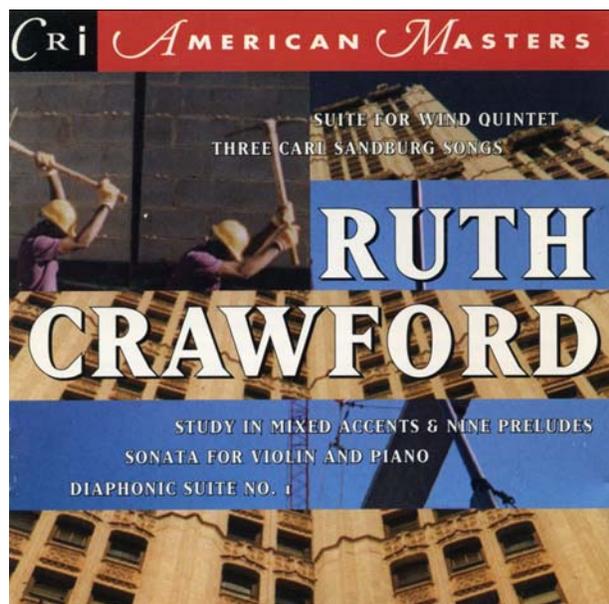


NWCR658

# Ruth Crawford



Ruth Crawford (1901-1953)

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1926) .....	(15:31)
1. I Vibrante, agitato .....	(5:22)
2. II Buoyant .....	(3:09)
3. III Mistico, intenso .....	(4:04)
4. IV-Allegro .....	(2:55)
Ida Kavafian, violin; Vivian Fine, piano	
5. <i>Piano Study in Mixed Accents</i> (1930) .....	(1:07)
Joseph Bloch, piano	
Nine Preludes for Piano (1924-1925, 1927-28) .....	(16:47)
6. Andante tranquillo .....	(0:49)
7. Allegro giocoso .....	(1:45)

8. Semplice .....	(2:22)	
9. Grave, mesto .....	(2:03)	
10. Lento .....	(1:38)	
11. Andante mystico .....	(1:57)	
12. Intensivo .....	(1:39)	
13. Leggiero .....	(1:55)	
14. Tranquillo .....	(2:05)	
Joseph Bloch, piano		
15. <i>Diaphonic Suite</i> for Solo Flute or Oboe (1930) ...	(4:57)	
Scherzando		
Andante		
Allegro		
Moderato, ritmico		
Joseph Ostryniec, oboist		
<i>Three Songs to Poems by Carl Sandburg</i> for Contralto, Oboe, Percussion and Piano (1930-32) .....		(9:07)
16. Rat Riddles .....	(3:17)	
17. Prayers of Steel .....	(1:51)	
18. In Tall Grass .....	(3:58)	
Patricia Berlin, mezzo-soprano; Paul Hoff man, piano; Dan Armstrong, percussion		
<i>Suite for Wind Quintet</i> (1952) .....		(10:31)
19. Allegretto .....	(3:20)	
20. Lento .....	(2:38)	
21. Allegro possibile .....	(4:33)	
The Lark Quintet; Arthur Bloom, clarinet; John Wion, flute; Humbert Lucarelli, oboe; Howard T. Howard, horn; Alan Brown bassoon		

Total playing time: 58:04

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## Notes

"My music is experimental," **Ruth Crawford** said in 1933. Indeed it is—her small but choice oeuvre ranking as a major contribution to the experimental tradition in American Music. Crawford, along with Henry Cowell, Carl Ruggles, Edgard Varèse and Dane Rudhyar, were called "ultra moderns" in the 1920s—the formative decade for early American modernist music.

Born in 1901 in East Liverpool, Ohio into a Methodist minister's family, Crawford studied piano in Jacksonville, Florida (1913-1920). She moved to Chicago in 1921 to acquire a teacher's training certificate in piano at the American Conservatory of Music. Leaving this conventional path for women in music, she began composition studies in 1923 with Adolph Weidig, remaining his pupil for several years.

From 1924-1927 Crawford studied piano with Djane Lavoie Herz, who introduced her to the music of Scriabin. The Russian composer's harmonic palette and aesthetic mysticism served as a springboard for Crawford's first mature composition. Paramount in music from her first period (1924-

1929) is a concern for highly dissonant unusual harmonies and post-tonal explorations. The overall style can be termed "transcendental modernism," inspired musically by Scriabin and Rudhyar and based intellectually on ideas linked in American culture since 1900, including Theosophy and Eastern mysticism; the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau; and the imaginative traditions of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, the famous Chicago poet who was both friend and mentor.

In 1929 the most important modernist critic of the period, Paul Rosenfeld named Ruth Crawford as one of "the most independent, able and promissory of the new American composers," (as well as the foremost "woman composer" of her generation), having heard her Preludes for Piano and the Sonata for Violin and Piano.

Indeed, Crawford won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1930 based on her Chicago music. By the time, however, Crawford was in New York.

There, on the advice of Henry Cowell, she studied dissonant counterpoint with Cowell's first teacher, Charles Seeger, from

1929 to 1930. Seeger's advocacy of "heterophony" through the extension of dissonance as an over-arching idea applied to all parameters of music, greatly influenced Crawford's compositional developments between 1930 and 1933. Her new style secured her reputation among composers and historians as a daring and remarkably prophetic composer for her time. In the *Diaphonic Suite*, the *Study for Mixed Accents* and the *Three Songs on Poems by Carl Sandburg*, Crawford displays a dazzling mastery of "dissonated" or atonal melody and elaborate formal schemes based on serial control over pitch, rhythm, and dynamics. Seeger summed up the virtues of her new style in his praise for the *Diaphonic Suite* for flute, finding "joy in the shortness of the movements, their freshness and spirited friskiness...the nice balance and unbalance."

In Europe from 1930–1931, Crawford was disappointed with the popularity of neoclassicism in new-music circles. She asked Seeger, "is our 'dissonant music' a lost cause?" but she returned to New York in November 1931 still defining herself as a "warrior" for the avant-garde. All that changed in the wake of the Great Depression. Crawford and Seeger, whom she married in 1932, were caught up in the maelstrom of the period, involved in the proletarian music movement in New York.

The distance between writing music "for the people" to becoming a caretaker of music "of the people" is not that great. Ruth, along with Charles and his son Pete (from a previous marriage) discovered American traditional music in the 1930s. In 1935 Charles joined a New Deal agency and they moved to Washington D.C., closer not only to folk music archives at the Library of Congress, but to the South—the culture behind the sound. This proved catalytic, as Ruth Crawford, composer yielded first place to Ruth Seeger, folk-song specialist. From 1938 onward, she transcribed and edited melodies from field recordings and made arrangements of American folksongs for children.

In the 1950s Crawford returned to original composition. The *Suite for Wind Quintet* (1952) marked a new beginning but also unfortunately an end; for she fell ill with cancer and died in 1953. This reissue of music spanning the full range of her career is part of what Charles Seeger called a "resurrection" for Ruth Crawford, the composer, noting also that she would have been "surprised and very pleased."

The Nine Preludes for Piano were written in two groups, Nos. 1–5 from 1924–25; and Nos. 6–9 from 1927–28, this last set published in Cowell's *New Music Quarterly*, 1928. Two were heard at a Copland-Sessions concert in 1928. Most are impressionistic epigrams using unusual, highly dissonant

harmonies; some are interval studies; and the ninth prelude was inspired by a poem of the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse.

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1926), premiered at a League of Composers concert in 1927, and also was played at the inaugural concert of the Chicago chapter of the International Society for Contemporary Music in 1928—Crawford the only local composer so honored. Here we find a more energetic and bolder use of the harmonic vocabulary developed in the Preludes as well as a greater sweep of lyrical and expressive content.

The *Diaphonic Suite* for Solo Flute (1930) is one of four such suites, its title taken from Seeger's theoretical opposition of other-sounding ("diaphonic") to "same sounding" ("symphonic") music. Three of its four movements are studies in dissonated melodic line, analogizing intervallic content and phrase lengths to poetic rhyme and phrases. The third movement is a study in rotational permutation of a seven-note set. The work was premiered at a League of Composers Concert in 1931.

The *Study in Mixed Accents* for piano (1930) is a very short tour-de-force whose irregular accents and jagged melodic line sound with an acerbic austerity that conceal its formal complexity. Constructed in a single melodic line doubled in octaves, the study is organized in irregular group patterns outside of meter in an elaborate palindromic form. Three options for a dynamic plan allow the performer an element of choice—an unusual foreshadow of 1950s styles.

The *Three Songs* for contralto, oboe, piano, percussion and optional wind and string ostinati (1930–1932), set poems by Carl Sandburg—"Rat Riddles" (1930); "Prayers of Steel" (1932); and "In Tall Grass" (1931). They are bravura displays of serial organization mixed with free material, exploiting timbre as well through what John Cage called "Crawford's sliding tones" on strings, and tone clusters in the piano. The set was chosen to represent the United States at the festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music in 1933 in Amsterdam and published by Cowell in the *New Music Orchestra Scores* series in 1932.

The *Suite for Wind Quintet* in three movements synthesizes modernist techniques with a folk-oriented melos. The opening ostinato in the first movement resurrects the opening of the second movement in the Sonata for Violin and Piano; some serial organization appears as well; and the repeated-note figures and rhythms in the third movement evoke Anglo-American fiddle tunes.

—Judith Tick

### *Three Songs to Poems by Carl Sandburg*

#### **Rat Riddles**

There was a gray rat looked at me with  
green eyes out of a rathole.

"Hello, rat," I said,  
"Is there any chance for me  
to get on to the language of the rats?"

And the green eyes blinked at me,  
blinked from a gray rat's rathole.

"Come again," I said,  
"Slip me a couple of riddles;  
there must be riddles among the rats."

And the green eyes blinked at me,  
and whisper came from the grey rathole:  
"Who do you you think you are and why is a rat!

Where did you sleep last night and why do  
you sneeze on Tuesdays?  
And why is the grave of a rat no deeper  
than the grave of a man?"

And the tail of a green-eyed rat  
whipped and was gone at a gray rathole.

#### **Prayers of Steel**

Lay me on an anvil; O God.  
Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar.  
Let me pry loose old walls.  
Let me lift and loosen old foundations.  
Lay me on an anvil, God.  
Beat me and hammer me into a steel spike.  
Drive me into the girders that hold a

skyscraper together.  
Take red-hot rivets and fasten me into the  
central girders.  
Let me be the great nail holding a skyscraper  
through blue nights  
into white stars.

#### **In Tall Grass**

Bees and a honeycomb in the dried head of  
a horse in a pasture corner —  
a skull in the tall grass and a buzz  
and a  
buzz of the  
yellow honey-hunters.

And I ask no better a winding sheet (over  
the earth and under the sun).

Let the bees go honey-hunting with yellow  
blur of wings

in the dome of my head, in the  
rumbling, singing arch of my skull.  
Let there be wings and yellow dust and the  
drone of dreams of honey—  
who loses and remembers?—who  
keeps and forgets?

In a blue sheen of moon over the bones and  
under the hanging honeycomb  
the bees come home and the bees sleep.

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## Production Notes

From CRI SD 508: Sonata for Violin and Piano recorded in 1958. Recording Engineer: David Hancock Published by Theodore Presser, Inc. Funded by the McKim Fund of the Library of Congress and private individuals.

From CRI SD 247: *Study in Mixed Accents* and Nine Preludes for Piano recorded at Stereo Sound Studios, New York City, 1969. Recording Engineer: Jerry Newman. Preludes for Piano Nos. 1–5 published by Merion Music, Inc., (Theodore Presser; BMI). Preludes for Piano 6–9 published by the Hildegaard Publishing Company, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; (BMI). Funded by the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music.

From CRI SD 501: *Diaphonic Suite No. 1* for Solo Oboe recorded April–July 1979. New York City. Published by Theodore Presser Inc. Funded by the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, Inc. and the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University.

*Three Songs to Poems by Carl Sandburg* recorded in October 1983 at the State College, Pennsylvania. Recording Engineers: John Thomas and Arthur J. Curve. Published by Theodore Presser, Inc. Funded by the Baltimore Chamber Music Society, Inc., the Institute for Humanistic Studies at Pennsylvania State University, The Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, The National Endowment for the Arts and private individuals.

From CRI SD 249: *Suite for Wind Quintet* recorded at Studios 58, New York City on January 12, 1969. Recording Engineer: Jerry Bruck Published by Plymouth Music Inc. Funded by The Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, The American Academy of Arts and Letters, and The State University of New York at Binghamton.

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