

William Robin, "The Pioneering Modernist Who Wrote an Audacious String Quartet," *The New York Times* (Oct. 13, 2017)

Ruth Crawford Seeger created pathbreaking music. But her family's folk revival legacy has overshadowed her avant-garde compositions.

"In Europe one can work!" the young composer Ruth Crawford declared with excitement. Traveling abroad on a Guggenheim fellowship — the first woman to receive one — she had arrived in Berlin in 1930 planning to write her first orchestral piece.

Though mostly oblivious to the political upheaval in Germany at the time, she paid close attention to the latest in European musical trends, if only to dismiss them. French Neo-Classicism was "sickeningly sweet inanity," she wrote to her teacher and lover Charles Seeger back in New York. Although residing in the same city as Arnold Schoenberg, she avoided studying with the master of 12-tone composition.

"To work alone: I am convinced this is what I should do, to discover what I really want," she decided.

But the intended symphony never appeared. "I began to write down all my fears and was rather appalled," she wrote to Seeger a few months later. "Fear of having nothing to say musically, fear of not being able to say it, fear, fear, a whole web of it."

A different sound emerged: "It insisted on becoming a string quartet." With that new direction, she wrote, "the music came more easily, and after these six months of almost complete silence, it is such a relief." Crawford's "String Quartet 1931," which the JACK Quartet will play on Oct. 21 at the Miller Theater at Columbia University, was a significant contribution to the canon of American modernism, a hyper-refined and densely dissonant work that foreshadowed the postwar avant-garde. But shortly after its completion, Crawford returned to the United States and married Seeger. In short succession, she became a wife, a mother, a leftist and a folk revivalist. And for the next two decades, before she died at 52 in 1953, she wrote only a handful of works. ...

Born in 1901, Crawford grew up in Jacksonville, Fla., the daughter of a Methodist minister who passed away when she was 12. As Judith Tick's magisterial 1997 biography reveals, the 20-year-old Crawford traveled to Chicago to study piano after showing musical promise. The model female music career at the time was that of a "woman pianist"; she might achieve the status of a successful touring virtuoso and, if not, could settle for a comfortable income as a music teacher.

Though her mother wrote hoping that Crawford might become "a real lady musician, with nice manners and poise and self-confidence and pretty clothes," she swiftly bobbed her hair in the style of a flapper and befriended artists including the poet Carl Sandburg. And she increasingly saw her harmony lessons as a path toward a different life.

"It is so interesting, the composing of one's own melodies," she wrote home.

Crawford found her compositional voice just as modernism was emerging in American music. A previous generation of composers had developed a symphonic sound steeped in that of Antonin Dvorak, who famously visited the United States in 1892. But upstart vanguardists like Charles Ives and Henry Cowell instead took an idiosyncratic and disharmonious approach that shirked European models.

Crawford had a stint as a disciple of the cultish composer-philosopher Dane Rudhyar, and her first mature pieces, a series of searching and austere piano preludes, take the mystical chromaticism of Scriabin as a point of departure.

She was soon heralded by ultramodernists like Cowell, who praised her as a "completely natural dissonant composer." He recommended that she study in New York with his former teacher Charles Seeger, who had begun to develop a new model for avant-garde composition. This theory of dissonant counterpoint would invert traditional rules of harmonic writing and, Seeger believed, create a musical language at once radically discordant and uniquely American.

A paternalistic figure who once said that "women can't write symphonies," Seeger was initially skeptical of Crawford, but their first lesson lasted hours. She became indispensable to his work, helping draft his

counterpoint treatise and enacting its musical principles in her new scores by “dissonating” melodies into disjunct figures and refracting rhythms in willfully independent lines.

In her thrillingly compact “Piano Study in Mixed Accents,” a sinewy, rapid-fire melody bursts from the keyboard with shifting inflections. And her grittily angular Diaphonic Suites, written for unusual pairings of instruments like oboe and cello, weave stratified contrapuntal textures that point forward to Elliott Carter’s [music](#) of 30 years later.

Crawford and Seeger, who was an unhappily married father of three when they met, fell in love as she prepared to leave for her Guggenheim-funded trip to Europe. While abroad, she wrote a small body of astoundingly inventive music, including [ethereal choral works](#), [pulverizing songs](#) and the “[String Quartet 1931](#).”

The quartet helped secure her musical legacy, especially when it was rediscovered by midcentury composers like George Perle and Carter, who acknowledged the work as a major influence. Each movement is a miniature essay, bringing to visceral musical life the ideas of dissonant counterpoint. The Andante, her most famous piece, consists of a fierce litany of minuscule swells attaining such expressive energy that the music becomes a kind of discordant version of Barber’s Adagio for Strings.

But the quartet was more end than beginning. Crawford returned to New York, married Seeger and stepped eagerly into the role of stepmother to his children, and then mother of four of their own. (She also added Seeger to her name and is widely known to posterity as Ruth Crawford Seeger.)

Seeger struggled with his own attempts at composition and, though notionally supportive of her work, placed Crawford in charge of domestic duties. She acutely felt the pull between family and music, or what she once described in a letter as her “‘career vs. love and children’ battle.” During a creative crisis, she burned a score for a violin sonata she wrote in Chicago, seemingly renouncing her previous success. Asked about her current productivity by an audience member at a 1938 concert of her older music, she described her recent work as “composing babies.”

Crawford’s musical development was further upended by the Depression, which awakened in many American artists the desire to seek a language that would speak to the common man. Seeger embraced the moment, publishing articles in workers’ newspapers agitating for proletarian music. Crawford was less vocal politically, but again put into practice her husband’s theories in the militant songs “Sacco, Vanzetti” and “Chinaman, Laundryman,” which use clashes between vocalist and pianist as an analogy for class struggle.

And then came folk music. In 1935, the family moved to Washington, where Seeger took a job in the government. Vernacular art was increasingly important to the American left, and the couple became closely acquainted with the father-and-son folklorists John and Alan Lomax, who had been traveling the country capturing traditional songs on phonograph. John Lomax asked Crawford to help prepare an anthology of written arrangements of his field recordings, and she quickly became a fastidious transcriptionist.

Subsequent collections of folk arrangements published under Crawford’s name gave her national prominence, and the Seeger clan — which included her children Mike and Peggy and her stepson Pete — became a crucial force in the American folk revival. But the children, who called her “Dio,” had little knowledge of their mother’s former life as a beacon of American ultramodernism.

“I only knew her folk music persona, her classical piano playing, her attempts to cook,” Peggy writes in a new memoir, “First Time Ever,” coming in November from Faber & Faber. “Dio the Composer virtually did not exist in my growing up.”

Crawford attempted to reconcile her folk present and her dissonant past with a second quartet, but no sketches for it survive. “Will I ever write really simple music?” she wondered in a letter to Seeger. The only evidence of such a synthesis comes in her sole orchestral work, the all-too-short “Rissolty Rossolty,” which was the result of a 1939 commission from Alan Lomax’s CBS radio show and spins folk tunes into an exuberant clangor.

In 1948, Crawford penned a letter to the composer Edgard Varèse outlining the principles of her style, including an emphasis on clear melodic lines, independent rhythmic parts, musical cohesion and dissonance. “I still feel strongly about them,” she wrote. “I believe when I write more music these elements will still be there.”

And in 1952, Crawford did return to writing, with a compact and forceful wind quintet composed for a competition, which she won.

“I believe I’m going to work again — more,” she wrote. “If I live to be 99 as my grandfather did, that gives me 48 more years.”

A new creative confidence began to take hold. But it was quickly followed by a cancer diagnosis, and this pathbreaking American modernist died the following year.

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