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Women composers in early twentieth-century America were outsiders. The world of composition was dominated by men, acting as gatekeepers to the realm of musical relevance. Ruth Crawford Seeger is a rare example of a woman who became an influential and respected composer in early twentieth-century America. *Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Worlds* is a 308-page collection of essays, edited by Ray Allen and Ellie Hisama, that offers a comprehensive examination of Ruth Crawford’s diverse musical career as a twentieth-century composer, transcriber, writer, and educator. The first half of *RCSW* focuses on Crawford’s innovation and influence as an ultra-modern composer. The second half discusses her departure from composing “high art” works to transcribing and studying American folk music.

Although *RCSW* focuses on two contrasting parts of Crawford’s life, the authors effectively connect her interests in high-art and folk music by consistently highlighting her desire to mediate between the two genres. Chapters two and four, by Joseph Straus and Ellie Hisama respectively, work together particularly well to illustrate how Crawford’s political and compositional philosophies inspired her desire to reconcile the folk and high-art traditions. Crawford juxtaposed two competing types of melodies in many of her compositions to express “that even the most apparently irreconcilable conflicts can in fact be mediated” (53). Straus’s insight that Crawford’s “pre-compositional strategies” reflected her desire to mediate between the folk and high-art genres compliments Hisama’s chapter “In Pursuit of a Proletarian Music.”
Hisama’s chapter argues that Crawford’s motivation for composing “proletarian music” was “to reconcile the modernist musical idiom in which she was rigorously trained with her growing leftist political consciousness” (75). Crawford’s left-leaning political ideologies inspired her to write music that would combine the folk and high art traditions with the goal of conceiving a new genre to communicate with the proletariat (88-89). The parallels between Hisama’s and Straus’s chapters offer a valuable lesson about Ruth Crawford: her philosophies on politics, wealth, and American culture were very important factors in shaping her compositions.

Burkett’s analysis of Crawford’s 1930 composition, Piano Study in Mixed Accents, separates chapters two and four. It seems that the book’s editors grouped Straus’s and Burkett’s chapters together because they both address Crawford’s compositions from a theoretical perspective. The connection between Hisama’s and Straus’s explanations of Crawford’s interest in mediation between folk and high art music, however, would have been clearer had their chapters been placed in succession.

Whittall’s review of RCSW raises an important point about Crawford’s switch from high-art music to folk music: in devoting so much time to “saving” the folk tradition, Crawford suggested that high art music was able to “look after itself better than folk art could.”1 Although Whittall’s point is speculative, it offers an alternative to RCSW’s positive position regarding Crawford’s motivation for shifting to folk music. The authors would have done well to mention the possibility that Crawford may have had a subconscious patronizing attitude towards the folk music genre. Instead, the book comes across as somewhat myopic towards Crawford’s motivations for her involvement in folk music.

One of RCSW’s most important accomplishments is that it acknowledges the importance of Crawford’s gender without letting it define her as a composer. Judith Tick, a leading scholar on Crawford, authored the first essay in the collection and establishes the tone for how others address Crawford’s gender. Tick argues that “[j]ust as Western classical music rests on the social structures of patriarchy, so does the premise of the ‘woman composer’ as a category unto itself” (17). Her insight is particularly apt at the beginning of the book because it makes clear that RCSW will judge Crawford on her musical accomplishments, instead of defining her career by her gender. Tick’s invaluable biography on Ruth Crawford, from which RCSW borrows often, suggests Ruth Crawford would have supported this approach because she

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1 Whittall, “Ruth Crawford,” 683.
believed that “the more one acknowledged gender as an ‘issue,’ the less one felt a full citizen in the world of art.”

De Graaf’s chapter, “The Reception of an Ultramodernist,” examines Crawford’s gender as a cultural and historical factor, rather than as a tool with which to evaluate her musical accomplishments. While Crawford was a member of the “Composer’s Forum” in New York during the mid-1930s, critics resisted both her music and her presence in the forum. Instead of suggesting Crawford’s unfair treatment was a result of her gender, however, de Graaf states that critical resistance to Crawford was a reflection of “hostility prompted by deep-seated anxiety revolving around modernism and gender ideology” in early twentieth-century America (97). RCSW’s discussion of Crawford’s gender presents her as a composer first, choosing not to mention her gender to distinguish her.

Although the book’s approach to Crawford’s gender is effective, it does not mention several key issues relating to gender and modernism. Caricatures of the modernist composer are often masculine, and Hisama and Tick suggest the attitudes of modernists like Ives and Ruggles branded the modernist movement as inherently misogynistic and masculine. In his book *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, Richard Taruskin argues that Crawford composed dissonant music as a result of pressure to conform to the “norms of maverick manliness” during the modern era. Joseph Straus counters Taruskin by arguing that Crawford was drawn to dissonant composition because it represented an inclusive, universal approach to music. Straus’s position is supported by Crawford’s egalitarian political beliefs, as well as her desire to mediate between contrasting genres of music. Taruskin’s position is not as convincing because it does not fit with Crawford’s life philosophies. RCSW would have done well to mention the misogynistic undertones of the modernist movement, and to subsequently clarify that those undertones were not necessarily a significant factor in inspiring Crawford to compose dissonant music.

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Another important issue RCSW does not address adequately is whether Crawford’s gender was a factor in her decision to leave composition for folk music transcription. Taruskin claims Crawford was pushed to the brink of extreme modern composition by her male contemporaries until she “bounced all the way back to the other [extreme], forsaking classical composition for folk-song arranging.”  

Whittall’s review of RCSW states that Crawford’s switch from art to folk music was inspired by her husband. Unfortunately, RCSW relies on other scholarly work to object to these underestimations of Crawford’s autonomy. Hisama challenges both positions in her book Gendering Musical Modernism:

> there is no historical evidence that modernism’s alleged misogyny dissuaded [Crawford] from continuing to compose. Rather, Crawford’s desire to embrace folk music combined with her duties raising a family of four and of teaching music were . . . the reasons she chose to sidestep the world of art music until the 1950s.

It is possible that RCSW does not discuss the impact Crawford’s gender had on her dissonant compositions or her decision to stop composing art music because the authors decided neither argument was worth entertaining. While that position may be valid, neglecting both issues invites the reader to arrive at the same false conclusions that Taruskin and Whittall come to about Crawford’s gender and her musical decisions. RCSW could have avoided misleading the reader by mentioning the counter-arguments already provided by other scholars.

Nancy Yunhwa Rao’s chapter discusses Crawford’s significant influence on early twentieth-century American music, including her innovations in sliding tones, her influence on Elliott Carter’s and John Cage’s music, and her contributions to Charles Seeger’s compositional treatise. Rao contests that “the renewed recognition of Crawford the composer starting in the 1970s should be considered not so much as a new introduction of her music to the contemporary music scene but as away of introducing that which has already left its imprint” [emphasis in original] (137). Her argument contributes to a consistent attitude found throughout RCSW: Crawford’s compositions are not revered today because they have become valuable, but because her gender prevented them from being adequately recognized in her historical context.

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6 Taruskin, “The Danger,” 156.


Roberta Lamb writes of the connections between Crawford’s contributions to composition and folk education. Crawford used the same palindromic model for her lesson plans that she used in many of her modern compositions (184). Lamb contends that Crawford’s contributions to folk music education and ultra-modern composition should be valued equally. Other scholars support Lamb’s position. In their piece “American Folk Songs for Children,” Watts and Campbell commend Crawford’s philosophy of folk education for its emphasis on the musical and cultural identity of American children. They also point out that her influence on folk music education lives on in American schools today. Lamb’s chapter contributes to the overall quality of the book because it offers another example of how Crawford’s philosophies on music, education, politics, and life were all deeply intertwined.

Hirsch follows Lamb’s chapter with an examination of Crawford, Charles Seeger, and B.A. Botkin’s collaboration on folk music research. Hirsch’s chapter is the first to stray from the book’s central subject. The most valuable information in Hirsch’s chapter is that Crawford was, although not religious, deeply interested in spiritual philosophy (198). She believed in a “spirit world,” in which experiences of consciousness allow people to communicate to each other’s souls instead of their brains (199). If Hirsch had devoted his entire chapter to Crawford’s spirituality, he could have offered more valuable and new material to the book. Instead, the chapter distracts the reader with a discussion of B.A. Botkin’s ideas and successes in promoting American folklore. Hirsch’s chapter seems out of place with the rest of the collection.

The final two chapters are not consistent with the book’s focus. The eleventh chapter, by Ray Allen, presents an in-depth look into the career of Crawford’s son, Mike Seeger, as a folk revivalist. Assuming the average reader of RCSW wants to learn primarily about Ruth Crawford, s/he will be disappointed with this chapter. Allen states that “Mike gave credit to his father, Charles, along with folklorists Alan Lomax and D.K. Wilgus, for underscoring the importance of authentic folk style” (233). Allen should have confronted Mike Seeger’s omission of his mother from that list. He elects instead to let the sentence stand alone, missing an important opportunity. The twelfth chapter focuses on Crawford’s daughter, Peggy Seeger, and her development as a key figure in the American folk revival. This chapter is also a distraction from the central subject of the book, but Peggy Seeger does acknowledge Crawford for her influence and guidance several times (260). In sum, neither of the final two chapters contributes to the focus established in the first ten. It is curious that the editors decided to end the book

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10Ibid., 238.
with two chapters that are not directly about Ruth Crawford. RCSW would have been more focused as a collection had the purpose of the final two chapters been better explained by the book’s editors.

Moreover, some of Peggy Seeger’s statements about Crawford in the twelfth chapter contrast arguments made in earlier chapters, and there is no effort to reconcile the contradictions. The first ten chapters often mention Crawford’s left-leaning political principles and sympathies for the proletariat. Peggy says, however, that Crawford was “fascinated by folk music, but . . . didn’t really have any class orientation” (264). Hamessley argues that Crawford studied folk music because she was “intrigued by its possible usefulness as a resource for modernist composers who sought to develop a meaningful musical style” [emphasis mine] (253). The first ten chapters of the book argue that Crawford’s interest in folk music was inspired by her desire to reconcile classical and folk music and to help salvage American cultural music. The contradictions in Hamessley’s chapter are especially untimely because they are in the book’s final chapter.

RCSW is a worthwhile collection of essays that offers a comprehensive examination of Crawford’s careers as an ultra-modern composer, and as an American folk art transcriber and educator. The collection effectively connects Crawford’s work in both high-art and folk music by underlining her desire to mediate between the two genres. Although the book ignores several important issues regarding Crawford’s gender, the authors do well in acknowledging the importance of her gender without letting it define her legacy. The last three chapters of the book, however, are sometimes redundant, and their purpose in the collection is not made adequately clear. Further, the last two chapters are fraught with contradictions to the first ten. Shortcomings aside, RCSW is an excellent book for those interested in twentieth-century music, feminist musicology, Ruth Crawford Seeger, or American folk music.

For Further Reading:


