

**R U T H
C R A W F O R D
S E E G E R**



**A
COMPOSER'S
SEARCH FOR
AMERICAN
MUSIC**

**J U D I T H
T I C K**

ruth crawford seeger



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A Composer's

Search for

American

Music

JUDITH TICK

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To
Stephen Howes Oleskey,
a loving husband,
and
Mike Seeger,
a loving son

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p r e f a c e

I first saw the name of Ruth Crawford Seeger on the blue and orange cover of a CRI record while browsing in a store on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, California, in 1970. I immediately bought this curiosity, for I had never encountered music by a female composer, never mind an American woman, on a classical record before. My teachers in graduate school had filled my ears with preclassic symphonies and medieval motets; orthodox musicologists studied the European past. It would be years before I could hear the dissonant harmonies of Ruth Crawford's Preludes for Piano with aesthetic empathy.

Like so many other young women in those awakening years, I began to investigate women's history in my field. I wrote an article about "sexual aesthetics" and a letter in 1971 to Ruth Crawford's husband, Charles Seeger, for information about two obscure pieces whose titles sounded "political." Three years later he answered me that "Sacco, Vanzetti" and "Chinaman, Laundryman" were "declamations of tremendous power" and not in print.

To his friends he wrote, "Have you seen notices of Ruth's music? She would be very pleased at their 'renaissance.'" Slowly, works like the String Quartet 1931 and the Three Sandburg Songs won acclaim from modern audiences and critics. Simultaneously, this obscure American modernist became a symbol of light and dark—for at the same time that the process of recognition started in earnest, so did questions about unfulfilled promise and silence.

I began this project obliquely, not with the intention of writing a biography but with the goal of publishing music still in manuscript. In 1982 I went to Washington, D.C., for the first performance in over fifty years of the Sonata for Violin and Piano. Apparently, there was no autograph among the com-

poser's estate; at that time I did not suspect the significance of this omission. A score given as a gift had been lost and then found again by Ruth Crawford's pupil and friend, the distinguished composer Vivian Fine; she had heard its performance in Chicago in 1928. Now she and Ida Kavañian were playing it in the Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress. The emotional explicitness of the sonata's four movement markings in the program—"vibrant, agitated," "buoyant," "mystic, intense," and "allegro with ardor"—piqued my curiosity. Fierce dissonances and passionate themes swept through the hall. At a post-concert reception in a living room the size of a soccer field, Vivian Fine stood talking animatedly to a slight, long-haired man, whose boyish dress and speech resonated with a country twang. I thus met Crawford's son, Mike Seeger, with whom I had exchanged one letter, and was immediately swept into the vortex of their dialogue; they discussed my many questions that were on my mind: "Why did Ruth stop composing?" "Was there room in the house for two points of view?" Did she "waste her time" on folksong? Each knew little of the other's world.

The next day I hunted up music manuscripts as I had planned and read diaries as I had not. At twenty-six years old, Crawford wrote, "One can draw a kind of rhythmic or dynamic pleasure from the very smallest things." A piece of scrap paper "rustling across the sidewalk created a perfect scherzo of rhythmic variety and subtlety." As composers are wont to do, she experienced the world through sound. Her earnest transcendentalism touched me. The "voice"—that abstract concept that allows us to translate musical expression into human content—became a person.

I rifled through scapheaps of papers, delightedly discovering a proper bit of documentary musicological evidence—a scruffy piece of paper on which Ruth Crawford Seeger had scrawled some corrections for the score of the String Quartet 1931, her greatest work. In the margin of this document she had scrawled reminders about household chores in code, the proverbial "laundry list" for biographical zealots.

"What does that have to do with her music?" a musician friend scowled at me. She had been harassed out of a conducting class at a noted conservatory and, futilely denying the direction of her considerable natural gifts, was trying to become a singer, that most feminine of musical careers. Perhaps as a kind of reparatory act for her own history, she reasserted the formalist creed of autonomous art, reproaching me for any hint of collusion with those persecuting forces that made gender relevant to a musician's ambitions. Yet for me a list of daily trivialities opened a window into a world where a composer was not historicized either through augmentation or diminution as a figure engaged in epic struggle, a male archetype. This composer was my kind of heroine—a modern woman whom I could understand as well as admire—someone who was living with messiness and gray patches of confusion and responsibility that afforded some relief from the starkness of dichotomies. The juxtaposition of the two concerns, one the creative self and the other the relational, embodied the fundamental forces that are so unwisely seen as rivals when in fact they are twins—work and love.

Which side are you on? That early conversation between Mike Seeger and Vivian Fine had rattled me. Sometimes I thought about my subject as Ruth Crawford, other times, Ruth Seeger. Who claimed my loyalties, the composer or the “matriarch”—a term she would have resisted—of a legendary family in the urban folk revival movement that began in the 1930s, with three generations of professional musicians in its family tree? At the apex of the family’s fame and influence stands Ruth’s stepson Pete Seeger. “Hey Jim-along, Jim-along Josie,” Pete sang in a Folkways record album inspired by her work, changing his banjo licks to suit “Jump Jim-along,” “Run Jim-along,” “Hop-Jim-along,” “Skip Jim-along” just as she did in her piano accompaniment in her book *American Folk Songs for Children*. Because folk music had never been part of my professional training, I shared the innocence of discovery that so shaped her folk revival work in the 1930s. Preparing to teach a course on American music, I stumbled across Clarence Ashley and the Carter Family in Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* and Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers on *Smoky Mountain Ballads*. I fell in love with old-time genius while browsing through a library on Flatbush Avenue.

The integration of these two worlds Ruth Crawford Seeger once described as “stratosphere” and “well-traveled highway” slowly emerged as a major theme of this biography. At first I saw her life through the lens of cultural politics—that is, as a metaphor for a rite of passage for a crucial American cultural moment, when the high individualism of the avant-garde in the 1920s was supplanted by a new populist ethos of accessibility. Because she was so influenced by radical politics, I wondered if Communist rhetoric against elitist art had undermined her. An eminent American composer who admired Crawford Seeger’s music had once warily suggested this to me. Indeed, for her—as for later generations of folk revival musicians—the folk revival initially empowered the culture of an outsider class of rural poor.

As I traced the process of cultural mediation that engrossed Ruth Crawford Seeger, which she described as building bridges between country folk, who “came by it natural,” and city people, who deserved to know their national legacy, another theme took shape. Because she remained first and foremost a composer, no matter what she did, all of her various activities as transcriber, editor, and arranger of folk materials reflected that sensibility. I began to see how she understood tradition through a modernist perspective, finding affinities that linked the very old with the very new. An ideology of opposition pervaded her work. Just as modernism flouted conventional practice, so did tradition. Just as modernism rejected Romantic excess, so did tradition. Decoding the ways opposition as a value informed her musical choices integrated the two parts of her musical identity.

It also took much pondering to separate issues of loss and choice from arguments about the relative merit of two profoundly important types of musical expression, the individual and the collective. How did nursery school children reinventing lyrics and movement “make a sort of composition”? On the surface, the arena in which she moved within folk revival circles seemed so conveniently conforming to conventional roles for women. Crawford Seeger

herself wondered about “going back to her own music” too often while delighting in her resumption of it just before her death for us to assume that one kind of music substituted for the other.

In the end Ruth Crawford Seeger’s struggles with her own multiple and divided selves did not dissolve through ideas. Eventually, I accepted this as an enabling rather than constraining force in the writing of her life. She was the “straddler of two worlds,” the “bridge builder,” the “runner of a four-ring circus,” the “liver of too many lives at once.” She acted out the tensions in the paradoxical modernist idiom of dissonant counterpoint that so engrossed her as a young woman—“sounding together while sounding apart.” That phrase from art turned into a leitmotif of her humanity as a woman, whose genius transformed all the musics where she found a home.

A Note on Names

In the literature about the subject of this book, “Ruth Crawford Seeger” is the most commonly found name. For most of her life she used the surname Crawford on the scores of her original composition. After her marriage, she added the name Seeger to hers. There were other permutations along the way as well, as the reader shall see. Even Charles Seeger occasionally referred to “my wife, Ruth Crawford.” I use Crawford as her surname throughout this book for the sake of clarity and literary convenience.

Northeastern University, Boston
July 1996

J.T.

a c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

As my family, friends, and even acquaintances know, I have been involved with this book for more years than I ever expected to be. I have received many different kinds of help along the way. Those who have shared primary sources and privately held material are listed in the Selected Bibliography. I would like first and foremost to thank the Seeger family—in particular, Barbara, Mike, Peggy, and Pete—for their generosity of spirit and the interest they took in this project.

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c o n t e n t s

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Part I

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1901-1920

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a minister's
daughter

Some time around 1927 or 1928—it was hard for Martha Beck to remember just exactly when—Ruth Crawford stood in the doorway of Beck's studio at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago and wondered, "How does one ever write work without a reminiscence of something that has been written before!" That modernist fantasy merged patriotic pride with personal ambition. Ruth Crawford's "before" encompassed the past of European tradition. Her present glowed with the promise of her own youth. Born in 1901, she believed that the late 1920s were a time when American music sounded richer and more compelling than ever before. Even if she had discovered her musical calling as a composer just a few years earlier, she placed herself among a small band of "moderns" whom the critic Paul Rosenfeld praised as pioneer voices of national autonomy, starting "to represent the forces of American life, to interpret them in a large way."¹

By 1927 Ruth Crawford had publicly joined them. As one of six "members of the young generation," she—along with Aaron Copland and Marc Blitzstein—had been featured in a concert on February 26, sponsored by the League of Composers in New York, where her Sonata for Violin and Piano, written in 1926, received its world premiere. *Musical America* touted the event as "American Youth to Have Its Fling," printing photographs of the two women included on the program. Crawford's showed a handsome serious woman, whose dark bob framed a round face, the pensive tilt of her head contradicting the resolute set of her mouth. Reviews conceded her a future by granting dispensation from the weaknesses of sentimentality and conservatism historically stigmatizing the "woman composer"; they implied she

composed like a man. One critic praised the sonata as the “most masculine in quality the afternoon brought forth with the exception of the Copland”; another wrote how the sonata was “boldly energetic and virile.”²

About a year later the violin sonata received its local premiere in Chicago, Crawford’s musical home town, at a gala concert inaugurating the second American chapter of the International Society of Contemporary Music. The hall at the Cliff Dwellers Club included several local critics, who turned Miss Crawford into a musical athlete. One said she could “sling dissonances as mean as any of them,” while another made her into an “intrepid, fearless swimmer in a sea of notes.”³

If others made her work into a representation of gender and modernity, Ruth Crawford resisted such confinements by finding more spacious images of identity, which she expressed in a poem from 1925: “Spirit of me, dear rollicking far-gazing straddler of two worlds, message carrier from real to unreal. Vagrant wanderer thro cycles and universes, Biding a while to travel my small ways.” The incongruous juxtaposition of “universes” with “small ways” hints at the vulnerability of the young woman, who sat among Chicago’s musical elite, eating her two-dollar banquet dinner, waiting for music by Milhaud and Stravinsky to pass by. Finally, she heard her own piece receive enthusiastic applause. Should she stand and take a bow?

Watching her hesitate, Frederick Stock, the ISCM chapter president and the esteemed conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, took action. Crawford wrote how he “came to my seat, led me to the front, gripped my hand several times, saying ‘very beautiful.’” She inked the date in her diary in dark bold letters while understating the moment as an occurrence to be “set down for memory’s sake.” Even though there would be other triumphs, she never forgot this one, which made the violin sonata an emblem of ambition and success for the rest of her life.⁴

Clara Crawford, Ruth’s mother, sat next to her daughter in the Cliff Dwellers Club audience, for it was “ladies night,” permitting women as guests for this special event. She knew what the performance meant for her daughter’s career, and wrote her son a few days later acknowledging the double context of the achievement: “Four new compositions by well-known men and Ruth’s. The sonata was beautifully played by two Chicago artists with critics’ comments in several morning papers. Very thrilling.”⁵

The musical bond between mother and daughter exceeded ordinary maternal pride because it was based on reparation and unfulfilled dreams. A memoir Ruth wrote long after her mother’s death begins with an account of her sixth birthday that captures Clara Crawford’s intention to rear her daughter within the rules of conventional domesticity and at the same time give her opportunities she had been denied:

On my sixth birthday my mother did two things. She took me out on the front porch with great mystery, brought out her sewing basket, and gave me my first lesson in darning socks. Later she took my hand to lead me down the street to

another surprise. This she did [in] a sort of mixture of solemnity and triumph, for it represented something she had wanted and been deprived of all during her childhood. She took me to my first piano lesson.⁶

Crawford linked the lack of music in her mother's youth to the rules for social and artistic abstinence that characterized fundamentalist Methodism in the nineteenth century, for Clara Crawford was a minister's daughter whose parents were born-again Christians. Clara's father, the Reverend William Plummer Graves, converted to Methodism in 1838, when it was the fastest growing Protestant denomination in the country. In 1847 the Reverend married Mary Fletcher, a member of a prominent New England family, who could trace her lineage back to 1630. Mary Fletcher's conversion to Methodism at fifteen and her willingness to endure the itinerancy of a Methodist minister's family capture the extraordinary appeal of this young Protestant denomination, as it grew from a small sect in 1800 to a religious body so numerous that its "web of preaching circuits crisscrossed the frontier." After several years in Vermont, Reverend Graves was rewarded by his conference (a regional district of churches) with a pastorate in Victoria, in central Illinois, where Ruth's mother Clara Graves was born in 1858, the third of six children.⁷

The memorabilia of Clara Graves's youth (a diary and family letters) reveal a feisty young woman who felt psychologically and physically displaced as a Methodist minister's daughter. She took no comfort in the rewards of what a southern female writer once called the "candlelit drama of salvation"—eulogizing women who helped bring the gospel to the rural poor. Suffering a nomadic existence as her father took on a new parish every two years, she dismissed one small town as "totally insipid, dead, flat, uninteresting, demoralized etc. etc."⁸

Clara would later complain to her daughter Ruth about the "Graves way" of ordering life. Ruth in turn condensed the reverend's mentality in one telling phrase: he "forbade superfluities." Clara told stories of a cramped childhood, where as a young girl, she had to lock herself in a closet to do the "superfluity" of woodcarving. The reverend's zeal invaded every corner of home life, controlling large and small details. No "useless" flowers cluttered the Graves kitchen garden. His granddaughter Ruth satirized such thinking by parodying his rhetoric: "Grandmother wasn't allowed to grow flowers because you couldn't eat them." Although he later paid for Clara to have a year at Northwestern University in the early 1880s, when few women attended college, the reverend disapproved of decorative accomplishments like music for the same reason he disapproved of flowers.⁹

He feared that Clara might become what the critic James Huneker called "a piano girl . . . chained to the keyboard" to advance "social display." The stereotype of the "piano girl" epitomized the confusion between social constructions of gender and class on the one hand, and the act of performance on the other. Often trivialized as a social grace or "accomplishment," cultivated music in late nineteenth-century America served as a parlor skill for a young lady. The doctrinal Methodist point of view added further constraints, seeing

social music outside of hymn singing as a secular vanity. In the Graves household Clara's piano lessons were withheld throughout Clara's youth. She began at seventeen, and even then, duty came first.¹⁰

When she was "kept away from her beloved Chickering [piano]" and forced to skip a lesson so that she could "sew a bias ruffle on Allie's dress," she rebelled: "When will we learn that the cultivation and enlightenment of the mind (ahem!) is infinitely of more importance?" Her own daughter would later adopt the mannerism of writing out little "ahems" as reminders to lighten the sermonizing that had been ingrained in them both. Clara Graves's hyperliterary sensibilities searched for alternatives to life as a "bundle of duties, great and small." Her longings to escape once turned a cow pasture into a poetic English countryside, where an impressionable young girl heard a "thousand soft voices floating in the air, bringing pleasure to my music-loving ear." From this came the subversive thought that "Nature seems to appeal to Man's soul of *pleasure* not *duty*."¹¹

Clara's musical soul—her aural response to other aspects of daily life—appears in even humbler moments, when she analyzed a toddler's pre-verbal vocalizing as a series of "many variations on the first vowel and uttered in all the different tones from high to low A." Such primary sensory apprehension of the world through sound is a characteristic trait of the musician, and one that Ruth inherited. Yet for all of Clara's responsive nature, she remained a seventeen-year-old who advised a more daring girlfriend not to ice-skate in daylight but "to wait until dark and not make her sprawling motions quite as public." If Ruth later blamed her upbringing for her own conflicts about sexuality, she internalized her mother's codes sufficiently to call menstruation "womanly manifestations," duly passing on that verbal relic to her oldest daughter in the 1940s.¹²

Nevertheless, for her time and place, Clara Crawford was a feminist, as it was understood in the late nineteenth century, when the "New Woman" in all her contradictions was discovered by the American public. Determined to achieve emotional and financial independence before she married, and eager for adventure, Clara refused two offers of marriage at twenty-five and three years later left home with her brother to prove a claim in Monte Vista, Colorado, where the state was selling land to encourage the growth of timber on the western prairies. She took such pride in that act of daring that Ruth once said she "heard about Monte Vista enough so that the place seemed like an old friend," and later wrote about her mother as a frontier heroine.¹³

After that, Clara Graves taught school and then switched careers again in the 1890s. Ruth would later describe her mother as "one of those first female stenographers"—a pioneer once more. As a working woman in a labor force that was less than 20 percent female, Clara Crawford achieved the economic autonomy so crucial to feminist goals at the turn of the century.¹⁴

This was the period that Charlotte Perkins Gilman would later describe as "Women's Evolution from Economic Dependence: . . . the increasing desire of young girls to be independent, to have a career of their own, at least for a little while." Gilman's predictions of "altered family relations" fit the Graves

household. Clara told her brother how “very hard [it was] to be looked upon as a ‘dependent.’” She would later try to channel Ruth’s musical gifts into a practical career path, worrying about the poor prospects of composers. A list detailing the tiniest expenses on a tourist excursion testifies to Clara’s respect for money, a trait that turned into frugality in her daughter. The first thing Clara bought was a Sohmer upright piano, which she paid off over three years: the certificate of purchase was saved in the family archives and passed from daughter to granddaughter.¹⁵

In accounts of her mother Ruth gave her an identity that is totally consistent with Clara’s own words. Her sympathy for her mother later contributed to her own rejection of religion. It also forged a bond between them, for the daughter grew up under the shadow of contrasting privilege. Even if music entered the lives of so many American girls as a social accomplishment, for Clara and Ruth, it was a bond of reparation. Ruth practiced on the Sohmer, hardwon symbol of independence. At night her mother played Schumann’s *Träumerei*, Mozart sonatas, and Wagner’s *Bridal March* at Ruth’s bedtime.¹⁶

After joining her parents in Pasadena, California, following their retirement, perhaps no one was more surprised than Clara when she met and fell in love with Clark Crawford in 1894; their engagement was announced within the year. “I am only today sufficiently recovered from my astonishment to attempt a letter,” a relative wrote in response to the news. For in the end the rebellious Clara chose a man outwardly just like her father. “That he should be a minister seemed improbable, but that he should be a Methodist minister seemed *impossible*.” The fact that Clark Crawford made three times the salary of her father helped his suit, as did his advanced education. Clara wrote back that he was “very much of a student—has a fine mind with a will, energy and courage that will carry through anything possibly undertaken.” Even so, she confessed to her brother that “his work in life was a hard thing for me to make up my mind to be willing to share—not that I think the amount of work would be too much for me to endure—but the *kind* of work has always been distasteful to me. . . . I must think a good deal of the Minister or I wouldn’t be willing to undertake it.”¹⁷

Born in 1854 in Cabin Creek, West Virginia, Clark Crawford felt the call into service when he was eighteen and became licensed to preach a year later. With their quotations from Pascal and Milton, Crawford’s sermons show a literary cast of mind. A graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University in 1883, the reverend did not conform to the stereotype of the fire-and-brimstone Methodist exhorter, treating such themes as “The Value of Man” and “Social Christianity” through philosophical abstractions in a literary style more suited to urban Methodist churches than the frontier circuit-rider pastorates where he had begun his career. In 1885 Crawford was appointed pastor of the First Methodist Church in Pasadena, California, where at forty-one he met Clara Graves (then thirty-five) and quickly fell in love. During their first year of marriage, Clara gave birth to their first child, a son they named Carl Fletcher Crawford. In a move that cannot have been easy for Clara Crawford, the family was asked to leave sunny southern California in 1898 to relocate in East Liver-

pool, Ohio, a bleak mill town of about 17,000, just west of Pittsburgh. (Bordered by the foothills and ridges of the Appalachians on one side and the Ohio River on the other, East Liverpool was known nationally for its production of art pottery and dishware since the mid-1800s.) Two years later, on July 3, 1901, the Crawfords' second child was born—a daughter named Ruth Porter Crawford.¹⁸

The names the Crawfords chose for their children allow us to glimpse the balance of power in their marriage. Carl was an anagram of their own shared letters; his middle name came from Clara's mother's family. Ruth received the middle name of Clark's mother's family, and a first name with import for both parents. The biblical heroine Ruth was a convert (as was Clark) whose familial line eventually led to Christ, and therefore demonstrated the possibility of salvation through choice so basic to evangelical work. Ruth also represented the power of an exceptional version of a mother-daughter bond, again forged through choice. The story of a young widow and Jewish convert, who, when entreated by her mother-in-law to return to her own kind, pleads for the right to embrace a new way of life, was told repeatedly to Ruth Crawford. She remembered how "father used to stop in front of me as I sat playing and let off a long nonsense jargon, including some Bible history linking me with Ruth the Moabite."¹⁹

Ruth the Moabite's pledge—"Whither thou goest, I shall go"—was the reality of a Methodist minister's family life. In 1902 the Crawfords moved to Akron, about seventy miles away; in 1904 to St. Louis, Missouri; and in 1906 to Muncie, Indiana, where they lived from 1906 through 1910. Although she would later move twice more with her father and spend all her adolescent years in Jacksonville, Florida, Ruth clung to the memories of her four or five "very happy" years in Muncie as the locus of her childhood and her sense of home for the rest of her life. The move to Muncie (later studied as the sociological model for "Middletown") was a promotion for the Reverend Crawford. In a town of 35,000 that supported thirty Protestant churches, his High Street Church was the fourth largest Methodist congregation in the United States.²⁰

Religious observance governed the general tempo of Ruth's childhood, with religious school and two services on Sunday (mid-morning and evening) and family prayer hour at home. She memorized portions of the Bible each week and sang hymns. Associated with an affluent church, the Crawfords lived well, and even late in life, when she was known for her indifference to her appearance, Ruth still relished the memory of the "pink hair ribbons and pink stockings and a white dress with black velvet running through the beading" that she wore to Sunday church services. A photograph of the family in their Sunday best in front of the parsonage in Muncie places the Reverend Crawford standing behind his wife and daughter. Their six-year-old daughter sports an oversized bow in her hair.²¹

When Ruth wrote about her childhood in Muncie, she offered snapshots of past times in the style of a vernacular idyll—Sunday school picnics and "playing games . . . around the church and schoolyard in summer twilight." Although such nostalgic scenes breathe an American innocence and whole-

someness that characterized a part of Ruth's personality throughout her life, they imply a small-town history that does not quite fit the case. The Crawfords did not stay in one place long enough to accumulate the generational past that is the hallmark of small-town life; nobody knew her family beyond its most immediate nuclear self. And that family was on public display. Ruth accepted how "the pastor's family [was] an example for the whole church," and she endured the prohibitions against secular pleasures such as theater and dancing. At eighteen, she wrote down the date in her diary when "I danced a little for the first time." In her early childhood, even the circus was beyond reach.²²

How she longed to see the "Greatest Show on Earth," which came to Muncie every spring. At fifteen Ruth based a high-school English theme on a childhood memory of temptation and wonder as a grand circus parade passed by her house: "She would sit on our porch and wait for the wonders of it all": the spectacle of animal wagons, clowns, and the "pony cart . . . carrying the sweetest, fairest princess, who would wave and kiss her hand to the children," Ruth wrote effusively. "This was not an important event? He does not know the heart of a child who so declares." Her father had done so four years earlier, extracting insincerities from his dutiful daughter in a letter, where she wrote: "You told me about the show that was in town. You said you were not a bit interested in the parade. Well, now, what do you think? I just feel like you do. Isn't that strange for a little girl like me to feel *that way*?" The circus thus became a lifelong symbol of pleasure and spectacle in a world where imagination and play could triumph over duty.²³

In 1912 Clark Crawford became seriously ill, undergoing a series of operations in his last years. When he spent one summer at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, eleven-year-old Ruth wrote to him regularly. Her letters are marked with the meticulous conscientiousness that dominated her character. In one she counted the number of people ("about 247") at Sunday School in Bluffton, Indiana, the parish that had followed Muncie in 1910, and reviewed the substitute preachers. Above all, she assured him that she prayed for him every night and that, since he was sick, she "put more into it, my dear Papa."²⁴

The following fall Crawford refused a major appointment to Syracuse, New York, because of his ill health, asking for a less demanding climate. He was placed in Jacksonville, Florida, at Snyder Memorial Methodist Church. The family moved into a comfortable parsonage, and Crawford plunged into serious evangelizing, organizing Jacksonville's first house-to-house Methodist canvass, receiving 92 new members and founding two mission churches in other neighborhoods. Ruth was twelve when her father died of tuberculosis at fifty-nine. Two newspaper articles, one a front-page obituary and the other a long account of his funeral, testify to his community stature.²⁵

Clark Crawford's death left a void in Ruth's life. Idolizing a father she knew only as a child marked her with a great, perhaps exaggerated respect for

missionary fervor. Her admiration for his sermons heard constantly in church and read for their “literary merit” at home accustomed her to the power of the word as public performance and persuasion and to the voice of masculine authority. But she could use it herself and often spoke from a metaphorical pulpit in her high school essays. The sober fifteen-year-old echoed her father’s warnings that God “would be displeased to see us spend our time entirely in pleasure seeking . . . we should count every second, every minute, and not let them pass in idleness; for idleness is evil. . . . We each have our mission in this life. There is something designed for each of us which can be done by no one else. So, if we do not perform our task, it will go undone, and our life will have been useless.” Often in her diaries she addressed herself in second-person syntax to give agency to her conscience, reinforcing her father’s themes. “And listen to me, Ruth,” she instructed her sixteen-year-old self: “You will never make a success of yourself in this world, unless you learn to exercise your will power . . . Buckle to!” The perfectionism that she herself would later try to temper exploited these traditional Methodist values of hard labor and perseverance as a way to order life.²⁶

Clark Crawford’s death ended Ruth’s “fairly normal childhood.” The Crawford family was homeless within the year: the parsonage at 120 West Monroe Street had to be vacated for the new minister and his family. Since the token pension from the Methodist Conference provided around five dollars per year of service, less than \$200 per year, the responsibility of supporting herself and her daughter fell on Ruth’s mother, Clara, a widow at fifty-five. Mrs. Crawford rented a large three-story house at 305 West Duval Street, a few blocks away from the church, and opened a rooming house which was Ruth’s home for the next six years. Carl summed up the social fall from grace: “Mrs. Crawford—the minister’s wife” became “the landlady.” And a minister’s daughter became a boarding-house child, living among the ebb and flow of strangers. Ruth suffered a loss that she would attempt to repair as an adult when reestablishing a sense of place for herself. One of her closest women friends from her adult life would later mark the “transcendental importance” that Ruth attached to her own home, which has its roots in this period of mourning and displacement.²⁷

As in many areas of Florida, unregulated real estate development produced boom-and-bust cycles. Although the population would almost double in a decade (from 58,000 in 1910 to 91,000 in 1920), just when Clara Crawford opened her boarding house, the city suffered a serious depression, and Hemming Park, across from the church, was filled with unemployed and homeless men.²⁸ But somehow the family scraped by. Carl at nineteen turned down a Harvard acceptance and went to work at Armours department store. Occasional shipments of food and clothes from Methodist relief offices helped, and their boarders paid \$7 a week. Ruth described a difficult Christmas in her 1917 diary: “money is scarce, Mama is downcast, and the holiday is not as ‘merry’ as it used to be.” She wished for “plenty of money. . . . What wouldn’t

I do. And Mama should not have a bit of work to do. And I should have pretty dresses. And we could help people and make them happy.”

Clara Crawford carried on, keeping up the manners of the middle class. She managed to send Ruth to school in a smart outfit on the first day of Ruth's senior year in 1914, described in detail by her daughter: “I wore my honeycomb skirt, blue and white striped shirtwaist, pink tie, white corduroy coat, pink hat, sport high-top shoes and silk stockings.” In scrapbooks Ruth kept souvenirs of rare treats by pasting chocolate candy wrappers and wads of gum into ruler-lined notebooks, with each item neatly labeled in ink, as if it were a scientific specimen.²⁹

Ruth applied scientific observation to herself as well. “I will introduce you, my diary, to me. I am an ugly girl of thirteen years,” she wrote in 1915. She took too much perverse pride in self-deprecating honesty. A photograph of Ruth shows that she was not ugly, just younger than most of her class in Duval High School, still round with baby fat, still wearing large bows in her hair. Carl later recalled her as overly serious and shy and he attempted to lighten her mien. In the few early letters that survive between brother and sister, Carl's expansive sociability contrasts sharply with his sister's introspection. One time he dispensed the advice of the entrepreneur he eventually became:

Yes, Ruth, if you want to be popular with the boys, you've got to get some pep! Be vivacious, and lively & a good sport. Meet people every chance you get, make acquaintances with girls who know all about such things. You've got to advertise, Ruth. You can't just sit in your corner, and sew, & expect them all to come to you. You've got to be interesting, so interesting that they'll *want* to come & see you.

In effect, Carl restated socially accepted feminine norms in the language of masculine capitalism. Lucky Carl, whose temperament fit the energies of the early 1900s so naturally. (He would later earn a considerable fortune in construction, and Ruth leaned on him for financial support many times in her adult life.) His intellectual sister accepted his “good advice” and wrote it down “to have it in black and white, and follow it as best I can.”³⁰

Clara also watched Ruth sit on the front porch and brood, and like most mothers of self-conscious adolescent girls, she tried to help by combining her list of virtues with hints for social survival. Ruth duly recorded “Mama's Advice”:

1. Learn to disguise unkindly feelings.
2. Be proud that you are bashful, but try to overcome it to the extent of being comfortable, enjoying yourself and making others enjoy themselves in social affairs.
3. Let your neighbor's business take care of itself. You have enough to do to take care of your own.
4. Pretty is as pretty does.
5. We live for others. Let us not grudge any little act, tho' it may cause us a little trouble, which will make another happy. M.E. [Methodist Episcopal]
6. Be very thoughtful of others' feelings.³¹

Clara was training Ruth to be a good Christian woman, and she succeeded in raising her daughter to be loving and generous. Yet, “Mama's Advice” repre-

sented the one-sidedness of a female subculture, whose imperatives of nurturance and altruism were insufficiently balanced by ideals of self-realization and autonomy, particularly crucial for the development of an artist. Even if Ruth Crawford would rarely doubt her moral compass, the acts she would later label “selfish” testify to the code she accepted at an early age, operating at full strength even during adolescence. Thus her conscience, already fortified through her identification with her father, occasionally tyrannized her. Too many diary entries from these years offer examples of minor weaknesses furnishing occasions for morbid self-reproach. One unusual long entry broods about “a sort of burning, irritating, impatient feeling” in her “heartside.” Ruth named her faults—“listlessness, neglect of duty as to sewing, . . . bent to putting off unpleasant tasks: are these faults not enough to make a person dislike herself[?]” Her ever-active superego urged her to “mend your ways.” In a high school essay on the theme of “The Model Girl,” Ruth wrote that the goal was “to keep everything out of your heart which is bad.”³²

Ruth’s need to inscribe such values both privately in her diary and publicly as academic themes shows how the process functioned as a means of psychological discipline. Her persona of a Methodist preacher urged her onward and upward in self-improvement. At the same time, the writer honed her skills in observation by recording conversations of friends and family and providing short sketches of boarders.

Other literary energies found more formal outlets in verse, for Ruth began to write poetry at a very young age and by sixteen had “filled two books with over two hundred ‘poems,’ one of them in 800 rhymed couplets.” At eleven she had some verse published in magazines, and two years later she “published” her first collection of writings for her family. She wrote in her diary: “Now I tell you what I want to be. I want, oh so bad to be an authoress or poetess . . . I am making a history of the . . . Life of Ruth Crawford, Great American Authoress, Ahem!” At Duval High School she frequently published stories and poems in the school literary magazine, *The Oracle*. She and a few girlfriends also started a rival journal to circulate their work. They called themselves the “Wrens” and titled their magazine the “Chirps of the Wrens.” Such a humble persona for budding writers, awkwardly warding off charges of ostentatious self-display. Ruth Crawford, aspiring world-class authoress, was content to label her work the slightly comical “chirps.” Ambition collided with feminine propriety, and modesty prevailed.³³

A poem Ruth wrote when she was thirteen predicted her great American future:

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,
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 rise, 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.

Ruth possessed an unusual prescience about her gifts and a high degree of self-awareness. In this script of love and work, she was too innocent to anticipate conflicts between artistic ambition and her equally strong desire for home and children. Just at the time a new generation of feminist sociologists were doing research on women trying to balance “the world of women, of esthetics, of nurturance . . . and the world of men, of rationalism, of personal achievement,” a thirteen-year-old projected multiple citizenship: poetess, keyboard diva, singing mother. At thirteen, she wanted it all.³⁴

By Ruth's senior year the United States had entered World War I. At the same time that her future husband was fired from the University of California for his pacifistic socialism, a patriotic Ruth was writing anti-Kaiser poems and lyrics for high school rallies and listening to Jane Addams advise girls at Duval High School on how they could help the war effort at home. Ruth's brother Carl was training for the air force in Atlanta and Texas, and she recorded the outcome of battles in her diary. At school the issue of German music was discussed: should it be played during the war? She mulled over and rejected the possibility of writing her senior thesis on the lives of great German composers. She continued to do her church activities, recording her success as “special superintendent” for “Girls' Day” at Snyder Memorial Church on July 28, 1918. A month later she, along with other girls from a local WCTU chapter, ran a musicale for the Seaman's Institute, which tried to provide wholesome recreation for sailors in port.

As her high school years drew to a close, Ruth Crawford had made her mark in her class more as a writer than musician. When she graduated from Duval High School in the class of 1918 with eighty others, *The Oracle* yearbook staff proclaimed the rather vague goal of “poetic diction” as her chief aim and she was chosen class poet. Ruth also served as class treasurer, a stage

assistant for the senior play, class historian, and a contributing editor for *The Oracle*. Her “pet expression” was “let me think.” The caption under her senior picture read, “Knowledge Is Power.” But this is not typically the case among adolescents, who tax the smartest among them, and Ruth later wrote how “high school was lonely.” Her “book title” assigned in another senior class feature was “Not like Other Girls.” Perhaps inadvertently, the cliché foretold her future: she would be labeled an exception-to-the-rule throughout her life.³⁵

What might a “poetess” do after graduation? A number of Ruth’s classmates (girls as well as boys) planned for college. But the Crawfords could not afford that, and during Ruth’s junior year, Clara had asked Ruth to transfer out of the college preparatory track into the “normal” course, which trained teachers for elementary and secondary public schools.

But Ruth managed a bit more for herself. Even though her writer’s talents had won her a place in high school, her piano lessons claimed more and more of her interest. By her junior year she found a mentor in Bertha Foster, one of her first piano teachers and the founder of a music school in Jacksonville. Miss Foster had intervened with Mrs. Crawford just in time to allow Ruth to finish the college course. She also promised Ruth a job. After high school graduation in June, 1918, Ruth went to work immediately as a junior music teacher at Foster’s School of Musical Art.

a n “ a m e r i c a n
w o m a n p i a n i s t ”

*Almost before we realized it the native-born, and
in some instances, native-trained, pianist arose in our midst,
and we discovered the American woman pianist.*

—Harriette Brower, 1918¹

Bertha Foster hired Ruth Crawford because she had already invested in her protégée for three years. Ruth began lessons with her in 1913, and after Clark Crawford's death in 1914, when Clara Crawford could no longer afford the weekly \$1.50 for lessons, Foster had permanently waived the fee. In June 1918, Ruth took Miss Foster's ten-week teacher-training course where she read Trumbull's *Child Training* as part of her work. By August, Ruth had eleven pupils in the smaller South Jacksonville branch of the school, earning enough to liberate her mother from the hated rooming-house business. In January 1919 Clara Crawford sold her house on West Duval Street (“Hurrah! \$1600 cash,” Ruth wrote), and they moved to a bungalow on Van Wert Street, near Riverside Avenue on the outskirts of town.²

Channeling Ruth into music teaching made good sense to her mother and teacher. They had witnessed the enormous growth in the field and its opportunities for women, who were working outside the home in greater numbers than ever before. Between 1880 and 1910, while the population of the United States almost doubled, the number of musicians and music teachers increased almost five times. During this period classical music established itself as a cultural industry in the United States: orchestras and conservatories were founded, and classical-music journalism flourished through a multitude of nationally distributed magazines such as *Musical Courier* (founded in 1880), *Musical America* (1898), *Etude* (1896), and the *Musical Leader* (1907), with their networks of local correspondents fanning out to report on events in the burgeoning cities. Middle- and upper-class women emerged as the “chief promoters of culture,” the majority of conservatory students, and—within the

workplace—the rank and file of new music teachers. The percentage of women in the field rose from 42 percent in 1880 to 61 percent in 1910. Even after dropping slightly in the 1920 census, music and music teaching, at 56 percent female, still ranked third (after nursing and school teaching) among the most highly “feminized” professional occupations in the United States.³

Thus as a music teacher of young children, Ruth assumed a most conventional post. The influx of women into music teaching was indebted partially to the nineteenth-century tradition of feminine accomplishment, and it did not inherently challenge prevailing Victorian ideologies about the proper role of women. Since musical “accomplishment” filled domestic space in the parlor, in a sense, part-time teachers, traveling around to pupils’ homes or receiving them in their own, had not moved so very far from it. Female musicians clustered around the lower-status lower-paying rungs of the professional ladder. “Music teacher”—an umbrella term that could cover the lady around the corner who gave lessons in her home to the teacher with her own studio—was one thing, while “musician” another, and when the census distinguished between them, the distribution clarified the differences between private and public space. The great majority of musicians out in the world, on stage as performers, in print as composers, were men.⁴

Yet Ruth Crawford’s luck held when she found Bertha Foster, who was not a conventional “lady musician.” Born a generation later than Ruth’s mother, Bertha Foster (1880–1968) did not have to battle quite so fiercely the stereotype of the decorative Victorian “piano girl.” She began her career teaching organ and music theory in a fledgling music department at the Florida Female College in Tallahassee. (Renamed the Florida State College for Women the next year, the school eventually grew into the coeducational Florida State University, now supporting one of the largest music schools in the country.) In contrast to the large number of female pianists, women organists were a relatively new breed, with the opening up of major church jobs and professional concert opportunities starting around the turn of the century. Thus Bertha Foster represented another version of the “New Woman.” Even though it was widely understood that unmarried women like Foster had been “pressed into self support,” the “New Woman” could choose from occupations now considered appropriate. Along with other professional women making their “advent”—such as women dentists, lawyers, clergy, physicians, scientists—were the “woman composer,” the “woman organist,” and the “woman pianist.”⁵

Foster moved to Jacksonville in 1908 to found the School of Musical Art at 818 Laura Street, around the corner from the Snyder Memorial Church parsonage, where the Crawford family would later live. It was a sensible choice. Although no longer enjoying the cultural boom of its earlier fin-de-siècle tourist decades, Jacksonville supported a lively if limited musical life. In order to satisfy northern tourists, who had demanded city music, the larger hotels had traditionally imported dance orchestras of northern musicians, some of whom remained down South. Educated local women had organized the Ladies Friday Musicale, which grew from a small private club into the “oldest and best-known musical organization in the state,” sponsoring annual

series of international virtuoso singers and pianists. (The 1915 roster included Nellie Melba, Lillian Nordica, Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler, Alma Gluck, Augusta Cottlow, Olive Fremstadt, Maud Powell, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, David Bispham, and Harold Bauer.) In 1875 Jacksonville had boasted that it had more pianos per capita than any other city of its size, about thirty thousand people. Whether or not that was true, the fact that the *Florida Times Union* printed a simplified keyboard course in 1906 shows the market for amateur music. One conservatory had been established in 1889 during the peak of the city's popularity as a winter playground; Foster's was the second.⁶

Foster made a grand success of her school, offering courses in harmony, counterpoint and composition, the history of music and languages, as well as performance in organ, piano, and voice. In its seventh season the school offered diplomas in music for the first time. In 1916–17, three additional staff piano teachers taught beginners at the main school and Foster had opened a branch site in South Jacksonville.⁷

Ruth saved newspaper clippings about her school and Miss Foster. In 1911 Foster accompanied the three hundred-person Jacksonville Choral Society when Walter Damrosch and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra were imported south as part of the Choral Society's third spring festival. Notices of faculty concerts and elaborate student recitals in spring ran routinely in the *Florida Times Union* and in the nationally distributed *Musical America*. Bertha Foster, a dynamic administrator, would leave Jacksonville in 1921 to start another conservatory in Miami; to merge it with the University of Miami, becoming its first dean of a school of music in 1925; to establish one of the first retirement homes for musicians in 1939; to be honored repeatedly as a leading force in Miami's musical life; and finally to sponsor Pete Seeger at a concert "way back in the frightened '50s," he recalled in 1982. "[W]e were picketed by the American Legion, [a]nd she stood up to them. . . . 'Any time you want me to go on a picket line with you, Pete Seeger, just let me know,' and at the same time, she let me know that 'you know, Ruth Crawford was one of my students.'"⁸

Bertha Foster was one of Ruth's first heroines. In her diary, she took a verbal snapshot: "Miss Foster. Radiates happiness, joy and life wherever she goes. Quick, 'sweet,' pleasant, lover of children, nervous, beautiful auburn hair."⁹

After Ruth had been at the school for three years, Foster assigned Ruth to the best piano teacher in her school, Valborg Collett. Ruth described the musician who would prove to be her most formative influence in her youth as "warm-hearted, generous, sympathetic, impulsive." At the first lesson Madame Collett received Ruth "with open arms, saying, 'Hello darling, is this you?'" Ruth recorded her reply: "And I said it was." Sometimes Madame's florid style overwhelmed her.¹⁰

But the "darlings" quickly yielded to stern judgment:

She said I played like a baby, that *her* pupils did not play like babies, *they* played like little artists, which hurt my feelings a bit. I am not saying I did not need & deserve this criticism: I am saying it hurt my feelings a bit, as I think it would anyone's. And I do not feel mad at her, at all.

Well, when I got to Staccato Caprice, my fingering caused commotion. My fingering, it was unheard of. But my other teachers had seldom said anything to me about fingering, I did not consider myself much to blame. At 4:50 I left— Oh, I forgot to say that we took up the 9th Concerto of Beethoven, the accompaniment which I was to play with Elizabeth.

Madame judged without mercy, but Ruth reacted with characteristic fortitude. Like the ten-year-old girl who wrote to her father that she did not miss seeing the circus, Ruth said she did not “feel mad” at Madame Collett “at all.” Instead, intimidated by the prospect of failure, she turned her humiliation inward. She “came home feeling very dejected . . . I remember I wished on the way home, that somehow I could lose consciousness—die or something, to forget the responsibility of having to practise as Mme. Collett had told me to.” At a period in her life when poetry vied with music for her loyalty, Ruth coped with the blow to her ego by recreating herself as a literary heroine, investing fiction with the power of resolution. In three short stories about her musical coming of age, she baptized herself “Mary Marshall” and Madame Collett became “Madame Zielinsky.” Madame Zielinsky fit Ruth’s stereotype of the snobbish European musician. Speaking to the American Ruth/Mary “from her height of foreign superiority,” she

pours a torrent of high-toned invective on the head of poor little Miss Marshall. . . . “You have no understanding! no knowtetch of piano-blaying! You blay like a baby!”—“Ach! In Europe they do not bley so! Such finkering! Such hants! Ach! It is terrible! My bupils they do not blay so! Dey play like artists, Ach!”

Fiction enabled Ruth to bypass conscience and admit her anger. Madame Collett, whom as an adult Ruth later described as “very fine and beloved, but much-feared,” turned into a vaudeville dialect act. Resentments against “foreign superiority” would later find their constructive integration into Crawford’s ambition for and insistence on an American voice in modernist composition.¹¹

Madame Collett began to weed out what she labeled “trash, bash, mush” from Ruth’s repertory. She had studied with two outstanding Norwegian musicians, Johan Svendsen (rival of Edvard Grieg) and Agathe Backer-Grøndahl (1847–1907); she attended the Leipzig Conservatory, taught for twenty years in Oslo (then called Christiania) and taught at Hamburg as well. When she joined Bertha Foster’s school in 1910, the catalogue promoted her as “one of the finest teachers of piano in the United States.”¹²

The next three years saw Ruth learning nineteenth-century Romantic repertoire—Mendelssohn’s “Songs Without Words,” Moscheles etudes, Chopin preludes, an unidentified Beethoven sonata, and Brahms waltzes. Madame Collett also assigned Heller etudes and, as her recital piece, Chopin’s Variations Brillantes in B flat Major, op. 12. This was Ruth’s big piece. Not much more than “Gallic eau sucrée,” in the estimation of James Huneker, a famous critic of the period, but the summit of Crawford’s training in her youth. In 1918, she played it at the School of Musical Art on May 18, at a benefit concert for St. Vincent’s Hospital on May 31, and, most important, at the public

recital for the School of Musical Art's "advanced students" in Duval Theater on June 20.¹³

"Am scared of recital in Duval Theater. I do not know my piece very well," Ruth worried two days earlier. Duval Theater, decorated with thousands of shasta daisies, was filled with a "large and most enthusiastic audience" (it seated about thirteen hundred people) assembled in spite of the heat. This was "testifying most forcibly to the fact that Jacksonville people . . . are anxious to give encouragement and countenance to all proper musical effort," according to the review in the *Florida Times-Union* the next day. Ruth's brother Carl recalled the recital as "somewhat of a significant event in Ruth's early period." One of three pianists among the fourteen soloists, even Ruth was satisfied with herself. "Recital over. Everyone says I did splendid. I did not tremble a bit but controlled myself. Almost forgot the audience."¹⁴

A few months later Ruth objectified this moment in her life in a second story of Mary Marshall and Madame Zielinsky:

Mary forgot the audience—the lights—everything—absorbed in putting her whole soul and heart into the music. Melody, each note like a pearl, so perfect and so beautiful. The audience was entranced. It listened as one in a dream.¹⁵

As the expression of her idealized self and a channel for her adolescent narcissism, Ruth's fiction permitted a freer, more passionate side of her personality to be expressed. Invoking the subversive potential of the woman as Romantic artist, Ruth as author sanctions ambition and ego for her alter-ego Mary, whose emerging subjectivity overwhelms the constrictions of gentility.

At the same time that Ruth liberated "Mary", she invented "Stuart," a complementary musician-hero, to live out her dream of harmony between love and work. Embodying both father-figure and artist-partner, he ministers to her by "praying for Mary Marshall while she is on stage," and calling her his "little girl."

Even though fifteen years later, Crawford described her fiction as "tales of romantic dreamings spread out over the years," the image of a partnership persisted as a recurrent construction of her identity. The more music empowered her in real life, the more Ruth Crawford polished herself in print, defining herself as a young "American woman pianist" through musical act and literary construction.¹⁶

She was hardly alone. Along with the American "woman composer," the "American woman pianist" came into focus in the early twentieth century, both through the achievements of actual performers and through the cultural discourse that objectified them. Following the trail blazed by Teresa Carreno, a nineteenth-century prodigy and international virtuosa, performers like Augusta Cottlow, Olga Samaroff, and Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler won considerable fame. These women inspired the rank and file of female pianists and piano teachers, whose entrance into the profession had so altered its statistics. Catering to their consumers—that is to say their heavily female reader-

ships—the national magazines produced a huge literature on the role of women in music. As a barometer of gender ideology, this transient literature reflects its broad spectrum of beliefs and values, touching on identity and commitment (the process through which one becomes a composer), professionalization (the socio-economic choice of occupation), and aesthetics (the relationship between gender and musical performance or composition).¹⁷

Writ large over this diverse literature are the tensions that typically accompany shifts in power; it acknowledged the visibility of the “American woman pianist,” on the one hand, and her marginality, on the other, in language that mediated her status in the marketplace of classical music. Indeed, the whole notion of an “American woman pianist” or “Woman’s Work in Music” reflects the ambiguities associated with the metaphor of a “separate sphere” of gender-determined activity and identity in American society. As the historian Linda Kerber has pointed out, this metaphor relies on a loose nexus of meanings, including an “ideology imposed on women, a culture created by women, a set of boundaries expected to be observed by women.”¹⁸

All three meanings come into play in the early part of the century. How much economic viability did the “American woman pianist” have? W. S. B. Mathews on “The Young Woman Pianist and Her Business Prospects” forecast gloomy prospects for success but painted an endearing portrait of the “virtuoso who does not wear her heart upon her sleeve, a generally uncommunicative person with no end of grit . . . and a warm heart inside her, who if given a warm atmosphere to play in, will astonish you now and then.” What kind of repertory should she play? In his article “Some of the World’s Greatest Women Pianists,” James M. Tracey disclaimed sexual equality in music, for “women did not possess the physical strength necessary to carry them through the immense amount of work” demanded by a professional career; and those that did lacked “sufficient talent, temperament, perseverance and concentration.” Even Ethel Leginska, a rising young musician around World War I, occasionally expressed disappointment in her sex. In an interview titled “Are Women Men’s Equals as Pianists?” she answered in the negative, for women lacked “unity of purpose and the strength to carry it out.” Should the American woman musician leave home and go abroad to study? What advice could be gleaned from concert stars, past and present? Read “American Women Pianists: Their Views and Achievements. Back from Drudgery Abroad. Our Artists Need Encouragement and Support of Their Countrymen—Careers of Prominent Native Artists and Jottings from Their Conversations.” Thus the commercial classical musical press made issues of gender and music topical. Within the classical music workplace, the status of the American woman musician was in flux, her equality in doubt; but attention was paid, and a domain within music was constructed both *for* and *by* women—a negotiated cultural space resounding with the contradictions that marks periods of significant social change.¹⁹

October 12, 1918: “*Etude* came today,” Ruth wrote in her diary. “Read it all morning.” To some American male musicians, chafed by their marginality in the masculine world of commerce and gazing longingly at their European counterparts, these magazines epitomized the evils of a capitalist culture. The

puff pieces of publicity for touring virtuosi, the advertisements that turned concerts into commodities grated on Charles Ives, for example; he reproached "the commercial monopolists" for the "Prostitution of Art," catering to the "ladies' smiles," he said, feminizing, in a gesture of vengeful contempt, the hostile male critics who spurned his music. Ruth Crawford's future husband, Charles Seeger, might have concurred. In 1912, just beginning his career as professor of music at the University of California, Seeger banished *Etude* and its sister magazines from his academic milieu in one of his first acts in his new post. In the waiting room for prospective students at the summer session for music teachers, he saw the magazines prominently displayed by his assistant. Miss Sweesey proudly told him that the magazines constituted "one of the most valuable assets of our work." Seeger then ordered their removal. "Please see that by tomorrow morning there's not a sign of any of them in this room," Charles said, the imperial dialogue recounted to an interviewer fifty years later. "You can imagine the consternation," he recalled, "but there were no more of them."²⁰

But Ruth, like the hapless Miss Sweesey and many other young American women musicians and music teachers, needed *Etude* as a window into the world of art. When years later she laughed at a woman she saw reading *Etude* in New York, she was attempting to transcend the provincial feminine in her past. "I didn't know anybody outside of Squeehonk read that!" she said. Yet in Jacksonville she read the November 1918 issue of *Etude* devoted to "Women's Work in Music" (the third in a series spanning 1901 to 1929), with articles by the noted composer Amy Beach on "The Girl Who Wants to Compose," the great singer Ernestine Schumann-Heink on "The Mother's Part in Musical Training of the Child," the progressive educator Frances Clarke on "Music as a Vocation for Women," and for the young "American woman pianist," an unsigned article on "Small Hands and Their Extraordinary Possibilities."²¹

After the recital in 1918, which coincided with her graduation from Duval High School, Crawford made her way into the musical life of Jacksonville. Madame Collett had waited for the time when her star pupil could begin to practice four and five hours a day; Ruth's diary charts her varying degrees of diligence—small segments of 45- and 50-minute sessions duly listed along with the whole mornings or afternoons at the keyboard. In addition, she served as a social pianist in a variety of ways, accompanying various students and teachers in their recitals and playing at local hospital benefits, women's clubs, and the Jacksonville Tourist Club. Because of mobilization for the war, Jacksonville was filled with soldiers. Ruth often organized lunches for them at her church, "played piano part time, helped serve part time." Notices of a few public performances of more than casual entertainment are scattered through these years. On New Year's Day, 1919, she played at the YWCA and then on February 4 and February 24 for the Woman's Club. Although Madame Collett tried to arrange a concert for her at the Jacksonville Ladies Friday Musicales, it is not clear whether Ruth's appearance before them on Oc-

tober 24, 1918, mentioned as scheduled in her diary two weeks earlier, actually occurred. Madame Collett proposed her for the opening concert of the Ladies Friday Musicale in January 1919, but without success. “Just missed a chance,” Ruth said. “Madame Collett certainly ‘praised me up.’”²²

On the whole, Crawford’s familiarity with serious professional music-making was fairly limited. Years later she recalled the very few concerts by serious concert artists she had been able to afford: “one concert each of [Percy] Grainger, Paderewski, and Hoffman [Josef Hofmann]”; she forgot Leopold Godowsky (billed as the “World’s Greatest Pianist”) and the violinist Mischa Elman, whose programs she saved.²³

Crawford’s other musical experiences amounted to very little. In 1915 the Ladies Friday Musicale helped a local violinist, George Orner, found a youth orchestra; Ruth, who was still in high school, had joined with great enthusiasm. She had previously served as the alternate pianist for a pick-up orchestra at Snyder Methodist Memorial Church, but her friend Althea Stevens had first claim on the job. How Ruth fretted over that—even though the orchestra comprised an undisciplined group of amateurs, and concerts were given with whatever instruments were at hand. At one church service an orchestra of four violins and a drum played a “Song Without Words”! When Althea missed a rehearsal, the conductor suggested that Ruth become an alternate. Even this modicum of assertion provoked Mrs. Crawford. She told Ruth it would be a “great piece of indelicacy . . . to speak about a thing, a change, to Althea, which is going to benefit me.” Ruth kept silent and wrote, “Just to think I can not go to practice any more. I *do* want to. I *wanted* to stay.” Later on in her career, when her professional advancement and her emotional well-being would have benefited from less anxiety over ambition, she had already internalized her mother’s warnings against egotism.²⁴

Between 1917 and 1921 Crawford became known as an excellent piano teacher for children in the community. Her day book entries for the year 1919 trail off from her earlier careful accounts into lists of names of pupils. She routinely scanned beginners’ literature to select suitable music for her many pupils, going downtown to Cohen’s Department Store to look through pieces and sending off requests for “approval music” to music publishers.²⁵

Ruth Crawford found her way to composition through the routine of playing through music for her small pupils. A few notations in her diary outline the steps. On December 18, 1918, Ruth “looked over more music [for teaching] and improvised some.” January 3, 1919: “Have made up another piano piece—the 2nd one,” she wrote, adding, “Love to do it!” She showed her compositions to a Mr. Pierce, who perceived talent and decided to teach her some theory. He gave her what she later belittled as “four dry lessons from Chadwick’s harmony book”; but on January 17, she wrote in her diary that she was “crazy about harmony.” Two piano pieces, “Whirligig” and “The Elf Dance,” date from this period. “The Elf Dance” was pronounced “real cunning” by Mrs. Doe, a teacher at the School of Musical Art, and a “cute thing” by Madame Collett. Mr. Ward—perhaps the same Mr. Ward who taught Frederick Delius composition many years earlier—“gave her several good sug-

gestions." A few years later the head of composition at a major conservatory would praise "Elf Dance" as having a "certain perfection about it." As an adult Ruth would dismiss the now lost scores as a "few little bits of piano music."²⁶

Did she stumble into her self? The air of serendipity recounting Ruth Crawford's debut as a composer typifies the lack of self-consciousness about composing at this point in her life. She had no sense that a professional path had opened, little comprehension of her gift. Instead, her ambition remained focused on the concert stage.

In 1918 the war was over and a sense of opportunity was in the air. "Carl is home, Carl home!" Ruth wrote, when her brother returned in December, a month after the armistice was signed. On April 22, 1919, she heard a concert by the American pianist Beryl Rubinstein, a prodigy who had studied with Busoni in Berlin. She pronounced him "perfectly wonderful. His technique is marvelous. Scales like pearls." That summer she apparently took some lessons with him when he returned to Jacksonville to give master classes. But more change was thrust upon her. In 1921 Bertha Foster announced that she would relocate her school, which by 1920 had a student body of 750 and a faculty of 35, to Miami in 1921.²⁷

Ruth decided to make her move as well and to leave Jacksonville. Carl remembered several decades later how his sister had the "ability, the initiative and the consuming desire to follow her music, and so it was worked out that she would go." That decision caused all of them "considerable sacrifice" during a post-war period when "things were not too prosperous." Carl had already moved to Orlando. Even though Mrs. Crawford would be left alone, Ruth persisted, and word traveled among her family that she wanted to leave. A cousin—Nellie Graves—offered to finance a year.²⁸

The plan was for one year's study with a famous pianist, but exactly where and with whom remained in doubt. Europe was out of the question, for Mrs. Crawford refused to consider study abroad. She had read Amy Fay's *Music Study in Germany*. She disapproved of "how lessons were given over there. . . . Mrs. Taylor told me all big foreign musicians are what we would call immoral. . . . No daughter of mine with my consent would ever leave our own shores for music."²⁹

Mrs. Doe, who was running the School of Musical Art in Bertha Foster's absence, had already suggested that Ruth go to New York or Chicago the next summer to study with Harold Bauer or Leopold Godowsky and then come back and "get a big price for lessons." Ruth wrote to the Polish pianist Sigismond Stojowsky, who had headed the piano department at the Institute of Musical Art (forerunner of the Juilliard School) in New York and was still teaching privately in the city. He replied on May 14, 1921, that he would accept her as a pupil. (Stojowski's later pupils included Guiomar Novaes and Oscar Levant.) But both Bertha Foster and Clara Crawford had ties to the Midwest, and either one might have suggested the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, which Ruth eventually chose. Founded in 1886, the American Conservatory

had a solid national reputation as a very good teaching institution. Madame Collett vouched for the reputation of Henriot Levy, head of its piano department, and Miss Foster wrote Ruth a letter of recommendation. Ruth planned to take the one-year degree program leading to a teachers' certificate.³⁰

In the fall of 1921 Ruth Crawford “achieved” Chicago. She left on September 6 from the newly constructed Union Terminal train station to take the 36-hour train ride north.³¹ The *Florida Times-Union* wrote in its fanciest alliteration the next day:

MISS RUTH CRAWFORD WILL PERFECT HERSELF IN
PIANO STUDIES UNDER PEDAGOGUE

Miss Ruth Crawford left yesterday for Chicago, where she expects to spend the winter. Miss Crawford leaves a gap in musical circles here, for in the past few years she has become well and favorably known for her teaching and has come to be recognized as one of the best teachers of piano in the city. . . . She is a brilliant performer, reflecting credit upon Madame Collett, her teacher. . . . In Chicago, she will continue her studies under the well known pedagogue Henriot [*sic*] Levy. . . . All of Miss Crawford's friends and admirers are predicting for her a brilliant career.

In one of her first letters home Ruth protested to her mother that she felt “humiliated” by the “exaggerations” of this article. “It . . . sounded almost like a take-off. All the people for whose opinions I care know that I am not a *brilliant* player. I know Mrs. Gamble wrote it.”³²

Clara Crawford had her own ideas about her daughter's future. The separation was temporary, for Ruth had money enough for one year to meet tuition expenses of about \$175 and room and board of some \$36 per month. The sacrifice would be worth it, for her daughter would redeem the promises of her own youth. Clara imagined a future in which womanhood complimented art. She held up her ideal to her daughter. It was the pianist Augusta Cottlow whom Clara praised as the “beautiful finished American lady artist,” and “charming to watch, American trained. Nothing bohemian about her. . . . I would be proud to have you like her.” Clara wanted Ruth to become a “real lady musician, with nice manners and poise and self-confidence and pretty clothes.”³³

A triumphant Ruth would return home sounding and looking “different,” looking the “new Chicago way.” Then she would join the ranks of the elite circles in Jacksonville, list her Conservatory certificate and “pupil of” on her business cards, and start her own piano studio as Clara Crawford's apostle of success and independence: the American woman pianist.³⁴

Part II

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1921-1929

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the “wonder city”

*I wrote a few phrases of a symphony in my sleep the other night,
heard the clarinets and oboes coming in and the violins etc.*

—Ruth Crawford, March 1923

Crawford arrived in Chicago on September 8, 1921, to make her musical fortune. Just as her mother had homesteaded the hills of Colorado fifty years earlier, she would prove her own claim in the third largest city in the world. With a population of about three million, the “Metropolis of the West” was six times larger than Jacksonville. Clara called Chicago “advanced.”¹

The routines of a music student’s life marked off the boundaries of Ruth’s territory: where she practiced, took classes, and attended concerts. At Wabash Avenue and Jackson Boulevard, the American Conservatory occupied three of the sixteen floors in the new Kimball building, Chicago’s counterpart to Carnegie Hall. In the Auditorium Building on South Michigan Avenue, the Chicago Opera performed in a hall seating 4,700 people—larger than the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Orchestra Hall nearby housed the Chicago Symphony. All of these buildings lay near or on the central artery of Michigan Avenue, an elegant street lined with Chicago’s famous department stores. Ruth wrote home to her mother about the windows of Marshall Field. She walked to the nearby Art Institute and watched the changing moods of Lake Michigan. “It was so beautiful on a clear day.”²

She settled in at the YWCA on 830 South Michigan Avenue. The Y housed about four hundred young women and, since it was recommended by the Conservatory, its entire ninth floor was given over to music students, who paid \$9.50 for board and room and \$1.25 for piano rental per week. Generations of women, new to city life, had found a home there. Its central location helped them tolerate what literary pioneer Margaret Anderson remembered (in 1912) as the Y’s bad food, uncomfortable beds, and sap-green walls—

“it smelled like a laundry,” she wrote. Crawford’s letters home minimized every discomfort and lavished approval on new acquaintances, mostly other aspiring young women. She shared a small room with another musician — “so nice, without any of that slang and jazz about her,” she wrote her mother. She observed, with provincial optimism, the lives from which Midwest writers like Sinclair Lewis and Willa Cather fashioned their fictional heroines.³

So Ruth Crawford did not immediately bob her hair or hear a Russian Jewess sing the “Internationale,” like the librarian Carol Kennicott in Lewis’s *Main Street*. Instead, she adapted to the cloistered culture of the “American”: who were “star pupils” of various teachers; who had “won Commencement” (the winner played a solo concerto at graduation). The conservatory’s student body was about 85 percent female and its top-ranking performance faculty was 85 percent male—proportions that prevailed generally in the United States in the 1920s. Within days Ruth heard typical conservatory gossip. One student related an ill-fated teacher-student romance. Ruth imprudently told her mother that “the consensus of opinion of other girls here seems to be that ‘they would not marry a musician on a bet.’ ‘If their wives knew all that happens at a lesson!’” She appended some comfort: “I have heard this only of violin teachers, however. Let us hope!” She reiterated her vows: “I am here to practice, not to fall in love.” And so were most of her Y compatriots, whose overloaded schedules of outside jobs, practice hours, and lessons impressed her. By October she marveled at the ease of her adjustment: “Sometimes it seems so strange to me that I am actually in Chicago. I take everything for granted . . . the L (elevated), the busyness of it, the soot(!), the store windows, and forget that I am actually in Chicago, the wonder city and a thousand miles from home.”⁴

Crawford’s “wonder city” enjoyed so much classical music that a later critic would recall the opulent 1920s as “the years of splendor.” They were gilded by a brilliant Chicago Opera and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, both in their prime; four conservatories of national stature—the American Conservatory of Music (founded 1887), the Chicago Music College, the Chicago Conservatory, and the Bush Conservatory; a prominent musical publishing company, Clayton F. Summy, Inc., noted for educational materials; and a nationally distributed magazine, the *Musical Leader*. When describing Chicago’s 1921–22 season, *Musical America* paid the city’s arts the supreme compliment by equating their growth to that of its city’s industries. Five music critics, some with national reputations, issued daily judgments in Chicago newspapers.⁵

To Ruth Crawford, whose only exposure to live classical music had been solo recitals, Chicago offered a series of revelations. Having never attended a symphony or opera performance (and she had heard only one concert by a “traveling chamber music group”), she started catching up and relishing every minute of it. The opera season of 1921–22 was particularly brilliant. Mary Garden in her one year as “directa” (her term) mounted an extravagant season of twenty-nine operas. Ruth bought a Thursday night subscription, writing enthusiastic accounts to her mother of *Tannhäuser* (sung in German for

the first time since the war) and *La Bohème*, in which Claire Dux made her debut: "they were both so *very* wonderful." She witnessed the celebrated soprano Edith Mason open her long career in Chicago in *Madama Butterfly*, telling her mother how much she loved Puccini's operas.⁶

She also faithfully attended concerts by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, led by Frederick Stock, standing at "the great center of everything in the city." At her first concert, she asked a friend to point out the different instruments by name. She heard the symphonic repertory for the first time—Beethoven, Schumann, and Schubert, for example—often attending each concert twice, once with and once without a score. She was profoundly moved, and as composers often do, she transformed the musical work from object to subject. Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony became her friend and she "longed to hear it again, as one longs to meet again a friend one loves."⁷

In effect, Crawford was learning the old and the new at the same time. In 1921, Chicago taste considered Debussy quite modern. In spite of the city's skeptical conservatism about new work, Stock programmed an eclectic range of European and American contemporary music, so that the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's repertory was more extensive and more diverse than that of any other major American orchestra in the period. The 1921–22 season included local premieres of Debussy's "Printemps," Ravel's "La Valse," Franz Schreker's "Ekkehard," and Stravinsky's "Petrouchka." During the following season Crawford remarked on performances of Mahler's Seventh Symphony and Scriabin's "Divine Poem," the latter one of Stock's favorites. Ruth climbed 120 steps to the gallery, counting the orchestra as one of her blessings in the city.⁸

Yet the divinities of Crawford's world still remained the legendary giants of an Olympian age of pianism—Josef Hofmann, Ossip Gabrilowitsch, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Harold Bauer, Artur Rubinstein, and Leopold Godowsky—all booked for concerts during Ruth's first year. When Serge Prokofiev came to Chicago in 1921 for the world premiere of his opera *The Love of Three Oranges* on December 30—a performance later recalled by the Chicago critic Alfred Frankenstein as "one of the most beautiful and thrilling things I have ever sat through"—Crawford did not mention the event in her letters home. Instead, she described Prokofiev as a concert artist who was "[Annette] Essipoff's pupil" and therefore in the Leschetizky sphere of pianistic influence.⁹

She wrote about visiting virtuosi in the voice of a worshipful acolyte, using the sensuous sublimations of Romantic aesthetics that eroticized a pianist's tone and touch. She described "finger[s] like velvet," the "soft tones so soft they seemed heavenly, and yet full and round, penetrating the stillness of the hall with their magic daintiness." The playing of the "classicist" aristocratic Gabrilowitsch sent her into an emotional tailspin—"I almost could not remain still—cry, laugh, dance, something to form an outlet for my feelings!" Outwardly reserved, Crawford engaged and released her freest and deepest emotional expression and sexual energies through her performer's persona. To Charles Ives, hissing ridicule at Gabrilowitsch by caricaturing his name as "Osssssip," the "sissy" typified a musician who was spoiled by too much adulation:

Ives pronounced him a “poor musician.” To Ruth Crawford, Gabrilowitsch was “an artist, a painter of pictures, a weaver of fancies and dreams, a master.”¹⁰

At the American Conservatory Crawford was surrounded by well-known artist-teachers: Henriot Levy and Silvio Scionti in piano; Jacques Gordon and Adolf Weidig, violin; and Wilhelm Middelschulte, organ. Master classes by Josef Lhevinne, Percy Grainger, and Chicago’s own Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler were scheduled routinely as well. The atmosphere fostered intense competition; Ruth vied with many gifted students for recital opportunities, doled out as rewards. She was starting at the bottom of the ladder, enrolled in the one-year licentiate certificate program in the “Normal” department, which would certify her as a teacher for students “up to the middle grades.” (The conservatory also offered collegiate diplomas after three years of study; a post-graduate degree program, granting the bachelor of music and master of music.) She began her first of four terms, each ten weeks long, taking one private half-hour lesson per week, and four class courses for harmony, music history and pedagogy, and “normal” training. She practiced seven or eight hours a day. As one of sixty piano pupils studying with her teacher, she waited for Henriot Levy to notice her.¹¹

Born in Warsaw and educated primarily in Berlin, Henriot Levy (1879–1946) had “concertized extensively throughout Europe” before joining the American Conservatory of Music in 1904. Occasional appearances with the Chicago Symphony and annual recitals, at which he often played a group of his own compositions, along with his post as head of the forty-member piano department, made him a musician of high repute in the community. “He was a good pianist,” according to the composer Otto Luening, and an “excellent teacher” according to Levy’s former pupil, the composer Radie Britain.¹²

Within a month Levy commanded Crawford to switch from the one-year licentiate certificate program into the associate certificate track. The former required only a moderate technique and modest repertory: “all major and minor scales, simple broken chords and arpeggios; octaves; a limited number of etudes by standard composers; sonatas of moderate difficulty by Haydn and Mozart; easier sonata movements by Beethoven; compositions of moderate difficulty by Mendelssohn, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Weber, Grieg and others; and representative works by modern standard composers.” The associate certificate program required selections from etudes by Czerny, Cramer, and Chopin; Bach three-part inventions; more extended works by Chopin and Liszt. By December Levy had assigned her the most difficult music in her experience—a Bach French Suite, Beethoven’s op. 31, no. 3, and Chopin’s *Fantasia Polonaise in A Flat*. In her Christmas letter to her “dear darling Ruth,” her old teacher Madame Collett reacted to this news with words that added and subtracted at the same time: she was “astonished” and “stupefied”; she thought the Chopin “dreadful difficult—musically difficult! Mr. Levy must surely have found out something about you! You ought to be very proud! I am!”¹³

Despite her sprint from the starting line, the year did not go well. Crawford paid a price for her success. Overwork pushed her to the brink of nervous col-

lapse, and in the spring of 1922 anxiety made her "shake all over" with chills and chattering teeth as she walked down the hall of the Y near a practice room. Far more serious was the severe case of muscular neuritis in her left arm she developed not long after. She wrote home to her mother that "I cannot practice! My left arm has gone on strike!" She suffered from what was then named "occupational neuritis," and as recalled by a fellow student at the conservatory, it was considered a "fatal thing." She curtailed her long hours at the keyboard and, under a doctor's care, began taking long walks daily. Clara vacillated between urging Ruth to come home and giving her practical advice on staying the course.¹⁴

Levy's indifference to Ruth's problems disappointed her. Slowly she decided that more than overwork had produced the mess, and she began to suspect him. It was no small matter to switch teachers at the conservatory, where one's teacher determined one's identity. Yet other Levy pupils were plagued by similar symptoms. Was he the "killer" that another conservatory student recalled? Ruth had mixed feelings. It took two years before she could admit to her mother, "Mr. Levy's interest was so impersonal"; that "he cared not a whit whether I came back or whether I didn't"; he was "reticent, quiet, undemonstrative" until toward the last.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Crawford placed among the top five students among a class of eighty or ninety at year's end. She was invited to compete for prizes at a student recital in Kimball Hall. That achievement guaranteed her a gold medal for the year; and even though her performance of the Chopin Fantasia Polonaise placed her fourth, she was thrilled. She wrote, "I am the only one of Mr. Levy's pupils in the Certificate class who gets a medal! I keep saying to myself, how can it be, how can it be?" After the concert she reveled in her new status: "A week ago I was nobody, and now I am somebody."¹⁶

The gold medal allayed the concerns of both Mrs. Crawford and Ruth's brother Carl. But in a sense the physical crisis only unmasked a shift of focus already underway. Soon after her arrival, Ruth began taking the first two quarters of harmony simultaneously in order to meet the associate certificate requirements. She wrote her mother how

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. Orchestration and composition would come next year,—one composes fugues, sonatas, barcarolles, etc.—small ones, of course. But think, how *extremely* interesting.¹⁷

Another time she rhapsodized "at some new effects I could get because of something Mr. Palmer told me Tuesday that I danced around the room singing 'I am so happy, I am so glad.'" Here, at the beginning of the road, even the rudiments of harmony yielded minor epiphanies.¹⁸

Perhaps such letters were designed to assuage her mother's doubt. But Clara was skeptical, asking what purpose such theoretical work served:

You will be judged when you come home by what you can show *when you play*, and not by what you know of the science of music composition. And moreover

Mrs. T[aylor] says when you teach you do not teach harmony etc. to your pupils. They go to a harmony class for that. You are not supposed to give that to them, for you will be encroaching on the profession of the harmony teacher.¹⁹

She had a point. But in her own way Clara Crawford unconsciously carried on the old Graves sanctions against “superfluties.”

Ruth held her ground. She continued to address her letters to “dearest Mummy,” and sign them “your little girl,” but within months she planned for a second year because of her new priorities. “You *do* know I feel that I cannot leave my *harmony* work,” she wrote. Capitulating, Clara Crawford responded with practical advice. Ruth would need a job to stay on. She encouraged Ruth to confide in her teachers. When necessity demanded it, Clara summoned up the courage of her youth. “Push yourself into people’s notice. When you want a thing, ask for it,” she wrote in a fierce letter later that spring.²⁰

On June 20, 1922, among a group of seventy-three women and five men, Crawford received her associate teachers’ certificate in piano, pedagogy, and harmony, with an honorable mention in counterpoint and composition, a special honorable mention in history of music, and a silver medal in the Normal Department. After a summer in Jacksonville, she returned in the fall of 1922 without any savings or stipend from a rich relative. Desperate for work, she was grateful when Levy recommended her to the Hamilton Park Studio as a teacher for young children. The business arrangements were brutal: she was given a list of 100 names of prospective pupils to canvass and from that she acquired five; one-third of her fee of \$1.25 per lesson went to the studio; to one of the homes she “rode an hour and a quarter through the stock-yard district and an hour and a quarter back again.”²¹

In addition, Crawford, who had never seen a professionally produced play, took a job as an usher and hat-check girl at several of Chicago’s twenty legitimate theaters, working most steadily at the Studebaker. The opportunities to see such plays as *Anna Christie*, *A Bill of Divorcement*, *Porgy*, and the *Dybbuk* compensated for the dreary work and a boss who aroused resentments which she funneled into her small-town anti-Semitism. “He is so amusing, this Jew,” she wrote. “Amusing did I say? Maddening. He talks to you as if you were six years old and a criminal already—when you are twenty-one and a minister’s daughter.” To her mother she wrote how “it often strikes me as one of life’s queer tricks that Papa’s daughter, brought up to avoid the theater and anything connected with it, now *ushers* in one! It would have sounded very dramatic and would have finished nicely the preceding sentence to continue ‘and feels as much at home in [a theater] as in a church.’” The thought that had obviously sprung into her head had to be denied. “May I never be able truthfully to make that statement,” she lied. For the theater was a revelatory world which touched her deeply. Some of her most romantic fantasies about love and art were written on the back of theater programs. On one, she wrote a love letter to an imaginary beloved in a fairy tale of her future:

I do not know you. I have never seen you. I have never heard your voice. Yet you are part of my heart, part of my life—all of my thought. . . . You are mine.

I shall recognize you when we meet. You will know me. It will be as thou our souls have talked and felt together since time was. And we shall be one during all eternity. When wilt thou come?²²

On another the awakening composer spoke:

I am full of music tonight. I feel as tho I shall burst. Not concrete music, but abstract. In other words, I am in a receptive more than creative mood. I said to Agnes as we walked along Michigan tonight that I felt like composing or loving, one of the two. But I believe I am wrong. Tomorrow night, perhaps will bring forth the results of tonight's mood. Now, I must feel, and dream and long and be at once sad and happy; tomorrow—let it be put on paper if it will.²³

Crawford gave up on Henriot Levy in her second year. Still plagued by neuritis, in December 1922 she transferred to a new piano teacher, Louise Robyn, (pronounced Roe-bine), who ranked as the "most prominent among the conservatory's women instructors" and the only woman who had "real standing among the men." Robyn's roster of students included some of the best in the school: Marion Roberts, the leading "big name" among the students in the 1920s; the child prodigy Storm Bull; Irwin Fischer, a composer destined for the conservatory's faculty; and Robert Fizdale, who later found success as part of a piano duo (Gold and Fizdale). Professionally, Robyn was well known in the field of children's piano pedagogy (her course books included *Technic Tales* and *Keyboard Town*). At the conservatory she had become an eminence, whose connection to children's art was "almost mystical." Crawford adored Louise Robyn, much as she had Bertha Foster, and the mix of children and music made for a "fireside fancy" once again. She joked with her mother that she would "never marry a man who will not promise to live in Chicago, so that I can start every one of my thirty-five children in Miss Robyn's class!"²⁴

Crawford entered into the community of the conservatory in a new way because of Louise Robyn. She formalized her decision to become a musician first and a performer second by writing her mother about the "apprenticeship which I now accept at twenty-one." The word "apprenticeship," which sounds old-fashioned to contemporary ears, implied an integrated musical education, in which theory, keyboard skills, performance, and music literature—so often compartmentalized today—were treated as contingent, interdependent aspects of the totality of music. The very word "music" now embraced craft, art, and humility. One learned musical rudiments the way one learned a language. And as one alumna remembers, the earlier apprenticeship began, the better. She envied Robyn's students their knowledge of harmony, and she wondered if she could ever catch up to the star Marion Roberts with so many years lost: "I was spending my teens in blissful ignorance even of dominant seventh chords." (To Edith Borroff, whose training with her mother Marie Bergerson, another American Conservatory "star," had begun when Edith was three years old, it was "incredible" that Ruth could do it.)²⁵

The demands of apprenticeship anchored Crawford's work at the conservatory, allowing her to rationalize her study even as a concert career slipped

away from her: “What am I here for?” Ruth asked both herself and her mother after she left Levy. “Would I not better have taken Mama’s usually best advice and stayed at home?” “What am I gaining that is worth it all?” . . . “The knowledge that I am to blame for making my mother suffer is ever present with me, even more than it was last year.” . . . “I think and think—Am I doing wrong to stay up here? . . .” She answered her own question:

Again and again the debate has raged and always peace and contentment come in the answer: my theoretical work. Yes, even it alone is worth my being here. I feel myself broadening; my ear—the inner ear whose good judgment and training is of infinite value to composers—is hearing better than it did last year.²⁶

As the vision of Ruth in her own studio in Jacksonville dimmed, Clara Crawford balked at this change in plans. On the basis of an “inner ear,” how could Ruth justify another year’s stay? Through letters between mother and daughter from the academic year 1922–23—ten- and twelve-page tomes written two and three times a week—one senses the fragility of the enterprise. One can hardly view Ruth Crawford’s switch from performer to composer as unique, but few such prolific and intimate records exist of this rite of passage through the eyes and ears of an American woman, so innocent at the start, and so candid about the journey. Many letters chronicle the small triumphs that constituted the signposts along the way. Some praise, or a successful performance of her work in an ensemble class, or even a period of unencumbered composing—all these moments eventually gathered enough momentum to convince her that she could stay the course.

Much depended upon the judgment of Crawford’s teacher Adolf Weidig (1867–1931), head of the composition faculty. Weidig commanded a great deal of respect in Chicago’s musical life. Born and trained in Hamburg, he had studied with Hugo Riemann, the most influential German theorist of the late nineteenth century. Initially a violinist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 1892 to 1896 (under Theodore Thomas), Weidig joined the faculty of the American Conservatory in 1893. His solid reputation as theorist, performer, composer (with works premiered by the Chicago Symphony throughout his career) is summed up in Otto Luening’s description of him as the “Old Master.” Weidig’s father had apprenticed to Brahms and remained within his circle as a copyist. When Weidig began his sentences with the phrase “As Brahms said,” Crawford knew she was hearing the truth.²⁷

Weidig was not easy to please. Ruth rarely criticized anyone except herself in print, but one allusion to “sarcastic roly-poly Weidig” shows that the ruder side of his teaching manners affected her. “He must have eaten sour kraut” the night before one class, she told her mother. In fact, as a former student recalled some sixty years later, Weidig could be “extremely tactless, or perhaps it would be truthful to refer to it as cruelty . . . seeming to take pleasure in reducing students to tears.” To a nun in one of his classes he is reputed to have said, “Just because you wear those black rags should give you no reasons to submit stuff like this to me.” To a pianist, who inquired what other music she