

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Ruth Crawford Seeger – Andante for Strings

Born July 31, 1901, East Liverpool, Ohio.

Died November 18, 1953, Chevy Chase, Maryland.

Andante for Strings

The Andante for Strings is a transcription for string orchestra of the third movement of Ruth Crawford Seeger's string quartet, composed in 1931.

These are the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first performances of Crawford Seeger's Andante for Strings.

Ruth Crawford came into her own as a composer in Chicago. After a conventional musical upbringing in the Midwest and in Florida, she moved to Chicago in 1921 to study at the American Conservatory, with the intention of earning a teacher's certificate in piano—then the standard career path for women in music. With the encouragement of her teacher, a former Chicago Symphony Orchestra violinist, Adolph Weidig, who, to her surprise, “did not put hands over ears” when it came to modern music, she began to compose. Her first works show both the restless experimentation of a born pioneer as well as the strong influence of Scriabin. (Her piano teacher, Djane Lavoie Herz, a Scriabin disciple, introduced her to the Russian composer's music and philosophy.) While in Chicago, she also became a friend of Carl Sandburg and made arrangements of folk songs (the earliest hint of a future career) for his anthology *The American Songbag*. Later, she set several of Sandburg's poems to music.

In just a handful of years in Chicago, Crawford wrote more than half of the works in her complete output, and she began to win national recognition. In 1927, she and Aaron Copland were among the six “young Americans” whose music was performed at a League of Composers concert in New York. Crawford also was an activist for new music in Chicago, and in 1928 she was one of the founding members of the Chicago chapter of the International Society for Contemporary Music.

In the fall of 1929, after summering at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, Crawford moved to New York to study “dissonant counterpoint” with Charles Seeger, who had taught the American radical composer Henry Cowell. Crawford

spent the following year in Europe, after becoming the first woman composer to win a Guggenheim Fellowship. She was thrilled to meet Bartók and Berg, although she resisted a friend's urging to hook up with Schoenberg, devoted as she was to Seeger's less famous, noncerebral modernist style. (When she heard then-fashionable neoclassic music in Berlin, she wrote home to Seeger, "Is our 'dissonant music' a lost cause?") She returned to New York in 1931 and married Seeger, the "man with airplane views," who understood and inspired her own visionary ideas.

Early in her marriage, Ruth Crawford Seeger wrote her most experimental music, including the landmark string quartet that is the source of this Andante for strings. The string quartet, composed in 1931, is considered her masterpiece, a score of extraordinary complexity that foreshadowed a pioneering body of work that in fact never materialized. She described the slow movement, which she transcribed for string orchestra around 1938, as a study in dissonant dynamics, with the overlapping of crescendos and diminuendos alone creating a sense of melody out of single pitches in each instrument. (The orchestral arrangement was an attempt to clarify and highlight the effect that was nearly lost in the quartet texture.)

After the Seegers moved to Washington, D.C., in 1936, Ruth began to work with John and Alan Lomax at the Archive of American Folk Song, and she quickly switched her allegiance to transcribing and arranging this then little-known art form. It was, in her words, a "descent from the stratosphere onto a solid well-traveled highway.

I folded my wings and breathed good friendly dust as I traveled along in and out of the thousands of fine traditional folk tunes which I have been hearing and singing and transcribing from field recordings.

Eventually, she and her stepson Pete made Seeger the best-known name in folk music.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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