

Composer, Interrupted

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2001 AT 4 A.M.



Ruth Crawford, 1901-1953

Photo courtesy of Elmhurst College

Fifty years later, everyone's agreed on one thing: She never should have quit composing. And people are angry about it. For Ruth Crawford (1901-53) was the first great modernist woman composer, the first woman to tread, as an equal, the same thorny territory as Schoenberg, Ives, and Varese. In certain striking ways, she was more than an equal. From Henry Cowell she inherited a rhythmic theory of complex polyrhythms, and from her husband, Charles Seeger, a system for dissonant counterpoint, and arguably made more fully evolved music using both of those resources than Cowell and Seeger themselves did. Yet she quit composing in 1932, had her first child the next year (future folksinger Mike Seeger), became a collector and arranger of folk songs, and composed only one more work a few months before her death, leaving behind some two dozen songs, her notebooks, and a few manuscripts.

dozen gems heartbreaking in their promise.

For 50 years it seemed that no one thought much about Crawford except a few Americanist music historians, but Sarah Cahill's homage to her at Merkin Hall in the Interpretations series December 13 revealed that Crawford's memory has been smoldering in places one wouldn't have expected. Cahill had the happy idea of commissioning seven women composers, five from this coast and two from the other, to write homage pieces for Crawford's centennial, preceding them with Crawford's own Nine Preludes of 1924-28. The resulting essays revealed much affection for Crawford, mixed with a residual anger that music history's first great female figure gave up her art to raise children.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. The Depression was an immense challenge to the ultramodernists, forcing them into more populist strains if not out of composition altogether; even male composer Arthur Berger quit writing during the '30s for lack of any affinity for the political climate. But a strong counter-argument came from composer Eve Beglarian, who found in an innocent-seeming poem that Crawford had written at age 13 a shocking presentiment of her life's path. The poem tells of Crawford sitting by the fire and seeing her hopes for the future blaze up and then die away in the flickering light. First she sees herself as a poet and novelist, then as a famous musician, but: "That flame then grows dim, which to me seems to say,/That my first hope must soon die away, . . . /And then, after many flames rise, and die down,/The first burns even and slow,/And I see myself singing to children my own,/On the porch of a small bungalow." That 13-year-old would have been no doubt astonished by the angry descending chords Beglarian wrote, and also by the spare, mournful motives the music finally died away to.

Anger showed itself too in the big tone clusters that intermittently broke through minimalist figurations in Julia Wolfe's *Compassion* (the name *Ruth* means compassion), although Cahill managed to bring a restrained delicacy to their fortissimo. In *Holding Pattern*, by Bay Area composer Maggi Payne, anger dissolved into sadness, for hidden e-bows on the piano strings sustained poignant chords between Cahill's violent gestures; her West Coast colleague Cindy Cox achieved a similar effect with the sostenuto pedal. Mary Jane Leach went for sadness in *By'm Bye*, having Cahill sing phrases of a slowed-down lullaby over lushly depressive harmonies.

The older generation of composers, however, went less for pathos and more for music like Crawford's own. Pauline Oliveros abandoned her usual meditative style to write an abstract constructivist piece, *Quintuplets Play Pen*, in five-against-two rhythms, an attempt to match the idiom she was writing in the year Crawford died. Cahill, a longtime radio personality in her native Berkeley, interviewed the composers from the stage, and elicited surprisingly strong identifications with Crawford, especially from Annea Lockwood, who talked about what a haunting image she had kept of Crawford during her early years as a composer. The boldest and least emotive pieces, however, were Crawford's own Preludes, each one a rock-solid nugget of modernist granite. Despite one memory lapse (which anyone who's played such unrepeating

atonality from memory could forgive), Cahill etched these works in the air in vivid three-dimensionality.

The concert ended with one piece by some male composer, uh, William Duckworth, I think. Seriously, Cahill gave a careful but flowing rendition of Duckworth's eight *Imaginary Dances*, classically postminimal works threading snappily intricate rhythms through conventional harmonies. I find them even more beautifully worked out than his more famous *Time Curve Preludes*, and predict they'll someday be as well known.

Sponsor Content



©2016 Village Voice, LLC. All rights reserved.