

RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER'S NEW COMPOSITIONAL SYSTEMS

The American composer Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953) developed techniques for structuring pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and texture that anticipated both Integral Serialism and process-based Minimalism (see Chapters 10 and 14). Born in Florida, she studied at the American Conservatory in Chicago before moving to New York in the mid-1920s and establishing herself as a composer in what became known as the Ultra-Modernist group that included Carl Ruggles, Varèse, Cowell, and Charles Seeger, whom she married in 1932.

Crawford Seeger composed her String Quartet (1931) while in Berlin on a Guggenheim Fellowship, the first to be awarded to a woman. Each of the four movements explores different innovative possibilities for systematically organizing the elements of music. In an analysis prepared at Varèse's request, she described the third movement as "a heterophony of dynamics—a sort of counterpoint of *crescendi* and *diminuendi*." The final movement was a struggle between two voices in which the idea of dissonance is applied to dynamics and rhythm: "There is therefore a sort of dissonance within each voice between volume, in dynamics and number of tones, and also a sort of dissonance between the voices, in volume and number."

At the start of the fourth movement, the first violin plays a single emphatic note that grows, one note at a time, into a melody 20 notes long (Ex. 7.6). The other three instruments reverse the pattern, starting with a muted 20-note melody played in unison that with each statement becomes one note shorter until it is reduced to a single note. Crawford Seeger bases the lower voice on a 10-note row that is rotated with each statement to start on a new pitch. At the same time these processes unfold, the two voices exchange their dynamic character, the violin becoming softer as its statements are extended, and the lower instruments growing louder and more strident. In the second half of the movement all these processes are reversed, with both voices transposed up a half step, resulting in a large-scale palindrome.

These elaborate structural devices may have had programmatic significance for Crawford Seeger; for example, she characterized the relationship between the two voices in the String Quartet's finale as a struggle between two characters of contrasting mood and personality, pitting the initially forceful and uncomplicated top voice against the more subdued and unsettled lower voice. Scholars have read the movement as an expression of her own struggles to establish herself as a composer in a hostile, male-dominated environment. Shortly before she began work on the Quartet, she wrote in her diary: "I also vent my spleen today on the fact of being a woman, or rather on the fact that beastly men, not satisfied with their own freedom, encroach on that of women and produce in them a kind of necessitous fear which binds them about."

Though she later turned her attention to folk music and other more accessible musical forms, Crawford Seeger saw no contradiction in the early 1930s between new compositional systems and music with a political purpose. The song "Chinaman, Laundryman," the first of her *Two Ricercari* (1932), concerns

Example 7.6: Ruth Crawford Seeger, *String Quartet*, movement 4, mm. 1–14. (Accidentals affect only the note before which they appear.)

Allegro possibile

ffz *ffz ffz*

pp sempre con sordino

pp sempre con sordino

pp sempre con sordino

sempre ff

3

the exploitation of Chinese immigrants and explicitly calls for the workers of the world to unite against economic and social oppression. The text was originally published in the Communist newspaper *The Daily Worker*. The second *Ricercare* denounced the execution of the Italian-American anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in 1919. “Chinaman, Laundryman” is based on systematic transformations of a nine-note row, while the rhythm in each measure explores all the possible permutations of three rhythmic patterns; against this rigid framework the *Sprechstimme* voice struggles to assert its independence. The *Two Ricercari* were presented for a mass audience in the First American Workers Music Olympiad in New York in 1933.