in detail is rather small: *Four Diaphonic Suites*, String Quartet, Three Songs to poems by Carl Sandburg, and Suite for Wind Quintet. Straus argues that "it is on these works that her reputation must ultimately rest" (p. 1).

To expose the structural and expressive integrity of Crawford's music, Straus deploys an eclectic group of recent analytic methods, including those of David Lewin, John Rahn, Robert Morris, and George Perle, as well as those that Crawford herself

would have known—in particular those of Charles Seeger. Even though the recent theories were developed primarily to account for music of the Second Viennese School—just those whose aesthetic goals Crawford sought to negate—Straus sees little inconsistency in applying these methods. He argues, in fact, that because these methods prove highly effective for the analysis of Crawford's music, they reveal essential affinities between Crawford's music and the contemporary European music she rejected, affinities that place her "among the central figures of early twentieth-century music, in America and Europe" (p. 2).

One of Straus's strengths as a scholar has been his ability to organize effectively topics that could easily become unwieldy or unfocused, and to present his material in prose that is clear, concise, and often elegant. We enjoy these strengths again in *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*. In applying methods as diverse as those of Lewin, Morris, Perle, and Seeger, he could easily have created the impression of an analytical buffet. Straus minimizes this danger by choosing analytic methods that seem particularly well matched to the music at hand.

Of the theories that Crawford would have known, by far the most influential are Seeger's, which were later published as *Tradition and Experiment in the New Music*.[1] The second and more important part of Seeger's treatise, "Manual of Dissonant Counterpoint," was no doubt influenced by Seeger's work with Cowell and Crawford as students. In fact, it has remarkable similarities to Cowell's *New Musical Resources*, including an explicit commitment to what is called "dissonant counterpoint."[2] Straus uses Seeger's theories to provide a crucial context for understanding Crawford's music, pointing out that many of Crawford's finest works had their origins in composition assignments from Seeger. These works include not only the *Four*

[1]This treatise exists in four versions, two at the Library of Congress, dated December 1930 and September 1931. More than sixty years after it was written, it has finally been published in *Studies in Musicology II*, ed. Ann Pescatello (Berkeley: University of California, 1995).

[2]Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930; reprint, New York: Something Else Press, 1969).

Diaphonic Suites and the *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*, but even the celebrated last two movements of the String Quartet.

The compositional categories that Seeger provided to Crawford thus provide the large-scale structure of Straus's book. His first chapter considers the elements of Crawford's style, beginning with a discussion of melody—how she wrote melodies and how she combined them to create counterpoint, harmony, and large-scale form. The chapter goes on to clarify her original approach to register, rhythm, and dynamics. Straus's second analytic chapter gives detailed analyses of Crawford's most important works, including two of the Three Songs and two movements each of the String Quartet and the Suite for Wind Quintet. Again, the analytic method in this chapter has its roots in Seeger's treatise. Straus's final chapter discusses Crawford's music first in the context of her biography and the ultra-modern movement, and then in the context of the history of women in music.

One of Seeger's key assumptions—stressed in his lessons with Crawford—was the primacy of melody. Reacting against what he saw as Romantic over-reliance on vertically conceived chordal harmony, Seeger persuaded Crawford to write music that consisted of one or more independent, self-contained melodies. He insisted that these melodies be carefully structured to avoid triadic references and to project compelling original designs. Thus, it is not surprising that these melodies provide the essential components of what Straus regards as her best works.

Perhaps because of her stance against the aesthetic norms of European music, her melodies seem best described by what they are not—by what they exclude. First and foremost, her melodies exclude all triadic references or allusions to tonal harmonies. Second, her melodies consistently avoid emphasizing any notes through repetition; six or seven pitches usually intervene between any repeated notes. Third, the distribution of pitches avoids emphasizing one register over another; pitches are dispersed evenly in available register or pitch space, as well as pitch-class space. These features characterize two primary, but contrasting melodic types in Crawford's music. The first is similar to that

found in *Piano Study in Mixed Accents*, a melody that is "strictly regimented, rhythmically uniform, often constrained by some kind of precompositional scheme" (p. 7). The second type is more rhapsodic, rhythmically flexible, and saturated with recurring short motives. This second type of melody occurs frequently in Crawford's *Four Diaphonic Suites*.

Interest in non-repetition of pitches not surprisingly leads to a pattern of chromatic completion or saturation in a given registral space. Crawford's interest in filling a given registral space also results in what Straus refers to as "gap-filling"—the tendency for a melody to represent a self-contained unit with each of its gaps filled by a subsequent note or spanned by a previous one. Straus shows how Crawford uses contours characteristic of gap-filling to structure discrete registers within a single melody, thereby creating a means of structuring non-consecutive events, including phrases and formal periods. To my ears, this latter device frequently makes her melodies sound polyphonic, in a somewhat traditional way.

Crawford treats the intervals of her melodies much like their pitches: repetitions of intervals are avoided and are systematically varied. Straus makes a convincing case for Crawford's conscientious observation of Seeger's dictum that

> Not more than two consonant intervals of the same degree should be used in line successions... Not more than three dissonances of the same degree should be used in line succession, except rarely in a fast tempo, or for special effect (p. 16).

By avoiding intervallic repetitions, Crawford's melodies tend to emphasize all intervals equally, with the possible exceptions of semitones and major sevenths, which may occur more frequently.

By avoiding the repetition of pitches, intervals, and traditional motives, Crawford's melodies conform to Seeger's rule that melodies must be "dissonated," that is, made dissonant in certain prescribed ways. The music Seeger advocates is "founded upon a principle of dissonance, just as music prior to 1900 was founded upon a principle of consonance" (p. 17). Seeger's concept of dissonance represents the main premise of his compositional

method. "[Seeger's] basic insight is that if the old music can be understood as a consonant framework within which dissonances occur incidentally and under certain conditions, then the new, experimental music should be built upon a dissonant framework within which consonances occur incidentally and under certain conditions" (p. 17). Seeger goes on to extend the concepts of consonance and dissonance from intervals to other musical domains, including rhythm, tempo, accent, dynamics, timbre, and form. In illustrating the parallels between Seeger's theories and Crawford's music, Straus makes a very strong case for Crawford's dutiful adherence to her teacher's preferences and teachings.

One of Straus's more interesting discussions has to do with Seeger's concept of "neumes" and how Crawford uses it to structure melodies. Like a motive, a neume is a musical shape from which other shapes can be derived through specific transformations. However, neumes and their transformations are defined less by specific pitch content or contour than by the process that generates their internal progressions. Using Seeger's concept of neumes, as well as more contemporary analytic techniques, Straus shows the extent to which Crawford's melodies are finely and rigorously crafted. Straus succeeds admirably in illustrating just how carefully Crawford balances various melodic elements to achieve what most listeners will perceive as a melodic opaqueness or perhaps uniformity.

Straus devotes less attention to Crawford's contrapuntal use of independent melodic lines, a topic that frustrates analysis because of Crawford's emphasis on the independence of parts. As Straus observes, "the splendid isolation of the melodies results in as much intervallic variety between them as there typically is within them" (pp. 85–6). Straus does isolate some favored intervals, as well as some conventional contrapuntal techniques that are adjusted to a dissonant framework, such as dissonant voice exchanges and dissonant models of species counterpoint. But on the whole, no clear insight emerges about how Crawford's independent lines work together. Perhaps more analysis will reveal essential principles, but it seems unlikely. Surprisingly, one

of the effects I find most attractive in Crawford's music comes from interaction of simultaneous lines; but this effect seems sporadic and unpredictable and may reflect serendipity more than craft.

Straus makes a good attempt at showing how both vertical and horizontal harmonies are frequently governed by symmetrical partitionings and inversional transformations, or what he terms pivoting. He explores several interesting examples that illustrate how separate, but simultaneous, melodies use inversional pivoting to exert a type of gravitational pull on each other. These devices are highly audible in Crawford's music since simultaneous lines often tend to alternate back and forth in their motivic activity. But in less contrapuntal settings, it is difficult to generalize about how harmonies progress or develop in Crawford's music. Straus is probably correct in explaining the absence of any systematic rigor: "This is because, like her melodies, her harmonies are in a constant state of evolution, changing shape as they move. They have little fixed identity" (p. 100). He resorts to showing how harmonies progress by idiosyncratic operations that he calls "near-transposition" and "near-inversion." Here it seems to me that the traditional 20th-century analytic concepts such as transposition and inversion seem forced as applied to Crawford's work and not particularly useful. As with her melodies, we are again left describing harmonic progression by what it is not.

In his second analytic chapter Straus gives six extended analyses of pieces he regards as her most important. He takes on the challenge of applying the many varied techniques developed in the previous chapter to illustrate the larger-scale coherence of her works. In this respect, his effort is exemplary. What I like most is that Straus explains the finely wrought structures that Crawford uses to generate coherent melodic lines, but also fully accepts the implications of her apparent adoption of Seeger's principle of heterophony—that is, "a polyphony in which there is no relation between the parts except mere proximity in time-space, beginning and ending, within hearing of each other, at more or less the same time" (p. 80). By accepting heterophony as her goal, Straus is able to recognize Crawford's extraordinary

effort to insure that independent lines sound as if they truly interact randomly. The sound of random simultaneity is not all that easy to achieve.

One very good example appears in the discussion of Crawford's stunning setting of "Rat Riddles," a poem by Carl Sandburg (the first of the Three Songs of 1930–32). Here Straus shows that the entire vocal line derives from its initial six pitches, spinning forth a series of 21 variations. Showing how these variations form larger groups, Straus demonstrates how the vocal line creates a teasing heterophony with the text. He also makes a good case for levels of heterophony among the concertanti parts and between the concertanti and ostinati parts. The discussion concludes with a provocative statement about the overall form of the piece:

> Because of the independence of its constituent parts, it is difficult to discuss the form of the song as a whole. Rather, one must discuss it *forms*.... The song resists any single interpretation. There is no single place from which to view the whole, no way, in fact, to perceive a whole at all in the face of the irresolvable contrasts among the parts" (p. 146).

This description captures, I think, an essential aesthetic quality in Crawford's music, one that presupposes, plays with, and blocks our habits of perceiving unitary musical forms and may largely account for the "experimental" sound of her music.

Straus's extended analyses of "Rat Riddles," "Prayers of Steel," the third and fourth movements of the String Quartet, and the first and third movements of Crawford's final composition, Suite for Wind Quintet, reward close reading. Each reveals the different sorts of mechanisms that Crawford experiments with to ensure varying degrees of formal organization. Perhaps it is this feature that explains why no single voice or style emerges from her works as a whole. To my ears, at least, many of her works sound like artfully crafted answers to academic assignments. Each has a clear voice, but together they have a heterophony. No doubt biography explains to some extent this unsettling feature, since most of her pieces did originate as compositional assignments, but this biographical fact does not offer a fully satisfactory explanation.

Straus's last chapter considers Crawford's music in the context of her biography, the ultra-modern movement and the history of women in music, and attempts to provide a fuller explanation of why, blessed with extraordinary talent, Crawford failed to develop her full potential as a composer. In reading both Straus's book and Judith Tick's impressive biography of Crawford, I must admit feeling embarrassed by contradictions that Crawford seemed to tolerate and even cultivate.[3] For example, her diaries are full of complaints about not having enough free time to concentrate fully on composition. However, she had a remarkable talent for finding patrons to support her and to promote her music. How many other young composers during this period benefited from a strong advocate like Henry Cowell, had patrons that supported them for long periods while they explored the new music scene in New York, or had multiple invitations to reside at the MacDowell Colony, or enjoyed the enormous prestige of a Guggenheim Fellowship? When time was given to her, she tended to find distractions to keep her from composing, such as helping Seeger write what is probably a rather inconsequential book on music theory.

Another disturbing irony is that as much as Crawford cultivated independence, both personally and artistically, she repeatedly found herself under the influence of domineering or authoritarian teachers. Even when the Guggenheim Fellowship gave Crawford a year in Europe free (at least physically) of Seeger's influence, she herself admits that she avoided opportunities to study with, or even meet, a number of well-known European composers. She said that she needed time to absorb the insights Seeger had given her the previous year. I also find troubling Crawford's lack of concern about her acknowledged deficient knowledge of the classics of tonal music. This lack of concern appears in frequent off-hand comments she makes about pieces and composers that she heard in concerts. For example, about Schoenberg's Third Quartet she repeats the common reaction by critics that the work had "too much pattern,

[3]Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[and was] too cerebral."[4] The pattern, of course, clearly imitates Schubert's A minor String Quartet, D. 804, a fact that those familiar with the tonal classics would quickly perceive. Another self-indulgence is revealed in her quip about Schoenberg's *Suite* op. 25: "We discover that the Gavotte in Schoenberg's Opus 25 is like a cactus, and Henry suggests that we insinuate that name onto the poor gavotte. I think Cactic Suite would title well! Henry adds Cactylclysm."[5] For Crawford, Schoenberg had "grown too many geometric pages" in his music.[6] While one may excuse such trivialities, Crawford's tendency to dismiss opportunity probably accounts in part for her changing, inconsistent compositional style.

The integrity of its experimentalist ambition is no doubt a strength of Crawford's music, but her music nonetheless often seems impoverished by lack of allusion or context. Let me give one brief example. Consider the opening of the first of her *Nine Preludes for Piano* (1925). (See Ex. 1.) One is at first startled by the apparent explicit allusion to the opening of the first of Schoenberg's *Klavierstücke* op. 11. But as the prelude continues, the allusion is neither continued nor developed; it simply disappears. This prelude seems uncommonly void of allusions to other pieces, composers or styles, and Crawford's harmonies seem strikingly uni-dimensional, with few tonal or atonal reinterpretations possible. In retrospect, one is left with the suspicion that the echo of Schoenberg at the opening was meaningless and perhaps unrecognized. Such an unintentional echo draws attention to the fact that Crawford's music (unlike Schoenberg's) seems to spring out of a void, to inhabit a sterile environment that frustrates our enjoyment of music that lives in a context and tradition. This critique might well be answered with the argument that this exact effect was Crawford's grail—that she sought a mode of musical expression that negated the

[4]Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, p. 118.

[5]From the diary of Ruth Crawford, Feb. 1930, as quoted in Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, p. 119.

[6]In a letter from Ruth Crawford to Vivian Fine, Feb. 7, 1930, as quoted in Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, p. 119.

traditional forms and sonorities of European art music. Her goal in fact was consistent with the "ultra-modernist" aesthetic.

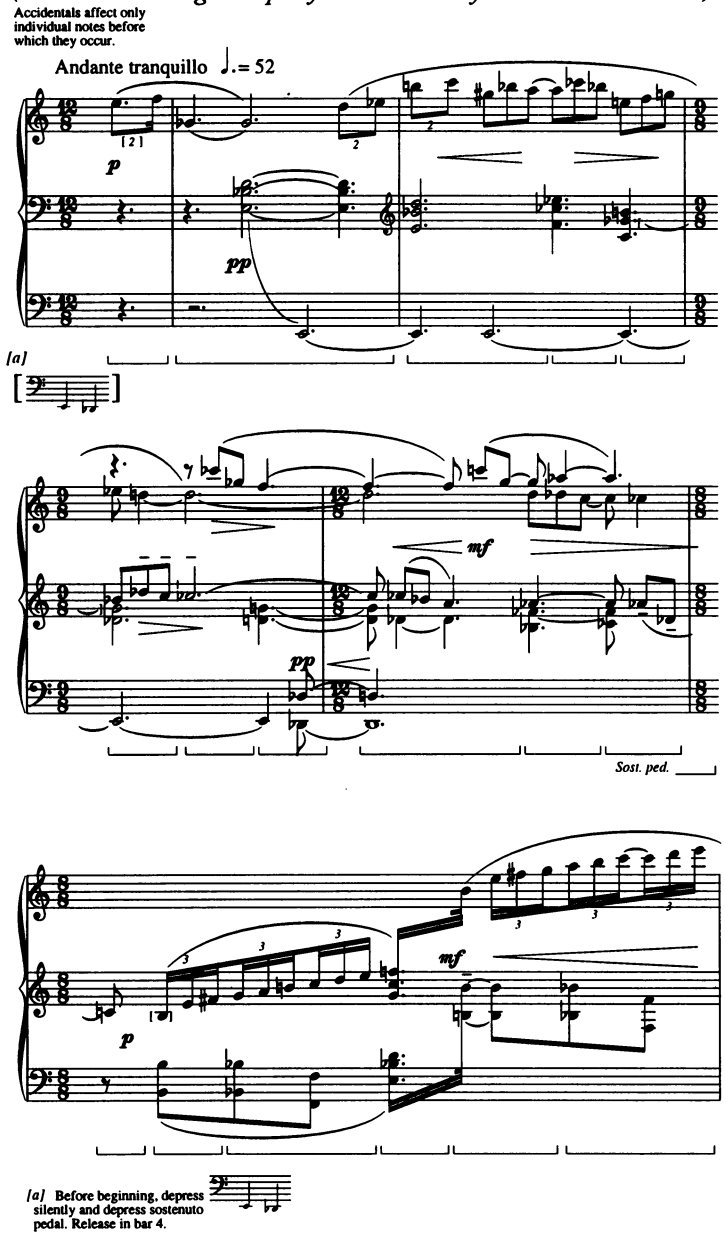
If that answer is satisfactory, we are still left with the question of why despite great talent and opportunity, Crawford produced very few works and willingly abandoned a promising career. Straus answers these questions by invoking the history of women in music. Because Crawford knew little art music by women composers of earlier generations, she had no tradition to sustain her, no female composers to emulate.

> Effectively cut off from their forebears, they [women composers] were forced not only to confront the musical challenges shared by their male colleagues, but simultaneously to engage the more difficult task of even imagining themselves as composers. This is what I have referred to...as the "anxiety of authorship" (p. 220).

Straus invokes a concept recently put forth by literary critics, the "female affiliation complex," a network of ambivalent attitudes women authors have toward their female precursors. "One strand in that complex may involve the reluctance of a woman author to identify herself with a tradition that, because it is female, has been widely devalued. She may turn in renunciation of her desire for a literary mother to the tradition of the father" (p. 221). Straus speculates that "by adopting a dissonant, ultra-modern idiom in her music, Crawford effectively cut herself off from the consolation and continuity of a distinctly female [domestic] tradition in music" (p. 221).

Straus's stimulating book ends with a bleak conclusion. "Ignorant of previous women composers of art music, and cut off musically from the women's tradition of domestic music, Crawford chose to make her way in a male-dominated world of musical modernism, one that was hostile to women in a deep and pervasive way" (p. 221). There may be truth in this diagnosis, but the Guggenheim and the support of her influential patrons raise some question about the hostility Crawford confronted. Perhaps Crawford like many promising artists of both sexes simply came to the boundary of her ambition or her confidence and stopped there.

Example 1. Ruth Crawford, Preludes for Piano, *no. 1, mm. 1–5 (Casia Publishing Company, Box 332, Bryn Mawr, PA 19010)*



[a] Before beginning, depress silently and depress sostenuto pedal. Release in bar 4.