



Review of Ray Allen and Ellie M. Hisama, eds., *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds: Innovation and Tradition in Twentieth-Century American Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007)

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[1] I have written elsewhere of Varèse succumbing to the musical variant of Beckett's Syndrome, that scholarly condition whose principal symptom is the disproportionate relationship between the number of words written about a subject and those written by him or her.⁽¹⁾ With the appearance of this volume of essays, it would seem that we have another victim: as a composer, Ruth Crawford produced a relatively small number of works, none of which is for particularly large forces or of extended length; as an anthologist of, and commentator on, folk song, she contributed to around ten published collections. Yet prior to the present publication, Crawford had already been the subject of two musical biographies (by, respectively, Matilda Gaume and Judith Tick, the latter running to over 450 densely packed pages), as well as Joseph N. Straus's *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*, and numerous other parts of books, book chapters, journal articles, dissertations, and so on.⁽²⁾

[2] The above comments are not in any way intended to disparage either Crawford or her work (as I have, since the late 1970s, valued both extremely highly); rather, they are an indication of the dangers inherent in an academic climate that increasingly prioritizes quantity over quality, and research outputs over scholarly insights. With a compositional oeuvre as small, and as heavily based in precompositional planning, as is Crawford's, there is a finite amount that can be written about any particular piece or process. Thus, while in *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds* there are worthy chapters contributed by Straus, Lyn Ellen Burkett, and Ellie M. Hisama on various aspects of Crawford's music, those who have studied the scores are unlikely to find much (if anything) here that is new, beyond the jargoning of an obvious point, or the diagramming of a simple process: at some stage it has surely to be acknowledged that the identification of a 6–Z43 [012568] is of somewhat limited interest. Contrarily, readers who are relatively unfamiliar with Crawford's music will inevitably need to return to earlier, more comprehensive, commentaries in order to discover (and hopefully marvel at) the broader picture.

[3] Rather more useful—even to old lags like me—are several of the chapters that follow, which variously consider such topics as Crawford's 1938 appearance at the Composers' Forum (Melissa J. de Graaf); the (dis)similarities between Crawford's

The Music of American Folk Song and Charles Seeger's *Tradition and Experiment in the New Music*, both of which only appeared posthumously (Taylor A. Greer); Crawford's considerable achievements as an educator (Roberta Lamb); and the links between Crawford, Seeger, and Benjamin A. Botkin (Jerrold Hirsch). Despite the exploration of some of these territories in Judith Tick's book, there is a good deal here that expands our knowledge and helps to fill out the picture of the "whole Crawford." And although I feel less convinced by their presence here—would Charles Seeger's achievements ever be measured through, or against, those of his children, I wonder?²—there are in addition well researched and often illuminating chapters titled "Performing Dio's Legacy: Mike Seeger and the Urban Folk Music Revival" (Ray Allen) and "Peggy Seeger: From Traditional Folksinger to Contemporary Songwriter" (Lydia Hamessley).

[4] More problematic, at least to my mind, are the two remaining chapters (if we discount Bess Lomax Hawes's tantalizingly brief "Reminiscences on *Our Singing Country*"). On the one hand, both Judith Tick ("Writing the Music of Ruth Crawford into Mainstream Music History") and Nancy Yunhwa Rao ("Ruth Crawford's Imprint on Contemporary Composition") carry out important work in demonstrating the degree to which Crawford's achievements sit in the broader frame of twentieth-century music and its interpretation. Thus, comparing the first and second editions of Wilfrid Mellers's *Music in a New Found Land*, Tick pointedly asks how a *woman* [my emphasis] was transformed "from nobody to genius" in the space of less than twenty-five years (page 9). And in similar fashion, Rao establishes many significant similarities between Crawford's compositional techniques and those of several later figures. On the other hand, though, I can't help feeling that, for whatever reason (be it based in issues of artistic precedence, of gender, or of overdue reparation) both authors go just a little too far in their claims on Crawford's behalf.

[5] Tick is the first to voice a refrain that reappears a hundred pages later in Rao's chapter: that (in Anne Shreffler's words, quoted on page 22) "the fruitful milieu of Varèse, Crawford, and Cowell was just as essential to [Elliott] Carter's elaborate structures as it was to Cage's anarchies." Neither this, nor any of the other similar claims made subsequently, is either new or news. But what *does* seem unprecedented is the degree to which Crawford appears cast here as the victim of a deliberate plot, or as a ewe unfairly sacrificed on the altar of male artistic supremacy. Teresa Davidian is quoted on page 23 as having claimed a few years back that "For all the attention and tribute paid to Crawford over the years, scholars have stopped short of investigating her influence on other composers." Beyond the palpable nonsense of this statement lies the need also to acknowledge that (pro rata) Crawford has probably suffered no more neglect in this, if not other, respects than have Cowell, Cage, and a veritable legion of others. It is—surely—a truth universally acknowledged that a singleton in possession of artistic ambition must also be in want of existing examples from which to copy: hence Bach's transcriptions of Vivaldi, Mozart's salutations to Haydn, Wagner's appropriations of Meyerbeer, Crawford's numerous allusions in her earlier music to Skryabin, and Carter's borrowings from Crawford. But it is also a truth universally unacknowledged that artists of all persuasions, not least as a result of their individual prides and prejudices, do everything they can to cover their traces in matters of precedence and influence.

[6] There are, in addition, a few minor quibbles: the editors are wrong to assume that all their readers are fully fluent in French and can therefore be spared translations; occasional typos are included, but a bibliography is not; it is at least twice asserted that Crawford's Three Songs of 1930–32 are "commonly known as 'Rat Riddles'" (which was news to me); and in the introduction, history is rewritten—or at least given an unusual spin—as we are informed that when Crawford moved to New York in 1929, she "became a vital participant in the 'ultramodern' school of composition, a group of composers that included Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, Marc Blitzstein, and Earl Robinson" (page 2). Overall, then, this is an often valuable, but at times frustrating, volume. Dare I conclude by hoping that it will be the last for some time on Crawford, and that instead scholars will turn their attention to some of her unappreciated, undervalued, and distinctly under-studied contemporaries, such as Johanna Beyer, Vivian Fine, Ray Green, and William Russell?

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Footnotes

1. Review of Felix Meyer and Heidi Zimmermann, eds., *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006) in *Music & Letters* 88/4 (2007): 702–4.

[Return to text](#)

2. Matilda Gaume, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Memoirs, Memories, Music* (Metuchen N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1986); Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Joseph N. Straus, *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For additional studies of Crawford and her work, see the bibliography of her *Grove Online* article, though noting that this only includes items published by 1999.

[Return to text](#)

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