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## The Innovations of Ruth Crawford Seeger

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What does it mean to be a “female composer”? Even today, in our music history books, women who compose music are often called out because of their gender; in some books, women hardly even get mentioned at all. The reason isn’t because we don’t know much about women who write music—we know lots and learn more every year—but because the traditional story of music history has marched along from Bach to Mozart to Beethoven to Brahms for a very long time, and that path has worn a groove in the way we talk about music history. Lots of composers never make it onto this path and disappear, including composers who are anything and everything except the familiar white, European men. We lose black composers, Asian composers, Hispanic composers, women composers, disabled composers, and so many more. And in losing those composers, we lose an incredible amount of amazing music that we would know, perhaps, if the composer had not been one of those “Others.”

Women have always been composers, but they haven’t always gotten their fair share of attention. And it wasn’t always easy being a composer in a world where they were a minority: some music schools wouldn’t accept women as students until well into the twentieth century; conductors didn’t want to program their music; critics wrote more about what they wore than how well they played ([a phenomenon that hasn’t changed](#)). So when we talk about “female composers,” we’re referring to a whole history of exclusion from the mainstream music world, and the work that earns them a place on the path of all great composers: into the books, where they belong.

### Ruth Crawford Seeger

In 1931, 30 year-old Ruth Crawford (later Ruth Crawford Seeger) wrote her first string quartet. Crawford trained as a pianist from a young age, but after enrolling at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago in 1921, she refocused her career on composition. At the time, women were expected to compose pieces that were pleasing to the ear and without much substance; parlor songs and lullabies were acceptable. Although there were exceptions—the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s 1896 performance of Amy Beach’s Gaelic Symphony, for example, was well-received—Crawford’s work was experimental. She wrote “ultra-modern” music, a realm populated mostly by male composers. Undeterred, she became the first woman to win two prestigious Guggenheim Fellowships to work in Berlin and Paris. She completed the string quartet upon her return to the United States, and scholars today consider it her most important work, writing that it uses certain compositional techniques “with greater elasticity and imagination than ever before.”<sup>1</sup>

Crawford was particularly interested in two methods of composition: serialism and dissonant counterpoint. With serialism, composers choose up to twelve pitches from the chromatic scale (that is, all the black and white keys on the piano from C to the B above it) and assign a specific order. She then uses each pitch without repetition until the selection—called the “row”—is used up; only then can she start at the beginning of the row. The technique is less limiting than you might think: the composer can use the row backwards, upside down, or

both together, or she can even change the starting pitch. Let's say a row includes the three pitches A, C, and F. Backwards (or retrograde) this is F, C, A. To make it upside down (or inverse), we figure out the distances between each pitch: A to C is a minor third, and C to F is a perfect fourth. A minor third upside down is a major sixth, and a perfect fourth upside down is a perfect fifth. So now we have A, F-sharp, and C-sharp. We can go backwards and upside down at the same time, too, in what is called retrograde inverse. ([You can learn more about serialism and see examples of all of these variations here.](#))

Dissonant counterpoint is a technique where the composer purposely avoids creating harmonious or consonant sounds. Dissonance means that two or more pitches, played together, sound harsh or clashing. Consonance, on the other hand, means two or more pitches that sound pleasant together. Whether something sounds dissonant or consonant to an individual is often subjective, but in traditional music history and theory, certain distances—called intervals—between two pitches are considered dissonant and some are considered consonant. ([You can listen to one explanation of dissonance and consonance here.](#)) In dissonant counterpoint, then, the composer might pair a D with an E-flat—a harsh-sounding, minor-second interval—instead of a D with a F, which is a consonant minor third.

Serialism and dissonant counterpoint gave early twentieth-century musicians exciting new ways to create musical ideas, organize sounds, and express themselves. And though both serialism and dissonant counterpoint are intriguing techniques, listening to them can take getting used to. While some composers, like Alban Berg, Igor Stravinsky, and even film composer Jerry Goldsmith found serialism and dissonant counterpoint to be fruitful in their work, others have dismissed it, including George Rochberg, Elliott Carter, and other prominent twentieth-century composers.

### **Crawford's String Quartet**

Crawford's string quartet was special—and has become her most famous piece—because she used serialism in ways other composers had not tried before. In addition to serializing the pitches of each of the quartet's four movements, she made other aspects of the music serial, including the lengths of notes and rests, the dynamics (volume), and rhythmic patterns. When a composer uses serialism to control all—or even most—of the elements that make up a piece, it's called integral serialism, and Crawford's string quartet is the undisputed winner when it comes to this technique.

The third movement of the quartet is the best-known, in part because Crawford created an orchestral version of it called *Andante for Strings*. Crawford called the plan for this movement a "heterophony of dynamics," or contrasting levels of volume that constantly change and shift so that listeners hear some pitches more loudly than others, creating a melody that moves between instruments from the beginning to the ending of the movement.<sup>2</sup> Each instrument of the quartet is either always building to a loud point or softening to a quiet point; no part is ever static, just playing piano or forte for more than a beat. The result is that the ensemble as a whole subtly but continually works toward a dynamic high-point, so that by the time the listener hears this climax, she hasn't even realized that the overall volume of the piece was getting louder and louder. The movement fades away the same manner: sneakily, so that you feel as if you've always been at the same dynamic. Further, all four instruments begin the movement a half-step or whole step away from each other. The resulting texture is thick and tight, and as each part moves along its own row, they rarely come into consonance with the rest of the group. And even when these consonances do happen—the cello and viola

create an E-major triad at measure 71, for example—those moments are brief, lasting no longer than a couple of beats.

*As you listen to the first two movements of the 1931 String Quartet, keep an ear out for patterns in the pitches, rhythms, and dynamics.*

*In the third movement of the 1931 String Quartet, try to follow the rising and falling dynamics. You may want to listen more than once, or follow along with a score. There are multiple levels of activities going on all the time in this piece, a beehive of complexity and a perfect example of things composers were doing in trying to create the ultra-modern music of the early twentieth century.*

After composing the string quartet and a few other works in this “ultra-modern” style, Crawford married Charles Seeger, formerly her harmony teacher. In 1936 they moved to Washington, DC, where Crawford stopped composing in a contemporary style and began working to preserve, transcribe, and arrange American folk songs. She and Seeger began working for the Federal Music Project (FMP) in 1938, which, among other things, organized research on America’s musical cultures. For almost 20 years, Crawford wrote traditional harmonic accompaniments for children’s folk songs, collected from all over America. Only in 1952, the year before she died, did she return to working with modernist musical materials in her [Suite for Wind Quintet](#). During her time with the FMP, she helped raise Seeger’s three children from his first marriage, including folk musician Pete Seeger, and four children that she and Seeger had together, including Peggy Seeger, also a folk musician.

Ultimately, Crawford was a pioneer—not just as one of the first women to work with the more complex compositional approaches of “ultra-modern” music, but one of the very best composers to do so. That her music was published in score form and in journals read by leading composers, theorists, and performers of the day suggests that her work stood out in a very competitive arena, and demonstrated that female composers could have their music judged by its own merits, without needing to consider the gender of its creator.

### **For Discussion**

1. What forces might have caused Crawford to give up her composition career in the 1930s?
2. As one of the only women working with “ultra-modern” compositional techniques, what challenges might Crawford have faced during her career in that field?
3. How does Crawford’s music compare with that by other composers who were successful in the 1930s, such as [George Gershwin](#), [Virgil Thomson](#), or [Paul Hindemith](#)?

<sup>1</sup> Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 212. See also Elie Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 214.