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Judith Tick. *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. xiv, 457 pp. ISBN 0-19- 506509-3 (hardcover)

Joseph N. Straus. *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xii, 260 pp. ISBN 0-521-41646-9 (hardcover)

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[See table of contents](#)

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*Webern Studies* makes an important contribution. It offers a representative sample of recent Webern scholarship, confirms that Webern scholarship is alive and thriving, and holds out the promise that the “breath of life” (p. xvi) achieved in this volume will find continued expression in future Webern scholarship.

Catherine Nolan

Judith Tick. *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. xiv, 457 pp. ISBN 0-19-506509-3 (hardcover).

Joseph N. Straus. *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xii, 260 pp. ISBN 0-521-41646-9 (hardcover).

Although Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–53) wrote the majority of her original compositions during the 1920s and early 1930s—after this period, she wrote an orchestral fantasy in 1939 and her *Suite for Wind Quintet* in 1952—most of her work first appeared in print beginning in the 1970s. Only her *Three Songs to Poems by Carl Sandburg* (1930–32) and her *String Quartet 1931* were published during her lifetime (1933 and 1941, respectively). This publication record speaks to the renaissance of her work in the last two decades, a period characterised by increasing attention to the musical contributions and lives of women composers. With Judith Tick’s biography we can explore and appreciate Crawford’s musical development and career in the context of her life story, and with Joseph Straus’s analytical study of her music, we can understand from a theoretical perspective the musical structure and style of her modernist compositions.

Judith Tick’s biography traces significant events that shaped Crawford’s personal and professional lives. The commentary is based on diary entries, letters, poems, critical reviews, and Ruth Crawford’s own autobiographical sketch (ca. 1947). Tick illuminates the literary value of Crawford’s writings, and indeed admits her own fascination for how Crawford “construct[s] her life as literature” (p. 297). In addition, Tick provides a broader social context by exploring Crawford’s mature life; political history also comes into play, especially through husband Charles Seeger’s interest in politics and proletarian music. What Tick accomplishes here is quite staggering—she explores Crawford’s personal and professional life through the lens of American social, historical, political, and musical history. She does all of this with a feminist sensibility, thereby making a major contribution to the field of women’s studies, providing a model of how to write a female composer’s life.

Tick’s feminist contribution exists not only in the fact that she is offering a careful study of a woman’s life and professional contributions. It is partly that, of course, but the feminist content exists more in the emphasis on gender and its role in the life and work of this individual. Tick is not only interested in the life events as absolute facts, but also in how various social factors effected and affected those events. One very strong message that emerges from Tick’s narrative is that the personal and the professional sides of Crawford’s life created two equally powerful forces on the composer, who constantly strove to achieve

a balance between them. She herself referred to this balancing act as her “career vs. love and children” battle (p. 173). Readers who are also “straddlers” will laud Tick’s effort to bring out those very personal and private details of Crawford’s existence, and thus to write such an honest account of this woman’s life.

One of the problems Tick had to confront in her task was the “female composer” question. That is, any feminist or gender-sensitive study of a woman composer must, by definition, address the question of how gender shaped and influenced her identity as a composer. Tick explores this through Crawford’s own thoughts as well as the evaluation of her music by others. Crawford did not describe herself as a “woman composer” and Tick asserts that this avoidance was deliberate—“to ignore is to resist” (p. 86). Although never self-described as a feminist, Crawford’s husband Charles Seeger referred to her as an “ardent feminist” because of her belief in intellectual equality between men and women (p. 86). It is interesting that she did not belong to the Society of American Woman Composers, or comparable organizations for women. As Tick proceeds, we learn that Crawford’s struggle to succeed in a male-dominated profession was largely a private one. Apart from close ties with certain individual women, such as Marion Bauer, she did not generally seek the company of women for professional support.

Tick organizes the biography chronologically as well as geographically, beginning with Crawford’s childhood and youth (1901–20) and then chronicling the periods of Crawford’s life spent in Chicago (1921–29), New York (1929–30 and 1932–36), Europe (1930–31), and Washington (1936–53). Because Tick takes a chronological approach, while at the same time providing many details on Crawford’s varied and layered existence, it is difficult to trace her compositional career. Tick juggles all of the various threads of Crawford’s life, much as Crawford herself had to juggle so many different roles, both personal and professional. Tick does offer a chapter on each period of compositional activity (chapters 5, 13, 17, and 21). For these chapters, the chronological narrative is interrupted, and the reader is offered the opportunity to reflect simply on the contributions of this great composer.

Despite a fairly short compositional career, Crawford had the opportunity to work with many influential figures in the American music scene. At the American Conservatory in Chicago she studied with the pianists Henriot Levy, Louise Robyn, and Djane Lavoie Herz, as well as with the composer Adolph Weidig. She also had the opportunity to meet Dane Rudhyar, part of the American avant-garde, a circle of “ultra-modern” composers. This group included Henry Cowell, who encouraged Crawford to join after he heard her music. Another Chicago associate was the poet Carl Sandburg; she not only set his poetry, but also contributed to his anthology of folk music. Before moving on to New York City, Crawford spent some time at the MacDowell Colony, where she became friends with Marion Bauer. In New York she began her study of “dissonant counterpoint” with Charles Seeger. Tick details the work they did together, and considers Crawford’s role in the production of his treatise on composition. Another significant professional contact for Ruth Crawford was John Lomax. During the late 1930s and 1940s she turned her attention to folk

arrangements and transcriptions, and worked with Lomax (and his son Alan) on *Our Singing Country* and *Folk Song USA*. Tick dedicates chapter 17 to Crawford's transcription techniques, which were heralded as innovative and sensitive. Chapter 21 then discusses her folksong arrangements, published in anthologies which occupied her professional time during the 1940s.

For the reader who is primarily interested in Crawford's musical contributions, the subtitle of this biography, "A Composer's Search for American Music," reflects an important theme in Crawford's life. The 1920s and early 1930s were a period of discovery for the young composer. In Chicago she revelled in her new-found talent and then blossomed as Seeger's student in New York. She embraced the style of ultramodernism and excelled at the highly technical manipulation of specific pitch and rhythm relations. However, as Tick so thoughtfully illustrates, in the mid 1930s, Crawford found herself in a compositional hiatus. Her attention was split in many directions, torn between work and family, but also torn between new composition and folk music. In the late 1930s when she tried to compose again, she experienced a new-found desire to combine the principles of folk music simplicity with her old love, modernism. Her last two compositions, *Rissoltry*, *Rosoltry* (1939) and *Suite for Wind Quintet* (1952), were her solutions to this profound dilemma.

Chapter 5 is a discussion of Crawford's "first distinctive style period" (1924–29), providing stylistic context and classification, as well as brief analytic descriptions of this early music. Tick categorizes the music from this period as "post-tonal pluralism" (p. 65). She explains that Crawford, along with other American composers, was exposed to European music (Scriabin, Stravinsky) in a relatively neutral context, removed from political-intellectual stances. Indeed Varèse advocated a pluralistic approach when he launched the International Composers' Guild. The analysis here is cursory, but provides a window into the general style and stylistic influences. It is offered in a rather descriptive style, highly imbued with Tick's own subjective response. The music of Crawford's second style period (1930–32) is studied in chapter 13. Here Tick cites the analytic work of Joseph Straus, focusing on some of the more technical aspects of Crawford's compositional process, specifically "dissonated melody, number centrality, the establishment of formal symmetries and their confoundment" (p. 212). During this discussion, Tick refers frequently to the influence of Charles Seeger, a subject which is most thoroughly explored by Joseph Straus in his book.

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In *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*, Joseph Straus analyzes Crawford's music using formal theoretical systems which fall under the general rubrics of atonal theory and twelve-tone theory. By analyzing her music according to the theoretical principles used to study the music of the second Viennese school, Crawford is thus placed alongside the great modernist composers of the twentieth century. The book has a value not only as a route into this particular composer's music, but also as a study of atonal theory and its applications to modernism.

In witnessing Straus's careful application of the theory to a music that has not yet been studied so exhaustively, the reader is offered a new perspective on the theory itself at the same time that this remarkable repertoire is brought to light. This book thus has enormous value for both scholars of atonal theory and Ruth Crawford's music. I myself have used it in courses on twentieth-century theory, and have found it to be useful to students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels; it is important, however, for these students to have a foundation in atonal theory in order to work successfully through Straus's analyses.

In addition to the traditional theoretical tools of set theory and twelve-tone theory, this study also draws on more recent developments of those fields by transformational networks and contour theory. In addition, and of great import, Straus incorporates the theoretical/analytical insights of Charles Seeger, who was Crawford's teacher and husband. The passages which focus on Seeger's theory are valuable for their own sake, and through these ideas we are given a theoretical perspective on Crawford's music that is an authoritative guide to her compositional practice. Crawford was intimately involved in the preparation of Seeger's manuscripts. In addition, as Straus points out, some of her mature works began as compositional exercises for Seeger and thus explore theoretical constructs that are explained in his treatise.

Straus's book is organized into four chapters, but the body of the work comprises two main parts. After a brief introduction, the first part is an extensive theoretical chapter, "Elements of a Style," which studies the technical aspects of Crawford's music, organized according to specific musical parameters (melody, form, counterpoint, harmony, etc.). Straus cites examples from Crawford's entire compositional output, and exposes the originality of her musical ideas. In this chapter, the discussion privileges the theoretical/technical content over the analysis of individual works. The second part, "Six Analyses," offers a more thorough analytic study of selected music from her mature style.

In his theoretical chapter, Straus begins with and devotes considerable attention to melodic procedures. Crawford focused much of her attention upon melodic and linear development, especially when working with Seeger. Straus's melody section occupies almost half of the theoretical chapter (pp. 5–48) and it is here that Crawford's core compositional concerns are defined and explored. Even as the chapter moves on to different parameters, many of the melodic processes continue to be engaged as central to the theoretical argument. The first part of the melody section focuses, as Straus says, on Crawford's "strategies of avoidance" (p. 20). Some of the principles of Charles Seeger's theory of dissonant counterpoint were expressed as negative values: the *avoidance* of pitch, intervallic, or triadic repetition or emphasis. In other words, in order to create "dissonation" Seeger identified ways to avoid tonal or consonant emphasis by defining strategies for the use of the total chromatic.

Seeger also discussed the importance of motivic treatment, exploring motivic shapes and transformations through the concept of "neume," a musical shape or contour, which can apply to pitch, dynamics, timbre, tempo, accent, or proportions. Despite the versatility of the neume within other parameters (timbre, tempo, etc.), Straus focuses on the pitch or melodic neume and goes so far as to

identify one particular neume as Crawford's "fingerprint"—a three-note motive which rises by a distance of two semitones, and then falls a semitone. Straus identifies this motive as M1, and studies its articulation and transformation throughout her music. He extends Seeger's concept of neumatic transformation, using some of the tools of contemporary atonal theory. The result is a series of functions, beyond the basic P, I, R, and RI forms, that allow an analyst to connect musical ideas. For instance, a melodic gesture which rises three semitones, and falls two semitones (+3, -2) would be an expansion of M1 (+2, -1), since each interval is expanded by one chromatic step. Anyone familiar with Lewin's transformations would be quite comfortable with the discussion here.

As Straus offers a motivic or neumatic reading of a given passage or section of a work, he will trace the transformational path of an important neume, such as M1, and will attribute a motivic function to the majority of pitches in the melody. A motivic statement might occur as a contiguous set of three notes, or it might be interpreted as a large-scale connection of three non-contiguous notes. The influence of organicism is evident here, as surface and large-scale connections are privileged as an important organizational feature of the melodic structure. However, Straus does not claim that his analyses are absolute, but rather clearly states that there will be alternate ways of hearing a given passage: "Crawford's melodies are multivalent, slippery, and elusive, resisting any single interpretation" (p. 38).

Straus also defines a series of functions or transformations which account for melodic process at the level of a single note. That is, he interprets the events of a given melody according to principles of melodic generation, pitch-space symmetry, chromatic completion, and registral expansion. He illustrates this analytic technique with the first phrase of Crawford's *Diaphonic Suite no. 1*, first movement. Note by note, Straus describes the generation of the melody, considering each new note in relation to what has gone before and using one of his transformational functions to describe each event. This way, as one "reads" the musical passage, the reader is treated to a narrative of the melody at a pace that permits reflection and theoretical speculation, and indeed, Straus refers to this analysis as a kind of narration (p. 45).

Although Crawford composed using a variety of musical forms and structures, Straus singles out one particular formal type for discussion in his theoretical chapter: the verse form, as defined by Seeger (who distinguished it from "prose form," sectionalized dance music). With the former, Seeger was interested in ways in which music could imitate poetic forms and metres. Techniques of musical rhyme were important in that regard, and what better way to achieve such musical rhyme than through the neumatic or motivic development which was also central to Seeger's theory? Straus illustrates the results of such compositional interest in his analysis of Crawford's *Diaphonic Suite no. 1*, fourth movement. This discussion illustrates how broader musical concerns such as phrase and cadential strength can interact with the detailed workings of neumatic transformation and melodic process. Seeger defined another strategy of phrase organization that is, according to Straus, "virtually a universal feature of Crawford's music": the articulation of a "phrase-neume" or "form-neume" (p.

57). With this strategy the composer projects a surface motive over an entire phrase. Certain notes of the melody will be emphasized and these notes will combine to form a statement of the surface motive. This kind of organic structure obviously informed Straus's earlier melodic/motivic analyses, yet here it is explicitly identified as a device for creating formal coherence.

Straus takes Seeger's phrase neume, or motivic projection to its logical next step within the context of contemporary atonal theory and transformation theory. He uses the term "transpositional projection" to account for a series of transpositional operations that themselves reflect the melodic profile of the motive being transposed. This is yet another means to create structural coherence over a larger form. Straus also discusses the importance of precompositional plans such as retrograde symmetry, rotational serialism, and ostinato in Crawford's music. Despite their familiarity as compositional strategies, Straus illuminates the fact that Crawford found ingenious ways of working with these devices. He also explores her own apparent distinction between free melodic process and such precompositional processes: "Crawford seems to equate her melodies with growth, evolution, spontaneity, change, and freedom, and the serial operations with stasis, planning, and a kind of mechanized slavery" (pp. 74-75). In his analysis of "Chinaman, Laundryman," Straus illustrates how the dichotomy between free and strict can be put to work in the communication of a socio-political message.

Although the greater emphasis is placed on melodic process, Straus does devote considerable time to the vertical dimension of Crawford's music. Seeger encouraged the composition of dissonant counterpoint and used the term "heterophony" to describe "a particularly intense polyphony in which the individual parts are concerned only with their own internal organization, not with the content or behavior of their neighbors" (p. 80). This concept of counterpoint had great appeal for Crawford, and Straus identifies such an interest in melodic independence even before her studies with Seeger (p. 81). When the lines are maximally independent, Straus suggests that it is quite difficult to discover the connections that bind the counterpoint. In other words, he once again privileges the notion of organic coherence. He identifies three techniques for coordinating the parts in a heterophonic texture: shared motivic content, intervallic consistency, and inversional pairing. The first two techniques are natural issues to investigate in the study of counterpoint. The third derives from Straus's interest in inversional symmetry, which was an important part of his analytic methodology for melodic process. Now in a contrapuntal context, Straus explores the potential for pitch symmetry around a central pivot, yet again he allows for a rapidly shifting pitch centre, and even sometimes two different centres simultaneously, one in each of the two contrapuntal lines (p. 91).

In such a thorough and systematic study of Crawford's compositional style and procedures, one might imagine that the discussion could become so theoretical or technical that the music would be lost. However, Straus gives the music its due emphasis. Theoretical discussions are always organized around a specific musical example; the reader is always provided with an illustration of the abstract construct being discussed. In a discussion of this sort, one is only able

to consider a brief excerpt or passage of a work, leaving one to speculate about the larger context and the continuation of the process. There are certain pieces to which Straus refers several times, and the reader could construct a more comprehensive analysis by patching together the individual fragments of the analysis. In this regard, the index is not always adequate as a guide to the separate references for a given work.

By the end of the extensive theoretical chapter, the reader is certainly more than ready to consider a thorough and continuous analysis of a single work. Chapter 3 provides six analytic essays, which illustrate how all of the theoretical parameters can come together in a comprehensive interpretation. During this chapter, the reader is still dependent on the theoretical chapter, as terms and theoretical concepts emerge that were given proper explanation in chapter 2. Occasionally one must refer back to that chapter for a definition or explanation.

Given the status of the String Quartet as Crawford's best-known work, most readers will want to consider Straus's analysis of its third and fourth movements. Crawford herself wrote about these movements; her commentary is included as an appendix to Tick's biography and Tick also analyzes this music at the end of her chapter 13. The discussions by Crawford, Tick and Straus illustrate the different approaches that one can take to the work. Crawford offers her analysis as technical observations on the formal organization and use of particular rhythmic and dynamic patterns. Using Crawford as a point of departure, Tick provides a good general summary of the motivic and formal procedures used in each movement. She makes frequent references to sketches, diary descriptions, and manuscript evidence, which provides a valuable context for the compositional history of this monumental work. Straus also uses Crawford's own analysis as a point of departure, but then pursues a formal theoretical approach, which allows him to put his analytic machinery to work. A careful reading of these three passages would be a valuable assignment in any twentieth-century analysis course.

Crawford died of intestinal cancer in the middle of a full and rewarding life. She kept her various projects going even as she suffered with this illness, and through Tick's sensitive portrayal of the final stage of her life, the reader is made acutely aware of the loss that her death represented. Perhaps in response to the overwhelming feeling of the abruptness of her death, Tick provides the reader with an epilogue, which allows the Crawford narrative to continue with a brief glance at her legacy—her children and their activities, as well as her musical contributions and their reception. In his final chapter, Straus also takes the opportunity to reflect on Crawford's life and work; even though his work was primarily intended to be analytical and theoretical, he still provides some biographical information and considers her work in the context of the ultra-modern movement, as well as in the context of women in music. It is a testimony to Ruth Crawford that her musical and personal achievements are equally held in such high esteem.