March 2019

A Niche of Her Own: The Nine Piano Preludes of Ruth Crawford Seeger

Joshua Medrano

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, medranojoshua30@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations

Part of the Music Performance Commons

Recommended Citation


This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
A NICHE OF HER OWN: THE NINE PIANO PRELUDES OF
RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Music

in

The School of Music

by
Joshua Medrano
B.M., Texas State University, 2011
M.M., Missouri State University, 2014
May 2019
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to express my most sincere gratitude to my professor, Gregory Sioles. Mr. Sioles has been the most nurturing teacher, his guidance and willingness in helping with this project is very much appreciated. To my committee members, Dr. Willis Delony, Dr. Pamela Pike, and Dr. Ramachandran Vaidyanathan, thank you for taking the time out of your incredibly busy schedules to serve on my panel, you all continually inspire me. I would also like to thank my family in Texas, The Medranos, Zavalas, and Garcias, especially my mother and father, Domingo and Raquel Medrano. Thank you for believing in me, and in your everlasting support. Finally, to the most amazing woman that I have had the opportunity to trek this journey with, my beautiful fiancé, Loriana Zavala. This entire process would have been inconceivable if it was not for you. Thank you for your unending patience, your persistence in pushing me to try harder, and for sticking by my side while traveling to different cities and states in pursuit of my passion for music.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................ ii

List of Figures ........................................................................................................... iv

Abstract ...................................................................................................................... vi

Chapter One. Who Is Ruth Crawford Seeger? ......................................................... 1

Chapter Two. Her Time in Chicago (1921-1929) .................................................. 7

Chapter Three. A Woman Composer in a Male Dominated Era .............................. 13

Chapter Four. The *Nine Preludes* for Piano ......................................................... 16

Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 46

Bibliography ............................................................................................................. 48

Vita ......................................................................................................................... 50
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1. Prelude for Piano no. 1, mm. 1-2 .................................................. 19
Figure 4.2. Prelude for Piano no. 1, mm. 5-6 .................................................. 20
Figure 4.3. Prelude for Piano no. 2, mm. 1-5 .................................................. 21
Figure 4.4. Prelude for Piano no. 2, mm. 15-19 ................................................. 22
Figure 4.5. Prelude for Piano no. 2, mm. 21-22 ............................................... 23
Figure 4.6. Prelude for Piano no. 2, mm. 27-28 ............................................... 24
Figure 4.7. Prelude for Piano no. 2, mm. 36-41 ............................................... 25
Figure 4.8. Prelude for Piano no. 3, m. 1 ......................................................... 26
Figure 4.9. Prelude for Piano no. 3, m. 7 ......................................................... 27
Figure 4.10. Prelude for Piano no. 3, m. 9 ....................................................... 27
Figure 4.11. Prelude for Piano no. 3, mm. 23-24 ............................................. 28
Figure 4.12. Prelude for Piano no. 4, mm. 1-4 ............................................... 29
Figure 4.13. Prelude for Piano no. 4, mm. 15-17 ............................................ 30
Figure 4.14. Prelude for Piano no. 5, mm. 1-2 ............................................... 31
Figure 4.15. Prelude for Piano no. 5, mm. 6-8 ............................................... 32
Figure 4.16. Prelude for Piano no. 6, mm. 1-6 ............................................... 34
Figure 4.17. Prelude for Piano no. 7, mm. 1-4 ............................................... 36
Figure 4.18. Prelude for Piano no. 7, mm. 12-15 ........................................... 37
Figure 4.19. Prelude for Piano no. 8, mm. 1-9 ............................................... 39
Figure 4.20. Prelude for Piano no. 8, mm. 21-25 ........................................... 40
Figure 4.21. Prelude for Piano no. 8, mm. 40-42 ........................................... 41
Figure 4.22. Prelude for Piano no. 8, mm. 62-69 ........................................... 41
Figure 4.23. *Prelude* for Piano no. 9, mm. 1-7 ......................................................... 42

Figure 4.24. *Prelude* for Piano no. 9, m. 10 .............................................................. 43

Figure 4.25. *Prelude* for Piano no. 9, mm. 12-15 ...................................................... 44
ABSTRACT

For a large part of music history, women composers like Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953) were easily overlooked. Often, their music and ambitions in contributing to the repertoire were not taken seriously by the masses. Instead, they tended to be disregarded in comparison to the great many male figures that have prevailed through the years. Through gaining an understanding of Crawford Seeger as a woman from upbringing until death, her compositional style, specifically focusing on her first distinctive style period during her years studying in Chicago from 1921-1929, and also through hands on learning of the Nine Preludes that will be presented in a public lecture recital, I feel I will be equipped with the knowledge to bring this composer’s music out of the shadows and into the recital hall. Through brief analysis and study of Crawford Seeger’s Nine Preludes, I plan to resuscitate music that is often left out from the repertoire and provide curious pianists with an overview on the style, compositional process, and the pianistic challenges that arise within this evocative music. This study will also touch on the extended piano techniques were used within this time period and are a contributing factor to the atmospheric sound world that Crawford Seeger employs in some of the Nine Preludes.
CHAPTER ONE: WHO IS RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER?

Born in East Liverpool, Ohio, Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953) is undoubtedly the lesser known of the pioneering figures of the American group of composers known as the Ultra-moderns. Among the many men composing during this time and in this ultra-modernist group, Crawford Seeger was the only female. She lived a bit of a divided life, with interests in this very cerebral avant-garde music and later as a folksong arranger. Before delving into her actual interests in composition, and of course the piano; it is important to learn about the type of upbringing she had while growing up without many of life’s little superfluities.

Her father Clark Crawford, was a well-established and much in demand Methodist minister and her mother Clara Alletta Graves, a reverent housewife, came from a background of tightly run households, as her father was also a minister. Clark and Clara Crawford, a well-educated couple, would have fallen under the upper middle-class category and lived comfortable lives in the homes and communities they resided in. Together, they raised two children with morals and values in accordance with the Methodist ideology, Carl born in 1895 and Ruth born in 1901.\(^1\) Clark Crawford was a licensed travelling minister by the age of nineteen and moved wherever he was assigned. From this young age until his death, he held various parsonages in many different cities and states, including Akron, Ohio; St. Louis, Missouri; and Muncie, Indiana. Clark’s position as minister, even though not a “fire-and-brimstone”\(^2\) Methodist, meant he had to hold his family in close accordance with the church. He knew the family would be in the public eye wherever they moved, and because of this, he forbade the common secular


pleasures any young girl such as his daughter would have enjoyed. These would have included things like, theater, dancing, and even the circus.\textsuperscript{3} The family was required to dutifully observe religious commitments which included, two Sunday services, a daily family prayer hour at home, as well as church meetings.

The bond between mother, Clara Crawford and Ruth Crawford was vital in shaping the ideas and attitudes that she would eventually apply to her life and music. From her mother, she apparently received not only her good looks but her personality, love for the arts, and her determination to achieve her goals against the odds.\textsuperscript{4} Early on in the relationship between mother and daughter, Mrs. Crawford’s mothering was brought forth by restoring unfulfilled dreams from her own childhood. As mentioned before, she too grew up in the house of a minister, where she lived by much stricter guidelines than those she imposed on her daughter. She later mentioned to the young Crawford Seeger about living the “Graves way,”\textsuperscript{5} in which her father’s intensity invaded the entirety of home life.\textsuperscript{6} In trying to give her own daughter new experiences, Mrs. Crawford’s intentions were not to live vicariously through her daughter, but to provide her with opportunities she had been denied. However, she also knew the importance of rearing her daughter within the rules of conventional domesticity.\textsuperscript{7} On Crawford Seeger’s sixth birthday, her mother did something that represented both solemnity and triumph and was something she had wanted and had been deprived of during her own childhood.\textsuperscript{8} She took young Crawford Seeger to her first lesson in darning, and more importantly, to her first piano lesson. Only a few years after receiving these opportunities, the family moved to Jacksonville, Florida

\textsuperscript{3} Tick, \textit{A Composer’s Search for American Music}, 9.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 4-5.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 5.
where later Clark Crawford died in 1914. His death ultimately caused changes to the household that most families would consider drastic, those mostly being in economic standing and parenting. Upon her husband’s death, Mrs. Crawford found herself alone in caring and supporting her two children. As mentioned before in Crawford Seeger’s inherited traits from her mother, Clara Crawford was not one to be easily defeated by her hardships. In the face of economic difficulties Mrs. Crawford acted quickly and was able to rent a large three-story house in Jacksonville. The home was able to provide her with income by renting out rooms, as well as providing a home for the Crawfords.

As a teen, Crawford Seeger was a serious and introspective person who demanded much of herself and was always in search of self-improvement of her attitudes and habits. Before her actual journey of becoming an established musician, she aspired to become either an authoress or poetess. She wrote very mature poetry and highly self-critical journal loggings throughout the entirety of her life. In her writings she was able to detach herself from everyday realities and view herself as a “small soul in a sea of humanity.” One such example of her poetry which exemplifies a higher level of thinking and soul searching was written not as an adult, but during adolescence at the young age of thirteen. She writes:

_Fireside Fancies_

When I sit by the side of the blazing fire  
On a cold December night,  
And gaze at the leaping and rollicking flames  
As they cast their flickering light  
I see what I would be in future years,  
If my wishes and hopes came true,  
And the flames form pictures of things that I dream,  
Of the deeds that I hope to do.  
One tall yellow flame darts above all the rest,  
And I see myself famed and renowned,

---

9 Tick, 12.  
A poetess I, and a novelist too,
Who is honored the whole world around.
That flame then grows dim, which to me seems to say,
That my first hope must soon die away,
Then another one darts on a great opera stage,
The most exquisite music I play.
And then, after many flames arise, 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.
Oh, I dream, and I dream, until slowly the fire
Burns lower, grows smaller, less bright,
Till the last tiny spark has completely gone out,
And my dreams are wrapt up in the night.11

At such a young age, her insight and open-mindedness in relation to the world was indeed rare. She was a studious girl during her high school years, serving as class historian, class treasurer, the director of the senior class play, and a staff member of her school newspaper, *The Oracle*.12

Aside from keeping a busy school life, Crawford Seeger was growing a deep interest in the piano and began to take a more serious approach to practicing.13 Fortunately, she was receiving lessons from someone whom she considered her most influential teacher in Jacksonville, Ms. Bertha Foster. Foster, native of Indiana, came to Florida and eventually created her own music school called *School of Musical Art*. Here, Crawford Seeger began lessons in 1913 and stayed for an extended period. Foster was not only nurturing and encouraging to the young girl’s piano study but eventually extended to her a teaching position at her school following Crawford Seeger’s graduation from high school. While teaching at the *School for Musical Art*, Crawford Seeger also changed piano teachers from Ms. Foster to Madame Valborg Collett. Collett was described by Crawford Seeger as a “beloved but much feared Leipsic-trained

---

11 Tick, 12-13. This excerpt is included in Judith Tick’s book, but is from Rosland Rosenberg’s, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982).
12 Ibid., 14.
Norwegian teacher.”

Lessons with Collett seemed to be typical of foreign trained teachers, very strict and demanding. This was something new to the gentle natured Crawford Seeger and after a one pleasing lesson, they turned traumatic due to the high level of responsibility that Madame Collett expected. Crawford Seeger often felt exhausted from Collett’s demand for perfection and started feeling a sense of self-consciousness. It is interesting and important to note that during this time period, Crawford Seeger was seeking osteopathic and electrical treatments for tense, cramped muscles. This is the beginning of a, so to speak, plague that would haunt Crawford Seeger for most of her pianistic career.

It was advantageous in many ways for Crawford Seeger to have begun teaching piano lessons. Primarily, it was a great way for her to start making and saving money for her future musical endeavors. She earned up to eight dollars a month, a small sum, yes, but from far greater perspective it was satisfying for her to teach and at the time it was a lucrative position for a young female pianist. She also continued taking lessons while giving them, and began studying harmony with her former piano teacher, Bertha Foster. It is here that some of her first attempts at composition, most likely student assignments, were written. Some of these pieces are reminiscent in harmony and style of the miniatures of Schumann; they are charming and tuneful in character.

Upon receiving a generous monetary donation from a cousin, Nellie Graves, Crawford Seeger made the decision to study music for one year in Chicago. Her plan was to study with a big-name foreign teacher, earn a teacher’s certificate, and move back to Jacksonville to fetch “a

---

14 Ibid., 15 – this quote is used from Gaume’s book but its original source is a letter from Ruth to Nicolas Slonimsky dated January 29, 1933.
15 Ibid., 16.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 The pieces written at this time were short pieces called, _Elf Dance, Whirligig_, and _Variations._
big price for lessons.**19 Having several ties to Chicago, being that her mother had studied at Northwestern, and also the knowledge of a Chicago magazine that regularly reported on the musical events in Jacksonville, made the decision easier.**20 Through several recommendations, her teachers Foster and Collett thought the reputable Heniot Levy**21 at the American Conservatory would be a good fit. So, off she was, well-trained as a good Christian woman, timid, delicate, and self-conscious, to a large city to further promote her interests in music and return as an elite American woman pianist.**22

---

19 Tick, 23.
20 Gaume, 17.
21 Heniot Levy (1897-1946) – Polish American pianist, teacher, and composer, emigrated to America in 1900 and became a teacher at the American Conservatory in Chicago.
22 Tick, 24.
CHAPTER TWO: HER TIME IN CHICAGO (1921-1929)

Perhaps one of the most important events in the life of Ruth Crawford Seeger in advancing as a musician took place on September 8th, 1921 when she moved to Chicago, or as she called it, the “Wonder City”.23 During this time period in American music history Chicago was bustling with music of all genres and proved to be significant epoch in American modernism. This was now Ruth Crawford Seeger’s musical territory. Chicago was host to a wide range of musical centers accessible to all musicians and music students. Some of these were the Chicago Opera, where Crawford Seeger was able to experience her first operas and fall in love with the music of Puccini and the Chicago Symphony, under the direction of Frederick Stock, where she faithfully attended and for the first time heard the symphonic repertoire of Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann. At the symphony Crawford Seeger would attend the same performance multiple times, once as a listener, and then again studiously following along with a score in hand.24 There were also many music schools in the surrounding area, the Bush Conservatory, Chicago Conservatory, Chicago Music College, and then there was the American Conservatory, where Crawford Seeger made her home for her musical studies.

Upon attending the conservatory, her original intention was to complete a one-year licentiate certificate program where upon completion she would be able to teach students up to the middle grades. During this early period of study, she lived a very strenuous conservatory life. She faithfully practiced anywhere from seven to eight hours a day, as well as attended classes in harmony, music history, pedagogy, and “normal” training.25 Normal training or Normal Schools during this time period referred to programs, classes, or institutions where students are trained to

---

23 Tick, 27.
24 Ibid., 29.
25 Ibid., 30.
be teachers. The conservatory life provided an atmosphere of intense competition amid her peers. Competing against one another for recital opportunities was common in her circles. This was something she wasn’t used to doing during her younger school years as she was quite timid and often kept to herself. The school also provided the students with well-known artist-teachers that placed high demands on their students. This was so students could strive towards reaching their best work, much like most students experience in music schools today.

Among all the strenuous work that Crawford Seeger was faced with, her piano teacher Heniot Levy was ultimately her biggest stressor during this first year. In a way he was also one of the reasons she started turning towards composition. During her first few months of study with Levy at the conservatory, Crawford Seeger was asked to switch from her program to the associate certificate track. Obviously, Levy saw much potential in the young pianist and aimed to see how far he could push her. The associate program was more demanding as far as the requirements in repertoire and technique. Upon switching programs, Crawford Seeger’s repertoire consisted of larger pieces of music that included a Bach French Suite, Beethoven’s piano sonata Op. 31, No. 3, and Chopin’s Polonaise-Fantasie Op. 61. In time, and due to the intense workload and over-bearing demands of her teacher, she suffered from a nervous breakdown and became very tense within her environment. Among the mental insecurities brought forth from her surrounding atmosphere came a more serious issue especially for a pianist. She was developing a severe case of muscular neuritis in her left arm, most likely due to over practicing to meet the demands of her teacher and to keep up with the competitive nature of conservatory life. Unfortunately for Crawford Seeger, her teacher Levy was un-sympathetic to

---


27 Tick, 30.
her problems and encouraged her to move past her issues. Being the strong-willed person that her mother taught her to be, she pushed forward and ended up in the top five of her class of ninety. This earned her a gold medal as well as a recital opportunity where she performed Chopin’s Polonaise-Fantasie. Although performing at the piano was looking brighter for Crawford Seeger, an interest in composition was beginning to form.

While in harmony classes, she was enthralled by the function of musical harmony and was excited to learn something new each time she took class. She even wrote home to her mother saying, “it seems so wonderful each lesson to discover some new chord which will make more variety; and it is so interesting, the composing of one’s own melodies, I just love it.” At first, her mother was against Crawford Seegers’s new-found enthusiasm for composition, and thought of it as a superfluity in her education. Despite all the hardships that she endured during her first year at the conservatory, on June 20th, 1922, she received her associate teacher’s certificate in piano, pedagogy, and harmony, with an honorable mention in counterpoint and composition. She also received a special honorable mention in the history of music, and a silver medal in the normal department. It is apparent that she kept very busy and was focused on reaching her goals. After spending the summer back in Florida, Crawford Seeger felt she had left her new-found passion for composing unfinished and returned to Chicago for more study.

While back in Chicago, and this time without the aid of a generous monetary donation, Crawford Seeger was in search of a way to earn a living while still being able to focus on her studies. Her teacher, Levy, recommended that she begin teaching. This was not going to be new

28 Tick, 32.
29 Ibid., 31.
30 Ibid. This quote comes Judith Tick’s book, its original source is a letter from Ruth to her mother Clara dated December 11, 1921.
31 Ibid., 32.
32 Ibid.
territory for her since she had already held a position while in Jacksonville at Bertha Foster’s school. She was able to secure a position, albeit unsteady and with inconvenient scheduling and commuting demands, but it was a way to bring in a small amount of funds. Aside from her teaching, Crawford Seeger was drawn to the theater and began ushering at a near-by performing center whose ultimate compensation was the freedom to watch shows at her own convenience. Maintaining a hectic schedule, Crawford Seeger found little time to practice. Apart from a persistent failing arm, she often would practice mentally while on commute. “I find that going over them [her pieces] mentally, note for note not only fixes them in my memory, but actually improves them technically.”

While the return to Chicago brought Crawford Seeger new experiences in teaching piano and working in a theater, she also began to approach composition more seriously. She began studies with Adolf Weidig, the head of composition at the conservatory and who was at the time, a reputable violinist, conductor, and teacher of theory and composition. He was a serious teacher who held unrelenting standards towards his students, but after some time in lessons with Crawford Seeger, praised her abilities. This gave her reassurance and also a much needed boost in her confidence in becoming a composer. She also began pondering the financial benefits of becoming a composer and realized that publishing her works and children’s teaching pieces would be in her favor.

The second year in Chicago also brought a change in her piano studies. Tired of the unsympathetic nature of Levy, she left his studio and began studies with Louise Robyn in the

33 Gaume, 28.
34 Adolf Weidig (1867-1931) – American violinist, and composer of German origin, emigrated to America in 1892. Taught theory and composition and was the Associate Director of the American Conservatory in Chicago.
35 Gaume, 21.
36 Louise Robyn – known pedagogue during this time, some of her books include, *Technic Tales*, and *Keyboard Town* among others.
conservatory as well as outside of its walls with Madame Djane Lavoie-Hertz.\textsuperscript{37} Robyn, at the time was a strong figure in the field of piano pedagogy and ultimately grew became interested in helping Crawford Seeger with her developing ailment. Robyn knew that Crawford Seeger needed help in learning how to relax and in turn offered her help at no cost, suggesting that she could cure that problem at the piano.\textsuperscript{38} Lessons with Madame Lavoie-Hertz brought forth many new dimensions to Crawford Seeger’s life and ultimately played an important role in Crawford Seeger’s development musically, socially, and intellectually. This study seeks to explain this relationship further in the chapter discussing the *Nine Preludes*. On June 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1924 Crawford Seeger graduated with her Bachelor’s degree and entered a third year to work towards a Master’s degree in composition. Some time later in 1926 Crawford Seeger began teaching piano at the conservatory as well as at Elmhurst College. She continued studies with Lavoie-Hertz and Weidig until graduating summa cum laude in 1927.

The years 1924-1929 in Chicago were crucial in shaping Crawford Seeger’s ideals as a composer and a person.\textsuperscript{39} At the conservatory and in her new social circles, she was often challenged and taken out of her comfort zones, both mentally and physically. As a composer, her upward progress was first-rate and she effortlessly made the shift from a young music student to a budding composer.\textsuperscript{40} Although she met many new acquaintances in the realm of contemporary music, she also realized there was more to be discovered outside of the “Wonder-City.”\textsuperscript{41} Deciding to leave Chicago proved to be a difficult decision for the young composer, however, she knew if she wanted to make further advances in the field she would have to leave in order to

\textsuperscript{37} Djane Lavoie-Hertz (1889-?) – reputable piano teacher in the first half of the twentieth century. She studied most notably in Brussels with Alexander Scriabin and with Artur Schnabel in Berlin.
\textsuperscript{38} Gaume, 28.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{41} Tick., 28.
expand her knowledge. Upon receiving a MacDowell Scholarship to study at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, she decided she would make the move to New York in the fall of 1929 in order to study with Charles Seeger, a long-time friend and mentor of Henry Cowell.\textsuperscript{42} In remaining focused on this specific time frame in Chicago, this study will move forward in order to briefly discuss some of the adversities Crawford Seeger faced as a female composer.

\textsuperscript{42} Gaume, 56-57.
CHAPTER THREE: A WOMAN COMPOSER IN A MALE DOMINATED AREA

There is no doubt that women composers throughout history have been pushed aside and that this neglect is a topic that can be discussed at great extent. And indeed Ruth Crawford Seeger did face many adversities. While searching for an independent voice within the musical spectrum, it was apparent that Crawford Seeger held strong views of her position as a woman. In a journal entry from 1927 that Matilda Gaume has highlighted in her book, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: Memoirs, Memories, Music*, Crawford Seeger writes,

I also vent my spleen today on the fact of being a woman, or rather on the fact that beastly men, not satisfied with their own freedom, encroach on that of women and produce in them a kind of necessitous fear which binds them about…Women have gained great independence, but men have that which women will never have.\(^{43}\)

It is important to remember that women had just, years earlier, received the right to vote by the passing of the nineteenth amendement in 1920. During this time, and in many fields, women were also beginning to feel a sense of empowerment which perhaps led Crawford Seeger to compose the type of music she did. Judith Tick writes an interesting passage on this in her book, *Ruth Crawford Seeger A composer’s Search for American Music*,

she began her career in music at a time when American writers decried the “feminization” of classical music, spoke approvingly of a “distinguishing virility” as a hallmark of achievement for her generation…and continued to debate the potential of the woman composer.\(^{44}\)

It is interesting to think about how some of these writings may have shaped Crawford Seeger’s compositions, if she had any contact with them or others. One such example was written after the Chicago premier of her Violin Sonata. One critic is thought to have said, she

---

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 54.

\(^{44}\) Tick, 85.
[Crawford Seeger] can “sling dissonances as mean as any of them,”\textsuperscript{45} referring to some of her male counterparts. By the 1930s when Crawford Seeger had moved from Chicago, her music had already gained a certain reputation as too “cerebral and elitist.”\textsuperscript{46} At the time Crawford Seeger was composing she was easily overshadowed by some of her ultra-modern colleagues, like Edgard Varèse and Henry Cowell. Even though these men were perhaps more well known in the new music field, it is because of Henry Cowell’s advocacy in the new music realm and his publishing of Crawford Seeger’s works that they were heard during her time. “If she hadn’t been a woman, that genius and that spark would have been not only encouraged, but would have been welcomed and would have been promoted.”\textsuperscript{47} Due to an interest in the research of American avant-garde music in the 1970s, Crawford Seeger’s music has seen a revival and her name is becoming a regular part of the canon of texts dedicated to the history of western music. Her music is especially associated with modernist trends and in the preservation of American folk music.

The biggest adversities that Crawford Seeger faced were in promoting her music and in being accepted by the critics writing about modernist trends. Charles Ives was a composer who also resisted much of Crawford Seeger’s music because it was written by a woman. Ironically, before they were married, Charles Seeger also showed resistance in taking Crawford Seeger as a pupil. Upon first listening to her work, he criticized her music and remarked, “why bother about women composers,”\textsuperscript{48} he ultimately agreed to mentor her and after several successful lessons, and realizing her talent, insisted there be no charge and that she should have as many lessons as

\textsuperscript{45} Tick, 4.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{48} Gaume, 63.
needed.\textsuperscript{49} Although Crawford Seeger was faced with the fact of being a woman in a male dominated area, she stood up to the fact and in 1930, after a difficult application process, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition and was allowed to study abroad in Berlin.\textsuperscript{50} She was the first woman in composition to receive the award ultimately providing her with feelings of triumph.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 64. An account from C. Seeger after lessons with Crawford Seeger.
\textsuperscript{50} Tick, 110.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE NINE PRELUDES FOR PIANO

The purpose of studying Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Nine Preludes is to resuscitate music that is largely left out of the pianist’s repertoire. Ultimately, this chapter will provide pianists with a detailed review of the style, compositional process, and the pianistic challenges that arise within this evocative music. Crawford Seeger’s Nine Preludes were composed during the creative and soul-searching period in Chicago between the years 1924-1928. Preludes nos. 6-9 were first published due, in part, to Henry Cowell’s New Music Quarterly. 51 Preludes nos. 1-5 were published posthumously in 1993, and edited by Professor Rosemary Platt. During Crawford Seeger’s study in Chicago, she began lessons with Madame Djane Lavoie-Herz outside of the conservatory in 1924, as well as the study of composition with Adolf Weidig as mentioned in a previous chapter. Due to her acquaintance with Lavoie-Herz, she met several new people outside the walls of academia, and even further removed from her own personal walls growing up in a Methodist minister’s household. At one of the many musical soirees held at Madame Lavoie-Herz’s home, she met Dane Rudhyar, who was to become an influence on her music and was valuable in helping her find new paths for her musical imagination to travel, or what the author Judith Tick has identified from a diary excerpt as Crawford Seeger’s, “Spiritual-Concept.” 52

During this time Crawford Seeger discovered the music of Scriabin, Schoenberg, Hindemith, and Stravinsky among others. Regarding personal ideology, she was drawn to Rudhyar’s interest in Theosophy and Mysticism which played an important role in the compositions during her first distinctive style period. Later, both Lavoie-Herz and Rudhyar

51 Tick, 51.
52 Tick, Judith. "Ruth Crawford's "Spiritual Concept": The Sound-Ideals of an Early American Modernist, 1924-1930." – This article is based off a diary entry by Crawford Seeger, where she mentions her ideas regarding composition are her “spiritual concept”.

16
introduced Crawford Seeger to the music of Scriabin, and his personal beliefs in Theosophy and Mysticism. Crawford Seeger was easily able to obtain information about Scriabin due to the fact that Lavoie-Herz had studied briefly with him and was able to give her students personal insight on him and about his music. “Esthetically and philosophically Ruth was curious about Scriabin’s theosophical ideas as new and different from and as a possible substitute for the religion she had experienced in her family life, which had far-reaching effects on her spiritual outlook.”

From a birds-eye perspective, the *Nine Preludes* are a set of post-tonal, quasi-expressionistic, and highly individualistic minatures split into two books consisting of *Preludes* nos. 1-5 from 1924-1925, premiered in New York by the concert pianist Gitta Gradova in 1925, and *Preludes* nos. 6-9 from 1927-1928, with possible premieres also in New York. The *Preludes* range in length, from about one minute to about three minutes each. “They are mood pieces, where languid introspections are often interrupted by whimsical humor and playfulness.” Upon listening to Crawford Seeger’s *Preludes*, one can trace the influence of the harmonic sound world of Scriabin as well as the Expressionist composers from the Second Viennese School. Her *Preludes* follow along the lines of Expressionist musical ideology, in that Crawford Seeger avoids the use of key signatures, conventional scales, traditional use of harmonic function, as well as regular beat and rhythmic patterns. Instead, emphasis is placed on an extensive use of dissonance and a fondness for complex rhythmic patterns, slow moving harmonies that often have melodic implications, chords constructed of fourths and fifths instead of triads, the tritone, and overall, in the use of vivid emotional expression. An overarching mood that hovers over the atmospheric sound world of the *Nine Preludes* is one of darkness and

---

53 Gaume, 135.
54 Gaume, 139. Pianist Richard Buhlig gave the premier of *Prelude* no. 6, but Nos. 7, 8, 9 are unknown.
55 Tick, 66.
intensity. Judith Tick’s research uncovers an interesting bit of information from the time some of these *Preludes* were being written. These words may provide insight into the reason behind such intense music, most especially the *Preludes* written after the year 1926. In a diary entry from 1926, Tick unveils Crawford Seeger’s thoughts during this year. Crawford Seeger wrote, “1926 as a “nightmare,” and that my wretchedness comes from the returning to my eyes of last years pulling, wracking strain, which makes practice and composing hard.” Crawford Seeger is of course referring to the bout of muscular neuritis she was suffering from during this time which undoubtedly caused moments of anger and frustration. The review of the *Nine Preludes* that follows will encompass Crawford Seeger’s stylistic traits, compositional process, pianistic challenges, and the extended piano techniques she employed in her music.

**Prelude for Piano. 1 – Andante tranquillo**

The first *Prelude* begins with the extended technique of silently depressing keys on the keyboard. This allows one or more dampers to release the strings without the hammers actually striking the strings. This effect causes the strings of the depressed keys to vibrate when other keys are played. Crawford Seeger also indicates the use of the sostenuto pedal in combination with the damper pedal. Ultimately, this causes the undamped strings to respond to the overtones of the played pitches. Figure 4.1 shows the direction of which notes to silently depress as well as an indication of how to treat accidentals.

---

Figure 4.1. *Prelude* for Piano no. 1, mm. 1-2. Shows instruction on depressing the notes E and Db as well as the treatment of accidentals.

Throughout the piece and in the majority of the *Preludes*, Crawford Seeger’s use of meter is fluctuating constantly. The use of 12/8 is essentially her equivalent of common time.\(^{57}\) As seen in the above figure, Crawford Seeger writes on three systems in order to provide the pianist with the ability to create a layering in the sound texture, which is very much in the style of modernist composers. She also writes different dynamic marks, treating each system as its own independent part of a whole. The opening melodic line introduces a three note motive that permeates the entirety of the piece. This melody is accompanied by streams of augmented chords and parallel triads stabilized only by bass pedal tones.\(^ {58}\) After a short and unhurried A section, only four measures in length, Crawford Seeger takes the listener for a climactic run crescendoing up the keyboard in faster triplet values. The climax of this short B section is characteristically written in the highest register of the piano and marked fortissimo. Judith Tick also mentions in this section,

---

\(^{57}\) Tick, 66.

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
“the line is arrested by a slightly different, highly dissonant six-note chord that is a variation of Scriabin’s “mystic chord” pitch complex.”

Figure 4.2. Prelude for Piano no. 1, mm. 5-6. Climactic rush up the keyboard marked by a quasi-mystic chord, three-note motive in left hand.

In this figure the three-note motive is then played in the left hand in octaves and gets repeated in higher registrations. Whether or not Crawford Seeger purposefully chose to quote one of her most profound influences by the use of the mystic chord is unknown, it does leave the performer and listener with those associations in mind. After this section comes to an abrupt end, a return to the A section offers the listener a sense of formal clarity.

59 Ibid.
Prelude for Piano no. 2 – Allegro giocoso

The exuberant second Prelude is a whimsical piece with etude and scherzo-like qualities. The playing of short rhythmic cells in rapid succession as well as leaping and landing on chords that construct interlocking fifths is characteristic of Crawford Seeger’s music. This is seen in figure 4.3 below.

![Figure 4.3. Prelude for Piano no. 2, mm. 1-5. Short rapid passages and interlocking fifth chord structures.](image)

The idea of playing passages with interlocking intervals to construct dissonant chords is something Crawford Seeger employs throughout the Preludes. In the Preludes, the interlocking interval feature interweaves the right and left hand together in close coordinates to often create a dissonant chord structure. The A section of the second Prelude abandons the dark emotional character of the first Prelude for a more jaunty and nervous character. This A section of the piece
also contains the longest section with an unchanging 6/8 meter. In transitioning to the more spacey yet somewhat agitated B section, Crawford Seeger writes a short passage marked *burlesco* which consists of widely-spaced leaps that move up and down the piano. There is a slight tempo change here as well as an indication of 4/4. This passage is virtuosic and challenges the pianist in playing large leaps up and down the piano with accuracy. Among those challenges, and one that persists throughout the B section, is that of proper voicing and articulation. In considering the layering of sound, the pianist must not play the inner thirty-second note figures too loudly. In this passage the pianist is required to leap more than an octave and immediately begin playing consecutive ninths.

![Figure 4.4](image)

Figure 4.4. *Prelude* for Piano no. 2, mm. 15-19. Treacherous leaping section.

The section that follows this *burlesco* immediately changes character from the whimsical scherzo-like mood to a more serious and mysterious sound setting. Here the melody is passed
between the hands, and the addition of the sostenuto pedal maintaining long pedal tones adds to the unique ethereal sound that is required in this section. Another feature of this passage is the feeling of rhythmic ambiguity created by the use of ties and duple and triple subdivisions. The change in character is noted by a descriptive shift in tempo marked \textit{più lento} – \textit{grazioso}.

Figure 4.5. \textit{Prelude} for Piano no. 2, mm. 21-22. Shifting melody between hands as well as the use of the sostenuto pedal.

The B section comes to a close only after a stormy and climactic passage consisting of widely spaced, highly dissonant chord structures. Again, containing the descriptive marking, \textit{burlesco}. This passage yet again taxes the pianist’s ability to leap far distances while maintaining
accuracy. This passage is challenging due to the complex chord structures as well as the dynamic mark, \textit{fff}, stretching the limits of forte playing.

![Image of musical notation]

Figure 4.6. \textit{Prelude} for Piano no. 2, mm. 27-28. Scherzo-like passage with highly dissonant chord structures.

After this stormy section finishes, a short restatement of the B material is again presented and the A section returns. Only this time, it ends with a difficult succession of rapid rhythmic cells from the beginning. The ability to maintain clarity and note accuracy, while also providing crescendo and accelerando is an exciting, but fiendishly difficult way to end this \textit{Prelude}.
The second Prelude is also a good example of one of Crawford Seeger’s compositional traits in that she often holds together an entire piece by the use of short rhythmic motives. In this case the rapid rhythmic cell is used as an element which binds this piece together.

_Prelude for Piano no. 3 – Semplice_

The third Prelude of this set and its obscure melodic lines is reminiscent of random streams of consciousness. This thought is also evident in that there is constant shifting of meter, fourteen meter changes to be exact. Crawford Seeger often provides the interpreter with different realizations of the meter, using both simple and compound beat divisions. Judith Tick mentions a similarity of persistant metric shifts used by Scriabin in his _Poeme_, op. 52, no. 1, where the meter changes practically every measure. Perhaps this piece may have provided Crawford Seeger with
inspiration. In figure 4.8, the opening of the third Prelude, the composer writes 21/8 and then 7/4 in parenthesis, perhaps offering two possibilities of counting and interpreting the pulse the music is to convey.

Figure 4.8. Prelude for Piano no. 3, m. 1. Unusual meter indication as well as a note on which notes to depress before beginning.

Before beginning this piece, the pianist must depress the cluster of pitches, Eb-D-Db-B and apply the sostenuto pedal. Set again in a ternary form, the A section is langorous and opens with a three note motive that is used primarily in the A section. The overall texture of this section is homophonic where the melody is accompanied by long pedal tones in the bass, while the left hand plays slow moving inner chords. The left hand has double duties in that aside from the slow moving chords, it is also responsible for melodic material that is pitted against the right hand melody. The melody of this Prelude is seamless and pensive in character, yet lacks direction which supports the random streams of consciousness concept, it is almost hypnotic in some

---

60 Tick, 66.
sense. The *Semplice* tempo indication also directs the interpreter to play this *Prelude* with a sense of ease and to treat the melodic line with simplicity.

Another common feature of Crawford Seeger’s *Preludes* is that she provides a highly contrasting B section when her A sections are languid in feeling. The third *Prelude* is no exception and is full of agitated, yet humorous melodic figures. This section is much more dissonant and employs a motivic rhythmic cell consisting of dotted rhythms surrounded by disjunct staccato writing. Although not marked, this section is also reminiscent of a *burlesco* due to its humorous character. Figure 4.9 shows the angular writing of this section, which from a performer’s perspective, is difficult to play while maintaining a consistent melodic line. The end of the measure also contains the dotted rhythmic cell that is expanded upon in a later measure.

![Figure 4.9. Prelude for Piano no. 3, m. 7. Angular writing and dotted rhythmic motive.](image)

![Figure 4.10. Prelude for Piano no. 3, m. 9. Dotted rhythmic motive in left hand.](image)
Figure 4.10, shows the dotted rhythmic motive in the left hand that is now used to climb up the piano, accompanied by chords in the right hand. After a return to the A section, a short restatement of this awkward B section closes out the piece.

Figure 4.11. *Prelude* for Piano no. 3, mm. 23-24. Restatement of B material as closure.

**Prelude for Piano no. 4 – Grave, mesto**

The most somber and sorrowful feeling of the *Preludes* is reserved for the fourth in the set. Again, set in a ternary form, the *Prelude* is filled with sighing half-step motives throughout the piece. Also characteristic of this piece is the Scriabinesque sound world that Crawford Seeger finds through her use of harmony. This *Prelude* is also held together by a rhythmic motive. In this *Prelude* it is the dotted-eighth sixteenth rhythm that constantly rings in the high registers of the piano. Crawford Seeger will later develop this rhythmic cell in the B section by changing the meter, which in turn, shortens the rhythmic value of the motive to a dotted-sixteenth thirty-second note cell.
Figure 4.12. Prelude for Piano no. 4, mm. 1-4. Sighing half note motive and dotted rhythmic motive in highest register.

The writing in this Prelude shows the influence of Adolf Weidig’s concept of using chord tones melodically as opposed to purely harmonically, and the concept of moving units of sound with the same freedom as a single tone. An example of this can be seen in the figure 4.12, where the opening chord and the suspension provide the sighing melody, Db-C. From a pianistic perspective, the A sections of the fourth Prelude are demanding in terms of proper voicing, as well as achieving a balanced sound while still following all dynamic indications in the different

---

61 Gaume, 132.
melodies. The B section develops these ideas further along with the rhythmic motive that was introduced in the beginning of the *Prelude*.

![Figure 4.13. Prelude for Piano no. 4, mm. 15-17. Development of the dotted rhythmic motive.](image)

The dotted rhythm written in the upper register is persistent throughout the entirety of this *Prelude*. Also seen in figure 4.13, is how Crawford Seeger increases dissonance, the use of extreme registers, and increasing tempo and dynamics. After this rush upward provides the listener with feelings of anxiety, Crawford Seeger writes a brief and pensive section before returning to one last restatement of the A section’s opening bars. This *Prelude* contains a wide
range of emotions and is, in many ways, a look back to the quality of sound and the emotional world of earlier expressionist composers.

**Prelude for Piano no. 5 – Lento**

In the fifth *Prelude* Crawford Seeger breaks free from the traditional ABA straightjacket and instead writes a through-composed form. In this short piece, Crawford Seeger recalls the use of interlocking fifths from the second *Prelude* and transforms the idea into a much darker world of sound by using interlocking tritones. As the piece begins with these tritone structures, a highly chromatic recitative-like melody is placed in the upper register and is maintained throughout the entire piece.

![Figure 4.14. Prelude for Piano no. 5, mm. 1-2. Use of interlocking tritones and recitative-like melody.](image)

Judith Tick offers a wonderful description of a later section in the piece, she says: “A typical climb on a chromatic melodic ladder to a dissonant climax is accompanied by reminders of the earth below in the tritone clusters. The pianissimo ending of Crawford’s interlocking
tritones, gnarled further by chromatic clusters, is intense and extreme.⁶² The section the author refers to is shown in figure 4.15.

Figure 4.15. Prelude for Piano no. 5, mm. 6-8. Intensification of dissonant clusters and dynamics.

In this section, Crawford Seeger instructs the performer by writing molto intensivo. The fifth Prelude is perhaps the most harmonically dissonant and intense of the first set of Preludes. This, as well as Crawford Seeger’s unique chromatic and searching quality of melodic writing, that is generally non-lyrical, is also one of her chief stylistic traits.⁶³ A challenge that arises within this Prelude is that of pulse. Although the time signatures are not complex, the recitative-

⁶² Tick, 68.
⁶³ Gaume, 136.
like melody above the chords provides a complex rhythmic structure that is difficult to count. From an interpretive standpoint, however, the improvisatory nature of the melody allows the music to flow with a coherent sense of pulse.

From a performance perspective, in the first book of Preludes, it is important to avoid a feeling of resemblance among these last three Preludes. Due to the languid and intense feeling of nos. 3, 4, and 5, the performer must find a way to present the pieces with a particular degree of individuality so as not to bore audience members by tedious repetition of like material. If one adheres to Crawford Seeger’s descriptive marking in regard to tempo and its fluctuations, as well as the use of rubato, the interpreter should be able to produce a diverse performance of the first set of Preludes.

Prelude for Piano no. 6 – Andante Mystico

Bearing the dedication, “with deep love and gratitude to Djane, My Inspiration,” the second set of Preludes further seeks the connection of mysticism and post-tonal harmony that Lavoie-Herz and her circle of colleagues introduced to Crawford Seeger. All these ideas are thoroughly explored in the sixth Prelude. One of the most obvious connections is the descriptive tempo indication, Andante Mystico, which provides the interpreter and listener with a glimpse of the possible sound world this Prelude could convey. The sixth Prelude is highly unique in many ways and is the only other Prelude aside from the fifth, to avoid the ABA structure. A unique feature here is the pedaling; the left hand’s low resonating chords require constant use of


65 Tick, 76.
sostenuto pedaling, and the cyclic ostinato figure in the right hand requires regular use of the damper pedal. The effect produced is one of continuous sound and blending of chords.\textsuperscript{66} Another unique characteristic of this Prelude is the cyclic ostinato figure that is presented as a set of eight ascending dyads, this figure sounds through the entirety of the piece and is then transformed towards the end into a single melodic line presented in a lower register of the piano. Judith Tick writes about this ostinato pattern and connects its celestial quality with the spirituality Crawford Seeger associated with Lavoie-Herz.\textsuperscript{67}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Prelude_for_Piano_no_6_mm_1-6.png}
\caption{Prelude for Piano no. 6, mm. 1-6. Shows dedication to Herz, unique pedal indications and the use of the cyclic ostinato pattern in the right hand.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
This very dissonant Prelude demands advanced pianistic coordination. The interpreter must carefully balance the voicing and dynamic levels between the hands. This also plays into the importance of pedaling to properly create the desired effects. Meanwhile, the left hand takes on the dual role of melody and accompaniment. Dynamics present a big challenge as well. The beginning is marked, \textit{ppp}, with indications of a very long pedal. If not properly voiced with a good fingering, the correct sound is hard to achieve, and it is easy to overplay the dynamic marking ultimately taking away from the sublime character of the piece.

\textit{Prelude for Piano no. 7 – Intensivo}

Similar to the fifth Prelude, an intense character permeates the seventh. Marked \textit{Intensivo}, this Prelude is short and held together by quick rhythmic cells. Other characteristics are an increasing use of dissonance accompanied by the use of extreme dynamics ranging from \textit{ppp} to \textit{fff} as well as the constant use of the high and low registers of the keyboard. The only conventionality of this Prelude is the use of ABA form. An interesting and unique way of highlighting the melody is written in by the composer as an extra system above the grand staff, literally marked as, \textit{Melodic line}. The melody is highly disjunct and characteristic of Crawford Seeger’s writing in that it is non-lyrical and contains searching qualities.
This Prelude also contains an interesting use of meter, which fluctuates at a higher rate in the second A section and from an interpretive perspective can be seen as a way to increase the intensity of the feeling of the music. The fluctuating meters along with more extreme dynamics and increasing dissonance imply an increasing tension in the music. The added melodic line is shown throughout the entire piece.

In terms of harmony, Crawford Seeger employs the use of quartal and quintal harmonies, which are harmonies that are constructed by primarily using perfect fourths and fifths, although the use of augmented and diminished fourths may also be used.\textsuperscript{68} Aside from the use of this type

of harmony, Crawford Seeger frequently employs the use of the minor seventh interval which,
accompanied by the quartal and quintal chords in the right hand, and often using diminished and
augmented intervals, relates again to the influence of Scriabin and his use of his mystic chord.
These combinations create a high level of dissonance in the music.

Figure 4.18. *Prelude* for Piano no. 7, mm. 12-15. Fluctuating meters, increased rhythmic values
use of minor 7ths, and quartal and quintal harmonies.

Aside from the challenge of highlighting the melody which is often melded into the thick
texture, is the problem of achieving accuracy while leaping with both hands from high to low
registers. Finally to play the quick rhythmic cell as more of an effect and part of the overall
texture, rather than striving for clarity from this group of rapid notes, is an additional challenge.

**Prelude for Piano no. 8 – Leggiero**

“Having just finished playing my wild Prelude No. 8 in primitive fifths…this one
represents a human laugh.” These words that come from the composer herself in a diary entry
is one of only two descriptive passages concerning musical meaning in Crawford Seeger’s
Preludes that are known. The other will shortly be discussed in the ninth Prelude. From an
interpretive perspective, Crawford Seeger’s use of the word “wild,” is an and accurate
description of the music. The eighth Prelude is a barbarously difficult piece which calls upon
Crawford Seeger’s previously mentioned compositional trait of interlocking intervals. In the
eighth Prelude’s A sections, Crawford Seeger again constructs her piece primarily using
interlocking harmonic fifths and occasionally using melodic fifths. This Prelude is like an etude
in interlocking fifths and leggiero playing. The interlocking fifths are played primarily staccato
in a relentless motion up and down the keyboard. These patterns also contain varying dynamics,
as well as a multitude of hand crossings. Crawford Seeger’s genius in this piece is turning what
she herself calls, “primitive,” into something novel, by using harmonic intervals as the melodic
driving force. As an interpreter of the score, one must be patient in finding proper hand
crossings, fingerings, and in watching stem direction. Here, stem direction seems to imply which
hand should be used to play the patterns correctly. Ultimately though, it is up to the performer to
either use what the composer indicated in regards to stem direction or find what best suits their
individual technique to properly play the piece. Figure 4.19 represents the above descriptions.

---

69 Gaume, 139. This quote was used from Gaume’s book but its original source is a diary entry from Crawford
Seeger dated, November 12, 1928.
The B section of this Prelude contains an interesting twist of the interval of the fifth and musical texture. The use of the fifth from the A section is now transformed at the opening of this section into the diminished fifth, or tritone. It is not until the final bars of the section that Crawford Seeger begins restating the perfect fifth more clearly. The style of writing from a figural perspective is reminiscent of the pointillistic sound world of Anton Webern.\textsuperscript{70} Melodies

\textsuperscript{70} Burkholder, \textit{A History of Western Music}, 827.
are angular and to be played staccato, however, Crawford Seeger also employs a rhythmic cell that bonds the spontaneity of the pointillistic writing into a coherent structure.

Figure 4.20. Prelude for Piano no. 8, mm. 21-25. Opening statement of B section containing the dotted rhythmic cell which contains the tritone A-Eb, as well as pointillistic writing of sixteenth notes.

The opening of this B section contains the tritone, A-Eb, embedded into the dotted rhythmic cell which serves as the motivic unit. This motive aids in the cohesiveness of this section. In the next figure 4.21, Crawford Seeger resolves the uneasy feeling the tritone has created for this section into a perfect fifth, B-F#. 
The *Prelude* then wraps up with a short but technically taxing coda that plunges from the highest range of the keyboard all the way down to the lowest range. The use of hemiola also adds interest here.
**Prelude for Piano no. 9 - Tranquillo**

“…if that is not true since music is supposed to be an e-motive experience…I would rather say that music is an effort to gain calm.”\(^{71}\) This fragment of a diary entry by Crawford Seeger was written during the time the second set of *Preludes* were being composed and corresponds to the nature of the ninth *Prelude*. This *Prelude* is also the second piece to contain a dedication, in this case it is to the American pianist, Richard Buhlig. During a conversation between the pianist and composer, Crawford Seeger revealed the programmatic essence of the *Prelude*, that it was inspired by her beloved Lao Tse and the ideal of calm.\(^{72}\) Although there are no concrete programmatic elements, Crawford Seeger does write, *Tranquillo* at the top of the score.

Figure 4.23. *Prelude* for Piano no. 9, mm. 1-7. Opening of *Prelude*, *Tranquillo* marking, wide spacing between right and left hands.

---

\(^{71}\) Tick, 77. From a diary entry dated October 20, 1928.

\(^{72}\) Ibid.
From the start, the music of the ninth Prelude is meditative. The left hand plays an ostinato cluster of major seconds in the lowest register of the piano, creating a gong-like quality further enhancing the meditative feeling. The meter and slow tempo combined create the feeling of rhythmic ambiguity. High on the keyboard the right hand melody chimes forth in a succession of widely spaced dissonant intervals, chiefly featuring descending parallel sevenths. The pedaling is long and, in combination with very soft dynamics, offers the listener a certain sonority evocative of the “cosmic nature of tranquility.” The B section is less calm and the use of dissonance is much greater. Again, the use of quartal and quintal harmonies are favored in this section. Crawford Seeger also begins this passage with a set of tense chromatic clusters that then expand into an intense but slow moving melody that is passed between the hands.

Figure 4.24. Prelude for Piano no. 9, m. 10. Chromatic clusters and slow moving melodic line alternating between right and left hands.

From a performance perspective, it is difficult to portray calmness for many reasons within the B section. The dissonant nature of the chord structures along with the extreme use of dynamics and keyboard registration almost seem to imply a sense of agitation and hurry. If going along with Crawford Seeger’s idea of calmness, the interpreter must realize this passage with a

---

73 Ibid.
sense of patience as to not play in a hurried manner but rather to maintain a sense of space within the pulse and rhythm even during the most extreme passages in the section. Figure 4.25 is a passage where this type of patience is required by the performer. On first glance, the interpreter may be tempted to do the opposite, playing in a turbulent manner as opposed to a calm one, as intended by the composer.

Figure 4.25. *Prelude* for Piano no. 9, mm. 12-15. Dissonant chord structures, extreme use of register and dynamics.

The return of the A section that follows is written out as an exact repetition of the meditative opening section and is a great way to end the set of *Preludes* that have been, for the most part, so emotionally intense. Crawford Seeger brings the listener back to a more tranquil state. The second set of *Preludes* is more contrasting than the first set. Each *Prelude* offers the
listener something new and unique with every piece. They are a fantastic set of pieces that explore a broad range of pianistic techniques and fascinating compositional traits, styles, and sonorities, in the modernist manner.
CONCLUSION

Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Chicago years (1921-1929) proved to be the most crucial years in her development as a composer and in finding a true voice within the realm of the American Contemporary music scene. She left Jacksonville as a young girl who was unsure of what her future would hold in order to study music and ultimately face adversities as a female composer in Chicago. Crawford Seeger seamlessly made the switch from skilled pianist to budding composer, and in turn created her own distinctive style; leaving behind what would be her largest body of works.

Included within this time period are the *Nine Preludes* that are often left unplayed, unheard, and unknown from the pianists repertoire. Although the *Nine Preludes* are a but a small contribution to the piano repertoire, they are pieces that are pianistic to the interpreter, well-written by the composer, and contain the ability to transport the listener on an evocative journey through sonority. The purpose of this project was to focus on a specific set of compositions and time period of the ultramodernist composer, Ruth Crawford Seeger. It was my aim to provide new listeners and readers a brief insight into the short, but impactful life this composer lived; including her music and influences. Through in-depth research, learning the *Nine Preludes for Piano*, and giving a public lecture recital on the topic, I hope to have done my part in shedding light on a composer otherwise left in the shadows of her male counterparts.

Later in life, Crawford Seeger married her teacher, Charles Seeger. They would move to Washington, DC, where she would abandon her modernist compositional style in order to aid in the preservation of the American folk music scene. She worked closely with the father and son duo John and Alan Lomax where she collected, transcribed and arranged songs for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. She served as editor for the Lomaxes' book
of folk song transcriptions and arrangements, *Our Singing Country*. She would also become an active music educator developing several materials that are still in print and use in music classrooms today. These publications include her well-known *American Folk Songs for Children*. During her years in Washington, Crawford Seeger gained a reputation as an educator and often gave teaching demonstrations of her work with children at music conferences. After a brief return to composing in the 1940s, writing her last piece in 1952, the *Suite for Wind Quintet*, Crawford Seeger was diagnosed with and ultimately succumbed to intestinal cancer in 1953 at the age of 52.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Discography


Journal Articles


Musical Scores


Websites


VITA

A native of South Texas, Joshua Medrano holds a Master of Music degree in piano performance from Missouri State University and a Bachelor of Music in piano performance from Texas State University-San Marcos. Uniquely, Josh did not start formal piano instruction at a young age, but began his studies at seventeen years old. With dedication, top-tier teachers, and undeniable persistence, Josh is a perspective candidate for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree at Louisiana State University under the tutelage of Professor Gregory Sioles. As a performer, Josh has performed and studied abroad with renowned teachers, such as Yong-Hi Moon and Julian Martin at the Valencia International Piano Academy in Valencia, Spain as well as Enrico Elisi at AmiCaFest in Grammichele, Sicily. He has also performed as guest artist at the Texas State International Piano Festival in San Marcos, TX. His previous teachers include, Jason Kwak, Washington Garcia, and Hye-Jung Hong. Currently, Josh is an active teacher as well as keyboard/organist at St. Gerard Majella Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.