Ruth Crawford’s “Spiritual Concept”: The Sound-Ideals of an Early American Modernist, 1924–1930*

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RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER (1901–1953) was an American musician who had two important careers in one relatively short lifetime. As a young woman she was an “ultra-modern” or avant-garde composer both in Chicago and New York, receiving the first Guggenheim Fellowship in composition awarded to a woman in 1930. After 1935, when she and her husband Charles Seeger moved to Washington, D.C., her interests shifted to American traditional music, and she became an editor, transcriber, and music educator, best known at the time of her death for her highly praised books of folk song arrangements for children.¹

Since the mid-1970s Ruth Crawford Seeger has been rediscovered as a composer.² Without doubt her most widely known and indeed most important composition is the String Quartet 1931, supporting the stylistic identification of her music with dissonant counterpoint

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and proto-serial techniques. By and large, perhaps because of the nature and reputation of the Quartet, Crawford has been historicized as an abstract formalist of "historical prescience," without much consideration for or knowledge of her musical thought.

There is another side to Ruth Crawford. Well before her work with Charles Seeger, Crawford developed an aesthetic that sustained her in the first part of her compositional career. She worked it out in the mid- and late 1920s at the same time that she crafted a post-tonal idiom. This study discusses her musical thought and selected compositions written between 1926 and 1930, and shows the relationship of style and idea to what she termed "spiritual concept": the core of her transcendental modernism.

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Crawford once wrote that the greater truth for her was "feeling" an idea rather than thinking it, that "her tendency was toward 'spiritual concept.'" She "liked to wonder about things rather than know about them." Such wonder can be filled with awe as well as doubt. While a young composer in the late 1920s, Crawford "wondered" about the relationship between music and life. She left a trail of her speculation, not in any formal or methodical fashion, but in her diaries, letters and poems, as well as in her compositions. Her compositional environment was permeated with philosophical and literary ideas and it sparked her ambition to infuse her music with spiritual values.

As the daughter of a Methodist minister, Crawford grew up taking religion seriously. In Jacksonville, Florida, where she spent her adolescence, she regularly attended church and midweek prayer

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4 Mellers, Music in a New Found Land, xv.

5 Diary, 26 July 1929: "I like to wonder about things rather than know about them. Do I really want peace? My tendency is toward spiritual concept. I 'feel' it, my thought bends that way, yet I see great beauty in other concepts." Unless otherwise indicated, Crawford's unpublished letters, diaries and poems are located in the Seeger Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
meetings. All of this began to change in 1921, when she moved to Chicago, which her mother described as having “the advanced atmosphere of the third largest city in the world.” Not surprisingly, her own commitment to Methodism waned and by the late 1920s she distanced herself from the “personal element” and the “too material and literal” attitudes she associated with evangelical Christianity. Unlike Charles Ives or Virgil Thomson, Crawford did not see the church music of her youth as a musical resource: her experience with religion had been too strict to sustain nostalgia or idealization.

Diary, 15 November 1927: Concretely since the Schlusnus concert [Schlusnus was a German baritone], abstractly since the last few months, during which I have been unconsciously preparing for the discovery, I suddenly realize the close relation of the artistic and the religious emotion; art and religion result both from a need for man to express something big in himself. The religious express this up-flowing, engulfing, flowering emotion by trying to create better conditions around them, helping poor and sick people, or else simply by spending this not-containable joy that threatens to burst them in worship of a great God. . . . In the same way the composer of music releases these surging painful joys into tones, the sculptor into marble, the painter into color and rhythm, the poet into sweeping words. . . . Doing this, they either exchange religion for their art, feeling no need for the former, or, merging the two in mystic beauty, attain greater heights in their art, become spiritual, not simply “religious” and creators in the highest sense.

Crawford’s spiritual manifesto was based on a group of ideas, not all of equal prominence, but nevertheless interactive and supportive of one another. Among the most important are Theosophy, Eastern religious philosophy, nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism, and the imaginative tradition of Walt Whitman. Thus Crawford was drawing on an eclectic legacy of ideas and values that had been linked in American intellectual life since the turn of the century, to

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6 Diaries from 1912 through 1914 as well as clippings in scrapbooks describe her involvement with the Methodist church. These diaries are in private collections. The author is grateful to Michael Seeger and Barbara Seeger for access to this material.

7 Letter, Clara Crawford to Ruth Crawford, 22 May 1922. Seeger Estate.

8 Diary, 3 September 1927.

shape what one writer in 1909 termed "the New Spiritual America Emerging."\(^{10}\)

Theosophy, as is well known, attracted a number of European artists, writers, and composers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^{11}\) It also appealed to American artists and composers, although its currency is less documented in American music history.\(^{12}\) Theosophy as an organized religion was in fact a Transatlantic phenomenon, founded in New York in 1875 by the Russian-born émigré Helena Blavatsky, its major theorist, and her colleague, Colonel William Olcott. The movement, led in the 1920s by the magnetic Englishwoman Annie Besant, reached its high point around 1927–1928, claiming 45,000 members in the world and 7,000 in the United States.\(^{13}\)

New York and Los Angeles had substantial branches of Theosophical societies, as did Chicago, where Ruth Crawford lived from 1921 through 1929. Chicago had become receptive to esoteric philos-

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\(^{10}\) Michael Williams, “The New Spiritual America Emerging,” in a review cited by Henderson, “Mysticism,” 224: “Emerson was one of the prophets of the ‘New America’ and Walt Whitman wrote its psalms. . . . New America is nothing else than that mystical and spiritual America which centers predominantly about the recognition of new and hitherto unrecognized powers of Mind. . . . From the Orient too have come contributing influences—Madame Blavatsky with her Theosophy and Swami Vivekenanda with his Vedanta philosophy.”


ophy particularly after Swami Vivekananda had addressed the World Congress of Religions at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, inaugurating what a contemporary Theosophist art critic described as “the missionary movement to the West.”¹⁴ In 1920 Sinclair Lewis in his best-selling novel Main Street included Theosophy in his catalogue of Chicago’s many cultural fads.¹⁵ In 1926 the city hosted the fortieth annual International Convention of Theosophy, which Besant and her young protégé Krishnamurti attended with great fanfare.¹⁶ The composer Otto Luening found his way to the Theosophical Society headquarters in Chicago in the mid-twenties, reading much the same mixture of American, Eastern, and occult writers as Crawford.¹⁷ Thus Crawford was probably receptive to Theosophy because it was in the air, at least among American intellectuals and artists in some avant-garde circles.

Theosophy was also a major interest of Crawford’s piano teacher, Djane Lavoie Herz, with whom she began to study in the fall of 1923.¹⁸ Herz’s influence on Crawford was formidable, and the young composer idolized her as a musician and intellectual, “whose knowledge of philosophy and other subjects” was “phenomenal.”¹⁹ Madame Herz often suggested books for her pupils to read. Some time after


¹⁵ Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), 10. His heroine Carol Kennicott “read scores of books unnatural to her gay white littleness: volumes of anthropology with ditches of foot-notes filled with heaps of small dusty type, Parisian imagistes, Hindu recipes for curry, voyages to the Solomon Isles, Theosophy with modern American improvements, treatises upon success in the real-estate business.”

¹⁶ Information about the 1926 convention is in “News Summary,” The Chicago Daily Tribune (30 August 1926): 5; and The Theosophist 47 (November 1926): 120–21. The convention celebrated the founding of the national headquarters at Wheaton, IL, a Chicago suburb.


¹⁸ Djane (pronounced Di-anne) Lavoie Herz (1888–1982) was a Canadian-born pianist and teacher who came to the United States about 1920, settling in Chicago. She later moved to New York, setting up a successful piano studio. This information was supplied by her son Tristan Hearst in an interview conducted by Nancy B. Reich for the author, 7 September 1985.

¹⁹ Diary, 26 August 1927.
1924 Crawford read *The Secret Doctrine*, the magnum opus of Blavatsky. In 1927 she exhorted herself to read it yet again, for she “felt more and more the need for it.” The composer Vivian Fine, who was studying piano with Herz and theory with Crawford at the same time, recalled that Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* was a book that she too read in the 1920s and one that Crawford would probably have known as well.

Criticizing the religious ethnocentrism of the West, Blavatsky postulated an “Ancient Wisdom” or truth that united all religions in a “Universal Brotherhood.” The sources of Ancient Wisdom flowed from a vast literature, unveiled to Adepts or the Masters of Wisdom, whose words Blavatsky recorded. Indeed, the belief in cross-cultural existential principles was precisely her point. Blavatsky drew on Greek myth, Scripture, legendary mystics like Paracelsus and Jakob Boehme, and classic Eastern religious philosophers. Other writers and artists later used her theories to create visual analogies and literary paradigms for the spiritual principles she postulated as truths. That Blavatsky’s global pan-historical syntheses contributed to the emergence of Modernism has been demonstrated most recently in art history, as scholars have traced the varieties of “cosmic imagery” derived from Theosophy in the evolution of abstract art.

Crawford’s affinity for the spirit of Theosophy surfaces in poetry written between 1925 and 1928 that occasionally employs such cosmic imagery. In a poem from 1928 she described the wheel of a street-car as the “God-sign of the age-old mystics” because of its circular shape. In other poems Theosophical depictions of the Sun and Fire, which are treated like elemental divinities, dramatize the genesis of her creativity. “Shades of Dead Planets,” for example, depicts a “soul that shall soar in the face of suns”:

20 Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Co, 1888.) This was the first of six volumes.
22 Interview with Vivian Fine, 20 November 1984. *Isis Unveiled* (1877; reprint, Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1972) was Blavatsky’s first book; Gitta Gradova in an interview 8 September 1984 also stated that “all Madame Herz’s pupils read *Isis Unveiled*.”
23 A reference surfaces in Ives’s song “Paracelsus” (1921) based on a text by Browning. The title “Arcana,” an orchestral work by Varèse (1927) comes from the writings of Paracelsus. For the quotation Varèse appended to the title page, see Charles Hamm, *Music in the New World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 582.
To burn . . . ecstasy of pain . . .
   Even to burn,
To touch flame, creator, destroyer . . .
To fold unto me space, time, rhythm, form,
Myself to be depth unbottomed,
To be all shadow, all flame, all planets . . .
Thro my heart the pulse of universes,
In my veins the liquid fire of all suns . . .

The desire to experience creative ecstasy through immolation is so
uncharacteristic of the earlier Ruth Crawford that this Promethean
poem is surprising, a testimonial to her intense need to merge art and
spirituality, as line four suggests.

Yet despite such chapter and verse, Crawford was not a practicing
Theosophist. Although she indicated her belief in the immortality of
the soul (hardly an occult idea) she left no evidence that she adopted
more extreme Theosophical concepts such as the belief in “auras” or
“astral planes” of existence. There were attempts in the United
States in the 1920s to apply Theosophy to music, for example by
Dane Rudhyar and the pianist Katherine Heyman, but Crawford did
not involve herself to that extent. More important, Theosophy
guided her to non-Western thought, for one of its goals was to
disseminate the ideas of Eastern philosophy in the West.

Djane Lavoie Herz was the personal conduit for Crawford’s
interest in Eastern thought. Both she and her husband Siegfried, who
was an agent for the music impressario Arthur Judson, were culti-
vated people for whom Oriental culture and thought were major

25 The poem dates from December 1928.
26 J. Stillson Judah, The History and Philosophy of Metaphysical Movements in America
(Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 103, summarizes the concepts of astral
planes as those spiritual planes on which the higher soul of man exists. According to
Besant, the astral body emits various colors according to one’s emotions that can be
seen by a clairvoyant.
27 See Katherine Ruth Heyman, The Relation of Ultra Music to Archaic Music
(Boston: Maynard Small, 1921). “Archaic” refers to “Ancient Wisdom,” while
“Ultra” referred to the “ultra-modernist” style. Heyman is remembered by Elliott
Carter as a “very progressive pianist” who was an advocate for new music, playing
Ives, Griffes, Rudhyar, some Schoenberg, and especially Scriabin. See Vivian
Perl’s oral history Charles Ives Remembered (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977),
131–32.
28 Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled, xli, states that the purpose of the Society was “to
experiment practically in the occult powers of Nature, and to collect and disseminate
among Christians information about Oriental religious philosophies.” A year after the
Society was founded, Blavatsky became an American citizen, although she left for
India soon after and never returned. Allstrom, A Religious History, 1041, points out
that Annie Besant strengthened the connection between Hinduism and Theosophy.
interests. Sculptures of Buddhas decorated their home, and incense perfumed the air of Djane Herz’s studio. A young Ruth Crawford was seduced by an ambience that the composer Vivian Fine describes as “redolent with mystery.”

Crawford freely acknowledged her involvement with both mysticism and Asian philosophy. She read the Bhagavad Gita and the Tao of Lao-Tse. In 1928 she described herself as “especially interested in Eastern philosophy,” and in 1930 as “interested in mysticism.” On one occasion she quoted an aphorism from the Bhagavad Gita in a discussion with a skeptical friend about the purposes of art: “That man who sees inaction in action and action in inaction is wise among men.” Thus she was drawn to the central belief of wise passiveness in which meditative statis is the source of understanding.

Crawford’s interest in mysticism had important links to American intellectual and spiritual traditions. One of them was nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism, with its links to Eastern philosophy understood by other artists as well. Vivian Fine recalls that “Madame Herz or Ruth or both talked about Emerson, about the individual. . . . Because Madame Herz was so caught up in Eastern philosophy, there was some talk of Emerson’s ideas.” Crawford opened her 1927 diary with a long quotation from Walden Pond, underlining Thoreau’s admonition to “probe the universe in a myriad points.” Another reference to the “honored thoughts” of Emerson and Thoreau underscores their stature. Crawford’s interest in Transcendentalism was that of a modern 1920s woman, not the

39 Interview with Tristan Hearst, 7 September 1985.
30 Interview with Vivian Fine, 29 November 1984.
31 Diary, 29 October 1928; Letter to Charles Seeger, 11 November 1930. Seeger estate.
32 Diary, 29 October 1928. The conversation was between Martha Beck, a student at the American Conservatory of Music, and Beck’s brother Norman.
34 Interview with Vivian Fine, 16 April 1989.
35 A quotation from Thoreau’s “Thoughts on Nature” is the frontispiece to her diary from 1927 and has these words underlined: “Probe the universe in a myriad points. . . . Whatever things I perceive with my entire man, those let me record and it will be poetry.” The comment about Emerson is from the Diary, [8 September] 1927.
reverence of an Ives. Still, she regarded Emerson and Thoreau as intellectual and spiritual ancestors for her modernist aesthetic.

Walt Whitman was a far more pervasive influence on Crawford’s sensibility. Both as poet and philosopher, Whitman was a model for the spiritualizing of the vernacular. In her diaries Crawford praised particular poems from *Leaves of Grass*, one entry recounting a telling incident at Djane Herz’s studio: “I pick up a copy of *Leaves of Grass*,” she wrote. “I find a good many of the first verses of ‘Song of Myself’ underlined. I feel at home.”36 Some of her poems from 1927 and 1928 are clearly derivative, veering off into unintentional parody, like “Of the wheels of streetcars I shall sing.”

Whitman also represented the democratizing of inspiration that marks Crawford’s aesthetic. Unlike German expressionists, who characteristically searched for material in the neurotic and the subconscious, Crawford most typically endowed everyday life with artistic expressiveness, penetrating the surface of the mundane for creative content. Once she fervently declared that she would rather watch gnats undulate in the wind than the great ballerina Pavlova dance.37 “Natural” or unintentional artistic expression similarly outranked the conscious product of an artist. Hence, she wrote that the Dempsey-Tunney heavyweight prize fight was “as glorious as a dancing performance—no, much more glorious, for it is natural.”38

Crawford also interpreted Whitman as confirmation of her own compositional stance towards sound sources. As Crawford read him, he did not divide sound into two camps, music and noise; he embraced the totality of the sonic universe.

Diary, 26 August 1927: What a sweep, like a great wind from the sea. And the more I read him, the stronger the bond that grows between him and my own thought. It strikes me with great force that some of his feelings about the city, come so close to mine. He has a love for the rhythms of what some people call noises,—and these have for over a year been giving me great pleasure as I ride thro the city streets on blundering clumsy streetcars. The name of the poem: “Sparkles from the Wheel.”

Whitman’s “Sparkles from the Wheel” is a portrait of a knife-grinder at work, sharpening a blade that releases “tiny showers of gold” from his wheel. Only one line celebrates sound, “the low hoarse purr of the whirling stone.” For Crawford that was enough to forge

36 Diary, [28 September] 1927.
37 Diary, 3 September 1927.
38 Diary, 26 September 1927.
the identification. The related generalization she made that "one can draw a kind of dramatic or rhythmic or dynamic pleasure from the very smallest things"39 is particularized in other diary entries.

Diary, [11] September 1927: Many things, either in motion to the eye or ear, make me chuckle inwardly; a piece of paper hopping along, making a little jazz dance of its own, or the poplar leaves, or the bumps of the bus on a brick street. Last spring an inflated empty envelope cut much capers when the wind found its cup, first rushing across the side walk, then sidling along enticingly, slowly as tho doing a bit of quiet flirting, then suddenly turning most unladylike somersets into a grass plot, where it lay discontented til it could creep stealthily back to the sidewalk for more acrobatics,—created such a perfect scherzo of rhythmic variety and subtlety that I laughed right out loud.

Such eulogies recall aspects of the aesthetic of Ives, which, although not that of an orthodox Transcendentalist,40 belong to this general spiritual tradition as it evolved after 1900. Ives's overt interest in Whitman was fairly limited, but like Crawford he mediated between style and idea through the transformed metaphor.41 Ruggles also admired Whitman, using Whitman's title "Portals" for one of his orchestral works and setting two Whitman texts.42

Crawford's admiration for Whitman was recapitulated in her friendship with the contemporary Chicago poet, Carl Sandburg, whom she met about 1925 or 1926. As the piano teacher for his children, Crawford became an "informal daughter" of Sandburg, contributing musical arrangements of American folk songs for his landmark anthology, The American Songbag (1927).43 He in turn knew her as an artist as well, once describing her as "mystic and elfin with quality akin to Emily Dickinson."44

39 Diary, 2 September 1927. Gaume, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 45, also comments on Crawford's "close personal relationship to the city of Chicago, especially the sights and sounds of the traffic" and "her beloved bus sounds."
41 Ives's involvement with Whitman in no way matches his attachment to Emerson, but he did plan various projects using Whitman texts and completed one choral work with words from "Song of Myself." On Ives and "imitations from nature" see Burkholder, Charles Ives, 32.
43 Gaume, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 45-46.
44 Letter of recommendation for Crawford from Carl Sandburg to the Guggenheim Foundation, 5 December 1929 (copy in Seeger Collection, Library of Congress).
Many diary entries and poems from the period suggest how she strove to assimilate the imaginative vision of this poet. Walking in the park at Elmhurst, the Chicago suburb where the Sandburg family lived, Crawford experienced an epiphany that was close to both Whitman and Sandburg’s mystical sense of place.

Diary, 25 November 1927: I feel a sudden awe regarding the ground I am trodding. I have a sudden illuminating sense of the inconceivable depth, massive, solid, that stretches beneath my feet. I feel it is a kind of sacred thing, this contact of my feet with this awesome substance. I feel that my feet are beating in regular rhythm a kind of hymn to the earth.

She subsequently set Sandburg’s poem “Loam” as a song for voice and piano in a group of Five Songs (1929). Such pantheistic solemnity could be tempered by the “elfin” quality that Sandburg liked, and she was not above occasionally satirizing his technique.

Diary, 26 July 1929: Sandburg: has he convictions? His spirit goes swooping into byways, pinching a piece of dust and asking “Are you a fact or fancy? Have you a little dust-soul somewhere? Where are you going and what for?”

Sandburg’s populism also appealed to Crawford. He was “right to search among down andouters for underlying poetry,” she once wrote, for he was “ten times more likely to find it there than in more polite circles.” A foreshadowing of her later political alliance with the rural underclass within American traditional music, this judgment shows that even as a so-called individualistic modernist, she recognized the interplay between social class and art. Although her generation would later be excoriated for its “elitist” stance, Crawford had her own version of the Ivesian distinction between substance and manner that she based on an American poetic tradition.

Like the American visual artists whose achievement “embodies the paradoxical marriage of innovation and tradition in the genesis of abstract art,” Crawford used “spiritual concept” as the basis for an

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45 Gaume, *Ruth Crawford Seeger,* 45.
46 This set is not the well-known group that includes “Rat Riddles,” but an earlier work that is being published by C. F. Peters, J. Tick, ed. (forthcoming, 1991).
47 Diary, 11 September 1927.
48 There is no evidence in Crawford’s diaries before 1930 that she knew Ives’s writings or music.
an avant garde style in her music. It was aligned with her compositional development in a number of different ways, including the composers she honored as models and the stylistic issues she chose to tackle.

Scriabin, a famous Theosophist, was one of Crawford’s icons. Comparing Bach’s spiritual stature to that of Whitman, she added Scriabin to the trio: “Bach: another great soul. He and Scriabine are to me by far the greatest spirits born to music.” In defending Scriabin to a fellow student, Crawford cited the critic Paul Rosenfeld’s literary fantasia on the composer, claiming that it “produced in me an effect deeper than almost anything I had ever read.”

In Crawford’s Piano Preludes 1924–1925, the Sonata for Violin and Piano and the Suite for Small Orchestra, Scriabin’s influence on her harmonic palette was palpable, as others have pointed out; the issue of sonority rather than form was paramount. She freely adapted his method of constructing chords from various kinds of fourths, abandoned key signatures, and explored post-tonal language through dense dissonant harmonies.

Although Scriabin was frequently performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Crawford was exposed to his piano music and his aesthetics through Djane Herz and her circle. Indeed, Herz was noted for the authenticity of her Scriabin interpretations: she was a disciple whose devotion was founded on personal contact in Brussels, during the period in which Theosophy was particularly important for him. In her own work she tried to replicate that

50 Scriabin’s spiritual aesthetics remain controversial to this day. For a contemporary assessment of Scriabin as a spiritual artist see A. Eaglefield Hull, A Great Russian Tone Poet: Scriabin (1922; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1970).
51 Diary, [26] August, 1927.
52 Diary, 26 October 1927. Crawford was referring to Rosenfeld’s essay “Scriabine” in Musical Portraits: Interpretations of Twenty Modern Composers (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), cited in Charles P. Silet, The Writings of Charles Rosenfeld: An Annotated Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1981). It is the only extended piece on Scriabin that Rosenfeld published before 1927.
54 Scriabin’s The Divine Poem was programmed annually from 1922 through 1941, with the exception of 1926, 1929, and 1932. “Prometheus” was performed in 1914, 1930, and 1937.
55 Herz, “Scriabine’s Prometheus,” Musical Canada 10 (May 1915): 3. “It was during my student days when in Brussels that I had the great happiness of meeting
Crawford heard Herz’s pupil Gitta Gradova play Scriabin in private during her lessons with Herz and in public at highly acclaimed recitals.\(^57\) In the fall of 1927 she wrote a poem describing Gradova’s performance of Sonata no. 4 as “the cataclysmic sweep of planets and universes.”\(^58\) Gradova’s early brilliant success owed much to her compelling interpretations of Scriabin.\(^59\) When in an interview the young Gradova described Bach’s music as a “serene expression of the highest soul experience” and Scriabin’s music as expressing “soul experiences so lofty that this indeed may be termed ‘music of the astral body,’” she summed up the world in which Crawford moved at this time.\(^60\)

Among its gurus was the Franco-American composer Dane Rudhyar, who in fact discovered Theosophy through the friendship of Djane Herz.\(^61\) Crawford met him at Herz’s studio, a salon for new music in Chicago, when Rudhyar came to Chicago in 1925 and then again in 1928.\(^62\) In a letter to Charles Seeger Crawford described herself as having made an “idol” of Rudhyar,’\(^63\) and diary entries from 1928 confirm this.

Diary, 9 November 1928: Tonight at Djane’s . . . Rudhyar reads some very beautiful poems. I begin to feel his beauty as never before. Previously when he was here I have admired and stood afar worshipping vaguely, you might say, intellectually, because I was dazzled by his

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Scriabine and that I had the privilege of being admitted into his circle of friends, when I was initiated in his philosophy of life which his music so perfectly expresses.”


\(^58\) This is a line from the poem “Your Face in My Hands,” Autumn 1927.


\(^60\) Interview with Gitta Gradova, The Musical Leader, (2 October 1924): 330.

\(^61\) Transcript of interview 18 March 1979 with Vivian Perlis (The Oral History Collection of American Music, Yale University), 8: “She had quite a library of books on occultism and Theosophy and so on. And I had known about it before but I mean I was too busy with other things . . . But there I began to read.”

\(^62\) Gaume, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 40–41.

\(^63\) Letter from Ruth Crawford to Charles Seeger, 18 January 1931. Seeger Estate.
erudition. Now I begin to "feel" his greatness. Some part of the film has been lifted from my eyes, there is a rift in the clouds which were before so dense.

Rudhyar was a messianic figure, whose passionate espousal of utopian modernism affected Crawford deeply. In the 1920s he was at the pinnacle of his musical career, publishing articles and books that applied Theosophy and Eastern thought to music and art. Rudhyar justified post-tonal language through his own version of "spiritual concept." He defined dissonance as spiritual symbol in the article "The Dissonant in Art," which he delivered as a lecture for a meeting of the Chicago chapter of Pro Musica in November, 1928. After the meeting Crawford quoted long excerpts in her diary, impressed by Rudhyar's

vision of the brotherhood of man, which blends all as human beings, despite slight exteriors which are discordant. To bring together in harmony far-related objects is a glorious achievement. . . . And so we see that dissonance is all a matter of point of view. It depends on us whether we look at it from a tribal or a universal approach.

Thus through dissonance might the world be saved from the "feudalism" of tonality. Such analysis validated Crawford's own harmonic explorations.

Like the philosophes of the eighteenth century and early French modernists, Rudhyar attacked Western musical practice as decadent and overintellectualized, rejecting the traditional structural forms of tonality and the techniques of counterpoint as rationalistic rather than intuitive. Perhaps deriving his method from surrealist ideas of automatism, Rudhyar claimed he composed by letting his hands drop

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64 Chase, America's Music, 466, discusses Rudhyar's thought and music, seeing him as a forerunner of John Cage. Mead, Henry Cowell's New Music, 43 and 47, discusses his stature in the period and his relationship to Scriabin.  
66 Diary, 11 November 1928.  
67 In Rudhyar's philosophy, consonance was "tribal" because it represented exclusiveness or the primitive expression of sectarian conditioning. Dissonance was "universal" because it symbolized the inclusiveness of the Theosophical "Universal Brotherhood." See Rudhyar, The Rebirth of Hindu Music (1928; reprint, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1979), 75 for a discussion of "tonalism as musical feudalism."

on the keyboard at random.\textsuperscript{69} Without adopting his formal nonchalance, Crawford accepted Rudhyar as “an inspiration leading her to experiment with new ideas,” rather than a model.\textsuperscript{70} His belief in “resonance,” that is to say in homophonic textures of synthetic chords, did affect her more directly.\textsuperscript{71} Later she confessed to Charles Seeger, the arch-contrapuntist, that she had “scorned counterpoint for two years” because of Rudhyar’s stance.\textsuperscript{72}

Rudhyar’s general musical influence on Crawford was duly noted by contemporary critics like Paul Rosenfeld, who labeled Crawford a member of “the Rudhyar-Scriabine faction.”\textsuperscript{73} When he was questioned about the matter near the end of his life, Rudhyar was careful about overstating the case. On the one hand, he dismissed the idea of an organized “faction” as critical hyperbole: “What faction? . . . It was only Djane and me.” Yet he surmised that the “first really interesting music Crawford wrote” came after she heard his piano preludes around 1925.\textsuperscript{74} His most revealing comment was his assessment of Crawford’s achievement. Although acknowledging the merit of the String Quartet 1931, Rudhyar valued her music from the 1920s more highly than her later composition. It was more spontaneous, less “determined,” less “intentional.”\textsuperscript{75}

For Crawford “spiritual concept” was an important musical value, albeit an elusive and difficult one to relate to specific compositional procedures. Yet there are details in several works that illuminate the ways in which it is “absorbed and arrested,” to borrow a phrase from Whitman’s “Sparkles from the Wheel.” Among these are (1) the local referential gesture, exposed through expressive terminology like “mystic,” “veiled,” and “religioso”; (2) the hidden program, in which an untitled work is revealed to have an extra-musical context; and (3) the free, imaginative recreation of Eastern sacred chant.

Between 1926 and 1929 Crawford used the expressive marking “mystic” in two compositions. These are the Sonata for Violin and

\textsuperscript{69} Martha Beck Carragan, interview, 11 July 1983.
\textsuperscript{70} Carragan in an interview with Rita Mead, cited in Mead, \textit{Henry Cowell’s New Music}, 109.
\textsuperscript{71} Mead, \textit{Henry Cowell’s New Music}, 88.
\textsuperscript{72} Letter from Ruth Crawford to Charles Seeger, 18 January 1931. Seeger Estate.
\textsuperscript{73} Paul Rosenfeld, \textit{An Hour With American Music} (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1929), 99.
\textsuperscript{74} She heard some of the early preludes from \textit{Moments: A Set of 15 Tone Poems for Piano} (Boston and New York: C.C. Birchard, 1930). These were dedicated to Djane Lavoie Herz; some were later published as \textit{Tetragrams}.
\textsuperscript{75} Interview of Dane Rudhyar by Sorrel Doris Hays for the author, 19 March 1984.
Example 1

Crawford, Sonata for Violin and Piano, first movement, mm. 1–2. © 1984, Merion Music, Inc. Used by permission of the publisher, Theodore Presser Co.

Vibrante, agitato (\( \frac{1}{\text{=50}} \))

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Violin} & : \quad \text{rit.} & \text{a tempo} \\
\text{Piano} & : \quad \text{a tempo}
\end{align*}
\]

\((\text{Ab A}^\# \text{B B}^\# \text{C Eb F})\) \quad \text{(Bb B}^\# \text{C Eb D F F}^\# \text{G})\)

Piano 1926\(^7\) in which the first movement has two moments marked “mystic” over them and a third movement, which is headed with the direction “mystic, intense”; and the sixth piano prelude 1927. The Sonata for Violin and Piano is the work that brought Crawford the most recognition before the String Quartet 1931.\(^7\)

In order to understand the two “mystic” events in the Sonata, a few comments about the harmonic language are necessary. In the first movement, which is a truncated sonata form, the introduction and the first theme employ a series of chord-complexes of six and seven different pitch classes at one time (see Example 1). If one arranges the pitches linearly, their common construction from chromatic segments is clear, as is their interrelationship: each includes a six-note segment of four half steps followed by a minor third. Although there are many simpler harmonies in the piece, these are characteristic formations. Crawford wanted dissonant intensity, which she achieved by embedding chromatic aggregates within her chords.

There are two specific moments that are marked “mystic” in this movement. One placed in the closing section (mm. 29–31) stands out precisely because it departs from these vertical sonorities (Example 2). In fact, Crawford’s “mystic chord” in measure 29 (C-F\(^\#\)-B\(^b\)-E\(^b\)-A-D)

\(^7\) The Sonata for Violin and Piano (New York: Merion Music, 1984) has been recorded by Ida Kavafian, violin, and Vivian Fine, piano, on CRI-SD 508. The score was presumed lost until the late 1970s, when Fine discovered it among her possessions.

\(^7\) The Violin Sonata was performed in New York at a League of Composers concert on 13 February 1927 and at the first concert of the Chicago chapter of the International Society of Contemporary Music on 8 February 1928. The revival of the work in 1982 was mistakenly described as a first public performance.
Example 2


![Musical Example]

is similar to Scriabin’s famous sonority. The structural function of this “mystic” moment is linked to the value of spontaneity or unpredictability, that Rudhyar linked to intuitive compositional process. These two measures, occurring directly after a climactic passage and an arrival on a fortississimo chord, derail the momentum of the drive toward the final cadential phrase. The fluid compound meter allows languid gestures unimpeded by metric downbeats. As if to emphasize its interpolative quality even further, the passage is followed by another fortissimo section, which restates thematic material from the Introduction.

The earlier “mystic” passage (mm. 7–8) is somewhat different (see Example 3). The chord is a carefully voiced chromatic hexachord. Yet the term “místico” applies to more than the harmony, appearing first over the single tone, G#. Such a gesture seems disingenuous: how can one tone convey a mystic mood? The answer lies most likely in Rudhyar’s theory of the symbolic content of the single tone, which he took from non-Western music. It was a leitmotif in his thought at the time: Crawford noted a few years later, “I heard much of the

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78 James M. Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986) uses Forte’s set terminology to describe vertical sonorities. In his terms (p. 166) the pc set that Crawford uses here (0, 1, 2, 5, 6, 9) is 6-Z28. It combines with another set to form what Baker calls a “secondary nexus which is used more widely than all sets except 6-34 . . .” (This pc set better known as the “mystic chord.”)

79 Chou Wen-chung, “Asian Concepts and Twentieth-Century Composers,” *The Musical Quarterly* 57 (1971): 215–16: “a pervasive Chinese concept” is “that each single tone is a musical entity in itself, that musical meaning lies intrinsically in tones themselves, and that one must investigate sound to know tones and investigate tones to know music.” Rudhyar’s views are discussed generally.
Example 3

Crawford, Sonata for Violin and Piano, first movement, mm. 7–8. © 1984, Merion Music, Inc. Used by permission of the publisher, Theodore Presser Co.

'single tone.' Among Rudhyar’s published explanations of its meaning is this passage from The Rebirth of Hindu Music, which Rudhyar claimed that "Crawford must have read":

A tone is a living cell. It is composed of organic matter. It has the power of assimilation, of reproduction, of making exchanges, of growing. It is a microcosmos reflecting faithfully the macrocosmos, its laws, its cycles, its centre. Concentrate on a cell, and the mysteries of the universe may be revealed to you therein. Concentrate on a tone and in it, you may discover the secret of being and find Ishvara, the Christ within.

Thus Crawford’s expression of “mystic” in relation to a single tone was intended to alter the performer’s mentality, changing the nature of the concentration that would somehow be communicated through touch.

That it was not a capricious gesture is demonstrated in later works, albeit in a less explicit context. A single repeated tone opens the chamber suite, Music for Small Orchestra (see Example 4). Furthermore, the symbolism of the single tone was apparently used seman-

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80 Diary, 3 May 1930, New York. By that time Crawford was much more detached from Rudhyar’s theories and immersed in dissonant counterpoint with Charles Seeger.

81 Rudhyar’s comment about Crawford’s knowledge of this book is in a letter to the author, 5 October 1984.


83 This work, written in 1926, is in two movements and has been recorded by the Boston Musica Viva on Delos Records 25405, 1975, under the title “Two Movements for Chamber Orchestra.” The title differs in the various catalogues of compositions made by Crawford; “Music for Small Orchestra” is on the holograph score.
RUTH CRAWFORD'S "SPIRITUAL CONCEPT" 239

Example 4

Crawford, Music for Small Orchestra, first movement, mm. 1–3, short score. The Estate of Ruth Crawford Seeger. Used by permission.

Slow, pensive piano

violins piano

clarinet bassoon

tically by other composers in the Herz circle. Vivian Fine remembers how "we wrote low notes with the word mystic over them" in this period.84

The association between mysticism and post-tonal harmony is explored further in the sixth prelude for piano (1927), marked "Andante Mystico" and dedicated "with deep love and gratitude to Djane, My Inspiration" (see Example 5).85 Here Crawford's thick resonating chords are deconstructed into intervallic components. A cyclic ostinato pattern appears in the right hand as the upper line, presenting eight ascending dyads containing all twelve notes of the scale.86 The high range of the right hand most likely symbolizes celestial regions and the spirituality Crawford associated with Herz. The extraordinary pedal markings, demanding unusual, constant sostenuto in the left hand and damper effects in the right, produce "continuous sound."87 Crawford was probably influenced here by Rudhyar's proselytizing for "the paramount importance of the pedals" in "blending chords":

Whereas in the classical tonal music each distinct harmony had to keep its resonance separate, in this "syntonistic" music there is in theory but one

84 Interview with Vivian Fine by the author, 29 November 1984.
85 Crawford's Preludes for Piano, nos. 6–9, were published in Cowell's New Music Quarterly (October 1928). They have been recorded by Virginia Eskin for Northeastern Records NR 204, 1981, and Rosemary Platt on Coronet, COR 3126.
86 Mead, Henry Cowell's New Music, 109.
87 Eugene Flemm, "The Preludes for Piano of Ruth Crawford Seeger" (D.M.A. diss., University of Cincinnati, 1987), 17 and 21, states that "the pedaling is unique in piano repertoire. . . . Both the sustaining and sostenuto pedals act as sustaining pedals. The sustaining pedal controls the upper voice duet, changing every two or three notes, while the sostenuto pedal 'sustains' the melody and lower arabesque figures out of which the melodic lines are initially carved. . . . From measure 18, all three pedals are in operation. . . . Thus this Prelude results in continuous sound, since the regular 'breathing' of the sustaining pedal is always covered by the slower moving sostenuto pedal."
harmony, that of the whole body of Sound or of Nature, and therefore
chords must be made usually to blend their resonances . . . 88

Example 5

Crawford, Prelude for Piano no. 6, mm. 1–3. © 1928. New Music Edition. Used by per-
mission of Theodore Presser Co.

Crawford both embraced and denied the existence of program
procedures in her music, seeking inspiration for specific works in
extramusical sources, but publicly severing the impulse from its
consequence. Her diary is the only surviving record of the hidden
meaning of the ninth piano prelude, which she dedicated to the pianist
Richard Buhlig. 89 Apparently moved by a conversation to disclose its

88 Rudhyar, Moments, preface.
89 Richard Buhlig (1880–1952) was an early advocate of Schoenberg as well as
American modernist composers. He played Crawford’s ninth prelude at a Copland-
Sessions concert on 6 May 1928 and a New Music Society Concert on 24 October
1928. See Mead, Henry Cowell’s New Music, 102–3. He also played one unidentified
prelude as part of his lecture-recital series “Landmarks in Five Centuries of Keyboard
Music,” listed on a program for 28 and 30 March 1931. Buhlig’s interest in Eastern
philosophy and his vision of utopian modernist music of a “more cosmic character”
program, Crawford recorded the event.

Diary, 29 October 1928: I tell Norman [Beck] what Prof. Symond said of my 9th prelude, when I told him its program from Laotze’s _Tao_. He said, “It is very difficult to express ‘calm’ in music. I ask myself out loud if that is not true, since music is supposed to be an e-motive [sic] experience, an effort to send forth out of one’s self certain strong feeling that cannot stay inside. But Norman replies, and I am quite moved by it, “No; I would say rather that music is an effort to gain calm.” Which brings to my lips Madame’s [Djane Herz’s] distinction between the artist and the mystic: the latter is simply farther along the road which the former is travelling: he has gone beyond the need for expression.

Unlike Ives, whose literary sensibility flooded his music with titles, quotations, and programs, constantly directing the listener to representational reception, Crawford separated process from finished work of art, once describing herself as a “scorner of titles.”90 She might reveal a program in private, but she would not direct a performer or a listener in a certain path. Thus there is no indication of this program in the score for the ninth prelude, and its expressive mark of “tranquillo” is hardly sufficient to interpret the work as a spiritual statement. It was not a case of believing in music as absolute or “pure” in the nineteenth-century sense of the term, but rather a matter of reticence about spiritual belief and the role of the composer in controlling the interpretation. Why should she reject the “literal” and the “personal” element in Methodism only to replace it with the literal in mysticism?

A program, as she saw it, was a point of departure for the composer, rather than a representational guidepost for the listener, and her love of the abstract surface that hid private references was typical of her modernism. When she heard a performance of Ives’s _Three Places in New England_, her reaction was revealing: “Ives is probably much greater than I realize. But the middle movement, sounding like a band concert and a prayer meeting hymn fest prejudices me violently.”91

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91 Diary, New York, February 1930. Crawford did not identify the work by name but mentioned that it was played at a rehearsal of the International Society of Contemporary Music. Thus it had to have been the performance of _Three Places_ by
Crawford preferred the paradoxical aphorisms of Eastern mysticism to Ivesian quotation. Although we do not know which aphorism from the *Tao* inspired the ninth piano prelude, the clue about “calm” in the diary entry may refer to the “wise passiveness” Crawford quoted from the *Bhagavad Gita* as well. For Lao-Tse the *Tao* (or Divine Principle) reveals itself through a tranquility whose perfection is emphasized through the contrast with periodic motion, as suggested by this passage:

> Attain the utmost in Passivity.
> Hold firm to the basis of Quietude.
> The myriad things take shape and rise to activity,
> But I watch them fall back to their repose.
> Like vegetation that luxuriantly grows
> But returns to the root (soil) from which it springs.92

The opening section of Crawford’s prelude (see Example 6) suggests the cosmic nature of tranquility through a number of techniques. One is the enormous musical space bounded by the two interval fields associated with the lower and upper registers, evoking the earth below and the sky above. In the left hand a tetrachord, almost at the bottom of the keyboard, oscillates between two major seconds that define the lower and upper limits of a whole-tone scale; its murky sonorities are blurred even further through its extreme softness (“ppp”) and the pedaling, which enhances its resonance in Rudhyar’s manner. In the right hand an arc of parallel sevenths more than five octaves away descends from B♭ / A in measure 4 to its lower axis F / E in measure 7, climbing back up in a quasi-retrograde. Underneath the activity of the opening eight measures are five pairs of sevenths that chromatically fill in the tritone from E to B♭. Here is another example of the association between meditative stasis, which was called “mystical” in the Sonata for Violin and Piano, and the structural reliance on dissonance controlled through a chromatic pitch-collection.

Crawford’s handling of rhythm supports the mood of complex tranquility as well. The left hand ostinato is never presented in the same rhythmic proportions, although it is repeated seven times in nine measures. Similarly, in the right hand the phrases are of irregular

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Nicholas Slonimsky and the Boston Chamber Orchestra on 16 February 1930, played before the American Section of the International Society of Contemporary Music. See Ives, *Memos*, 238.

length, rarely coinciding with the downbeat of the barely perceptible meter. The steady stream of quarter notes that rise and fall in tidal motion is echoed in miniature by the left-hand ostinatos.

* * *

After Crawford left Chicago, the influence of Djane Herz and her circle receded from her life. In 1929 she moved to New York in part to study dissonant counterpoint with Charles Seeger, who did not disguise his disapproval of what he perceived as lack of form in her
early music\textsuperscript{93} or his skepticism about Rudhyar's mystical aesthetics.\textsuperscript{94} Nevertheless, Seeger himself had been involved with a Yoga community in the mid-1920s and he knew and respected Asian philosophy.\textsuperscript{95}

Crawford transplanted her spiritual interests to New York, where they thrived in a new way, becoming more focused on actual Eastern music rather than esoteric philosophy. Two significant encounters with what Crawford later termed generically "Eastern sound"\textsuperscript{96} are described in her New York diary. The first was somewhat metaphorical in that one exotic experience is translated into another. In October, 1929 Crawford and her friend the composer Marion Bauer visited

the studio of Mr. Kornstein for a fascinating two hours of quarter, eighth, and sixteenth-tone music played by an ensemble of one cello, one voice, octavina, trumpet and zither. They play music of Julian Carrillo written for these infinitessimal intervals. . . . The music is extremely oriental, Hindu in effect as Carrillo writes it. On the order of chant. Very fascinating and moving.\textsuperscript{97}

No further clues about Crawford's prior experiences with Hindu music are offered, although it is quite possible that Rudhyar could have provided her with them. Yet her comments offer some insight into the appeal of the East in the evolution of early twentieth-century modernism. As is well known, many Western composers decades earlier had been attracted to the exotic surface of Eastern music, to the new timbres of its instruments, to its associations with non-Western spirituality and even to its evocations of primitivist ritual. The point here is the continuing appeal and fertile suggestiveness of non-Western music for a post-War avant garde as well: microtonalism, a

\textsuperscript{93} Mead, \textit{Henry Cowell's New Music}, 215.
\textsuperscript{94} Charles Seeger, "Reviewing a Review," \textit{Eolian Review} 3 (November 1923): 16–23. This is a fierce dismissive response to an earlier review by Rudhyar of Carl Ruggles's piece "Angels."
\textsuperscript{96} Letter from Ruth Crawford to Carl Sandburg, 26 January 1931. Sandburg Collection, University of Illinois.
way to validate and expand post-tonal explorations, was at least partially stimulated by an "increasing awareness of non-Western music" in the early 1900s.98

Crawford's second experience was more pertinent. In the winter of 1930 Seeger, Cowell, and Crawford went to see the performance of the Chinese actor Mei Lan-fang. Cowell, who would later give a lecture on "Newly Discovered Oriental Principles" as part of his course "A World Survey of Contemporary Music" at the New School for Social Research,99 told Crawford "a few things about Chinese singing." Undoubtedly Cowell shared more of his theories with Crawford, but here was a direct contact. Mei's vocal techniques astonished her.

Diary, 27 February, 1930: Hooks as he calls them. Approach a note by a slide from below, and sustain the note. Or by a slide from above and sustain the note. Or leave the note in either of these ways. There are also combinations of these hooks, infinite almost. At the theater we hear what Henry means. Mei takes only women's parts. This means he is a very great actor. . . . We are in another world tonight. On another planet. . . .

In contrast to Colin McPhee who was enthralled by instrumental color,100 Crawford associated Eastern sound with the human voice; in contrast to Henry Cowell, who began to define his interest in non-Western music in ethnomusicological rather than modernist terms by 1930,101 Crawford continued to respond to its spiritual resonances, as her comment about being "on another planet" suggests. The following year she produced her own reinterpreted synthesis of their import in a set of pieces written while she was in Berlin on a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Sometime in the spring of 1930, Crawford received a commission from Gerald Reynolds, the conductor of the Women's University Glee Club in New York. The work was to be performed in a concert

99 Cowell's course is listed in the Catalogue of the New School for Social Research for the spring 1930 semester. The lecture is described as "New discoveries concerning Oriental musical practice and science recently made by musicologists in Russia, and here. Amazing contrasts of Oriental standpoints with our musical views."
101 Cowell was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study with the leading musical anthropologist Erich Von Hornbostel in Berlin, during 1931–32.
of works written for the group by holders of Guggenheim Fellowships and to take place in December, 1930.\textsuperscript{102} Reynolds was a progressive musician, who had premiered many works by American composers, turning his chorus of amateurs into what Marc Blitzstein later called “a happy hunting ground” for new music.\textsuperscript{103} Crawford decided to write a set of \textit{Chants for Women’s Chorus} that would draw on the ambience of Oriental music. Apparently she explained this to Reynolds before she left for Europe, for in October 1930 he sent her scores by Gustav Holst, a devoted Theosophist. The pieces, not identified in the correspondence, were doubtless the second and third set of \textit{Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda}, which Reynolds had performed some years earlier.\textsuperscript{104}

Crawford thanked Reynolds: Holst’s music was “a help.”\textsuperscript{105} This could have been nothing more than courtesy. On the other hand, Holst’s hymns, which were prayers to Hindu deities (e.g. “To Varuna,” “To Agni”), may have prompted her to “suddenly break into titles and into a definite desire that the title should accompany the performance,”\textsuperscript{106} although she later vacillated about this.\textsuperscript{107} Between 6 October and 10 November 1930 Crawford wrote “To an Unkind God,” “To an Angel,” and “To a Kind God.” The first two were

\textsuperscript{102} The program took place on 18 December 1930. Clippings file for the Women’s University Glee Club and Gerald Reynolds, Music Division, New York Public Library.


\textsuperscript{104} In Sheila Lumby and Vera Hounfield, eds., \textit{The Catalogue of Holst’s Programmes and Press Cuttings in the Central Library, Cheltenham} (London: G. and I Holst, 1974), 43, there is listed a program of the Women’s University Glee Club for Monday, December 17, n.y., in which \textit{Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda} were performed. The year was most likely 1923, since an examination of WUGC programs eliminates other possible dates. I am indebted to Barry Weiner for this information.

\textsuperscript{105} Letter from Ruth Crawford to Gerald Reynolds, 11 October 1930. New York Public Library. There is some superficial resemblance between Holst’s “Funeral Chant,” the third of the second set of \textit{Choral Hymns} and Crawford’s \textit{Chant}, “To an Angel.” Holst uses a steady ostinato stream of quarter notes in intervals for the opening section, as does Crawford.

\textsuperscript{106} Letter from Ruth Crawford to Charles Seeger, 17 October 1930. Seeger Estate.

\textsuperscript{107} A subsequent undated letter to Seeger, quoted in Gaume, \textit{Ruth Crawford Seeger}, 160, states that “the Reynolds Chants have lost their titles and I think it’s much better.” Nonetheless, the program of the Women’s University Glee Club lists it as “To an Angel” and the composer’s own list gives titles for the first two.
written quickly between October 6 and 16; the third took more time. A fourth was planned but never materialized.\textsuperscript{108}

The Chants are relatively unknown works.\textsuperscript{109} Only one has been performed and published, and the manuscripts for the first and third Chants were presumed lost until 1976. For at least the first two, their genesis in Crawford’s interest in Eastern thought would be speculative without the evidence supplied in private correspondence. Documented there is the rationale behind her unusual approach to text. All three Chants use invented syllables formed from phonemes. Correspondence between Crawford and Seeger reveals that initially she had planned to use Sanskrit text from the \textit{Bhagavad Gita}. Since an English translation was unavailable in Berlin, making “the Sanskrit plan not possible,” it freed her to do what she “had wanted to do for years—invent my own syllables.”\textsuperscript{110} Crawford collated sounds from both English and German, describing the result as “a language of my own—consonants and vowels in a kind of chant which sounds quite Eastern.”\textsuperscript{111}

The \textit{Chants for Women’s Chorus} occupy a special place in Crawford’s oeuvre, each written in an idiom that she developed for it but virtually never used again. They are transitional works, retaining a few aspects of her earlier Chicago style in harmonic language, and to some extent foreshadowing her later formal preoccupations. Although influenced by Seeger’s theory of dissonance as a concept to be applied to many parameters of music, Crawford experimented with what she termed a “looser style,” writing him “there were many things [done] not according to \textit{A Manual of Dissonant Counterpoint}.”\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{108} The chronology of composition is based on letters between Crawford and Reynolds on 11 and 15 October 1930 and 10 November 1930. The fourth Chant was to be titled “To a Gargoyle”; it is mentioned in a letter from Crawford to Seeger, 9 October 1930. Seeger Estate.

\textsuperscript{109} For other discussions of these pieces see Gaume, \textit{Ruth Crawford Seeger}, 159–65, and Nicholls, \textit{American Experimental Music}, 112–16. Neither author mentions Crawford’s interest in the \textit{Bhagavad Gita} as a text source. Gaume, \textit{Ruth Crawford Seeger}, 135, says that “Crawford was probably aware of Scriabin’s experiments with inventing a new language for his ‘Mysterium.’”

\textsuperscript{110} Letter from Ruth Crawford to Gerald Reynolds, 13 October 1930. New York Public Library.

\textsuperscript{111} Letter from Ruth Crawford to Carl Sandburg, 26 January 1931. Sandburg Collection, University of Illinois.

\textsuperscript{112} Letter from Ruth Crawford to Charles Seeger, 11 October 1930. Seeger Estate. For a discussion of this Manual, see Tick, “Dissonant Counterpoint,” 412. The “looser” style probably refers to Crawford’s use of repeated pitches. Seeger held generally that a pitch should not be repeated until eight to ten different pitches had intervened.
The letters between former teacher and pupil surrounding the composition of these works vividly testify to the push and pull between theory and practice. Among the issues were the use of repeated notes more frequently than sanctioned by Seeger; the references to functional harmony, however attenuated; and a general sense of greater relationship among the parts than proposed by Seeger in his explanation of the heterophonic ideal.

The first Chant, “To an Unkind God,” lasts about two minutes and is only thirty-seven measures long but gives the impression of great density and energy, so mercurial are its rhythms and rhetorical its textural contrasts. This Chant is oration rather than ritual. There are three parts set out at the beginning (labeled by number but generally SSA) with an additional soprano solo and a section in which one part is divided; more often than not one line functions as leader against sustained single tones or whole-step pedal points. The opening phrase begins with a duet in unison and and ends with a passage of Orientalized vocalise, the ornamented notes and nasal syllables recalling Cowell’s description of Mei Lan-fang’s singing (see Example 7, mm. 1–9). In subsequent sections of more complex dissonant counterpoint the lines move frequently by chromatic or whole-step motion interspersed with minor thirds.

Harmonies based on the cell of half-step plus third form the basis of the surprising homophonic climax (see Example 8). Another cell C#-D-D#, prominent in the opening phrase (see Example 7) returns to shape the counterpoint after this section. The interval C#-D# functions as a quasi-tonal center of sorts, flavoring the work with “tonalitous” moments since it is used both for harmonic pedals and melodic cadential gestures. A brief excerpt must suffice here. In Example 9 the end of one phrase (m. 23) returns to the C#-D# in the same rhythm of the cadence in measure 9 (see Example 7). As the phrase elides into the next, the whole-step cell is used in the lower parts, transposed to the fresh sound of the B♭-C pedal (see Example 9, m. 24). This was a moment Seeger particularly relished and he advised a rewrite of the end of the Chant because of it; a detailed criticism of the last few measures proposed “one return of the really exquisite B♭-C natural pedal point” and also a return of the strong E♭.

113 “Tonalitous” was Seeger’s alternative to “tonal,” to distinguish between being related to tonality as opposed to being related to tone. He, like Schoenberg, did not like the word atonal.
114 Nicholls, American Experimental Music, 113, points out that this cell ends the second Chant and is crucial to the formation of the two cluster chords in the third Chant as well.
Example 7


Crawford adopted this suggestion, but couldn’t resist teasing him about this “shameful” sign of weakness.

13 November 1930:
Curious: at the end, I too had wanted a return to the E-flat, as at the beginning, but had abandoned it because of the reason you suggest: a consonance of form. Since you also had a shameful longing for such shocking consonance, I think I shall put it in.

Letter from Charles Seeger to Ruth Crawford 1 November 1930. Seeger Estate.
The second Chant, “To an Angel,” was, Crawford told Seeger, “thought entirely harmonically . . . to produce the effect.” Intended to contrast with the volatility of the first chant, this piece is serene and monochromatic. It is written for two choral parts (numbered 1 and 2 but functioning as soprano and alto) and one soprano solo. Only the latter sings invented syllables against a backdrop of choral humming. Crawford requested the choir to maintain a “complete monotony of tempo and ‘white’ tone throughout.” Here is a more conventional view of Oriental calm; indeed the rhythm of regular breathing is reinforced by the lull of the triple meter and the steady stream of quarter notes, varied only through occasional rests on first beats or longer cadences. The main material of this Chant is an ostinato pattern of intervals, dominated by thirds and sevenths, whose frequent alternation suggests an image of organic expansion and contraction. At the end of its first five-measure statement it covers the total chromatic (see Example 10).

According to Crawford, this Chant displayed “a certain looseness of technique” regarding the handling of repeated tones. Was it a concession to the limits of the Glee Club or “a conviction that this is the way I want the music to sound,” she asked rhetorically, ambivalent about the results:

I vary between an objective viewing of it as bad, impressionistic and worthless, and a secret liking for its simplicity and a slightly fascinated interest in the fact that the second part wanders about naively in its own

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116 Letter from Ruth Crawford to Charles Seeger, 26 October 1930. Seeger Estate.
117 “To an Angel” was published in a version Crawford later made for mixed chorus and soprano solo as Chant, 1930 (New York: Alexander Broude, 1971) and was recorded in this version by the Gregg Smith Singers (Vox SVBX-5353, 1979).
118 See Nicholls, American Experimental Music, 113.
tonality (which was not planned) while the effect is dissonant vertically.\textsuperscript{119}

Example 9

Crawford, Chant, "To an Unkind God," mm. 23–24

After this contemplative composition, Crawford produced the most radical Chant of the set. Initially titled "To a Kind God," it was inspired by Seeger's enthusiasm for Crawford's plan to use the \textit{Bhagavad Gita} as a text source. His vivid description of Eastern chant, in a letter written shortly after Crawford arrived in Berlin, proved catalytic:

My dear, your letter to Blanche (she showed it to me) was fine. . . . I was much delighted at your getting to work on the Gita idea. Remember, the \textit{flowing} line. . . . A pivoting reiterative line would well suite the Gita. If in three parts, one could deliver the text and the other two could repeat over and over the pranava OM (or—uu-mm). I have forgotten the number of counts to be given to each of the three syllables at different times, but any proportion such as 2–1,4/8–4–16. There is a more interesting proportion involving a total of nine counts that I have a record of in Paterson. If I can find it soon, I shall send it to you. . . . When the pranava is pronounced in earnest it [is] done at the pitch most suited to the individual voice regardless of any harmonic relation with the other pitches of other voices sounding it at the same time (it is done in a crowd in all the monasteries). Each voice, however, has a tendency to rise in inflection at the end of each breath (very long breath of course, a kind of hum), and as the repetitions go on, the pitch gradually gets lower and lower. If kept on long enough—say twenty minutes—the men's voices especially (but the women's also), attain an almost incredible impression of depth and the whole body vibrates to the sound as if in an electric shock machine. If you wanted to make a complex dissonant veil of sound for the chanting voice to cut through, this idea would be suited. (The proportion adding to nine is 2–3–4). (Suited to dissonant rhythm!)\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{119} Letter from Ruth Crawford to Charles Seeger, 26 October 1930. Seeger Estate. Also quoted in Gaume, \textit{Ruth Crawford Seeger}, 160.

\textsuperscript{120} Letter from Charles Seeger to Ruth Crawford, 7 October 1930. Seeger Estate.
By the time she received this letter, Crawford had already abandoned the idea of using the Bhagavad Gita. Even though by her own admission she “knew nothing about the chanting” Seeger’s exuberant imagery was enough to inspire her. When she later explained the piece to Gerald Reynolds as having its source in “chanting done in far-eastern monasteries,” she also appropriated Seeger’s image of the “complex veil of sound” and his description of the unintentional heterophony.

It was one thing to evoke “Eastern sound” in words and quite another to realize it in Western music. Crawford experimented with several techniques that have their roots in her earlier spiritual aesthetics. The most important was the use of chromatic aggregates, for this piece takes that trait to its logical conclusion. Chromatic segments are the sound ideal of the work and the presentation of the total chromatic its climax. As she described it to Reynolds, “the half steps” were “to effect a kind of new composite mass-pitch.”

Bold in conception, rather simple in design, the Chant unfolds the total chromatic through an additive process. The first section, measures 1–10, presents an initial hexachord, A–B♭–C–D♭–D–Eb, as a choral mantra on “OM,” articulated in three syllables (OR–U–M) in the proportions of 2:3:4 as suggested by Seeger. The opening of the piece was to be almost inaudible, “sotto voce and pppp,” as still as Ives’s “Druids” in The Unanswered Question. From the shadows of the mantra the Chant emerges through Crawford’s invented prayer

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\[ \text{Hum throughout (with complete monotonity of tempo and “white” tone throughout)} \]

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\[ \text{Example 10} \]

Crawford, Chant, “To an Angel,” mm. 1–6, short score. The Estate of Ruth Crawford Seeger. Used by permission.

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121 Letter from Ruth Crawford to Charles Seeger, 26 October, 1930. Seeger Estate.
122 In explaining the chant to Gerald Reynolds, Crawford adopted Seeger’s terminology, quoting verbatim from his letter. The letter from Crawford to Reynolds, 10 November 1930, is quoted in Gaume, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 162, without reference to the Seeger letter.
123 Letter from Ruth Crawford to Gerald Reynolds, 10 November 1930. New York Public Library.
124 Crawford was familiar with this mantra, once speculating whether “the vowels ‘o’ and ‘aw’ dominate in words suggesting spiritual values” as in “OM” and “home.” Diary, 13 April 1930.
language, expanding the pitch parameters to include a chromatic tetrachord E-F-F♭-G between measures 11 and 28. Example 11 shows this process at work: the first two mantra syllables ("OR-U") are present in the four lower parts and one upper part; five choral parts and the free alto solo chant the invented words; the aggregate uses ten different pitches.

The process repeats itself in the middle section of the Chant, measures 29–38. It too begins with the mantra on the same hexachord, this time transposed up a whole step; it expands not by four but by six pitches in the next ten measures. The final section of the Chant unravels the process, rounding off the piece in the tranquility of the initial "OM" hexachord once more.

Acknowledging ruefully to Seeger that "in the massing of half steps I may be crazy, it may not be possible or sound as I think it will," Crawford nevertheless worked carefully to make the scheme as practicable as possible. Aware of the demands she was making on the chorus, she simplified the scheme by assigning each vocal part one pitch only for long sections of the work. To counteract the possibility of each singer sliding into her neighbor's tone, Crawford gave Reynolds a chart "to place the singers of adjacent half-steps as far from each other as possible."

Once settling on the sound-ideal of "mass-pitch," Crawford animated her inchoate sonorities through two devices, the addition of solo parts and intense rhythmic heterophony. In the solo parts, the "melody" was not bound by the hexachord pitch content, and both alto and soprano solos move above and below the mesmeric chromatic harmonies, occasionally joining in with the group but more often cutting through the "complex veil of sound" by using different pitches.

More crucial for the vitality of the scheme were the textual rhythms derived from her synthetic phonemes. Once the "OM" drone was in place, it slowly yielded to "complex counter-rhythms . . . the effect desired being that of a group of people chanting quite independently to a central idea or emotion." Each phoneme bonds with a particular rhythm (such as "Ya-Nge-Nah" in triplet or "Zo-A-Ngya-

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125 Letter from Ruth Crawford to Charles Seeger, 11 November 1930. Seeger Estate.
126 This chart is reproduced in Gaume, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 163.
127 Letter from Ruth Crawford to Gerald Reynolds, 10 November 1930. New York Public Library.
Example 11

Crawford, Chant, “To a Kind God,” m. 22. The Estate of Ruth Crawford Seeger. Used by permission.

No” in a group of four sixteenths in Example 11). These patterns shift from one part to another and the “independence” of the worshipers through organized heterophony is therefore based on polytextuality as well as polyrhythms. Musically, the listener’s perception of a single pitch can be altered by the character of the “word”

128 Gaume, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 161, reproduces the chart.
of the moment. The climax of the work is the presentation of the total chromatic and the complete permeation of the texture by the invented words in a texture of dissonant rhythms. Thus the Chant reflects Crawford’s interest in “the almost unexperienced-with field of sounds possible to the human voice but not yet accepted as singing” as well as her committment to abstracted “dissonance,” or non-congruence of beat divisions. In fact, she described the piece as a “counterpoint of vowels,” and she produced a pulsating texture of massed choral sound that surfaced only many decades later as a technique among other Western composers.

The Chants for Women’s Chorus were Crawford’s representation of the act of worship as a sonic rather than cognitive experience. Since there was no language, there was no meaning and therefore no liturgy or formalized prayer. She, who was so biased against Ives because of his hymn tune quotations, found a way to recreate a prayer meeting purged of the literal elements she rejected in organized Western religion. It was an extraordinary vision.

When the Chant was mailed to Reynolds, Crawford confided to Seeger that “my heart was a bit in my throat.” It proved to be impossible for the conductor to program the work for the concert in December. Receiving the manuscripts late, probably about six weeks before the scheduled concert, he postponed their performance until the spring, eventually settling for one performance of the easiest one, “To an Angel,” on 7 May 1931. Kind words in The Musical Leader and neutral comments in The New York City Post balanced out an ugly review in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. Charles Seeger attended the performance and wrote his own account of her “lovely conception” to

130 This description, which relates the piece to Crawford’s interest in dissonant counterpoint, surfaces in a letter from Ruth Crawford to Carl Sandburg, 26 January 1931. Sandburg Collection, University of Illinois.
131 Nicholls, American Experimental Music, 114. He also points out the affinity between Crawford’s Chants and Ligeti’s Lux Aeterna.
133 Reynolds often built his programs around themes. This concert featured both exotic and spiritual works, including American Indian chants sung by Te Ata, an African spiritual, and Raymond Pettit’s “Chorus of the Spirits of Wisdom.” Programs located in clippings file for the Women’s University Glee Club, Music Division, New York Public Library.
134 The Musical Leader (14 May 1931), p. 10, praised the composer for “using the timbre of voices in a new and fascinating manner.” The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, cited in Gaume, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 160, called it “a singularly sterile, meaningless bit of harmonic improvisation as stupid as it was brief.”
Diary Crawford two days later. "The reception was polite and adequate," Seeger stated, "[but] R.[eynolds] had no idea of what it should sound like. It was just notes to him." A few weeks later in a letter for the Guggenheim Foundation, who was considering Crawford's request to extend her grant, Reynolds called the piece "an experiment" from a composer who "had never worked in this form before," charitably adding that "Mr. Russell Bennett stated that it had a character and quality that entitled it, in the parlance of a painter, to hang in any good Salon." There is no record of performance of the other two chants, which remain in manuscript.

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The Chants for Women's Chorus were the last works in which Crawford's interest in Eastern philosophy or in "spiritual concept" seems to have played an overt role. Furthermore, by the time she returned to New York in October 1931, the artistic climate had changed. Only a few years separate the following diary entry from the onset of the Depression.

Diary, [11] November 1927: What an inconceivably beautiful thing is this soul world, and the thought that existence among people, which I sometimes deplore as banal and boring, could be a glorious thing if one could speak to the soul and not to the brain.

Such idealism, so characteristic of Crawford's 1920s modernism, was sorely stressed by the economic and political chaos of the Depression. The priority given to sentience over intellect and the characterization of existence as "banal and boring" would hardly have seemed apt in the early 1930s. Like so many other American composers, Crawford would later abandon the high individualism of the avant garde; as she herself described it, around 1936 she descended from the "stratosphere," a term that does indeed suggest both her spiritual as well as artistic affinities, down to earth, to the "highway of folk music." "Spiritual concept" and "speaking to the soul world" were relics of her earlier life as a composer, an easier time.

when Crawford’s goals for music were deeply rooted in an American spiritual tradition that sustained her search for a modernist language.

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This article investigates the musical thought and stylistic evolution of the American modernist composer Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953) in her formative years. It shows the relationship of style and idea to what she termed “spiritual concept”: the core of her transcendental modernism. The sources of Crawford’s spiritual aesthetics are Theosophy, Eastern religious philosophy, nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism, and the imaginative tradition of Walt Whitman. Thus Crawford drew on an eclectic legacy of ideas that had been linked in American intellectual life since the turn of the century. Documentation of her thought is based on unpublished diaries, poems, and correspondence. The mediation between style and idea is discussed in terms of the influence of two composers, Scriabin and Dane Rudhyar, and specific compositional procedures, such as: (1) the local
referential gesture, exposed through expressive terminology like “mystic,” “veiled,” and “religioso”; (2) the hidden program, in which an untitled work is revealed to have an extra-musical context; and (3) the free, imaginative recreation of Eastern sacred chant. Music discussed includes the Sonata for Violin and Piano, the sixth and ninth prelude for piano, and the Chants for Women’s Chorus.