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Ruth Crawford Seeger

A Composer's Search for American Music

Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953) is frequently considered the most significant American female composer in this century. Joining Aaron Copland and Henry Cowell as a key member of the 1920s musical avant-garde, she went on to study with modernist theorist and future husband Charles Seeger, writing her masterpiece, String Quartet 1931, not long after. But her legacy extends far beyond the cutting edge of modern music. Collaborating with poet Carl Sandburg on folk song arrangements in the twenties, and with the famous folk-song collectors John and Alan Lomax in the 1930s, she emerged as a central figure in the American folk music revival, issuing several important books of adaptations (transcriptions and arrangements) and pioneering the use of American folk songs in children's music education. Radicalized by the Depression, she spent much of the ensuing two decades working aggressively for social change with her husband and stepson, the folksinger Pete Seeger. This engrossing new biography emphasizes the choices Crawford Seeger made in her roles as composer, activist, teacher, wife and mother. The first woman to win a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in music composition, Crawford Seeger nearly gave up writing music as the demands of family, politics, and the folk song movement intervened. It was only at the very end of her life, with cancer sapping her strength, that she returned to composing. Written with unique insight and compassion, this book offers the definitive treatment of a fascinating twentieth-century figure.

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