

2009-01-01

"An Enduring Cycle": Revaluing the Life and Music of Johanna Beyer

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

“AN ENDURING CYCLE”: REVALUING THE LIFE
AND MUSIC OF JOHANNA BEYER

By

Kelly Hiser

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Music

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2009

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Music

“AN ENDURING CYCLE”: REVALUING THE LIFE
AND MUSIC OF JOHANNA BEYER

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“An Enduring Cycle”: Revaluing the
Life and Music of Johanna Beyer

(May 2009)

Abstract of a thesis at the University of Miami.

Thesis supervised by Professor Melissa J. de Graaf.

No. of pages in text. (113)

This thesis presents an integrated assessment of the life and music of Johanna Beyer (1888-1944) through a combination of socio-cultural and musical analysis. It examines the composer's biography in the context of the New York music scene in which she participated and the social and cultural paradigms of her time. Contemporary conceptions of gender and sex had a particularly strong impact on Beyer's work and the reception of her music. Ideologies concerning gender, sex, work, composition and modernism intersected in a variety of ways in her life and music; these issues are examined extensively in Chapter Two. Because gendered thought was so instrumental in obscuring the work of this important composer, Chapters Three and Four provide a thorough and synthesized analysis of Beyer's music that has thus far been denied to her. These chapters discuss both the composer's dissonant, "ultra-modern" music and her later tonal music, exploring elements of continuity and change in her oeuvre. The thesis rejects earlier interpretations of Beyer's work as disjointed and argues that it is instead the product of a constantly evolving composer.

Dedicated to the memory of my grandmother,
Margaret Mager

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I must thank Melissa de Graaf for introducing me to this wonderful composer. Her advice and support have been indispensable in this project and many others. I am deeply grateful for her generosity with archival documents, scores, ideas and time. Deborah Schwartz-Kates has also been a constant source of encouragement and a valued advisor. I wish to thank her and Paul Wilson for their editorial assistance as well as their thoughtful and intriguing comments and suggestions. This thesis owes much to these three remarkable scholars.

Thanks also go to my colleague Jess Hendricks for his invaluable and gracious assistance with musical examples. Finally, to my family: you not only listened to me speak about this work for a year, you took an interest in it and helped to edit it. I am deeply grateful for your care and support. Truly, not a word of this thesis would have been written without your love for me, and your faith in me.

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Chapter 1 Scholarship and Biography

The music and biography of Johanna Magdalena Beyer (1888-1944) are in many ways defined by difference. She spent the majority of her first thirty-five years in Germany—a time about which almost nothing is known—and the remainder of her life in New York City. Her music bears the mark of both American and European influences. Much of her oeuvre is split, stylistically and chronologically, between a radical, dissonant American idiom and a tonal, neo-classical one identified with Europe. Beyer's public and private lives were also compartmentalized at times. She was remembered as a solitary figure by many of her colleagues in the New York music scene. Meanwhile, the Beyer correspondence reveals that her personal life was filled with close friends, students and family. Her letters also demonstrate an energetic and willful personality that contrasts with the acutely shy and awkward persona perceived by acquaintances.

Yet these dichotomies are incomplete explanations of a complex person and body of music. For instance, while the majority of Beyer's earliest and latest works are easily categorized respectively as ultra-modern and neo-classical, many works incorporate elements of both styles. Furthermore, Beyer's musical language cannot be described exclusively in terms of this modern-classical dichotomy. Her pieces for percussion ensemble are some of the earliest written for the genre and have a distinctive language of their own. She was the first female to score a piece for electronic instruments. Striking examples of minimalism—a concept that only emerged two decades after her death—appear in works for piano, string quartet and large ensemble. These and other components of this composer's musical language require an analytical approach that

embraces the personal and unique aspects of her music. Moreover, this music warrants an assessment that weaves its diverse qualities into a recognizable pattern—one that acknowledges her oeuvre as the product of an ever-evolving composer.

Over the last several decades, scholars of all disciplines have begun excavating the forgotten (or ignored) contributions of female artists such as Beyer and more recently assessing the impact of gender on the music and lives of such figures. Unfortunately, when these important individuals are written into general histories their status often remains peripheral. Their output may appear fragmented or reduced to one or two major works rather than examined as a cohesive whole. Beyer's music was largely obscured during her lifetime and is still absent from the history of Western music. Existing scholarship has yet to assess her music in a comprehensive, holistic manner.

The purpose of this thesis is then twofold. It assesses the role of gender in Beyer's life and in the reception of her music and provides an integrated analysis of her work so often denied to female composers because of their gender. Chapter One establishes a background for the remainder of the thesis through a review of the scholarship on Beyer and a discussion of her biography in the context of the New York music scene in which she was active. Chapter Two assesses the impact of ideologies and prejudices concerning gender in the early twentieth century on Beyer's struggles as a composer. This discussion applies recent scholarship on music, modernism, labor and gender (and their various intersections) to the composer and her work. It further weighs the possible impact of Beyer's nationality (a German in America between the World Wars) and age (a student in her 40s) on the reception of her music in New York.

Chapters Three and Four trace Beyer's evolution as a composer through a discussion of her music. Chapter Three focuses on several representative works written between 1932 and 1938. The primary focus of Chapter Four is the music written after 1938, but it also includes a comparison of earlier and later piano works. While many of these works are drastically different, I conclude that certain characteristics—including balanced forms and an economic use of resources—persist throughout the composer's repertoire.

Analysis of Beyer's music has, to this point, largely focused on the influence of the ultra-modernists, especially of Henry Cowell, Ruth Crawford Seeger, and Charles Seeger, leaving the later works unexamined. This study offers a more inclusive interpretation of Beyer's output that incorporates the later works and notes both change and continuity within her body of work. Additionally, it attempts to deepen the current understanding of the above-mentioned important influences and explore previously unmentioned ones, specifically that of Dane Rudhyar, another ultra-modernist theorist and composer with whom Beyer studied. I will depend on the music and writings of these ultra-modernists to draw comparisons and contrasts with Beyer's work. I will also explore the influence of European classicism in her music. This latter influence stemmed largely from the sparse textures and simple forms of early classical keyboard music of the eighteenth century. The late Beyer keyboard works are close representations of that style and have little in common with the neo-classicism of the 1930s and 40s. The ways in which Beyer's disparate styles overlap and intersect in her music will be a key component of my discussion.

My ultimate goal is to cultivate a deeper understanding of the value and unique qualities of Beyer's music through my discussion of her work and style. I also hope to sharpen our awareness of the role that Beyer's gender played in obscuring her music. Through this combination of cultural and musical analysis, this thesis will enhance the current understanding of Johanna Beyer's significance and by doing so join the many voices who call for a more inclusive canon in which composers are judged on the merit of their works without regard to their race, creed or gender.

Literature Review

During her lifetime, Beyer's music garnered only sporadic performances and scant attention. After her death her manuscripts were deposited in the archives of the New York Public Library (strangely unclaimed by relatives or friends) where they languished untouched for decades. As far as is known, the music was not performed for more than thirty years until several sympathetic composers—among them John Kennedy, Charles Wood, and Charles Amirkhanian—began studying, advocating, and arranging performances of her works in the 1970s.

Around the same time, composer and writer Larry Polansky began to conduct research on her life, resulting in the groundbreaking 1995 *Musical Quarterly* article “‘Total Eclipse’: The Music of Johanna Magdalena Beyer: An Introduction and Preliminary Annotated Checklist,” co-authored with John Kennedy.¹ The two also began publishing Beyer's compositions through Frog Peak Music, a composer-run organization dedicated to the publication of experimental music. The New York ensemble Essential

¹ John Kennedy and Larry Polansky, “‘Total Eclipse’: The Music of Johanna Magdalena Beyer: An Introduction and Preliminary Annotated Checklist,” *Musical Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 719-778.

Music gave the first concert dedicated entirely to Beyer's music in 1988, one hundred years after her birth. Since then, the number of performances and recordings (and subsequent premieres) of her music has steadily increased. Concerts featuring her music have taken place across the United States and in Germany and Australia.

Yet, while a great deal has been accomplished towards securing the legacy of this unfairly forgotten composer, much work remains. Approximately two thirds of her compositions are currently unpublished; the Johanna Beyer Project at Frog Peak Music depends entirely on the work of volunteers to transcribe her manuscripts and prepare them for publication. Many of her works have yet to premiere—this is especially true of the pieces for orchestra and concert band. Repeat performances are also infrequent, even of highly acclaimed pieces such as the First and Second String Quartets and the three piano suites. Along with performances and publications, scholarship on Beyer is limited. At this time, there is no full scale biography or comprehensive study of her extant correspondence. Currently available analysis of Beyer's music is limited to small studies of isolated works.

The richest source of biographical information on Beyer is her correspondence, particularly the more than 100 letters exchanged with Henry Cowell. These are housed primarily in the Henry Cowell Collection in the Music Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. I examined them and three other collections of letters—for the most part written by Beyer—from the Serge Koussevitsky, Fabian Sevitsky, and Percy Grainger Collections at the Library of Congress. The documents, all of which date from 1935 to 1941, contain information about Beyer's living situation, employment, struggles as a composer and relationship with Henry Cowell. Her curriculum vitae—

written in 1937 and now located with other correspondence in the Serge Koussevitzky Collection—lists her education, employment and performances of her works. Only a few programs and announcements chronicle concerts of her music during her lifetime and no full reviews from the time exist.

John Kennedy and Larry Polansky's *Musical Quarterly* article remains the primary and most expansive resource on Beyer's music. The article provides a rough biography, a complete annotated list of her extant compositions, and reproductions of several score excerpts, letters and programs. A detailed analysis of several works and an early assessment of her general compositional style augment the article. The authors gleaned the majority of their biographical information from the abovementioned collections of correspondence housed in the Library of Congress. The letters contained in the Cowell Collection had yet to be made public at the time of the article. The unavailability of those documents—the most personal and extensive collection of Beyer's writings—limited the thoroughness of the article and led to some misunderstandings. The article quoted from the recollections of several contemporaries who portrayed Beyer as an isolated, almost hermitic figure who knew few people in the New York music scene and had no family. With the availability of additional documents, we now know that Beyer had family in the city and was in contact with—and close to—many important figures in the New York scene. Other biographical details, such as those relating to Beyer's employment and residencies in Germany have since been uncovered.² Polansky also originally dismissed Beyer's later tonal works as unimportant and even speculated

² Kennedy and Polansky, 72; Amy Beal, "Her Whimsy and Originality Really Amount to Genius": New Biographical Research on Johanna Beyer," *American Music Review* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 4, 12-13.

that some were written by a student. He has since reversed this assessment.³ Despite these drawbacks, “Total Eclipse” remains a valuable resource and a seminal work in scholarship on Johanna Beyer.

Kennedy and Polansky are also responsible for the publication of much of Beyer’s music as the respective associate editor and editor of the Johanna Beyer Project at Frog Peak Music. Approximately a third of Beyer’s compositions are currently available through this composers’ collective; until 1994, almost all of her music remained in manuscript form.⁴ Only one work was published during her lifetime: *IV* for percussion ensemble in New Music Editions in 1936. This work is currently available through Smith Publications.⁵ Facsimiles of two other works, *Music of the Spheres* and *Three Movements for Percussion*, were printed in *Soundings* in the 1970s.⁶ Most overlooked among the unpublished works are the eleven compositions for large ensemble including seven orchestral works. More compositions are currently being prepared for publication, and the list of available works by Beyer will undoubtedly continue to grow.

Since Kennedy and Polansky’s initial work, many scholars and musicians have contributed to scholarship on Beyer. In her article “Ruhelos: Annäherung an Johanna Magdalena Beyer,” (1999) Kirsten Reese analyzed several of Beyer’s compositions and detailed important musical connections to Charles Seeger and Ruth Crawford. Elizabeth

³ Kennedy and Polansky, 749; Polansky, *Sticky Melodies*, liner notes, 80678-2 CD, New World Records, 2008, 23-24.

⁴ The scores published by Frog Peak Music are listed and may be ordered online at the following address: <http://www.frogpeak.org/fpartists/fpbeyer.html>.

⁵ <http://www.smith-publications.com/catalog/>.

⁶ Johanna Beyer, *IV*, *New Music Orchestra Series*, San Francisco, CA (1936); Johanna Beyer, *Music of the Spheres*, *Soundings* 7-8 (1973); *Three Movements for Percussion* in *Soundings* 10 (1976).

Hinkle-Turner included a brief description of Beyer's *Music of The Spheres* in two articles, "Lady Ada's Offspring: Some Women Pioneers in Music Technology" (2000) and "Women and Music Technology: Pioneers, Precedents and Issues in the United States" (2003), and in her book, *Women Composers and Music Technology in the United States: Crossing the Line* (2006). Melissa J. de Graaf assessed the impact of gendered thought on Beyer's music and reception in her article "Intersections of Gender and Modernism in the Works of Johanna Beyer." Her study "'Never Call Us Lady Composers': Gendered Receptions in the New York Composers' Forum, 1935-1940" (2008) further explored the effect of gender ideologies on Beyer and her female contemporaries in the context of the Composers' Forum Laboratory concerts, established under the Works Progress Administration. De Graaf also discovered the only known picture of Beyer, which first publicly appeared in her 2004 article and is on the cover of the recent recording *Sticky Melodies*. Marguerite Boland analyzed several of Beyer's compositions in two articles: "Experimentation and Process in the Music of Johanna Beyer" (2007) and "Tempo Melodies in the Johanna Beyer Clarinet Suites (Fourth Movement)" (2007-2008), the latter co-authored with Larry Polansky. This second study is especially interesting in its identification of Beyer's use of "tempo-melody," a compositional technique proposed by Henry Cowell in which temporal ratios are translated to intervallic ratios. Amy Beal has undertaken the most extensive biographical research on Beyer. She published many of these findings in her essay "'Her Whimsy and Originality Really Amount to Genius': New Biographical Research on Johanna Beyer" (2008).⁷ This essay illuminates many facts concerning Beyer's residences in Germany, the circumstances of her immigration and her contacts and friends in New York.

⁷ Kirsten Reese, "Ruhelos: Annäherung an Johanna Magdalena Beyer," *MusikTexte: Zeitschrift für*

Before 2000, only one piece—*Music of the Spheres* for strings or electronic instruments—had been commercially recorded. Its inclusion on the historic 1977 album *New Music for Electronic and Recorded Media*, performed by the Electric Weasel Ensemble, helped spark the revival of Beyer's music. Recordings of Beyer's music have multiplied in the last decade. Sarah Cahill recorded the solo piano works *Dissonant Counterpoint* and *Gebrauchs-Musik* alongside the piano music of Ruth Crawford Seeger on the album *9 Preludes* (2001). *IV*—the only work for percussion ensemble yet to be recorded—is part of the collection *Historic Works for Percussion Ensemble 1931-1942*, performed by the ensemble at the University of Michigan. *Suite for Clarinet Ib* and the *Suite for Violin and Piano* also appear in recorded collections. *Sticky Melodies*, the 2008 release by New World Records, is the first album dedicated entirely to Johanna Beyer's music. It features the first two string quartets, along with an assortment of chamber and solo instrumental works, several songs and choral pieces.⁸ Every recording of Beyer's work thus far is a premiere.

Neue Musik, no. 81-82 (Dec 1999): 6-15; Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner, "Lady Ada's Offspring: Some Women Pioneers in Music Technology," in *Frau Musica (nova): Komponieren Heute/Composing Today*, ed. Martina Homma. (Sinzig: Studio-Verlag, 2000), 25-33; "Women and Music Technology: Pioneers, Precedents and Issues in the United States," *Organised Sound* 8, no. 1 (2003): 31-47; *Women Composers and Music Technology in the United States: Crossing the Line* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006); Melissa J. de Graaf, "Intersections of Gender and Modernism in the Works of Johanna Beyer," *Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 8-9, 15, <http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/isam/>; Melissa J. de Graaf, "'Never Call Us Lady Composers': Gendered Reception in the New York Composers' Forum, 1935-1940," *American Music* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 277-308; Marguerite Boland, "Experimentation and Process in the Music of Johanna Beyer," *Viva Voce*, no. 76 (2007) <http://mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de/materialsammlung/material/BeyerBoland.pdf>; Marguerite Boland and Larry Polansky, "Tempo Melodies in the Johanna Beyer Clarinet Suites (Fourth Movement)" (2007-2008) http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/beyerjpegs/beyer_tempo_melodies_boland_polansky.pdf; Amy Beal, "'Her Whimsy and Originality Really Amount to Genius': New Biographical Research on Johanna Beyer," *American Music Review* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 1, 4-5, 12-13.

⁸ Electric Weasel Ensemble, *New Music for Electronic & Recorded Media Women in Electronic Music, 1977*, works by Johanna Beyer and others, 80653-2 CD 728, New World Records, 2006 (original released as 1759 Arch S-1765, 1977); This recording of *Music of the Spheres* is also included on *Anthology of Noise & Electronic Music*, Volume 2, Sub Rosa, 2003; Ruth Crawford Seeger and Johanna Beyer, *9 Preludes*, performed by Sarah Cahill, NA114CD, New Albion Records, 2001; *Historic Works for*

Biography in Context

Several sources corroborate Beyer's birth date as 11 July 1888, Leipzig.⁹ Most of what is known about her life in Germany comes from her curriculum vitae, which she sent to the conductor Serge Koussevitzky in hopes of securing his referral for her Guggenheim Fellowship application. From this document we know that Beyer attended a German high school and later undertook studies in "piano, theory, counterpoint, singing, [and] dancing" at a conservatory, graduating in 1923.¹⁰ Later colleagues in the United States recalled that her musical training seemed "traditional and solid."¹¹ She moved frequently after the age of seventeen, living at several locations in Leipzig and in at least four other cities and towns throughout Germany. In 1911 she sailed to New York, apparently joining an uncle there. She returned to Germany three years later in June 1914 just before the outbreak of World War I.¹² She spent the war years in Germany, which would have been nothing short of a harrowing experience. A period of political and social unrest following the war continued in the early years of the Weimar Republic. It was not until the year that Beyer left Germany (1923) that the country began to recover

Percussion Ensemble (1931-1942), performed by the University of Michigan Percussion Ensemble, EQ 62, Equilibrium, 2002; *If Tigers Were Clouds*, performed by Zeitgeist, 589 CD, Innova, 2003; *Works for Violin*, performed by Miwako Abe and Michael Kieran Harvey, 80641-2 CD, New World Records, 2006; Johanna Beyer, *Sticky Melodies*, performed by the Astra Chamber Music Society, liner notes by Larry Polansky, 80678-2 CD, New World Records, 2008.

⁹ Nicholas Slonimsky, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of 20th Century Classical Musicians*, ed. Laura Kuhn (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 121-122. A copy of a birth record discovered by Cordula Jasper that appears to be Beyer's is located at: http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/misc_writings/talks/beyer.index.html.

¹⁰ Johanna Beyer to Serge Koussevitzky and Curriculum Vitae, October 11, 1937, Serge Koussevitzky Archive, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

¹¹ Kennedy and Polansky, 720.

¹² Beal, 4. Beyer lived in Dessau, Elgershausen, Gießen and Essen.

financially. The lack of further documentation from this time period renders a complete understanding of her life in Germany impossible at present.

Beyer arrived in New York in 1923 and lived in and around the city for the remainder of her life. She shared an apartment with her niece for many years and often visited friends outside the city.¹³ During her first decade in New York, she undertook a variety of musical studies at two prestigious institutions and with several influential composers and theorists. According to her curriculum vitae, she earned a diploma in solfege (1927) and a teaching certificate (1928) from the David Mannes Music School (now the Mannes College of Music). She continued part-time studies there for an additional year. Her curriculum vitae also lists compositional studies with Dane Rudhyar, Ruth Crawford, Charles Seeger and Henry Cowell, all prominent members of the ultra-modernist contingent. The exact chronology of those studies is difficult to determine, but it is clear that Beyer's work with Crawford and Seeger began before 1932 when her clarinet suites, which are obviously influenced by the two, were composed. Her apparently brief studies with Rudhyar probably took place prior to 1930, around which time he ceased composing and turned his attention from music to astrology. Letters indicate that Beyer never studied privately with Cowell in a formal capacity but she did frequent his classes and lectures at the New School for Social Research. She attended the school on a scholarship in 1934 and 1935 and she mentioned various events there involving him in several letters.¹⁴ She was a student alongside John Cage in

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Curriculum Vitae; Beyer to Cowell, undated, Box 2, Folder 5, Henry Cowell Collection, New York Public Library, New York (Hereafter, HCC). Beyer wrote, "Perhaps I simply state my studies in Europe, then here at the Mannes School and at the New School and the studies with the Seegers. Have I studied with you, or have I not. In a way I have not, yet again, I have. And the little bit with Rudhyar should perhaps not be mentioned at all." Beyer to Cowell, Dec 17, 1935, Box 2, folder 1, HCC. This letter

Cowell's 1935 class on rhythm, which she apparently audited. She also enrolled in "Creative Music Today" (which covered "elementary" and "modern" harmony) and possibly audited "Primitive and Folk Origins of Music," both taught by Cowell during those years. She also appeared as a speaker at the New School at least once, alongside Wallingford Riegger in a talk on the "relation of German to American music."¹⁵

All of Beyer's surviving compositions date from after her exposure to the ultra-modernists. Two known works are lost—the incidental music for a play, *The Modern Composer*, and most of her unfinished opera, *Status Quo*—and it is likely that many more vanished without record (she once wrote that she composed over 100 works).¹⁶ The surviving manuscripts include solo and chamber instrumental works, songs, three string quartets, several pieces for symphonic or large wind ensembles, works for percussion ensemble and a piece for electronic instruments. Beyer wrote the vast majority of these works (all but seven) between the years 1933 and 1939. While it is possible, and even likely, that some compositions written prior to 1933 remain undiscovered (or were destroyed), the drastic decline of productivity in 1940 is not surprising. It is around this time that the symptoms of ALS began to severely limit her activities. The disease attacks the nerve cells in the brain and spinal chord, leading to the gradual loss of control over muscle movements. Symptoms are progressive and include clumsiness, stiffening and weakening of the muscles, and in some cases paralysis. Considering the physical

describes a concert of Cowell's at the New School which Beyer attended; Beyer to Cowell, June 4, 1941, Box 2, Folder 4. This letter discusses Cowell's presentation of Beyer at the New School, which she wrote "stunned" and aggravated her.

¹⁵ Rita Mead, *Henry Cowell's New Music 1925-1936: The Society, the Music Editions, and the Recordings* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981), 447, n. 33; Beal, 5; Edward R. Carwithen, "Henry Cowell: Composer and Educator" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1991), 201; "Activities of Musicians Here and Afield," *New York Times*, October 22, 1933.

¹⁶ Beyer to Cowell, June 4, no year, Box 2, Folder 5, HCC.

suffering she experienced during the final years of her life, it is remarkable that she continued to compose and work at all. While she was healthy, she was an unceasing creative force. The description of the production of her aforementioned play, *The Modern Composer*, illustrates the range of her talents and interests. Not only did Beyer compose incidental music and write the script for the work, but she also “designed and made the costumes, slides, illustrated advertisements, directed the whole play, [and] took the piano part.” By several accounts she was a talented pianist capable of performing the most dauntingly complex and acrobatic new repertoire. She also composed poetry, some of which survives in song settings.¹⁷

While Beyer lived in New York, the city was, as it remains, a mecca of new art and music in America. Galvanized by the famous Armory Show in 1913, which included works by Picasso, Duchamp and Matisse, artists such as Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O’Keeffe and Arthur Dove made a name for American modernism in New York’s galleries. Jazz, only a few decades old, ruled the clubs and cafes of Harlem. Important composer-run organizations such as the International Composer’s Guild and the League of Composers claimed New York as their home base, as did many prominent composers, including Edgard Varèse, George Gershwin and Aaron Copland. In the year after Beyer’s arrival, 1924, the city witnessed the American premiers of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Varèse’s *Octandre* and the debut of Henry Cowell playing his infamous cluster-chord compositions.

Cowell was fast becoming the most visible member of the small, forward-thinking group of composers dubbed the ultra-modernists. In addition to the composers listed above, this label applied to Carl Ruggles, John J. Becker, and Wallingford Riegger. It

¹⁷ Curriculum Vitae, Serge Koussevitzky Collection.

was this group with which Beyer aligned herself as a composer. Diverse in background and training, the ultra-modernists were united by a common dedication to dissonance and experimentation. Furthermore, the group's members repeatedly expressed their belief that the type of innovation to which they aspired could not be achieved under the shadow of European influence. Instead, they strove to create an autonomous and original American musical style. Even Rudhyar, a Frenchman by birth, was fervent in his dismissal of European models.¹⁸ Although the group was familiar with the music of European modernists, including the serialist music of Schoenberg and his pupils, they considered their own methods to be independent from those of their Old World counterparts. They were also frequently critical of the neo-classicists, partially because of their ties to Europe and also because they considered their music less modern. Crawford for one described it as “Sugar and water, cambric tea, soup saltless” and “sickening sweet inanity.”¹⁹ To Cowell the neo-classicists were a “curiosity”; to Seeger they were “at their wits’ end for a compass, a course, and a hand at the helm.”²⁰ While it is true that the ultra-modernists developed highly individualized and original approaches to tonality and dissonance that were neither serial nor neo-classical, their often dismissive attitude towards their contemporaries seemed extreme at times. For instance, when

Crawford traveled to Europe in 1930 and 1931 as the first woman recipient of a

¹⁸ Rudhyar refers to “the old scholastic European ideals of intellectual virtuosity.” He “trust[s] that the present era in America may see the fruition of another period of the sowing of great esthetic forms...” Dane Rudhyar, “Dissonant Harmony” and “The New Sense of Space” in *Art as the Release of Power: A Series of Seven Essays on the Philosophy of Art* (Carmel, CA: Hamsa Publications, 1930), 21, 20.

¹⁹ The first quote is from a 1930 letter from Crawford to Vivian Fine. She continues: “It is the style to mix C major triads with dissonances, juggle them in your trickster derby hat, and spill them out at random like so many scared rabbits.” Ironically, by 1933 Crawford and Seeger agreed that the neo-classicists had “won” and that dissonant music was a lost cause. Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 124, 149, 198.

²⁰ Oja, 233.

Guggenheim Fellowship, Seeger urged “her not to get too mixed up with European teachers,” especially Schoenberg and Nadia Boulanger. As a result of both Seeger’s advice and her own convictions, she studied seriously with no one during her year abroad and extolled the advantages of the American dissonant counterpoint method over serialism.²¹

However, despite the exchange of criticism—even of the public sort—the divide between the ultra-modernists and neo-classicists and Americans and Europeans was not so wide as it is sometimes represented. Organizations officially dedicated to the cause of American music also sponsored performances of important European works. And both prominent groups of American composers—the neo-classicists and the ultra-modernists—committed themselves to creating a personalized, unique American musical idiom. If they disagreed on methods, they still interacted and supported one another in many ways.²² Beyer, like most of her fellow ultra-modernists, had contact with composers on both sides of the stylistic divide. As an immigrant she had extensive ties to many Europeans living in America.²³

As with the perceived divisions among various musical factions in New York, the actual amount of European influence on the ultra-modernists is certainly debatable. However, most of the experimentalists opted for an exclusively American education. This was at a time when a period of study in Europe was still considered a necessary

²¹ Charles Seeger in “Remembering Ruth Crawford Seeger,” 447; Ruth Crawford to Charles Seeger, November 11, 1930 quoted in Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 143-144.

²² Cowell and Seeger both criticized Schoenberg’s twelve-tone method in their treatises as limited in scope because it did not adequately address any musical element other than pitch order and choice. See Oja, 177-200 for a detailed study of the interactions between internationalism and nationalism and the neo-classicists and ultra-modernists in 1920s New York.

²³ Beal, 4.

component of a composer's education, which would compensate for the assumed inadequacies of American teachers and institutions. Many of the ultra-modernists' colleagues, particularly those considered neo-classicists, embraced this tradition, traveling mainly to France. In fact, the grande dame of European pedagogy—Nadia Boulanger—rose to fame primarily because of the American pupils she taught during the 1920s, including Aaron Copland, Virgil Thompson, Roy Harris, Paul Bowles, Marc Blitzstein and Marion Bauer. Undoubtedly, the ultra-modernists saw their rejection of European training as concrete evidence of their musical independence. Beyer traveled the traditional path of compositional training path in reverse, beginning in Europe and culminating her studies with the ultra-modernists in New York.

Although Beyer continued to compose in a dissonant avant-garde style up until 1939, the other ultra-modernists had largely turned away from the idiom by then. During the 1930s composers of all types became deeply concerned with politics and society as the Great Depression took its toll on the country. Henry Cowell and Charles Seeger helped found the proletariat-championing Composer's Collective in the early 1930s, which included such luminaries as Aaron Copland. The collective began as a reaction to the decade's economic hardships and labor unrest, as its members felt a moral obligation to voice their political beliefs in their music. The group published two *Workers Song Books* in the mid 1930s featuring left-wing political mass songs written by the members that are essentially pieces of American *Gebrauchsmusik*.²⁴ The songs echo the ideas of

²⁴ Cowell wrote several proletariat songs under the impetus of the collective, as did Charles Seeger. Crawford was also a member, although she was less active in the group than her husband or Cowell. While she did not contribute to the *Song Books*, her 2 *Ricerare*, "Sacco, Vanzetti" and "Chinaman, Laundryman," clearly express the social concerns she shared with the collective. William Lichtenwanger, *The Music of Henry Cowell: A Descriptive Catalog* (New York: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1986), 140-141; Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music*, 195.

Eisler, Weill and Hindemith in their collaborations with Bertolt Brecht on the *Lehrstücke* (teaching pieces, which were essentially educational Marxist plays).²⁵ Beyer, as far as we know, never participated in the Composer's Collective. It is unclear what, if any, were her political allegiances.²⁶

Following 1935, Cowell, Crawford and Seeger became increasingly interested in folk music. By that time the ultra-modernist scene in New York had effectively dissipated. Cowell disappeared from the city altogether when he was imprisoned on a morals charge in 1936.²⁷ He continued to compose while serving his sentence and frequently used folk idioms as the basis for works, including *Old American Country Set* and *Celtic Set*. Crawford, more than any other composer, exemplified the connection between the ultra-modernists and American folk music. She and Seeger moved to Washington, D.C. in 1935 where he took a job with the government-created Resettlement Administration. This appointment sent him throughout Appalachia and the southern states to record and teach folk music. Crawford joined him occasionally in the field and became immersed in the process of transcribing field recordings. She contributed hundreds of transcriptions and arrangements to various publications, most notably

²⁵ Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 197, 229; Carol J. Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 364. Eisler was highly regarded as a composer and Marxist agitator in avant-garde New York music circles and was friends with the Seegers. He taught a course at the New School for Social Research on "mass song writing" beginning in 1935 and participated in the Composer's Collective.

²⁶ Some of her song texts and the ideas of her unfinished opera, *Status Quo*, uphold ideals of universal brotherhood and the goodness of humanity, but these texts are more spiritual than political in nature.

²⁷ Cowell was charged with engaging in oral sex with a teenage boy. See Joseph Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 134-140 for details about this arrest and imprisonment.

collaborating with the Lomax family. Beyer eventually turned away from ultra-modernism as well, but not until several years after her colleagues did so. In 1939 she wrote several symphonic and piano works in a simplified, tonal style. These pieces take inspiration from the European classical tradition rather than the American folk tradition. Yet, it is worth noting that she also composed four works for percussion ensemble and a set of pieces for oboe and piano, which are not entirely tonal, in 1939.

The true nature of Beyer's relationships with her composition teachers and other musicians and artists is gradually beginning to emerge, thanks in great part to Amy Beal's biographical research. Beyer corresponded with many eminent figures in New York and around the country, among them composers, conductors, dancers, publishers, performers and professors. Aaron Copland, Joseph Schillinger and Martha Graham were just three of her many notable contacts. Beyer had personal relationships with the Seegers and the then-famous composer and pianist Carol Robinson.²⁸ She was friendly with Percy Grainger and his wife. She collaborated with the dancer and choreographer Doris Humphrey (also known as Dorsha Hayes) who danced to at least one of Beyer's compositions.²⁹

Beyer's relationship with Henry Cowell, which seemed to waver between friendship and romance, was her most intimate with a fellow composer. Unfortunately, the relationship was plagued by misunderstanding and frustration toward the end of her life. However, a few surviving letters from the mid-1930s (before the souring of

²⁸ See Beal, 12-13 for an extensive list of Beyer's correspondents. See Glenda D. Goss, *Music and the Moderns: The Life and Works of Carol Robinson*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993 for information about Robinson.

²⁹ Beyer's curriculum vitae lists "several performances of dances to which I wrote and played the music" at the Theatre of the Dance, founded in 1924 by Humphrey and her husband. See Chapter Four for more details.

relations) reveal mutual affection and regard between the two. The two corresponded throughout the four years during which Cowell was incarcerated at the San Quentin State Prison in California. During that time Beyer was a dedicated and passionate advocate of Cowell's work. The tone of their correspondence during the 1930s—when Beyer wrote that Cowell “opened a wide field” for her through his music and he in turn expressed concern from his jail cell that she too was “being imprisoned by the closeness of the contact in letters”—changed drastically after his release.³⁰ Much of the tension in their relationship after 1940 seemed to stem from the as-yet inexplicable romance between the two. However, it is difficult to determine whether this romance actually took place, was a misperception on Beyer's behalf or was entirely epistolary. Regardless, the strain between the two caused her a great deal of emotional distress at the end of her life while she also suffered from the painful symptoms of ALS.

Despite the breadth of contacts and close friends who might have supported her work, Beyer listed only nine performances of her compositions on her curriculum vitae in 1937. The only other known performance of her work at the time was of two movements of *Three Movements for Percussion* in the northwestern tours of John Cage during the late 1930s.³¹ In 1939, Percy Grainger's wind band rehearsed two of her works, *Elation* and *Reverence*, but it seems that the band never performed these pieces publicly. This was apparently the first and only time that Beyer heard “something orchestral” of her own. Her comment in 1939 to Grainger about this rehearsal is a stark reminder of the compositional disadvantage she faced due to the lack of opportunities to hear her music

³⁰ Beyer to Cowell, December 17, 1935, Box 2 Folder 1, HCC; Cowell to Beyer, undated, Percy Grainger Archives.

³¹ Kennedy and Polansky, “Total Eclipse,” 723.

performed. She wrote, "...I was rather taken aback to have to listen to my unskillful stuff, but it was a fine experience for me, and the best lesson, I could possibly have."³² Returning to the performances listed on Beyer's vitae, only two—the Composers' Forum concerts in 1936 and 1937—featured multiple works of hers on a single program. These concerts were an initiative of the Federal Music Project under the Works Progress Administration, which included question-and-answer sessions between the audience and composer after each performance. The Forum concerts—over two hundred in all—spanned the years 1935 to 1940 and promoted composers both eminent and obscure. The programs for both of Beyer's concerts featured some of her most dissonant compositions including Movement for Two Pianos, rife with chord clusters, and Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon, also written in the dissonant counterpoint idiom. The response of the audience at both concerts, recorded in transcripts of the question-and-answer sessions, was overwhelmingly negative.³³

Performances featuring Beyer's music received limited press coverage, consisting usually of an announcement or a brief summary, if they were mentioned at all. Only two published reviews of her music have been discovered. One, in the New York *Herald Tribune* following the 1937 Composers' Forum concert, described her music as "seem[ing], at a first hearing, more experimental in form and modernistic in harmony." The other appeared in the *San Francisco Examiner* following a 1934 New Music Society performance, which included a movement from Beyer's Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon.

³² Beyer to Grainger, May 16, 1939, Percy Grainger Collection.

³³ Audiences were baffled by the avant-garde, dissonant qualities in her music. For a thorough examination of Beyer's Composers' Forum Concerts, especially in regard to gender, see de Graaf, "Never Call Us Lady Composers," 277-278, 290-295.

The reviewer described the work as “a doleful dull duet.”³⁴ In light of the infrequent performances and dismissive reception of Beyer’s music, it is no surprise that she lived to see only one publication and one recording of her music. Both came under the aegis of Cowell’s New Music Society, which he founded specifically to make available modern music with limited market appeal. What has become her best-known work for percussion ensemble, *IV*, was published in the Society’s *New Music Orchestra Series: Percussion Music* in 1936. In 1938, New Music Quarterly Recordings issued a record with the second and fourth movements of Beyer’s Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon on one side and Cowell’s *Two Chorales and Ostinato* on the other.³⁵

Obviously, Beyer was unable to earn a living as a composer. Like many during the Great Depression, she lived in poverty throughout the 1930s until her death. She taught piano and composition lessons in private and piano classes in public schools. She described her income from teaching as “uncertain” and “a frightful worry” in an undated letter to Cowell, probably written in 1940 or 1941.³⁶ According to her curriculum vitae, she also taught music for a year through the Federal Music Project in New York. From 1936 until 1940, while Cowell served his prison term, she worked as his secretary and agent, largely without compensation. She copied parts, distributed scores, promoted his book on melody, lobbied composers on behalf of his works and collected letters petitioning for his release. After his release he and Beyer agreed on a small amount of payment for that work, and she continued to assist him with copying, correspondence and

³⁴ F. D. P., “Two Composers at Forum” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 20, 1937; “Modern Works Played by Music Society,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 26, 1934.

³⁵ Mead, 336, 598. The recording was number 1413A-B, New Music Quarterly Recordings.

³⁶ Beyer to Cowell, undated, Box 2, Folder 5, HCC.

other secretarial tasks.³⁷ Beyer's employment is discussed in further detail in Chapter 2. Despite her undertaking what seemed to be a crushing workload, it ultimately proved impossible for Beyer to support herself. She was on Home Relief (a welfare program created through the New Deal) for a time before opting out of the program. Tragically, at the end of her life when she needed it most, she was unable to qualify for aid again.³⁸

Beyer's last letters are full of heart-wrenching descriptions of her suffering. Because she could not secure assistance from the government, she continued to teach despite the debilitating symptoms brought on by ALS. Her death certificate lists 1938 as the onset date of the disease. In letters to Cowell dating from 1940 on, she describes a range of gradually worsening symptoms. She mentions difficulty eating and walking and a weakening of one leg. A letter from 1941 reads, "I am sick in bed, bleeding. My condition is worse than we both have been wanting to believe. I have been trying frantically to keep out of the hospital." Further into the letter she describes her difficulty in playing the piano on account of pain and swelling in her fingers.³⁹ Eventually she was forced to give up her work for Cowell. Yet she continued to travel for months after this letter was written from her home in Manhattan to Brooklyn, Staten Island and New Jersey to teach every week. She managed all of this despite the fact that she was barely

³⁷ Beal, 12.

³⁸ Bertha Reynolds, a close friend of Beyer's, wrote to Cowell, "I am afraid it would be difficult for her to get back on Home Relief because of her resistance to answering some of their questions about the work she was doing for you at the time she dropped out." Bertha C. Reynolds to Cowell, January 22, 1941, Box 2, Folder 3, HCC. Beyer also described the situation: "The city would not help me, because they accuse me of having worked for you while I should have stayed in bed and taken care of my health." Beyer to Cowell, January 7, 1941, Box 2, Folder 3, HCC.

³⁹ Beyer to Cowell, January 7, 1941, Box 2, Folder 3, HCC.

able to walk and had to pull herself up the stairs to her apartment.⁴⁰ Her final compositions are not in her own hand. She was surely unable to write by that time and instead dictated the music, perhaps to a student. On June 30, 1943, Beyer entered the House of the Holy Comforter, a free hospice, where she remained until her death on January 9, 1944 at the age of 55.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Beyer to Cowell, March 22, 1941 and Beyer to Cowell, April 3 1941, Box 2, Folder 4, HCC.

⁴¹ A copy of Beyer's death certificate is located here:
http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/misc_writings/talks/beyer.index.html.

Chapter 2

The Impact of Gender Ideologies

During the 1920s and '30s, a variety of sexual prejudices and gender ideologies converged to powerfully affect the lives and music of women composers. This chapter examines the impact of these factors on the life and work of Johanna Beyer and the reception of her music. Cultural paradigms of labor, gender and sex (which included disparate employment opportunities between the sexes and the “feminization” of the teaching and clerical professions) affected Beyer’s type of employment and her ability to support herself. Specific prejudices and stereotypes directed at female artists of the time worked to devalue her contributions and those of many others. The act of artistic creation was for centuries considered the privileged realm of men. This prejudice carried over into the early twentieth century and was compounded by the ascription of masculine qualities to ultra-modernist music. The gendering of modernism and the act of composition played a powerful role in the reception of music by Beyer and her female contemporaries. Her correspondence and the transcripts of the question-and-answer sessions of her Composers’ Forum Laboratory concerts provide insight into the challenges she faced because of her sex and her response to them. Her letters include descriptions of various jobs (as a teacher, pianist and secretary) and her struggles to make a living wage and hear her orchestral works performed. The Composers’ Forum transcripts paint a vivid image of the way her ultra-modernist music was perceived, and criticized, in gendered terms.

Along with these primary sources, I draw on a variety of interdisciplinary scholarship throughout this chapter. Two studies in particular inform my discussion of

labor and gender during the 1930s. Historian Lois Scharf's book *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (1980) is an in-depth cultural study of women workers during the Great Depression. Her account of the "feminization" of the teaching and clerical professions and the specific stereotypes associated with them is especially enlightening when applied to Beyer's employment and income. Laura Hapke's book *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (1995) provides further insight on relevant stereotypes about women, work and social independence.⁴² More specific to Beyer's work as a composer is Christine Battersby's *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (1990), which traces the concept of the creative genius and its constantly changing relationship with both feminine attributes and females throughout western history and into the twentieth century.⁴³

Musicologists first addressed the role of gender in the tradition of western music during the early 1990s, with Susan McClary's seminal *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* leading the way in 1991.⁴⁴ Shortly thereafter, several scholars began to examine the gendered musical discourse of early twentieth century America. These musicologists drew in part on similar studies addressing modernist literature, mainly those of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *No Man's Land: The Place of the*

⁴² Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

⁴³ Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁴⁴ Susan McClary, *Feminist Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century (1888-1994).⁴⁵ Judith Tick's article "Charles Ives and Gender Ideology" (1993) examines the gendered characteristics ascribed to music by Ives and his colleagues as a product of Western patriarchal values. I apply her ideas to my exploration of gendered language in several essays by Dane Rudhyar. Catherine Parsons Smith, in "'A Distinguishing Virility': Feminism and Modernism in American Art Music" (1994), analyzes the music and writings of modernist critics and composers as a reaction against both "feminine" romanticism and the success of female composers at the turn of the century.⁴⁶ Her study informs my discussion of Beyer's reception and challenges as a composer.

Our understanding of the complicated issues of gender, sex and modernism continues to evolve and I rely on several recent works of scholarship in my discussion. Ellie Hisama, in *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (2001), argues that women composers, rather than being consumed by the rhetoric of modernist masculinity, used the idiom as a means of feminist expression. Her book explores several works by each of these women in search of a feminine, anti-patriarchal voice. Nadine Hubbs, in *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (2004), addresses the ways in which anti-feminine rhetoric was directed at the group of neo-classicists

⁴⁵ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988-1994).

⁴⁶ Judith Tick, "Charles Ives and Gender Ideology," In *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 83-106; Catherine Parsons Smith, "'A Distinguishing Virility': Feminism and Modernism in American Art Music," in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, ed. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 90-106.

associated with Aaron Copland and Virgil Thompson (many of them gay).⁴⁷ These studies contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural forces at work in Beyer's life and a more balanced interpretation of her music in its context.

The recent scholarship on Johanna Beyer and gender by Melissa J. de Graaf provides the groundwork for much of the present study. Her article "Intersections of Gender and Modernism in the Works of Johanna Beyer" (2004) explores how Beyer constructed her personal and unique gender identity through her music and public persona. In "'Never Call Us Lady Composers': Gendered Receptions in the New York Composers' Forum, 1935-1940" (2008), de Graaf assesses the impact of gender ideologies on the participation and reception of female composers in the Composers' Forum Laboratory Concerts. The author devotes a section of this article solely to a discussion of Beyer's experience at her two Forum Concerts, which serves as a valuable reference here.⁴⁸

Norms and Stereotypes of Work, Sex and Love

Beyer arrived in the United States as the first wave of feminist activism neared its end. The movement culminated in 1919 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. After securing their right to vote, many feminists turned their attention to the economic

⁴⁷ Ellie Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2001); Nadine Hubbs *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ Melissa de Graaf, "Intersections of Gender and Modernism in the Works of Johanna Beyer," *Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 8-9, 15; de Graaf, "'Never Call Us Lady Composers': Gendered Receptions in the New York Composers' Forum, 1935-1940," *American Music* (Fall 2008): 277-308.

and psychological issues facing women in the workforce.⁴⁹ Although social conservatives deplored the presence of females in jobs outside of the traditional domestic sphere, from the 1890s through the 1920s the number of working women in America continued to rise. However, as the Great Depression worsened in the mid-1930s, many gains of the previous decades were lost. The nation's fixation on specifically male unemployment, which began at the onset of the depression, became entrenched as the economy worsened. As a result, women not only faced the universal difficulties of finding and securing a job that provided livable wages, they also confronted sustained discrimination and prejudice. Their incomes, opportunities and status were drastically inferior to those of their male counterparts. Furthermore, women were accused of stealing jobs from men and working merely to earn "pin-money" to spend on luxuries.⁵⁰ The plight of jobless women was of secondary importance in New Deal programs, which slanted decidedly in favor of men. Unions likewise did little to help them, and women in blue-collar industries had little recourse against inadequate living wages, unsafe and miserable working conditions and job instability. Black women experienced higher unemployment rates and even harsher conditions than white women. While those in white-collar professions fared better than their sisters in blue-collar industries, they also struggled to find work and were often forced to accept jobs for which they were over-qualified.⁵¹

Until her illness set in, Beyer managed better than many women, piecing together a subsistence based on her skills as a pianist and teacher. It seems that during her two

⁴⁹ Scharf, 20.

⁵⁰ Hapke, 4-5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7-10.

decades in New York most of her income came from her work as a piano teacher. She taught both privately and in the classroom setting, primarily to young students.⁵² The Federal Music Project (part of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration) employed her as a teacher for a single year, possibly in 1936.⁵³ Yet her income was not steady and she depended on welfare to survive at one point during the mid-thirties. As her illness worsened beginning in 1939, her financial situation became dire and she struggled to maintain her demanding teaching schedule. In January of 1941 she wrote to Cowell, "I told Bertha, that I would fight desperately to be able to hold through till summer when pupils stop anyway; that, if I stop now, I will lose my chance to ever make a living again."⁵⁴ While she previously supplemented her income by working as a pianist, the symptoms of ALS affected her ability to play by the beginning of 1941, if not earlier.⁵⁵ Her final letters reveal her worries about the expense of such basic necessities as food and heat.⁵⁶

In addition to teaching and composing, Beyer voluntarily worked as Cowell's informal secretary and agent during his imprisonment from 1936 to 1940. Her efforts on his behalf were enormous. She was a crucial link to the outside world for him, managing

⁵² Beyer taught an after-school piano class in a public school in Brooklyn, probably beginning in 1940. Beyer to Cowell, September 28, 1940 and October 15, 1940, Box 2, Folder 2, HCC; Beyer to Cowell, undated, Box 2, Folder 5, HCC.

⁵³ Beyer lists this work on her curriculum vitae but provides no date. It is possible that her job was cut in 1937 along with those of almost one hundred other women in the Federal Music Project. de Graaf, "Never Call Us Lady Composers," 280.

⁵⁴ Beyer to Cowell, January 15, 1941, Box 2, Folder 3, HCC.

⁵⁵ Beyer describes an episode at a dance rehearsal in which her "muscles began to hurt and swell." She turned down another accompaniment request "on account of the condition of [her] fingers." Beyer to Cowell, January 7, 1941, Box 2, Folder 3, HCC.

⁵⁶ "The doctor insists I must live in a warmer place and I must eat! ...but food is so expensive now. I am using my electric stove beside the oil stove [to heat the apartment]. It will be expensive..." Beyer to Cowell, January 29, 1941, Box 2, Folder 3, HCC.

correspondence and acting as a liaison. She copied parts for several of his works and provided editorial assistance for his recent book, *The Nature of Melody*.⁵⁷ She also presented this monograph to several publishers and promoted it to teachers and composers. She lobbied prominent conductors to perform his works, negotiated premieres and payments, distributed scores and performed all manner of tasks in the name of Cowell's music. She also managed his membership and association with the American Composer's Alliance, helped maintain his organization New Music in his absence, and solicited letters from prominent musicians to the Board of Prison Terms and Paroles on his behalf, among other activities.⁵⁸ While Beyer was not employed by Cowell on an official basis, the work she did for him most closely resembles that of a personal secretary and this discussion considers her as such.

The secretarial and teaching fields in which Beyer worked were two of the so-called "feminized professions" of the early twentieth century. The professions earned the label because they were generally related to traditional domestic work and were filled, by an overwhelming majority, by women. In addition to teaching and clerical work, nursing, social work and librarianship fell into this category. While the large numbers of women working in these areas reflected their growing visibility in the workforce, the fields lacked professional status, due to a dearth of standardization and systematic, serious training. Moreover, women working in these professions were subject to a

⁵⁷ She copied nearly 150 pages for several different works. In reference to the book she writes, "I have been checking up on examples and the like." Beyer to Cowell, February 9, 1941, Box 2, Folder 3, HCC. Beyer to Grainger, November 15, 1937, Percy Grainger Archives.

⁵⁸ Nearly every letter by Beyer in the Grainger, Koussevitzky and Sevitzy archives was written on Cowell's account or contains a reference to him. She sent multiple scores to the latter two and communicated with them frequently about performances, broadcasts and the like.

variety of demeaning stereotypes including the “pleasant little schoolma’am,” the “social mother” and the “celibate spinster” devoted only to her career.⁵⁹

Female teachers such as Beyer were largely restricted to employment in primary and secondary schools and effectively barred from higher education. This close contact with children, which often took place in the homes of students, reflects the domestic aspect of the feminized professions. The feminization of teaching obviously did not extend to the more esteemed and lucrative realm of higher education.⁶⁰ Although women held a large share of music teaching jobs, men occupied the vast majority of professorships in colleges and universities. So while Beyer and Ruth Crawford taught piano and composition to children at home and in classes, many of their male colleagues held positions in higher education. Henry Cowell taught at the New School for Social Research, Columbia, and Peabody. Percy Grainger taught at New York University, Carl Ruggles at the University of Miami, and John Becker at the University of Notre Dame.⁶¹ One exceptional woman was Marion Bauer, who taught at New York University for twenty-five years. Yet for the vast majority of women, the barrier to academic careers remained strong. The fact that neither Beyer nor Crawford even attempted to gain such a position demonstrates how ingrained this particular norm was.

Single teachers such as Beyer were subject to a number of stereotypes. The unmarried teacher was depicted as “tyrannical,” “queer” and “moody”—qualities

⁵⁹ Scharf, 5, 10, 187-189.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-10.

⁶¹ Crawford was most notably involved with the Silver Spring Cooperative Nursery School.

attributed to her unmarried status and supposed resulting sexual frustrations.⁶² At the time, wedlock was deemed a necessary component in a normal and fulfilled woman's life. As a result, unmarried women were generally considered aberrations. Beyer's German heritage was perhaps even more problematic than her marital status in light of the nationalist atmosphere between and during the World Wars. By the late 1930s, many school boards and directors were obsessed with the patriotism of their teachers and many states required they sign an oath of loyalty to the constitution.⁶³ It is not clear whether Beyer faced this type of discrimination and stereotyping as a teacher, but the potential existed. Regardless, negative attitudes toward Beyer's nationality and unmarried status were pervasive and entrenched in American society and they impacted her life in multiple ways.

As in teaching, women working in the clerical field lacked professional status and were perceived through the lens of stereotypes. During the 1930s, the personal secretary was considered a sort of "office wife." Scharf writes of this persona, "She was nothing less than the office mate of the harried male executive, and she dutifully fulfilled the emotional and business needs of her boss. In direct imitation of marriage, in which the wife derives her social status from her husband, the private secretary achieved her exalted position through the man to whom her services were indispensable."⁶⁴ In light of Beyer's romantic letters to Cowell, her profound admiration of him and her role as his supporter

⁶² It is important to point out that married women faced intense discrimination in obtaining and securing jobs. Scharf notes that "nowhere [as in the field of teaching] was proposed and actual discrimination against working wives more pronounced." They were accused of simply augmenting the existing salary of their husband. Oftentimes, defenders of the rights of married women were the propagators of prejudice against single women. Scharf, 75, 82-83.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

and champion, this conception of the secretary-as-wife takes on complex meanings in her case.

How closely did Beyer's role as Cowell's secretary resemble the stereotype defined above? She clearly met his "business needs" and seemed to tend to his emotional needs as well. After his original sentence was set at a shocking fifteen years, he wrote to her from prison:

You have been wonderful in writing so often, and I enjoy every letter from you greatly. If you wish to continue writing them, I shall be delighted. But if you find, that it is upsetting to you to continue, I shall understand this perfectly. Sometimes I feel that part of you is being imprisoned because of the closeness of the contact in letters, and perhaps you would be setting yourself free by breaking up the contact. That you will know better than I.⁶⁵

Beyer's regular contact with Cowell (which obviously continued after this letter) undoubtedly provided a constant source of encouragement and support for him. Her unpaid work mirrored the duties of the housewife, and there is good reason to believe Beyer wished to be Cowell's true wife. After his release, she admitted her hopes of a future relationship and described the expectation of her family and friends that the two would marry:

"While you were away, I always visioned [*sic*] our work together someday, meals together, fun, I did not bother about other things. I used to go to sleep with my head on your shoulder and also I found you here when I woke up. I had to... Perhaps it will be better to be absolutely frank with you in the case of my friends and relatives. They all trust and like me somehow, despite, and so they never interfered in what I did for you. But now they have all expected that you will marry me as soon as you are able. [I] have said that you are not the marrying kind..."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Cowell to Beyer, undated, Percy Grainger Archives.

⁶⁶ Beyer to Cowell, August 7, 1940 and August 24, 1940, Box 2, Folder 2, HCC.

Whether she derived her status from her connection with him is a more delicate matter. Several times she sent her own scores along with Cowell's to conductors, using her work for him as an introduction. Yet her willingness to work for him was anything but opportunistic. She never asked for anything in return and it was not until 1941 that Cowell compensated her at all. Even then he only paid her for copying parts and ignored the countless hours spent otherwise on his behalf.⁶⁷ Although she recognized this oversight and desperately needed the money, Beyer only reluctantly billed him and accepted his payment.⁶⁸ Her sincere desire to help was intricately tied to her regard for him. She held him and his music in highest esteem, once declaring him "the greatest living composer," and writing that her "admiration of [his] genius, [his] basically wonderful qualities as a human being can possibly never die..."⁶⁹ She writes in another letter "I shall love to do your parts and as payment I shall have the privilege to study your work!"⁷⁰ Ultimately, her work for Cowell did little to help her, and she recognized in hindsight that her sacrifices on his behalf were detrimental to her own cause as a composer. In 1941 she wrote to him:

The copying was actually one of the smallest unimportant parts in the whole affair, and what is more, it was not done to make money with it. For me, all this is very, very sad and it would never have come up, had I not sacrificed once more too much of my own self. It is a mistake to do so, but it is my weak point, inherited from my mother. Had I been more

⁶⁷ In 1941 she sent him a tally of copied pages. Cowell sent her a check for \$58. He also paid her \$12.50 in January of that year for arranging a lecture. Beal, 12.

⁶⁸ "I am still frightfully reluctant about it... In my opinion bookbinding, spending days at the Independent and the like were bigger items than the copying. However, let's both go by bounds and leaps, it should relieve you, and settle the copying business now and with it the past." Beyer to Cowell, undated, Box 2, Folder 5, HCC.

⁶⁹ Beyer to Cowell, March 22, 1941, Box 2, Folder 4, HCC; Beyer to Cowell, January 1-2, 1941, Box 2 Folder 3, HCC.

⁷⁰ Beyer to Cowell, undated, Box 2, Folder 5, HCC.

selfish and seen to it, that I also pursued my own interests at the same time, I would be better off by now and would not need to beg.⁷¹

Beyer did not realize that she inherited this “weakness” not from her mother but from the patriarchal values of Western culture that affected all women. As Amy Fay, a pianist and teacher, wrote about female composers in 1900:

Women have been too much taken with helping and encouraging men to place a proper value on their talent, which they are prone to underestimate and to think not worth making the most of. Their whole training from time immemorial has tended to make them take an intense interest in the work of men and to stimulate them to their best efforts. Ruskin was quite right when he so patronizingly said that ‘Woman’s chief function is praise.’ She has praised and praised and kept herself in abeyance.⁷²

This expectation—that women champion the activities of men rather than pursue their own—was directly related to the importance placed on heterosexual romance in female life. Laura Hapke notes that even the most radical literary works written during the Great Depression place this type of relationship in a central role.⁷³ Yet Beyer seemed to recognize the downfall of this type of romance, in which women were, as a rule, powerless. She wrote in 1940 “I begin to see myself a little clearer, I shall attempt to give you a picture. I had once answered G.’s letter that I detested wanting, grasping females.”⁷⁴ She implies that she is anxious not to become one of these, but the normative values of the early twentieth century, instilled in her by family and society at large, pushed her (and all women) to “grasp” at romance. It would be years before prominent

⁷¹ Beyer to Cowell, January 21, 1941, Box 2, Folder 3, HCC.

⁷² Amy Fay, “Women and Music,” *Music* 18 (October 1900): 506, in *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Carol Neuls-Bates (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 217.

⁷³ Hapke, 110.

⁷⁴ Beyer to Cowell, August 7, 1940, Box 2, Folder 2, HCC.

feminists began to question and challenge the normative heterosexual romantic relationship.⁷⁵

Gendering Composition and Musical Modernism

The number of women working as musicians in the United States (as teachers, performers, conductors and composers) increased dramatically during the final decades of the nineteenth century, mirroring trends in the general workforce. While the majority of these women worked as teachers, some circled in the upper echelons of performance and composition. Among these were several composers who produced the first large-scale symphonic works by American women. The Boston Symphony Orchestra was instrumental in the success and publicity of many of these works. The organization premiered the first symphonic work by an American woman in 1893—Margaret Lang’s *Dramatic Overture*—and appeared with pianist/composer Helen Hopekirk for her American debut in 1883. The foremost member in this group of composers was Amy Beach, whose Gaelic Symphony, also performed by the Boston Symphony in 1896, was the first by an American woman.⁷⁶

Despite these gains, prejudices and gendered ideologies about artistic creation, born and solidified in the romantic era, persisted. The idea of the composer as a creative genius and a near-deity (which began decisively with Beethoven) was explicitly male. In the nineteenth-century world of Victorian ideals, women were believed to be too emotional, sensitive and unstable to undertake the divine act of artistic creation. The

⁷⁵ Hapke, 141-142.

⁷⁶ Tick, “Passed Away is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Musical Life, 1870-1900,” 332, 341-342.

romanticists paradoxically valued these traditionally feminine *qualities* (emotionality, sensitivity and instability), applauding these traits in male artists, and simultaneously denigrated the female *sex*.⁷⁷ In 1880, George Upton, a Chicago music critic, attempted to explain this circuitous logic in his book, *Woman in Music*:

Conceding that music is the highest expression of the emotions, and that woman is emotional by nature, is it not one solution of the problem that woman does not reproduce them because she herself is emotional by temperament and nature, and cannot project herself outwardly, any more than she can give outward expression to other mysterious and deeply hidden traits of her nature?

Upton argued that men can control emotions, and thereby reproduce them in music, while women are controlled *by* emotions and thus can only “absorb music.”⁷⁸

The conception of the male creator-genius retained its cultural currency well into the twentieth century. Critics and composers continued to characterize women as incapable of becoming successful composers, particularly of large-scale orchestral and operatic works, despite evidence to the contrary.⁷⁹ As late as 1940, Carl E. Seashore, a pioneer in the field of music psychology, asserted that “Woman’s fundamental urge is to be beautiful, loved, and adored as a person; man’s urge is to provide and achieve in a career.” He blames this inherent passiveness for the lack of “great women composers.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Battersby notes that the romantics derived their notions of artistry and sex from Renaissance ideals, which in turn inherited ancient Greek and Roman concepts. Thus, “nineteenth-century cultural misogyny turns out to have a very ancient pedigree indeed.” Battersby, 23.

⁷⁸ George Upton, *Woman in Music* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1880), 21-28, in Carol Neuls-Bates, *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*, rev. ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 206-207.

⁷⁹ Tick, “Charles Ives and Gender Ideology,” 91-93.

⁸⁰ Carl E. Seashore, “Why No Great Women Composers?,” *Music Educators Journal* 22, no.5 (March 1940): 21, 88, in Neuls-Bates, 297-302.

While nineteenth-century ideas about the female sex remained embedded in the psyche of American musicians in the twentieth century, modernist composers and critics simultaneously reacted against romantic aesthetic values. In the most extreme manifestations of this reaction, American ultra-modernists caricatured the traditionally feminine aspects of romantic music and claimed that their own music was inherently masculine and therefore superior. Prominent musicians and critics described American dissonant music as virile, assertive, penetrating and rational. Irving Weill emphasized the significance of these qualities: “One senses in [American modern music] a distinguishing virility—the virility with which it so constantly seeks to express its ideas and its feelings.”⁸¹ In contrast, previously valued feminine qualities in romantic music were distorted into the effeminate, frivolous and hysterical. Take for example the preeminent critic Paul Rosenfeld’s assessment of Edward MacDowell: “Where his great romantic brethren, Brahms, Wagner, and Debussy, are direct and sensitive, clearly and tellingly expressive, MacDowell minces and simpers, maidenly, and ruffled. He is nothing if not a daughter of the American Revolution.”⁸² Perhaps the most infamous example of this type of rhetoric is that of Charles Ives, who declared “music has always been an emasculated art” and titled a movement of his Second String Quartet “Andante Emasculata.”⁸³ The words of Ives, Rosenfeld and Weill were echoed in major journals of the day including

⁸¹ Irving Weill, “The American Scene Changes,” *Modern Music* 6 (May-June 1929): 7-8.

⁸² Paul Rosenfeld, *An Hour with American Music* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1929), 46.

⁸³ Tick, “Charles Ives and Gender Ideology,” 85, 100.

the *Musical Quarterly* and *Modern Music*, and in the writing of Edgard Varèse, Carl Ruggles, Nicolas Slonimsky, and many others.⁸⁴

Judith Tick's analysis of Ives's misogynistic language reveals the larger cultural conversation that such rhetoric reflected.⁸⁵ Her approach informs my exploration of gender in the writing of Dane Rudhyar, an ultra-modernist composer, teacher and theorist. He is best known for his theoretical and philosophical ideas about music. Although he has largely been forgotten today, he was an influential figure during the 1920s and early '30s and had a profound effect on Ruth Crawford, Henry Cowell and Beyer.⁸⁶

In his essay "Creators and Public: Their Relationship" (1924), Rudhyar establishes a dichotomy between a masculine composer-elite and a feminine mass culture. He accordingly divides musicians into two categories: those who gratify the tastes of the masses—which he labels "artists"—and those who "conquer and impose their wills upon the multiple and female Mind of the Race—the "creators." The music of each group is judged based on its relativity to the feminine qualities of mass culture and the approval of the feminine mob. While the "creators" and "artists" are both composers, Rudhyar argues that only the former are truly creative:

Creators and artists are, therefore, two entirely different types of beings, though outwardly they may use analogical means of expression and ordinarily are not distinguished the ones from the others. Their *aesthetic attitudes*, as also their 'vital attitudes,' are opposite. The creators are

⁸⁴ See Smith, 93-98 and Tick, "Charles Ives and Gender Ideology," 91-96 for a more thorough examination of modernist misogyny in print.

⁸⁵ Tick, "Charles Ives and Gender Ideology," 97.

⁸⁶ Tick traces Rudhyar's influence in several of Crawford's works in her article "Ruth Crawford's 'Spiritual Concept': The Sound-Ideals of an Early American Modernist, 1924-1930," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 44, No. 2 (Summer, 1991): pp. 221-261.

essentially the males of the mental world, whereas the artists incarnate its feminine aspect. They do not so much ‘create’ as ‘express’ the already born tendencies of their age. The first fecundate, the second deliver; they are practitioners; technique is the greatest of their possessions.⁸⁷

Through their association with the feminine, the artist-composers are robbed of their ability to create. They are only “*reflective*,” whereas the true creators are “essentially *positive* or active.” The masses are assigned even less value than the “reflective” artists; they are labeled “negative” or “zero” in opposition to the creators’ “positive” contribution.⁸⁸ This valuation of the masses deems them, like the females whose nature they reflect, unable to create—they can only destroy. Rudhyar then describes his vision of the destructive force of the feminine:

[There is a] spiritual and æsthetical [*sic*] couple constituted by the creators on one side and the public on the other. Male and female they are, and somewhat opposite in their respective points of view. As no divorce is possible in such realms, the end is often tragic. The male commits moral suicide, and becomes an artist. In other words, instead of working positively at the ‘new creation,’ he turns backward and goes on expressing over and over again the ‘old creation.’⁸⁹

In his concluding remarks, he heightens this rhetoric by equating the creator with a “King or High Priest” who “alone is the source and foundation of the Great Work.” These men are the twentieth-century embodiment of the romantic composer-as-god. Rudhyar names the “*Incarnating Souls*. They do not ascend to Art; they descend to Humanity, out of which they have evolved in ages past. Messiahs and Spiritual Teachers give to the world its religions and metaphysics. After them follow the true artistic Creators that give to the world...understanding.” Like spiritual messiahs, this creative

⁸⁷ Dane Rudhyar, “Creators and Public: Their Relationship,” *Musical Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (January 1924): 120.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

demigod is “crucified, then worshipped” by the feminine “assembly of the Faithful, the congregation, the public.”⁹⁰ In Rudhyar’s philosophy the feminine masses are not only confined to the basest aspects of culture, they precipitate the demise and death of the sacred male creator. This type of allegory, in which a rabid feminine mob devastates the elite male order, was common throughout the nineteenth century.⁹¹ In a widely disseminated and influential study on the subject, *The Crowd* (1895), Gustave Le Bon evokes a powerful feminine symbol of destruction to depict the threat the masses pose to the established male order: “Crowds are somewhat like the sphinx of ancient fable: it is necessary to arrive at a solution of the problems offered by their psychology or to resign ourselves to being devoured by them.”⁹²

Rudhyar’s reaction against the masses and mass culture takes on racial overtones in his essay “Dissonant Harmony” (1930), which links jazz to the stereotype of the feminine mob:

Jazz is the typical product of the world-city, of its feverish excitement and personal loneliness, of its confusion of types, styles and moves, of its alcoholic spirit (truly the product of the decay of cultural fruit), of its mad craving for escape from the ugliness and mechanization of the city-life, the mob-life. It is thus the negative and materialistic aspect, the shadow of the spiritual regeneration of earth-man into Mind-man, which takes place in

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 129-130.

⁹¹ The “image of woman served as a receptacle for all kinds of projections, displaced fears and anxieties...brought about by modernization and the new social conflicts...[which] threatened the liberal order.” Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 52. For example, the “red whore” stereotype linked socialist masses and dangerous feminine sexuality. The image was depicted in the arts and popular culture and directed at actual women during political upheavals such as the Spanish civil war and the socialist uprisings in Germany following the First World War. For details on this see: Shirley Mangini, “Memories of Resistance: Women Activists from the Spanish Civil War,” *Signs* 17, no. 1 (Autumn, 1991): 183; and Richard W. McCormick, “From ‘Caligari’ to Dietrich: Sexual, Social, and Cinematic Discourses in Weimar Film,” *Signs* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 644.

⁹² He unequivocally genders the crowd several times in his study: “Crowds are everywhere distinguished by feminine characteristics.” Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd* trans. Bernard Miall (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 59, 62.

the very midst of the age of cultural disintegration, in the city but not *of* the city, or to say truly THROUGH the city. The few strong Souls who accomplish such regeneration ‘save’ a few who answer their call; they lead them to the sacred brotherhoods, real Arks of Noah in whom the spiritual elite of mankind escape the doom of the age of decay, of the Dark Ages, the Winter of the racial cycle. They become thus the *seeds* of what in time will be the next culture. They are the Preservers of life, of the Archetype of the Human Species; that is of Civilization, metaphysical and changeless, the true seed of MAN. Dissonant music is thus seen as being the music of civilization, the music of MAN.⁹³

Here, the mob’s embrace of jazz represents its spiritual downfall. Moreover, jazz is depicted as a symptom of “cultural disintegration” and the “Winter of the racial cycle.” During the early twentieth century, as jazz became increasingly popular and influential (particularly through ragtime and Tin Pan Alley songs), concerns grew about the effect of this “black sound” on the white population. The “xenophobic rhetoric” that emerged in reaction to this perceived menacing threat linked both jazz and black society with “drunkenness,” “fever” and “frenzy.”⁹⁴ While Rudhyar never explicitly makes this connection in his article, his description of the jazz-loving mob’s “feverish excitement,” “alcoholic spirit” and “mad craving” echo popular white reactions against jazz at the time. Moreover, these characteristics overlap with traditional Victorian associations of the feminine with madness and disease.⁹⁵ This conflation of black and feminine

⁹³ Rudhyar, “Dissonant Harmony,” in *Art as the Release of Power: A Series of Seven Essays on the Philosophy of Art* (Carmel, CA: Hamsa Publications, 1930), 17-18.

⁹⁴ Ronald Radano, “Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm,” in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano and Philip Vilas Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 461-463.

⁹⁵ Numerous scholars have examined the cultural links between the feminine and mental disease. See, for example, Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); Yannick Ripa, *Women and Madness: The Incarceration of Women in Nineteenth Century France*, trans. Catherine du Peloux Menagé (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

stereotyped traits strengthens Rudhyar's argument against popular expressions, represented here by jazz, by associating them with two distinct and devalued populations.

In the end, Rudhyar's fixation with the feminine dominates his rhetoric. Again, biblical images portray the male composer as a holy savior, this time in the guise of Noah rescuing his brethren from the "doom" of the feminine floods. The act of artistic creation is vaguely sexualized in the image of the male seed. And while "MAN" can be read as a reference to humanity, Rudhyar's consistent capitalization of the word in this excerpt and throughout the article places special emphasis on the word and reminds us of the absence of a female voice in his writing. To Rudhyar, dissonant music is the expression of civilized culture, and as such is the exclusive realm of white men.

The gendering of both the general public and "low" or popular culture as feminine was common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his assessment of this oppositional conception, literary scholar Andreas Huyssen writes, "the political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities."⁹⁶ Huyssen further notes that the "the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-option, commodification, and the 'wrong' kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture."⁹⁷ He points out that the main problem with

⁹⁶ Huyssen points out that both popular culture and the proletarian masses (especially in terms of bourgeoisie fear of them) were gendered as female. Huyssen, 47.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 53.

this line of thought is not the differentiation between “high” and “low” art, but the “persistent gendering as feminine of that which is devalued.”⁹⁸

Historian Linda Kerber notes that in our culture “authority has traditionally validated itself by its distance from the feminine and what is understood to be effeminate.”⁹⁹ And speaking specifically of music, Catherine Parsons Smith argues that modernist “antiwoman attitudes...effectively suppress[ed] the work of women composers of art music, shutting them out of the modernist movement, or silencing them completely.”¹⁰⁰ She interprets the gendering of modernism as a backlash against the first wave of feminism and the success of women in the American romantic school such as Amy Beach.¹⁰¹ Indeed, even as ultra-modernists such as Rudhyar attacked the supposedly feminine traits of romantic *music*, they upheld the romantic ideal of the composer as a male god. Both masculinity and males were celebrated, while femininity and females were derided.

While this rhetoric was clearly anti-female, it is important to note that it was employed primarily to devalue the work of male composers. Tick points out that for Ives, this meant both American neo-classical composers—particularly the group associated with Aaron Copland and Virgil Thompson, many of whom were gay—and the traditional European “masters.”¹⁰² Rudhyar likewise implicates these neo-classicists in

⁹⁸ Huyssen, 53.

⁹⁹ Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 39.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, 90.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

¹⁰² Tick, “Charles Ives and Gender Ideology,” 87, 99.

his fervent dismissal (through his feminization of) “old” styles, jazz and popular culture—three musical elements associated with that group. And although he never names them, his description of “artists” implicates the same composers. Edgard Varèse expressed his vitriol toward Copland and his colleagues in a letter to Carl Ruggles, in which he posits a gay conspiracy theory in offensive terms: “use your arse as a prick garage—or your mouth as a night lodging and...N[ew] Y[ork] is yours.”¹⁰³ Nadine Hubbs notes that anti-feminine rhetoric often masked attacks against homosexual men. She links such attacks to the tendency during the early twentieth century and beyond to elide females and the feminine with homosexuals and the effeminate. This affiliation often resulted in “gender inversion” in which “the male-deviant body serves as the vessel for a woman’s soul.” Thus, the misogynist expressions of the ultra-modernists could be—and frequently were—simultaneously anti-woman and anti-homosexual.¹⁰⁴

All of this is made more complex by Henry Cowell’s ambiguous sexuality. His four-year imprisonment on charges of sodomy came as a shock to many of his associates. As a result of his incarceration, several colleagues cut off contact with him, most notably (and not surprisingly) his close friend Charles Ives. Yet, it seems that his marriage to Sydney Robertson in 1941 and his official pardon in 1943 helped to mitigate negative consequences for him. At least to the public, these events established him as heterosexual.¹⁰⁵ Ives, in fact, resumed contact with Cowell after he announced his

¹⁰³ Edgard Varèse to Carl Ruggles, November, 1944, Yale MSS, Box I.5, folder 115, quoted in Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity*, 156.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 79-83.

¹⁰⁵ The question of Cowell’s sexuality is a complex one best left unanswered here. I do not intend to over-simplify the matter, only to highlight the issue in relation to his career. In any case, his marriage to Sydney was by all accounts a happy one.

intention to marry. His career advanced as well (although he would never again be at the vanguard of the American music scene) and included government positions, professorships and nine years as the in-house critic for *Musical Quarterly*.¹⁰⁶ Remembering Beyer's (and Ruth Crawford's) much humbler employment we observe that gender, as opposed to sexuality, is a less fluid property. Cowell's career options were seemingly less restricted by his defamed sexual past and ex-convict status than Beyer's were by her sex. Nor did Cowell ever experience the gendering of his music in a negative way, while Beyer and her female contemporaries (as well as many male neo-classicists) confronted a variety of such criticisms.

While Rudhyar never explicitly attacks female or gay composers in misogynistic or anti-homosexual terms in his published writing, these composers are implicitly devalued through their association (either through their sex or chosen musical style) with the consistently denigrated feminine. In his gendered philosophy, femininity is considered either worthless or a dangerous threat to be avoided. Yet, Rudhyar's contact with actual women during the same period in which he wrote these essays does not point to a misogynistic worldview. In fact, it seems that he had a more egalitarian view of women composers than many of his contemporaries. While Charles Seeger initially hesitated to accept Ruth Crawford as a student because she was female, by all accounts Rudhyar judged her music solely on its merit. He encouraged her to apply for the Guggenheim Fellowship in composition, and even his criticisms of her work make no reference to her sex.¹⁰⁷ His anti-feminine rhetoric does not necessarily indicate actual

¹⁰⁶ Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell, Bohemian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 134-149.

¹⁰⁷ Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music*, 110, 127.

antipathy toward women. Rather, it reflects the inheritance of a centuries-old gendered philosophy of aesthetics, which he and his fellow ultra-modernists manipulated to further their personal causes. Although Rudhyar apparently separated his gendered ideologies from his judgment of women composers, as we will see, many of his contemporaries did not.

The Suppression and Struggle of a Female Composer

The music of female composers—from the romanticists at the turn of the century to Beyer and her ultra-modernist colleagues in the 1920s and ‘30s—was more often than not assessed in light of the composer’s sex, rather than on the merit of the music alone. The gendering of musical genres—particularly large symphonic forms as masculine and songs and small chamber works as feminine—resulted in a double bind for the female composer. If she wrote in the small forms she was dismissed as trivial; if she composed in the large forms she was “seeking virility.”¹⁰⁸ A case in point is the criticism leveled at Amy Beach’s *Gaelic Symphonic*, which premiered in 1896. One critic noted that her “efforts to be Gaelic and masculine ends in being monotonous and spasmodic,” and another blamed the weaknesses he found in her orchestration on Beach’s attempt to compensate for her “eminently feminine” nature.¹⁰⁹ In the mind of these critics, not only did Beach mimic, or even ape, a masculine expression—she failed at it because she was a woman.

¹⁰⁸ Tick, “Passed Away is the Piano Girl,” 336-338.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 344.

Beyer also defied these norms and composed in the large forms. She actively promoted her orchestral and operatic works to prominent conductors of the day, but with no results. She sent several symphonic works to Fabian Sevitzy, Leopold Stokowski and Sergei Koussevitzky. She even chided Koussevitzky once on his non-response to both her and Cowell's music, writing, "I have sent you some very fine scores and a few letters, yet there has not been any response from you!"¹¹⁰ It is likely that some or all of these conductors were put off by the audacity of this unknown woman who dared to promote her symphonic music.

While women writing in any style were subject to prejudice based on the assumed inferiority of their sex, female ultra-modernist composers faced the additional problem of modern music's "distinguishing virility."¹¹¹ While Beach ultimately retained her feminine identity in the view of critics, female ultra-modernists like Crawford and Beyer assumed masculine qualities to critics and audiences alike. The premiere of Crawford's Sonata for Violin and Piano prompted one critic to declare it "the most masculine in quality that the afternoon brought forth."¹¹² The audiences at Beyer's Composers' Forum Laboratory Concerts also responded to her music in gendered terms. During the question-and-answer session at her 1936 concert, one observer asked, "Miss Beyer, you seem to have gone your male preceptors one better in search for strange and ineffective tonal combinations. Have you consciously adopted Rudyard Kipling's statement, 'The

¹¹⁰ Beyer to Serge Koussevitzky, November 14, 1939, Serge Koussevitzky Collection.

¹¹¹ The quote, from which Smith drew the title of her article cited here, is from Irving Weill, "The American Scene Changes," *Modern Music* 6, no. 4 (1992).

¹¹² "Music by Six Young Americans is Heard by a Large Audience. Composers' League Has Program for Native Writers with Works for Piano, String, and Voice Given," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 14, 1927, 10, quoted in Tick, "Charles Ives and Gender Ideology," 95.

female of the species is deadlier than the male' as a guiding principle in your composition?"¹¹³ At another Composer's Forum Concert weeks later, an audience member referred to Beyer (who was in attendance) as a composer "who claims to compose mannish but to me, not so Spanish."¹¹⁴ The following year, at Beyer's second Forum concert, audience members drew on the cultural perception of a woman's need for romance to further attack Beyer in terms of her gender. By referring to her compositions as "mere brain children" and inquiring whether she had ever been in love, they called into question her femininity (and underhandedly referred to her unmarried state).¹¹⁵ To audiences immersed in the gendered discourse of modernism in the 1930s, Beyer's dissonant avant-garde music was irreconcilable with her identity as a woman.

While the audiences at the Composers' Forum concerts characterized her compositions as over-intellectual "brain children," Beyer's colleagues took a different stance. Otto Luening recalled that some "viewed her as 'problematic'—unsure whether her compositions were deliberately primitive or lacking in 'technique.'"¹¹⁶ This criticism almost undoubtedly stemmed from the examples of minimalism and economy in her music that are lauded as evidence of her visionary genius today. For example, the fourth movement of her First String Quartet (performed at the 1936 Composers' Forum concert) derives nearly all of its material from a chromatic scale and a major scale. Even more striking is the incessantly repeating pitch played by the second violin, which persists

¹¹³ Composers' Forum Transcripts, May 20, 1936, quoted in de Graaf, "Never Call Us Lady Composers," 294.

¹¹⁴ Composers' Forum Transcripts, June 3, 1936, quoted in *Ibid.*, 295.

¹¹⁵ Composers' Forum Transcripts, May 19, 1937, quoted in *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Kennedy and Polansky, 720.

uninterrupted for almost the entire movement. This type of gesture, a recurring element in Beyer's work, was uncommon, even undesirable, in any style of the time, and certainly in ultra-modernism.

Cowell used the word "primitive"—one of the criticisms leveled at Beyer's music—to describe what he saw as a desirable new trend in music in an article published in *Modern Music* in 1933.¹¹⁷ He described "neo-primitivism" as a reaction "to the over-complexity of the earlier modern music," which by that time had become a concern of many in the New York music scene. He cites an emphasis on melody and rhythm as the defining elements of traditional primitive music. These qualities may be expressed in modern music through complex rhythmic combinations and novel approaches to melody.¹¹⁸ As evidence of this trend he cited several emerging genres and techniques: mass songs, works for percussion ensemble, vocal slides and tone clusters. All of these elements—with the exception of the mass song, which was first in Cowell's list and received the most attention—appear consistently in Beyer's work.

Yet in Luening's remembrance of criticism against her, the term "primitive" has a pejorative connotation. This specific descriptor has ambiguous associations with gender, which may suggest an explanation for these alternate valuations of the primitive. In some contexts, particularly in connection to the masses and mass culture as discussed above, primitivism is characterized as feminine. For example, in his treatise on the crowd, Le Bon directly links the two:

¹¹⁷ Henry Cowell, "Towards Neo-Primitivism," *Modern Music* 10, no. 3 (March-April 1933): 149-153. Cowell makes a point of excluding Stravinsky from this movement because his music is too "highly subliminated."

¹¹⁸ For example, "In the melody there may be a wide range of different sorts of pitch curves as well as straight lines of sound. The tones either wobble [*sic*] back and forth or slide up and down..." Ibid., 152.

Whether the feelings exhibited by a crowd be good or bad, they present the double character of being very simple and exaggerated. On this point, as on so many others, an individual in a crowd resembles primitive beings... The simplicity and exaggeration of the sentiments of crowds have for result that a throng knows neither doubt nor uncertainty. Like women, it goes at once to extremes.¹¹⁹

Thus, woman represents the primitive because she is understood as “simpler” or less evolved than her male counterpart. This connotation is paradoxical with the ultra-modernists’ conception of a male intellectual elite and is quite different from the type of primitivism Cowell had in mind. Instead, Cowell’s essay emphasizes the importance of the “modern, sophisticated, experienced” qualities—all typically gendered as male—of the composer who successfully writes in a neo-primitive style. Moreover, he describes modern music, including neo-primitive music, as “a highly organized, evolved and sophisticated art.”¹²⁰ In contrast, as applied to Beyer’s music, the “primitive” descriptor seems linked to her supposed lack “of technique.” It thus takes on a negative quality that implies its association with an inferior, under-evolved femininity as opposed to a civilized and intelligent masculinity.

This interpretation of the criticism leveled at Beyer’s music strongly implicates gender ideologies as a culprit in negative reactions to her work. Does this mean that we can accept Catherine Parsons Smith’s interpretation of this rhetoric as “effectively suppressing the work of women as composers of art music, shutting them out of the modernist movement, or silencing them completely?”¹²¹ The very existence of the ultra-modernist music by women such as Johanna Beyer, Ruth Crawford and Jessie Baetz

¹¹⁹ Le Bon, 70.

¹²⁰ Cowell, “Towards Neo-Primitivism,” 150.

¹²¹ Smith, 90.

argues against this.¹²² While misogyny manifested as discrimination and criticism certainly impeded the successful dissemination and fair evaluation of their work, it did not by any means silence them completely. Rather, these women embraced ultra-modernist techniques as a means of personal expression and creativity. When asked during her 1936 Composers' Forum whether Beyer found it "difficult to attain an authoritatively individual style" using these techniques, she answered "I think it is highly individual."¹²³ Recent scholarship has rejected the notion of modernism as devoid of a feminine voice through an examination of the work of women authors and composers. By interpreting their creations as a challenge to patriarchal norms, these scholars argue that modernism was in fact conducive to feminist goals and values.¹²⁴ As Melissa de Graaf writes, "In the musical world of the 1920s and '30s, the ideas of modernism as a reaction against feminism and modernism as a venue for feminist thought are not mutually exclusive."¹²⁵

This study leaves the search for feminine meaning in Beyer's music to future scholars and instead concludes with an assessment of the role of gendered rhetoric and sexual prejudice in obscuring her work during and after her lifetime.¹²⁶ Scholars have posited a variety of explanations for the icy reception of Beyer's music by her colleagues

¹²² Jessie Baetz studied with Beyer and her music was featured in a Composers' Forum Laboratory Concert in 1937. See de Graaf, "Never Call Us Lady Composers," 290-291, 296 and 307 n. 38 for more information.

¹²³ Composers' Forum Transcripts, May 20, 1936.

¹²⁴ The most notable musicological work in this vein is: Ellie Hisama, *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹²⁵ de Graaf, "Never Call Us Lady Composers," 290.

¹²⁶ De Graaf noted one interesting possibility for this type of analysis in the first movement of Beyer's piano suite *Dissonant Counterpoint*. See "Intersections of Gender and Modernism in the Music of Johanna Beyer," 4.

(evidenced primarily in her lack of performance opportunities), including the timing of her shift away from ultra-modernism several years after her colleagues, the perceived awkwardness of her personality and her nationality. We might suggest that another reason lies in the references to European traditions in her music, a past that her contemporaries reacted against. Yet none of these explanations is completely satisfactory. Like Beyer, her fellow ultra-modernist Carl Ruggles continued to compose in an ultra-modern style into the 1940s, and he was celebrated with honoraries and festivals at the University of Vermont, Brandeis University and Bowden College. And while Beyer's late stylistic changes were drastically different from those of her contemporaries, Ruth Crawford was part of a large movement to revive American folk music and her contribution was, like Beyer's, written out of history for decades. In both of these instances, it was the music by females that was obscured, regardless of other factors.

Likewise, while Beyer's personality may have been a liability, the problems it caused were likely exacerbated because of her gender. Again, the romantic image of the composer as a near-deity is implicated. Eccentricity, solitude and moodiness were often considered signs of genius in male artists during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These same qualities when exhibited by women were perceived as signs of instability, madness and disease. Several statements by those who wrote references for Beyer's Guggenheim Fellowship application are telling in this regard. Alvin Johnson, director of the New School for Social Research, wrote "both Miss Beyer and her project are a little mad." Cowell expressed concerns that her personality flaws would interfere

with her plan for the fellowship, writing “whether she is steady enough to carry out such a huge and difficult (although interesting) project one cannot say...”¹²⁷

The committee rejected Beyer’s application, determining that “at age fifty she doesn’t appear to be a good risk as a composer.” In a field that prizes precociousness as an indication of true creative genius, her continued studies past the age of forty almost certainly soiled her reputation as a composer with some. Indeed, a number of factors beyond gender combined to thwart Beyer’s chance at success as a composer. Propaganda fueled prejudice against Germany and Germans between and during the World Wars. American composers were eager to demonstrate their patriotism. In the midst of this nationalistic (and even jingoistic) atmosphere, Beyer’s background was easily recognizable. Although her English was strong, letters contain syntactical errors, and she spoke with an accent. An undated letter written to Cowell indicates that she faced open prejudice because of this:

Tell them that some of my forefathers fought in the Civil war of America, some are English stock and that I have alive native close Irish-English relatives walking around in Washington to-day. My own father lived for a number of years in France and England, his going back to Germany was merely accidental! Why do I mention this now? Perhaps because you brought out the 100% American once too often. Those percentages make me laugh!¹²⁸

Her poverty was also a factor, barring her access to the wealthy sector of society that often supports the arts. It is notable that the majority of successful American women composers in the preceding decades came from upper and middle class backgrounds.

¹²⁷ While Cowell expressed reservations about Beyer’s character, he also praised her ability as a composer: “she has the greatest natural talent, and the least steadiness of temperament... Her whimsy and originality really amount to genius.” Beyer’s Guggenheim Fellowship file, quoted in Beal, 13.

¹²⁸ Beyer to Cowell, undated, Box 2, Folder 5, HCC.

As a middle-aged unmarried poor female immigrant, Beyer faced a remarkable amount of opposition as a composer. With no one to effectively champion her works, no access to a decent job and no sympathetic understanding from Cowell, the composer she admired the most, Beyer's life in New York was a difficult one. Her sex, nationality and age were liabilities, any one of which might easily have induced her to abandon her aspirations as a composer. Yet against all odds, she continued to create until just months before her death. As she said to the audience of her 1937 Composers' Forum concert, "I write music because I love to write music. I have to! It is an inner urge. It is a necessity."¹²⁹ Beyer was convinced that she possessed the spark of creative genius, and nothing cowed her into believing otherwise. While during her lifetime others could not separate her music from the gendered ideologies of modernism and artistic expression, she knew its worth went far beyond the narrow understanding that greeted it at the time.

¹²⁹ Composers' Forum Transcripts, May 19, 1937.

Chapter 3 Ultra-Modern Works, 1932-1938

It is difficult to summarize the music of Johanna Beyer in just a few words. Critics and scholars have described it as experimental, raw, witty, whimsical, and prophetic. She composed some of the most radical and innovative works written during the 1930s, several of which anticipate future trends in composition. While she frequently utilized experimental techniques proposed by her contemporaries in her ultra-modern music, she developed her own distinctive gestures and procedures that distinguished her music from that of her colleagues. She was passionate about the cause of new music, but did not share the disdain of her fellow ultra-modernists for European tonal traditions. Rather, she drew on her German roots and traditional European training for inspiration throughout her career. During the final years of her life, the classical influence replaced ultra-modernism as the defining element in her work. As a result, her final compositions are in many ways drastically different from her earlier music. Yet certain persistent traits subtly link these two seemingly opposite groups of music to one another.

In this chapter and the next, I examine selected works that demonstrate Beyer's stylistic breadth and the threads of continuity that run through her oeuvre. These threads—which comprise the defining and personal characteristics of Beyer's compositional voice—include, most prominently, a dedication to balance, economy and experimentation. My discussion progresses in a roughly chronological order. This chapter deals primarily with the ultra-modernist works, from the clarinet suites of 1932 through *Music of the Spheres* in 1938. I discuss how the ideas and music of other ultra-modernists, in particular Ruth Crawford, Charles Seeger, Henry Cowell and Dane

Rudhyar, had a profound influence on Beyer's own work. I also explore the ways in which her compositional choices diverged from the visions of her teachers and colleagues.

Theory and Practice: Dissonant Counterpoint and *Clarinet Suite I*

The majority of Beyer's earliest compositions are exemplary of "dissonant counterpoint," a theoretical compositional system developed by Charles Seeger and most famously articulated in the music of Ruth Crawford. Seeger outlined his methodology for dissonant counterpoint in his treatise "Tradition and Experiment in (the New) Music," which is a valuable reference in the following discussion of Beyer's dissonant music.¹³⁰ Seeger completed the majority of the book—with the input and assistance of Crawford—during the summer of 1930, although he continued to edit it for many years. He dedicated the book "To Ruth Crawford of whose studies these pages are a record and without whose inspiration and collaboration they would not have been written."¹³¹ As a record of Crawford's studies with Seeger, "Tradition and Experiment" provides valuable insight into Beyer's training with the couple and an intellectual framework for her earliest compositions. While Seeger was the theorist behind the method, it was Crawford who brought the ideas of the treatise to fruition in her music. Her music clearly influenced Beyer—especially the four *Diaphonic Suites* (1930), *String Quartet* (1931) and *Piano*

¹³⁰ It was not published until 1994, long after their deaths. Charles Seeger, "Tradition and Experiment in (the New) Music" in *Studies in Musicology: 1929-1979*, ed. Ann M. Pescatello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Henry Cowell also wrote about dissonant counterpoint in his compositional treatise. His discussion of the system is brief and far less technical than Seeger's. See *New Musical Resources* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 35-42.

¹³¹ Crawford's contribution to the book was significant enough that the possibility of co-authorship was briefly raised but just as quickly abandoned. Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press), 131-132.

Study in Mixed Accents (1930)—and it provides an additional reference in our study of the latter’s music.

While the method of dissonant counterpoint outlined in “Tradition and Experiment” is not serial, Seeger discourages repetition of a pitch “until at least six progressions have been made,” and likewise stresses the importance of varying the type of intervals between melodic notes.¹³² The crux of Seeger’s method is the creation of “a dissonant foundation into which consonance is introduced,” so that dissonance takes the place of consonance as the norm.¹³³ He applied the concept of dissonance not only to pitch, but also to rhythm, timbre and dynamics. This type of projection—in which a characteristic traditionally associated with pitch is applied to other musical elements—is a recurring theme in Seeger’s treatise and the music of Beyer, Crawford and Henry Cowell.¹³⁴

Both Crawford and Beyer composed suites for solo and pairs of wind and string instruments that are quintessential examples of dissonant counterpoint style.¹³⁵ In “Tradition and Experiment,” Seeger specifically recommends this instrumentation as a starting point for dissonant composition.¹³⁶ Two of Beyer’s earliest surviving works are a pair of virtuosic clarinet suites written in 1932, which she clearly wrote while working

¹³² Seeger, 172-175.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³⁴ Seeger writes, “...if we accept the conclusion that the present chaos in the overorganized [*sic*] pitch resource may be compensated for by an increased organization of some of the other resources, we have one possible and not entirely undesirable alternative.” For example, the treatise includes a chart demonstrating how contour (or the shape of a melody) may be applied to each of six musical elements: pitch, dynamics, timbre, tempo, accent and proportion. Seeger, 90, 139. Cowell also addresses this in *New Musical Resources*, especially in regards to rhythm, as the discussion below demonstrates.

¹³⁵ These are: Crawford’s *Diaphonic Suites* (for flute or oboe, bassoon and cello, oboe and cello) and Beyer’s clarinet suites and *Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon*.

with one or both of the Seegers. My discussion of *Clarinet Suite I* demonstrates the wide variety of experimental techniques that Beyer explored in this and other works in dissonant counterpoint, including the *Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon*, the piano suites *Dissonant Counterpoint* and *Gebrauchs-Musik*, and the *Quintet for Woodwinds*. I also identify characteristic elements that are found throughout Beyer's repertoire, regardless of chronology or style.

One such defining characteristic is Beyer's commitment to balance, which is easily identifiable in the clarinet suite's first movement. The movement is a musical palindrome—its second half is an exact retrograde of the first. This results in a perfectly balanced form in which the two halves mirror one another. Two of Crawford's most important works, *Piano Study in Mixed Accents* (1930) and the final movement of her *String Quartet* (1931), are palindromes that almost certainly influenced Beyer's use of the form. As in *Piano Study*, the first movement of Beyer's clarinet suite contains a series of notes at midpoint that are not part of the palindromic schema. In both instances, these non-conforming notes act as what I will call a structural "keystone," a feature that exists in nearly every palindrome Beyer composed. In this movement, the two-measure keystone is composed of six notes that span measures 74 through 76. This keystone is shown with the surrounding material of the palindrome in example 3.1.

Each line of staff in this example contains a specific and varied number of measures. This is a hallmark of the dissonant counterpoint style known as "verse-form," which is based on the structure of irregular poetry. In this form, small melodic units are equated with words or syllables. The succession of these musical "words" comprises a

¹³⁶ He writes, "Small suites for the single woodwind instruments make a nice vehicle for early efforts in dissonant writing." Seeger, 195.

Example 3.1. *Suite for Clarinet I*, movement I, measures 68-82.

68 *p* *stringendo*

72 *ppp* *ppp* *rallentando molto*

77 *ppp* *ppp*

79 *p* *rallentando*

musical “verse” (or a line of staff), which in turn comprises a musical stanza (the entire piece or movement). Crawford arranged her first and fourth *Diaphonic Suites* (1930) in such a way and Seeger briefly discusses the form in “Tradition and Experiment.”¹³⁷ The first two movements of Beyer’s *Dissonant Counterpoint* and *Percussion Suite* are also in verse-form. Seeger notes that within this format “a repeated tone, a characteristic interval, some particular neume or rhythmic figure, a distinctive slurring or dotting, can recur at symmetrical intervals at the beginning, middle, or ending of each phrase.”¹³⁸ Beyer uses just such a recurring gesture, or rhyme, in the first movement of this suite. See the two-note motive (B-flat and B) at the end of each line in example 3.2. Beyer

¹³⁷ See Joseph Nathan Strauss, *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 53-57 for a discussion of Crawford’s use of verse-form.

¹³⁸ Seeger, 196.

frequently emphasizes one or two notes throughout a work, thus creating a tonal center or anchor while avoiding traditional harmonic movement.

Example 3.2. *Suite for Clarinet I*, movement I, measures 1-19.

Presto ♩ = 132

f *sfz*
sempre non legato

mp

mf *sfz sfz*

This movement also demonstrates what we might describe as a germinal approach to melody, in which all melodic material in a work proceeds from one or a few brief ideas. In this case, Beyer retains the melody established in the second line and inserts an increasing number of notes in each successive line, using the variable length of lines in verse-form to great advantage. After the musical verses have nearly tripled in length, she reverses the process, gradually subtracting notes so that the lines shrink to their original size. Marguerite Boland, an Australian composer and theorist, describes this as “a process of cumulation-reduction” that occurs frequently in Beyer’s music. The

“cumulation” corresponds to the addition of melodic notes and the “reduction” to the subtraction of notes. As we will see, this process applies to elements in Beyer’s music other than pitch, such as rhythm, tempo, dynamics and instrumentation.¹³⁹ I take the liberty of borrowing Boland’s convenient terms throughout the following discussion as they apply to various works.

The third movement of *Clarinet Suite I* exemplifies another important aspect of Beyer’s melodic construction: contour. Seeger emphasized the importance of contour throughout “Tradition and Experiment,” and most notably in his conception of the “neume.” He appropriated the term from medieval plainchant notation and used it to denote what he considered the “smallest melodic unit”: three notes. He characterized neumes by the “progressions” (or intervals) between their pitches, thereby placing more value on their contour than on their pitch content. He identifies neumes that proceed in ascending or descending lines as “line” neumes and those that change direction after two notes as “twist” neumes.¹⁴⁰

Beyer’s handwritten note on the third movement of the First Clarinet Suite refers to a process Seeger mentions only briefly: neume “transformation,” in which “any neume can be transformed into any other neume.”¹⁴¹ The note reads: “modulation from skippy + twist neume (large interval) to steppy + line neume (small interval)” and “contrast between staccato and legato climax falling down.”¹⁴² The movement progresses just as

¹³⁹ Boland, “Experimentation and Process in the Music of Johanna Beyer,” *Viva Voce*, no. 76 (2007): 2-4.

¹⁴⁰ Seeger, 138-141.

¹⁴¹ Seeger, 149.

¹⁴² Kirsten Reese was the first to note this connection in “Ruelos: Annäherung an Johanna Magdalena Beyer,” *MusicTexte: Zeitschrift für Neue Music*, no. 81-82 (December 1999): 6-15.

described, beginning with large leaps articulated by *staccato* markings and gradually progressing to a long *legato* line at the end of the movement. The opening angular melody changes direction nearly every note (twist neumes), while the final line is an extended linear descent from the upper to lower register of the instrument (line neumes). Example 3.3 shows the opening and closing lines of this movement, which demonstrate this metamorphosis. Beyer carefully controls the rate of this “neumatic transformation,” which essentially transforms the melodic contour, from one line to the next.

Example 3.3. *Suite for Clarinet I*, movement III, measures 1-16 and 53-69.

Moderato (♩=120)

The musical score is presented in four staves. The first two staves (measures 1-16) show the opening line. The first staff begins with a *p* dynamic and a *staccato* marking. It features a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a quarter note, and then a quintuplet of eighth notes. The second staff continues with a *f* dynamic, a *pp* dynamic, and a *mf* dynamic. It includes a triplet of eighth notes, a quintuplet of eighth notes, and a sextuplet of eighth notes. The last two staves (measures 53-69) show the closing line. The third staff begins with a *crescendo* marking and a triplet of eighth notes. The fourth staff continues with a *sfz* dynamic, a *crescendo* marking, and a *ff* dynamic. It includes a sextuplet of eighth notes, a triplet of eighth notes, and a *longa sfz* marking.

A final outstanding technique in our discussion of the clarinet suites is that of “tempo melody.” Boland first identified its application in the fourth movement of each clarinet suite. Both Charles Seeger and Henry Cowell discussed this device in writing

but neither employed it in a composition.¹⁴³ In Beyer's use of the technique, the final measure of each line (or verse) determines the tempo of the following line. Beyer uses the marking "m =" (suggested by Seeger) to denote the tempo changes as seen in example 3.4. This indicates that the last measure of each line is equal in duration to the first measure of the next line. Thus, if the determining measure contains three eighth notes and the contingent measure contains two eighth notes (as in the first two lines shown in example 3.4) the tempo slows at the rate of 3:2. This ratio expressed in terms of pitch is a perfect fifth. This "mapping," as Boland calls it, of temporal ratios onto intervallic ratios creates the tempo melody. These movements are some of the earliest examples of a pitch-based approach to rhythmic processes. The use of mathematical ratios as a temporal and structural device was not fully explored again until the late 40s and beyond by composers such as Elliot Carter (with his "temporal modulations") and Conlon Nancarrow (in his music for player piano).¹⁴⁴ While the clarinet suites are the only works by Beyer to utilize this device, they are a remarkable example of her commitment to experimentation.

The clarinet suites demonstrate Beyer's ability to compose lyrical and animated music within the context of highly experimental and systematic techniques. She internalized the dissonant counterpoint method and used it as a means for the expression of her own ideas. The organization of these works, as a suite, is one that Beyer used

¹⁴³ Seeger, 118; Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources*, 104-108.

¹⁴⁴ Boland, "Tempo Melodies in the Johanna Beyer Clarinet Suites (Fourth Movement)," (2007-2008) at: http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/beyerjpegs/beyer_tempo_melodies_boland_polansky.pdf. Excerpts from this article are included in the liner notes to *Sticky Melodies*, 10-13. See these sources for a more detailed explanation of tempo melody and metric modulation in the clarinet suites.

throughout her life. This easily adaptable form comprised of short movements is perfectly suited to her succinct, economic musical style.

Example 3.4. *Suite for Clarinet I*, movement IV measures 1- 25.

The musical score for Example 3.4 is presented in three staves. The first staff begins with the tempo marking "Rallentando (♩ = 132)" and the dynamic marking "ppp". It contains measures 1 through 13. The second staff starts at measure 14 and also begins with "ppp". It contains measures 14 through 20. The third staff starts at measure 21 and begins with the dynamic marking "p". It contains measures 21 through 25. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings, with some measures marked "m =".

An Ultra-Modernist or a Minimalist? The First String Quartet

While the clarinet suites are essentially undiluted examples of dissonant counterpoint, the First String Quartet (begun only a year later and completed in 1934) is an individualized response to the system, which at times breaks its rules entirely. It is an important work that communicates Beyer's distinctive compositional voice and anticipates the Second String Quartet. I will focus on the fourth and final "Presto" movement, which is most remarkable for its use of sliding tones and repetition.

Although this movement is still clearly influenced by dissonant counterpoint (as are the quartet's first three movements) Beyer's use of the method is cavalier in this

instance. She completely disregards Seeger's stipulations about pitch and intervallic repetition and limits the lower three voices to a minute amount of musical material. This "economy of means" is one of the most recognizable characteristics of Beyer's style. The beginning of this movement is shown in example 3.5. The first ten measures contain only two notes—E and F—between which all four voices oscillate via *glissandi*. The voices rejoin on these same pitches in the final twelve measures of the movement. The viola and cello play *glissandi* throughout the movement. The pitch content of their "arrival" notes (or those notated in the score, the outer limits of the pitch slides) is limited; the cello plays a C on every other downbeat, sliding up to the notes of an ascending chromatic scale. The viola also continuously returns to C—two octaves higher than the cello and every fourth measure—and slides up to the notes of an ascending C major scale. The two lower voices continue these patterns throughout, which, combined with the use of mutes, create an eerie sonority and focus the listener's attention on timbre and texture. The first violin begins in a manner similar to that of the cello, although in a descending motion. Around measure 45, it breaks free of its monotonous pattern to begin a dissonant melody that accrues rhythmic and articulated variety as it unfolds. While these repeated patterns demonstrate Beyer's dedication to economy, it is the second violin that generates comparisons to minimalism. With the exception of the opening and closing sections, the second violin plays an E-flat₆ on the downbeat of every measure. This remarkable gesture stands alone in the ultra-modernist literature and anticipates a movement that did not exist until more than three decades after Beyer's death. Similar, if less pervasive, examples of minimalism are present in several other works of hers, up to and including those written at the end of her life.

Example 3.5. String Quartet No. 1, movement IV, "Presto," measures 1 – 29.

Presto ♩ = 144
con sordini

5 10

VI.1
Sempre ppp
con sordini

VI.2
Sempre ppp
con sordini

Va.
Sempre ppp
con sordini

Vc.
Sempre ppp

15 20

25

The implications of the term “minimalism” as a descriptor of Beyer’s work have yet to be examined in detail. In reference to this connection, this “Presto” movement has been called “prophetic” and “astonishing.”¹⁴⁵ While such labels are deserved, if we fail to examine Beyer’s remarkable innovation in the context of both her own aesthetic milieu and that of the minimalist one projected onto her, we fail to grasp the true implications of this work. I will briefly attempt such an explanation in hopes of providing a clearer understanding of this fascinating aspect of her music.

Beyer completed her string quartet in 1934; not until the 1960s did the minimalist movement emerge in the visual arts and music in New York. Musically, minimalism is embodied most famously in the work of La Monte Young, Steve Reich, Terry Riley and Philip Glass. Simply put, it is characterized by an “intentionally simplified” musical language, which is frequently expressed through static harmonies, constantly repeating patterns and square rhythms and melodies. It is often understood as a reaction against the complexities of modernism. A quote from Keith Potter’s New Grove article on the subject is illuminating. He writes, “[Minimalism] is tonal or modal where Modernism is atonal, rhythmically regular and continuous where Modernism is aperiodic and fragmented, structurally and texturally simple where Modernism is complex.”¹⁴⁶

Although this description of minimalism is brief and admittedly over-simplified, it raises several issues that must be addressed if we are to label any of Beyer’s music as minimalist. First and most obvious is the chronological gap between her life and the

¹⁴⁵ Alex Ross, “Interrogations,” The Alex Ross: The Rest is Noise Blog, entry posted May 22, 2008, <http://www.therestisnoise.com/2008/05/johanna-beyer.html>, (accessed February 13, 2009). Ross calls the movement “a prophecy of minimalist and post-minimalist music of the seventies and eighties.” Larry Polanksy’s liner notes to the album *Sticky Melodies* describe it as “nothing short of astonishing.”

¹⁴⁶ Keith Potter, “Minimalism,” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40603> (accessed February 14, 2009).

inception of the minimalist aesthetic. It almost need not be said that the complete obscurity of her music until the late 1970s precludes interpreting it as influential on any of these composers during the pioneering stage of minimalism. Furthermore, simplicity and diatonicism are upheld as the defining elements in much of minimalist music. Many seemingly clear examples of the style in Beyer's work are embedded in an intricate and dissonant framework.

However, we can attempt to reconcile this incongruity by drawing on Potter's comparison of modernism and minimalism quoted above. With only a few word substitutions, this quote could accurately describe the contrast between Beyer's early ultra-modern works and the last tonal pieces. In light of her eventual rejection of ultra-modernism in favor of a simpler idiom, Beyer's use of minimalism within a dissonant framework could be interpreted as an early reaction to the complexities of her own avant-garde music, which culminated in her late tonal works.

Yet Beyer continued to compose in an ultra-modernist idiom for years after she wrote the first string quartet. While many of her contemporaries became uneasy with what they began to view as modernism's decadent complexity in light of the country's economic situation, it does not seem that she shared this sentiment. Rather, she continued to refine her use of dissonance and experimentation in an attempt to create music that retained its connection to ultra-modernism yet could be understood by a wider audience. Perhaps, then, the examples of minimalism in her work are the musical manifestations of a composer searching for a clear and simple voice within a complex and dissonant idiom. Unfortunately, the world was not quite ready for Beyer's music. The minimalist streak in her music and her colleagues' accusations that her work was

“problematic” and “deliberately primitive” seem clearly connected.¹⁴⁷ It is ironic that the characteristics that draw such acclaim today were perhaps the cause of scorn during her lifetime.

Using Old and New Resources: *Movement for Two Pianos*

My discussion of *Movement for Two Pianos* (1936) reinforces several aspects of Beyer’s style already mentioned and demonstrates Henry Cowell’s influence on her music. In his treatise, *New Musical Resources*, Cowell describes a variety of experimental techniques including the above-mentioned “tempo melody.” He studied with Seeger at the University of California, Berkeley in the 1910s, and many ideas in *Resources* are the direct result of Seeger’s instruction and influence.¹⁴⁸ *Resources*, however, is much less a compositional manual than Seeger’s book “Tradition and Experiment.” It is rather a collection of ideas and techniques, any one of which can be extracted as a singular element without regard to the remainder of the book’s contents. Beyer was thus able to choose various elements from the book and apply them in her work in a personal and unique manner, as she did in *Movement for Two Pianos*, *Clarinet Suite I* and many other works.

Cowell’s reputation today rests primarily on his development of extended piano techniques, including his famous tone-clusters, which are played on the piano with the fists, wrists or forearms. Beyer dedicated *Movement for Two Pianos* to him because, as she wrote in the program notes of her 1936 Composers’ Forum Laboratory Concert, “it

¹⁴⁷ Kennedy and Polansky, “Total Eclipse,” 720.

¹⁴⁸ Cowell devoted an entire chapter of the book to dissonant counterpoint—surprisingly without any acknowledgement of Seeger. Both men’s treatises also speak in detail about the harmonic series and its ratios as an organizational framework for harmony, melody and rhythm.

brings in its development tone-clusters, which he originated, as you all know.” Cowell’s performances of his “cluster compositions” for piano caused a sensation in New York a decade earlier. No less a composer than Béla Bartók requested his permission to employ the device in his own music. Indeed one of the most striking aspects of Beyer’s *Movement for Two Pianos* is its gradually thickening texture, which culminates in a series of large cluster-chords at the midpoint. Her description of this work suggests a conversation between the two pianos: “Each piano part has its own independent, individual theme, even themes, yet together they strive to make a whole and succeed, just because of their individual independence. One stresses more the tonal element, the other the rhythmic.”¹⁴⁹ It is paradoxically the more “tonal” and lyrical voice of Piano I that first introduces the large tone-clusters, which are then adopted by Piano II.

Further evidence of Cowell’s influence in this piece lies in the presence of polyrhythms. This device involves the simultaneous combination of two or more independent rhythms. Cowell discusses polyrhythms at length in *New Musical Resources*, going so far as to develop a new system of notation, with differently shaped note heads (e.g. triangles and squares) to represent more complex divisions of the whole note, such as by five or seven. Many of his proposed rhythmic combinations are too complex to be played by humans, which led him to commission Léon Theremin to build an electronic instrument that could, the Rhythmicon. Cowell wrote a concerto for the instrument in 1931 and named a solo piano work of 1938 *Rhythmicana*, apparently basing its title on the instrument’s name. This work, written during Cowell’s prison term in San Quentin, is dedicated to Beyer and is strikingly similar to *Movement for Two Pianos*. The first movement of *Rhythmicana* in particular recalls Beyer’s piece, which was

¹⁴⁹ Composers’ Forum Transcripts, May 20, 1936.

written two years earlier. The arch-shaped repeated pattern and uneven melodies in the left hand correspond to the second piano's material in *Movement*, while the more melodic right-hand line is consistent with that of the first piano.

Example 3.6 shows the most common polyrhythm in *Movement*—seven against three. Rhythmic combinations such as this are an integral part of Beyer's music. She placed such importance on their proper execution that she composed several exercises in cross-rhythms for her instructional *Piano-Book*.¹⁵⁰ Nearly all of her ultra-modern piano and chamber works include complex rhythmic combinations. Moreover, Beyer continued to incorporate polyrhythms into her later, neo-classical works, up to and including her last surviving work.

Marguerite Boland describes the larger form of this piece as an example of Beyer's "cumulation-reduction" process.¹⁵¹ As with our previous example of this compositional device (movement I of the First Clarinet Suite), Beyer adds then subtracts notes, this time harmonically rather than melodically. This results in a gradually thickening texture throughout the first half and a gradually thinning texture at the end of the movement. However, an extended section in the middle of the piece, which features the cluster chord, is not a part of this process. The large tone-clusters in this section contrast with the preceding and following material and lack melodic or structural definition. *Movement* is thus not in the two-part form that naturally results from the cumulation-reduction process. Instead, it is in three parts: the "accumulation," the amorphous middle section and the "reduction." Examining the middle section more

¹⁵⁰ This is a collection of beginning and intermediate piano pieces, which Beyer undoubtedly used with her own students.

¹⁵¹ Boland, "Experimentation and Process in the Music of Johanna Beyer," 1-3.

Example 3.6. *Movement for Two Pianos*, measures 11-14.

Example 3.6. *Movement for Two Pianos*, measures 11-14. The score is in 3/4 time. The top system shows the right hand with a melody and the left hand with a bass line, both marked *pp*. The second system continues the bass line with a *cresc. poco a poco* instruction. The third system shows the right hand with a melody and the left hand with a bass line, both marked *pp*. The bass line in the third system is marked with *7* and *8vb*.

Example 3.7. *Movement for Two Pianos*, measures 85-90.

Example 3.7. *Movement for Two Pianos*, measures 85-90. The score is in 3/4 time. The top system shows the right hand with a melody and the left hand with a bass line, both marked *f*. The second system continues the bass line with a *f* instruction. The bass line in the second system is marked with *3* and *f*.

closely, we see that the only melodic theme of the piece—first played at measure 11 by Piano I in the left hand—returns in a distorted and fragmented form following the cluster chords at measure 85. Examples 3.6 and 3.7 compare the first statement of the theme and its reappearance in the middle section. The theme is still placed in the left-hand part of Piano I, but the notes are three times as long, so that the original quarter notes become dotted half notes.

The modification of thematic material and Beyer's reference to this section as a "development" in her program notes indicate that this work might be in sonata form, or some approximation thereof. While the opening theme returns following the developmental section, the lack of a second theme and any tonal references may call this interpretation into question. However, the vague resemblance and the arch-like form created by the cumulation-reduction process demonstrate Beyer's preference for balanced structures, an affinity she shared with the eighteenth-century classicists. Several other works demonstrate that Beyer looked to earlier traditions for inspiration even as she composed some of her most experimental works. Both the First and Second String Quartets utilize the four-movement, fast-slow-moderate-fast structure that dominated the classical era. Beyer also named one work "sonata"—Sonata for Clarinet and Piano (1936)—which is also in this four-movement classical layout. The first movement of this work is a clearly defined sonata form, which Beyer described in the program of her 1937 Composers' Forum Laboratory Concert: "The first movement is fast, has two themes, contains a short period of organic development and recapitulation."¹⁵² The type of classically inspired form that *Movement for Two Pianos* shares with these works

¹⁵² Composers' Forum Transcripts, May 19, 1937.

reappears throughout Beyer's oeuvre, as do the polyrhythms and clusters chords featured in the duet. As we will see, she utilized all three of these elements throughout her career, in both ultra-modern and neo-classical works.

Innovation, Balance and Mysticism: *Music of the Spheres*

A large part of Beyer's legacy is tied to the work *Music of the Spheres*, which she wrote in 1938 and conceived as part of her unfinished opera, *Status Quo*. As far as is known, it is the first piece for electronic instruments by a female composer, and its historic recording in 1977 helped spark the revival of her music. Although Beyer allows for the work to be played by "three electrical instruments or strings," the composition is idiomatically electronic; its extreme pitch slides and continually changing dynamics and tempi would be difficult to play accurately on stringed instruments. Beyer heard a Theremin played at Cowell's house long before she composed this piece and it seems likely that she envisioned the work for this or a similar instrument.¹⁵³ Her inclusion of the triangle looks ahead to future innovations in the combination of electronic and acoustic instruments.

Beyer dictates in the manuscript that "all pitches are to be taken glissando as subtle [*sic*] as possible." The *glissandi*, or pitch slides, are a defining feature of this work and the sonic interest they generate contributes in no small way to its appeal. Not inconsequentially, Cowell's best-known composition (and usually the only work of his taught in twentieth-century music classes), *The Banshee* (1925), also features continuous pitch slides. This device is traditionally considered ornamental or expressive, but Beyer

¹⁵³ Beyer to Grainger, May 21, 1938, Percy Grainger Archives. Beyer writes, "I heard her [Mrs. Rosen] play the Theremin instrument years ago at Henry's."

and Cowell did not employ the slide simply for effect. Instead, as we will see, they used it as a unifying and structural element. They also transferred the concept of the slide to musical elements other than pitch, such as rhythm and dynamics. Cowell describes in *New Musical Resources* how the slide may be applied to these elements. He writes “Crescendo and diminuendo in dynamics is the same in many ways as sliding tone in pitch; and undoubtedly a definite relation could be found between a certain curve of pitch, and a similar curve [of volume].” Likewise, “considered in terms of tone, accelerated or diminished tempo would, of course, represent a sliding tone going upwards or downwards in the scale.”¹⁵⁴ A chapter of his unpublished book on melody, which Beyer edited and tried to see published, further addressed the slide and its notation and various classifications.¹⁵⁵

In *Music of the Spheres*, the instruments play an extended *crescendo/accelerando* to the midpoint, followed by a *decrescendo/rallentando* of the same length. The various musical elements of pitch, tempo and dynamics are thereby united by the ubiquitous slide. Beyer indicates a tempo of 52 quarter notes per minute and the dynamic *ppp* at the starting point which “gradually increase[es in] speed and dynamics” until measure 54. At this point the dynamic marking is *mf* and the tempo is four times faster than that of the opening, so that a whole note now occurs 52 times every minute. These values remain stable for a brief (and rapid) seven measures whereupon the process is reversed by Beyer’s direction: “gradually decreasing speed and dynamics back to the starting point.”

¹⁵⁴ Cowell, *New Musical Resources*, 81, 94.

¹⁵⁵ Nancy Yunhwa Rao, “Cowell’s Sliding Tone and the American Ultramodernist Tradition,” *American Music* 23, No. 3 (Autumn, 2005): 281-323. I am indebted to this article for its description of Cowell’s book *The Nature of Melody*, which I have not yet seen, and for calling to my attention his use of the slide as a structural element in works such as *A Composition for Piano and Ensemble* (1925) and *Quartet* (1935).

The piece thus ends at the same tempo and dynamic level at which it began, creating a structural arch. Example 3.8 shows the first page of this manuscript.

Beyer augments the arch formed by the dynamic and temporal slides with a pitch-based palindrome articulated in the two highest voices. After a six-bar opening section (which is part of the arch, but not of the palindrome), the palindrome unfolds from measure 7 through measure 106. Typical of Beyer's use of the form, a brief section at the exact center of the palindrome is not part of the schema. This six-measure keystone coincides exactly with the establishment of a stable speed and volume and is thus the center of both the palindrome and larger arch form. It should be noted that this piece is not a "perfect" arch. Beyer thwarts the symmetry by restating the opening theme of the top voices following the "completion" of the arch. This sort of discrepancy—in which she establishes a rigid interlocking structure and then defies her own parameters—is common in her work.

Examining the pitch content more closely, we find another example of Beyer limiting herself to a small amount of material. The lowest of the three voices does not participate in the palindrome but rather plays the same two alternating pitches—F and E—for the duration. The pitch content of the brief introduction, keystone, and ending is also restricted almost completely to the same two notes. The central theme placed contrapuntally in each of the top voices begins on F and E as well.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, this main theme (F, E, G, G#, B, C, Bb, A) is composed entirely of paired notes a half step apart, thus taking most of its intervallic material from the ubiquitous F and E. This is an extreme example of Beyer's economic use of musical resources in which nearly all of the

¹⁵⁶ This same pitch combination provides the foundation for the final movement of the First String Quartet (see above), and is prominent many other works, including the first movement of *Gebrauchs-Musik*.

Example 3.8 *Music of the Spheres*, first manuscript page.

15 min. "Music of the Spheres"
LENTO - MODERATO - LENTO

J.M. PENER
July 1928

I
II
Triangle

♩ = 52 starting point gradually increasing speed and dynamics

5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100

gradually decreasing speed and dynamics back to starting point

x all intervals are to be taken glissando as subtle as possible

pitch material derives from a single diad. Aside from the theme spelled out above, the only additional pitch in the piece is an E-flat, which replaces E just four times. Given the sparse amount of material she allows herself, Beyer creates a remarkable soundscape of dissonance and variety. Out of a simple concept, the arch, and a simple progression of pitches, music emerges that is at once elegant and strange.

The musical material of the triangle is also austere. It plays the same rhythm—a quarter note followed by a dotted half note—each time it enters. However, a closer examination of the position of its first three entrances possibly reveals a more complex pattern. These entrances occur at measures 5, 13 and 21: each a number of the Fibonacci series, skipping 8. The second voice enters at the neglected measure 8, adding further weight to this theory. Yet just as this pattern seems clear, it disintegrates; the triangle’s next entrance is at measure 29, far from the next number in the series, 34. Furthermore, the triangle’s first four entrances are simply spaced eight bars apart from one another. There is no other clear evidence of this series in *Music of the Spheres*. I mention it because a statement of Beyer’s has specific bearing on a retrospective numerical analysis such as this. In the program notes for her 1936 Composers’ Forum concert, her description of an excerpt from a piano suite describes her discovery of “dynamic symmetry” in the piece, as described by Ralph Pearson in his 1928 book, *How to See Modern Pictures*. Apparently she believed the piece’s formal construction was novel until she read this book. In response, she returned to the piece and analyzed it on Pearson’s terms “just for fun.” Her notes on this revelation end with a quote from Goethe’s *Faust*, “Du glaubst zu schieben und du wirst geschoben”: “You believe you

push, and you are pushed along.”¹⁵⁷ Her attitude towards this episode is one of amusement (note the word “fun”), as if she were solving a puzzle she unknowingly posed to herself.¹⁵⁸

The presence of a naturally occurring pattern in Beyer’s work should not be surprising: images of nature appear regularly in her song texts (those of her own and those by others). Moreover, the “music of the spheres” is a concept with Pythagorean origins that links the relationships between the planets to the natural proportions of musical intervals. Plato described it as music produced by sirens and never noticed by humans. Later philosophers connected this “cosmic harmony” to all manner of natural phenomena including the behavior of man.¹⁵⁹ Hindemith’s 1957 opera *Die Harmonie der Welt*, based on the life of the mathematician and astrologer Johannes Kepler, was inspired by this concept of cosmic harmony (as was Kepler). Cowell and Seeger both discuss the overtone series—a pattern strongly associated with the “music of the spheres”—at length in their compositional treatises.

Dane Rudhyar regarded this ancient idea of harmony as the ideal basis for modern compositional forms. His essay “The New Sense of Space” (1930) argues that for a form to be “esthetic and therefore meaningful in itself” as an absolute entity, it must be

¹⁵⁷ Composers’ Forum Transcripts, May 20, 1936.

¹⁵⁸ I point out the Fibonacci numbers in *Music of the Spheres* not to force an explanation of Beyer’s compositional process into a rigid theoretical construct, but to suggest the possible presence of yet undiscovered patterns in her work. Furthermore, based on her own statements, I believe that if Beyer was unconscious of this particular pattern, brief as it is, she would have been open to—and even interested in—an analysis of the work on its terms.

¹⁵⁹ James Haar, “Music of the Spheres,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/19447> (accessed February 13, 2009).

“organized according to the laws of nature and mathematics.”¹⁶⁰ He points to Pythagoras as the first champion of this natural organization, whose ideas were dismissed and distorted for centuries, only to reemerge (Rudhyar hopes) in modern American music.¹⁶¹ He quotes Jay Hambidge, an artist who also called for the revival of ancient concepts of organization in his system of dynamic symmetry: “Dynamic symmetry in nature is the type of orderly arrangement of members of an organism such as we find in a shell or the adjustment of leaves of a plant. It is the symmetry of man.”¹⁶² The proportion found in these examples (of the leaf and the shell) is that of the golden ratio, which is closely related to the Fibonacci series. According to Rudhyar, composers should strive to create unified and symmetrical forms, which can be transcribed from “the cosmic rays filling the very air through which we live and move.” He notes that it was “of such cosmic subtones [that] the Pythagorean gamut was really composed.”¹⁶³ Rudhyar wrote this essay roughly around the time Beyer studied with him. By the time she composed *Music of the Spheres*, he had turned his attention from music to astrology (perhaps spurred on by his study of cosmic harmony), a field in which he became a major figure. The parallels between “The New Sense of Space” and *Music of the Spheres* are numerous and compelling. While Beyer’s consistent use of symmetrical design throughout her works is highly individualized, its presence in this instance seems clearly linked to Rudhyar’s ideas on the matter.

¹⁶⁰ Dane Rudhyar, “The New Sense of Space,” 2.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁶² Jay Hambidge, *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry* (1926), quoted in Ibid., 14.

¹⁶³ Rudhyar, “The New Sense of Space,” 29.

A text that appears to be from *Status Quo* (the unfinished opera for which Beyer wrote *Music of the Spheres*) correlates to another essay by Rudhyar, “Dissonant Harmony.” This text is among Beyer’s letters in the Percy Grainger Archives and is labeled simply “Voice: (Announcer).” Both the text and Rudhyar’s essay trumpet the ideal of “universal brotherhood.”¹⁶⁴ The *Status Quo* announcer asserts:

Although this or that system of music from other countries is unfamiliar to us, we must be tolerant and interested, as we are in the lives of these different peoples, and then we will experience, that these strange sounds have a certain beauty...

In the last act, just before having another glimpse of eternity, people from all these countries will unite in a dance. Tolerance and cooperation will be the motives. The music to this dance is an attempt to unite features of different music systems to a rather substantial harmonious whole. And with this accomplished we will join the spheres once more.¹⁶⁵

A passage from “Dissonant Harmony” is especially reminiscent of the finale of *Status Quo* as depicted in this text. Rudhyar quotes of the English author and poet John Ruskin’s description of universal brotherhood: “the souls that are unlike and the nations that are unlike being bound into one noble whole.” Note the parallel to Beyer’s “attempt to unite” different national musical systems in a “harmonious whole.” Rudhyar goes on in his essay to equate musical consonance to human familial relations and dissonance to relations between culturally diverse tribes or states. Just as a universal brotherhood is

¹⁶⁴ Rudhyar’s philosophy of universal brotherhood was closely tied to his association with the spiritual movement theosophy, which originated in the late nineteenth century with the ideas of Helena Blavatsky. Many ideas of the New-Age movement are rooted in this spiritual philosophy. Theosophy was especially influential in California in the 1920s; Cowell was involved with it there. Judith Tick traces the movement’s and Rudhyar’s influence on the music of Ruth Crawford in her biography and the article “Ruth Crawford’s ‘Spiritual Concept’: The Sound-Ideals of an Early American Modernist, 1924-1930,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 44, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 221-261. There is no evidence that Beyer was directly involved in this movement, but considering her close contact with each of these people and the ideas paralleled in her music, she must have at least been familiar with its concepts. The concepts of both theosophy and the music of the spheres are similar to the aesthetic philosophy of Skryabin, a major influence on Rudhyar.

¹⁶⁵ Percy Grainger Archives, undated document.

composed of “people who are different,” so is dissonant music composed of “free, independent” tones.¹⁶⁶ Beyer’s final dance encompasses all elements of this line of thinking. It is the joining of different states and people enacted literally onstage in dance and figuratively in dissonant music.

The themes of universal brotherhood and the power of nature over humanity also appear in several of Beyer’s song texts. In the song *Have Faith!* for soprano and flute, tolerance and acceptance are extolled as the means toward achieving a universal brotherhood. The final lines read: “...we must try to understand and love and help each other. Have faith, have faith in things to come.” The dissonant setting of this text corresponds with Rudhyar’s analogy between dissonance and brotherhood. The opening lines of “Total Eclipse” from *Three Songs for Soprano and Clarinet* recall Rudhyar’s ideas on the relationship between nature and humanity in “Dissonant Harmony.” He writes that as an artist submits to natural forms “then there is no longer any opposition between universal Laws and the freedom of the expressive will.”¹⁶⁷ In other words, the composer can simultaneously control and be controlled by the laws of nature as she creates. Or as Beyer writes in “Total Eclipse”: “Moving of masses, Stirred by astro-phenomena, Directing matter, Their slave, yet their master, Still to be.”

In 1939 Beyer sent a description of her plans for *Status Quo* along with her curriculum vitae to Serge Koussevitzky in hopes of securing his referral for a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her plan for the fellowship was “to spend a year in the effort to

¹⁶⁶ Rudhyar, “Dissonant Harmony,” 4-11.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

create an opera that will be modern in theme and musical form.” Further in the document she continues:

From the above [layout of acts] it will be noted, that there is an attempt to handle the ideas and interests in our present world. Furthermore it will be seen, that I am adopting a musical form, quite new, and which, in combination with various forms of pantomimes, dances, as well as speech, exclamations, songs, would seem to express our modern life. By this technic [*sic*] I shall also be able to recall various historical music systems and give them their significant placing in the evolution of our social life.¹⁶⁸

Each of the four acts to which Beyer refers features a location: the United States, “The Kremlin,” Rome-Berlin and Geneva. It is the people of these nations that unite in dance and music during the opera’s finale. These locations were of no small significance in November 1939, just two months after Nazi Germany invaded Poland and three months after Hitler and Stalin signed the Treaty of Non-Aggression. Beyer’s idea of unity between these countries on the brink of war may be interpreted as naïve, but it is just as easily labeled as radical. It was certainly not a vision shared by the majority of her contemporaries, who were instead concerned with patriotic or proletarian expressions. Compared to the mass songs and folk music embraced by her fellow ultra-modernists, Beyer’s approach to societal issues was highly abstract. Instead of rejecting ultra-modernism as too convoluted to be meaningful, in *Music of the Spheres* she molded it into a simple and balanced expression that reflected the ideals of unity and cooperation. While Beyer’s colleagues utilized tonal idioms to express their political and societal

¹⁶⁸ Johanna Beyer, “Work Plan,” November 14, 1938, Serge Koussevitzky Archives. The manuscript of *Music of the Spheres* indicates that in addition to pantomime, dance and speech, Beyer planned to use a projection screen as a backdrop. This multi-disciplinary approach recalls the description of her play, *The Modern Composer*, performed in November of 1936 at the Central Manhattan Music Center under the auspices of the Federal Music Project, for which the composer acted as writer, choreographer, composer, set and costume designer and director.

beliefs, her later tonal music makes no reference to these issues. Instead, Beyer made her boldest statements about society and culture as an ultra-modernist.

Chapter 4 Continuity and Change

Johanna Beyer's first and last existing works are for solo piano. As a talented performer and piano teacher, Beyer was perhaps most at home composing for this instrument. The piano works are extremely varied and range from virtuosic to introspective expressions in both dissonant and tonal idioms. Because this body of music follows the entire trajectory of her compositional career, it provides a convenient framework for my discussion of the evolution of Beyer's compositional style. The presence of tonality and classically formed phrases in a few of the earliest surviving piano works links them to the latest, most conservative compositions. The piano music written between 1934 and 1936 exemplifies Beyer's ultra-modern style and includes two suites in dissonant counterpoint style. I discuss key characteristics in this music that also persist in later works. 1939 was a transitional year in which the composer created both tonal and ultra-modern music. I examine the transformation that occurred this year through an analysis of several contrasting works, including pieces for percussion ensemble and a tonal piano suite. The remainder of the chapter addresses the works written after 1940 and establishes a connection to earlier dissonant compositions.

Music for Piano 1931-1936

When an audience member at her 1937 Composers' Forum concert inquired, "Would Miss Beyer, with her qualifications, be able to compose something in the style of Haydn?" she answered "I guess so! In fact, I have!" Another attendee asked if she "believe[d] in key signature." Beyer responded, "Yes! I have written music within the

key but just now I am out of it!”¹⁶⁹ When asked, in 1936, to name a modern composer she admired, she declined, instead citing Bach as an influence. She said, “I like Bach. I am influenced by Bach. Bach is my morning prayer and Bach is my evening prayer.”¹⁷⁰

These statements demonstrate several important points about Beyer’s compositional style and her attitude toward it. First, she composed tonal music long before she wrote her late neo-classical works, as we will see in the section that follows. Secondly, she seemed to view her compositional style as continually changing and flexible. Her casual attitude towards being either “in” or “out” of tonality indicates that she did not consider this to be a matter of permanent artistic identity. Finally, her reference to Bach indicates that she looked to the past (specifically that of European traditions) for inspiration even as she wrote her most radical and dissonant works. As years passed, her proclivity to refer to and integrate this past in her own music grew stronger. The fact that her neo-classical work is more similar to classical music of the eighteenth century than contemporary neo-classicism further attests to Beyer’s embrace of traditions long past.

Some of Beyer’s earliest surviving tonal music is part of *Piano-Book*, a collection of pedagogical pieces for beginning and intermediate students. The book—undated, but certainly written before 1935—features works in diverse styles.¹⁷¹ In a description of the book, Beyer wrote, “I have used all the idioms I know exist and are possible: classicism,

¹⁶⁹ Composers’ Forum Transcripts, May 19, 1937.

¹⁷⁰ Composers’ Forum Laboratory Transcripts, May 20, 1936.

¹⁷¹ Beyer described the book in the letter cited below, which is dated February 1935. Only one work from this collection—*Bees*—has yet been published.

romanticism and modernism.”¹⁷² The classical style is represented more heavily than any other in *Piano-Book* by six short binary pieces (labeled by their tempi, including Lento, Allegretto and Andantino) and two Minuet and Trios. These brief pieces are simple and diatonic, and feature balanced, four-measure phrases. The Minuet and Trios modulate to traditional key areas; one proceeds from the tonic to the relative minor, the other to the subdominant. The romantic selections, such as “See-Saw” and “Little Leaves,” are in the style of character pieces. The modern pieces include a series of exercises in cross-rhythms, a piece featuring cluster chords (“Lento”) and a study of dissonant tremolos and trills (*Bees*).

Beyer had a great deal of teaching experience, and undoubtedly used this book with her own students.¹⁷³ Her inclusion of so much “classical” music indicates the value she placed on traditional styles. She obviously believed that traditional European music was an essential part of her students’ education. The variety of idioms in the method book encapsulates the breadth of resources she employed over the span of her career and demonstrates the ease with which she shifted between disparate compositional styles. It also supports the premise that Beyer viewed her identity as a composer as fluid and changeable. While her commitment to the cause of new music was strong, she was not averse to composing in a variety of styles at once. This is evident not only in *Piano-Book*, but also in the diversity of her output during the final years of the 1930s, as discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁷² Beyer to Cowell, February 12, 1935, Box 2, Folder 1, HCC.

¹⁷³ She wrote of the book: “All the years of teaching and never finding the right books and looking over the dozens of books at Schirmers with their few good things here and there, but never together, have helped.” Beyer to Cowell, February 12, 1935, Box 2, Folder 1, HCC.

Like the classical pieces of *Piano-Book*, the theme of Beyer’s first surviving work—“Waltz” (1931) for solo piano, later—is diatonic and comprised of even four-bar phrases.¹⁷⁴ Although much of the material surrounding it is dissonant, the tonal theme, shown in example 4.1, repeats unchanged throughout and dominates the piece. This brief work is rhythmically straightforward and its texture is homophonic, which suggests that it was written before Beyer studied with the Seegers. Its balanced tonal theme anticipates the melodies of later neo-classical works while the surrounding chromatic material foreshadows her plunge into dissonant counterpoint the following year.

Example 4.1. “Waltz,” measures 10-17.

The program notes for Beyer’s 1936 Composers’ Forum Laboratory Concert state that Doris Humphrey danced to this piece in 1930 and 1931.¹⁷⁵ Dance was an important component of Beyer’s work; it was an integral part of her lost play, *The Modern*

¹⁷⁴ Beyer played this and several movements from *Dissonant Counterpoint* on her 1936 Composers’ Forum Laboratory Concert under the title “Excerpts from Two Piano Suites.” She does not clearly identify these pieces in the program, and in addition to combining two separate works, the excerpts are not in the same order as the manuscripts of the two suites. However, from her descriptions, several of these pieces can be identified with near certainty, including this one. Beyer’s description for excerpt number 6, which she refers to as “Waltz,” (“After an introduction of 9 measures the theme enters and stays on the scene almost unchanged, only its environment changes.”) clearly points to this movement.

¹⁷⁵ Various sources are in conflict on the exact date of this piece. This program indicates it must have been written by 1930, while the manuscript is dated 1931. Because the manuscript is clearly dated in Beyer’s hand in several places, I refer to it. Program Notes, Composer’s Forum Program, May 20, 1936.

Composer, and of the plans for her unfinished opera, *Status Quo*. She collaborated with several dancers in New York and her enthusiasm for the art is apparent in several letters.¹⁷⁶ The dancer of “Waltz,” Doris Humphrey, was a dynamic force in the New York modernist scene and remains highly regarded for her innovative techniques and choreography. She choreographed the music of several figures in Beyer’s circle—including Wallingford Riegger, Dane Rudhyar and Henry Cowell—as well as that of other prominent composers, among them Aaron Copland, Roy Harris and Paul Hindemith.

In 1936, Beyer subsumed “Waltz” and “3 N.Y. Waltzes” (also written in 1936) under the title *Clusters*.¹⁷⁷ It is not known if the additional pieces were also meant to be dances. However, their content suggests that they were composed as a continuum of the musical ideas in the original piece. While the additional pieces are more dissonant than the first “Waltz,” the concept, texture, style and themes of the individual movements unite the suite. Like the original piece (which became the first movement in *Clusters*), the new pieces are improvisatory in nature, homophonic, brief and in no definite form. Most importantly, each is a musical satire of the waltz.¹⁷⁸ The first movement includes gestures associated with the dance but its shifting tempi and sustained dissonant chords create a high level of rhythmic instability. The parody is heightened in the additional

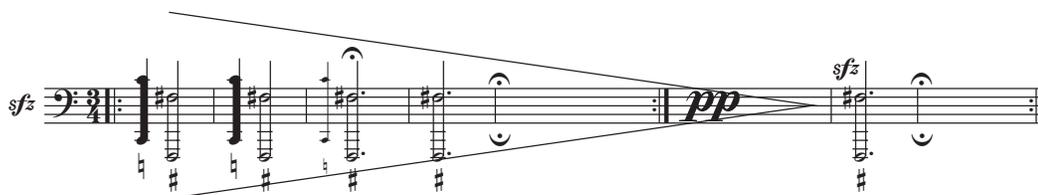
¹⁷⁶ Several letters to Cowell mention an upcoming Martha Graham recital and include her subsequent description of it. After Cowell apparently (and for unknown reasons) denied her request that he escort her to the recital, she wrote, “A true lover of art does not shy away from lonely back-row seats. Therefore, I still look forward to seeing and hearing [Martha Graham] and others.” She briefly described the performance in a subsequent letter and wrote that she “was boundless happy to be able to see Martha Graham once more.” Beyer to Cowell, January 17, 1940, Box 2, Folder 1, HCC; Beyer to Cowell January 21, 1940, Box 2, Folder 1, HCC.

¹⁷⁷ The title page of this manuscript reads: “Clusters; This is same as ‘3 N.Y. Waltzes’ and an additional ‘Waltz’ (1931).”

¹⁷⁸ Beyer’s description of this piece in the Composers’ Forum transcripts reads: “‘Waltz,’ I call it rather satirically.”

movements, through syncopation and complexity in the second and fourth, and an irregular meter (seven) in the last. The final movement seems to be modeled on the original “Waltz,” further uniting the suite. While the finale’s theme is not tonal, its shape approximates that of the original theme and its rapid passagework in the upper registers of the keyboard recalls comparable gestures in the first movement. Beyer similarly recycled the opening themes of the Second String Quartet and the Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in the final movement of each work.

Example 4.2. *Clusters, Starting Motive.*



The movements of the suite are also united by a cluster motive, which is “to be played between each piece and also at the end.”¹⁷⁹ This “starting” motive, shown in example 4.2, is comprised of two-octave clusters in the lower register of the piano. This rumbling motive fits perfectly nestled between what are perhaps the most bombastic pieces Beyer ever wrote. *Clusters* celebrates the modern finesse required to play large and rapid cluster chords.¹⁸⁰ One of these chords (in the second movement) spans the

¹⁷⁹ Beyer’s note, added to the 1931 manuscript.

¹⁸⁰ Despite their seeming intent to display the skills of the performer, it is unclear whether Beyer played all of the pieces from *Clusters* in public. In addition to the first movement, she seems to have played the third for her 1937 Composers’ Forum concert. Again, she labeled a group of pieces “Excerpts from Piano Suites,” and part of its description indicates this movement: “Throughout, the tone ‘F’ is reiterated. Around it, tones are grouped singly, becoming more substantial; chord clusters part again...”

entire keyboard, requiring the performer to play a *glissando* tone cluster with both forearms and then cross the left arm over to complete the chord—a true act of ultra-modern virtuosity.

The joining of the first, tonal movement of *Clusters* to the following, ultra-modern movements demonstrates Beyer’s willingness to incorporate elements from disparate styles within the same work. Later in this chapter, we will observe a similar synthesis of modern and traditional techniques in the late keyboard works, in which tonality and classicism dominate and ultra-modern elements are subdued. While ultra-modernism is clearly the predominant influence in *Clusters*, the suite is not in dissonant counterpoint style. Its homophonic texture, repetition of pitches, inclusion of a tonal theme and improvisatory nature all demonstrate that by 1936, Beyer no longer used the Seegers’ method as a framework for her compositions. Instead she incorporated certain ideas from dissonant counterpoint into a more personalized, eclectic style, which in this case drew inspiration from music composed prior to her exposure to the method.

Clearly, *Clusters* differs drastically from the two piano suites written in the mid 1930s—*Dissonant Counterpoint* (undated, but presumably written between 1933 and 1936) and *Gebrauchs-Musik* (1934)—when Beyer’s use of dissonant counterpoint was more rigid.¹⁸¹ These two collections share characteristics with several compositions written in that style such as the clarinet suites of 1932, the Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon

¹⁸¹ The title *Gebrauchs-Musik* is a reference to *Gebrauchsmusik*, a concept that originated in Germany in the 1920s and was familiar to musicians in the United States by the 1930s. Often translated as “utility music,” the term generally refers to music that is used in everyday life. It is usually presented as the antithesis to autonomous concert music, especially that of the complex and supposedly inaccessible avant-garde variety. Because of the conflicting spelling and the music’s difficulty and complexity, the true meaning of Beyer’s title for this piano suite is difficult to determine. John McCaughey, the composer and conductor of the Astra Music Society, posited that the title may be ironic or a play on words. Another possibility is that Beyer conceived the work as a “learning piece” that would familiarize amateur or professional pianists with the language of dissonant counterpoint.

(1933) and the First String Quartet (1934). For instance, the first two movements of *Dissonant Counterpoint* are in verse-form and strict two-part counterpoint, like the clarinet suites and the Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon.¹⁸² The eighth movement of the same suite is a palindrome with Beyer's characteristic "keystone" at the center (interestingly comprised of three full bars of rests), which recalls the first movement of *Clarinet Suite I*. Various pieces throughout the two suites evince a free approach to dissonant counterpoint, a certain improvisatory playfulness, and an economic use of means (qualities also present in the First String Quartet). The lyricism, attention to dynamic details and rhythmic complexity of these suites are also present in the other dissonant counterpoint works. Yet Beyer's pianistic writing is seemingly more personal and the mood of individual movements is frequently subdued and introspective.

The composer's liberal treatment of dissonant counterpoint is especially evident in *Dissonant Counterpoint*. Take for example the suite's third movement, which begins with large, dissonant chords that break apart into contrapuntal lines. This movement seems to be the fourth piece of the Composers' Forum excerpts, which Beyer describes as "a group of chords, confronted by a group of dissonant counterpoint. The chords are going through a process of being looked at from different angles, analyzed to the point of becoming dissonant counterpoint."¹⁸³ The sixth movement of this suite begins with a chorale (Beyer wrote the word "religion" on the manuscript of this movement) that undergoes a similar transformation from a chordal texture to a contrapuntal one.

¹⁸² The second movement of this suite may also be the second part of the "Excerpts from Two Piano Suites" on the 1936 Composers' Forum Concert. The description ("Two-part dissonant counterpoint with chord-passages thrown in") seems to fit this movement better than any other.

¹⁸³ Beyer, program notes, Composers' Forum Transcripts, May 20, 1936.

This manipulation of dissonant counterpoint is creative and new. Yet by the time Beyer wrote *Clusters* in 1936, she had taken the system's possibilities to further extremes. The contrast between these suites is striking. *Dissonant Counterpoint* and *Gebrauchs-Musik* feature thin textures, refined polyphony and a sense of introspection and thoughtfulness. *Clusters*, on the other hand, is dense, uninhibited and virtuosic. Moreover, the later work dispenses with many of the complexities of dissonant counterpoint in favor of a more direct expression.

Transition, 1939

The change that occurred between the dissonant counterpoint suites of 1934 and the less systematic *Clusters* two years later is observable in other genres. The Second String Quartet, Suite for Violin and Piano and the last four choral works all demonstrate a relaxed approach to the system of dissonant counterpoint. Beyer's idiomatic choral writing is especially recognizable for its clarity, antiphony, open spacing and use of *glissandi*.¹⁸⁴ These works simultaneously incorporate ultra-modern and simple, tonal gestures. Although they are dissonant, they contain scalar passages and frequently suggest a particular tonality, as in the incessant D minor ostinato in the piano part of *The Composers' Forum-Laboratory* (1937). Beyer's chamber works from the same time include traditional elements within a melodic and harmonic framework that remains highly angular and dissonant. The Suite for Violin (1937) constantly re-articulates the note G and even periodically suggests the key of G minor. The Sonata for Clarinet and Piano (1936), mentioned in the preceding chapter, takes a classical form as the model of

¹⁸⁴ The choral pieces referred to here are: *The Federal Music Project* (1936), *The Main-Deep*, *The People, Yes*, *The Composers' Forum-Laboratory* (1937). Beyer wrote the final three for a choral contest Committee sponsored by the Federal Music Project.

its first movement. The Second String Quartet (1936) repeatedly quotes a classical, tonal theme (Papageno's second aria in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*) in its otherwise dissonant first and final movements.

The changes vaguely foreshadowed in these works are suddenly realized in the piano and orchestral works written after 1938. Beyer composed her last essentially ultra-modern works during 1939; following that year she wrote exclusively tonal and neo-classical music. Her surviving correspondence from this year indicates that she was extremely busy working for Cowell, who was still in prison. Her tone in these letters is cheerful and she never mentions her disease, although this was the year of its onset. It seems that either her symptoms were mild or did not appear until the following year. The illness certainly did not prohibit a flurry of activity, compositional and otherwise, during 1939: Beyer composed four works for percussion ensemble, a set of pieces for oboe and piano, a suite for solo piano and two orchestral works that year. These works are impossible to categorize under a single style descriptor. The piano and orchestral pieces are tonal and neo-classical, while the works for percussion ensemble are essentially ultra-modern.

Six Pieces for Oboe and Piano combines both tonal and ultra-modern styles and is thus a microcosm of the disparities of Beyer's work in 1939. The first three pieces of this set are straightforward, tonal and occasionally minimalist. In contrast, the final three pieces are dissonant and rhythmically complex; they are characteristically ultra-modern. The manuscripts of this work indicate that the first and last three pieces were composed

at different times.¹⁸⁵ Considering the tonal language of the other works written this year, we might conclude that Beyer composed the ultra-modern movements four through six at an earlier date and added the first three movements years later, as she did with *Clusters*. Regardless of the chronological order of their composition, the final sequence of the movements, which results in a progression from simplicity to complexity, represents Beyer's compositional evolution in reverse. If she did compose the ultra-modern portion of *Six Pieces for Oboe and Piano* at an earlier date, the works of 1939 as a whole would be stylistically consistent, with the exception of those for unpitched percussion ensemble.

These percussion works are ultra-modernist in their use of characteristic techniques—including polyrhythms, palindromic forms and Beyer's cumulation-reduction process—and their novel instrumentation. Prior to 1939, Beyer composed only two pieces for the genre, a three-movement suite in 1933 and *IV* in 1935.¹⁸⁶ The sudden increase in output during this late year is only partially explained. It is not clear what compelled her to write all four works, but the impetus for at least one was most likely a rare performance opportunity. She dedicated *Three Movements for Percussion* to John Cage, who performed two of its movements on his tours of percussion music in the

¹⁸⁵ Of the four bound manuscripts of this work, two are titled "Three Pieces for Oboe and Piano." These contain the first three movements of the six-part work. There is no date for "Three Pieces"; the full collection is dated 1939.

¹⁸⁶ She composed the first of these pieces, *Percussion Suite*, two years before attending Cowell's percussion class alongside John Cage at the New School for Social Research. *IV* seems to have been written as a requirement of Cowell's class. In an undated letter, Beyer wrote "...I started a percussion movement...Now while working at it, a number of questions and different ideas popped in, but I went ahead. Whether it is, what you mean it to be, I do not know. You must tell me when I show it to you; I don't mind at all to do it all over again. I kept it short and rather simple: 8 times 8 measures, numbering the different instruments 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 so it can be played on different ones." Beyer to Cowell, Box 2. Folder 5, HCC. The non-specific instrumentation and numbering system corresponds exactly to *IV*. Additionally, Cage's *Quartet*, also written in 1935, also leaves the instrumentation unspecified.

Northwest with Lou Harrison, “Drums Along the Pacific.”¹⁸⁷ None of the other pieces contains a dedication or was performed during her lifetime as far as is known. Whatever the motivation for these works, they are among the most interesting early compositions for the genre. Defining qualities of Beyer’s work—including balanced forms, structural slides applied to elements other than pitch, humor and minimalist gestures—are all on display and used to marvelous effect in these overlooked works.

Three Movements for Percussion contains several of these qualities. Its first movement, “Restless,” is a palindrome that unfolds measure by measure as opposed to note by note. Like the eighth movement of *Dissonant Counterpoint*, the keystone of this movement is comprised of three measures of silence. The second movement of this work, “Endless,” is a clear example of minimalism. It is a purposefully tedious woodblock solo—comprised almost entirely of continuous quarter notes—sparsely accompanied by the subdued sounds of a cymbal, Lion’s-Roar and bass drum. Beyer ensures the joke is driven home with a repeat and coda at the end of the movement. The final movement, “Tactless,” likewise is a humorous rendition of its title, full of complex polyrhythms and startling loud moments.

Like the percussion suite and *Clusters*, two other percussion works dating from 1939—*March for 30 Percussion Instruments* and *Waltz*—are ironic representations of their titles. Polyrhythms dominate *Waltz*, thwarting its traditional meter of three, and the meter of *March* is an irregular 4 ½. Larry Polansky described *March for 30 Percussion Instruments* as “among the most gorgeous orchestrations for percussion ensemble ever

¹⁸⁷ An historic recording from Lou Harrison’s personal collection of one of these performances, which includes these movements (“Endless” and “Tactless”), may be heard online here: http://www.archive.org/details/OTG_1971_03_10.

composed.”¹⁸⁸ These pieces are certainly some of Beyer’s most intriguing and beautiful works and deserve a place in the canon of percussion music.

Beyer composed *Symphonic Movement I* and *Suite for Piano* (not to be confused with the collection of piano pieces labeled “Piano Suites” on her Composers’ Forum program) within months of the percussion works of 1939 and probably worked on at least some of these pieces simultaneously.¹⁸⁹ The neo-classical harmonic and melodic language of the piano and orchestral works seems incongruous with the non-pitched percussion pieces. Yet the piano suite retains many characteristics of Beyer’s earlier style (including some present in the percussion works), specifically the brevity of the movements, economic use of resources, and use of polyrhythms and cluster chords. This three-movement work is dedicated to Cowell. The relationship between the two had yet to deteriorate, and the work’s tone is introspective and bittersweet, perhaps reflecting Beyer’s hope for a reunion.

The first movement of the suite is in C major, with a contrasting “B” section in the relative minor. The themes of both sections (shown in example 4.3) are comprised of two-bar units and are rhythmically and melodically repetitive. The square rhythms and repeated notes in the left-hand part, particularly in the “B” section, suggest minimalism. The harmonic progressions throughout this movement are extremely simple and almost exclusively composed of the dominant and tonic chords, although subtle intricacies and unexpected dissonances occur occasionally. The return of the opening material after the contrasting middle section, which occurs in every movement of Beyer’s late piano music,

¹⁸⁸ Kennedy and Polansky, 726.

¹⁸⁹ The compositions of 1939 that Beyer dated by month, in chronological order, are: *Six Pieces for Oboe and Clarinet* (June), *March for 30 Percussion Instruments* (July), *Symphonic Movement I* (July), *Percussion Opus 14* (August), *Suite for Piano* (November), *Waltz* (December).

Example 4.3. *Suite for Piano*, movement I, measures 5-10 and 37-44.

The image displays two excerpts of a piano score. The first excerpt, measures 5-10, is in 4/4 time and marked *a tempo*. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth-note patterns and slurs, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment of chords and eighth notes. The second excerpt, measures 37-44, is in 6/8 time and marked *p*. The right hand consists of sustained chords with some melodic movement, and the left hand plays a simple eighth-note accompaniment that ends with a double bar line and repeat sign.

demonstrates that the composer's dedication to balance and symmetry remains intact in the final works.

The suite's second movement is a study in the polyrhythm three against four, which continues almost uninterrupted for its entirety. The slow tempo and minor mode of this "legato espressivo" movement are in contrast to the buoyancy and energy of the first movement. The second movement's F minor tonality (the minor subdominant) is an unusual relationship to the tonic by strict classical standards and perhaps a subtle musical joke. Beyer modulates quite suddenly to A minor in the last three bars, as if she had forgotten to do so previously. The movement thus ends in the relative minor of the tonic, a more expected key within these parameters. As in the first movement, after a contrasting middle section (during which the polyrhythm is briefly replaced by even rhythms) the opening theme of movement II returns in the final measures.

miniature tone clusters are almost unrecognizable as reductions of the crashing, grandiose forearm clusters in Beyer's earlier works. In contrast, the effect of the clusters in *Suite for Piano* is delicate and bell-like, especially as they enter the upper half of the keyboard.

Example 4.5. *Suite for Piano*, movement III, measures 108-117.

The Final Years

Beyer's compositional output decreased drastically in 1940 and through the final years of her life as the effects of her terminal disease worsened. The tone of her correspondence to Cowell during these last years is alternately hopeful and despairing. As late as December of 1940 she wrote, "Things will grow better by and by I am sure. Just now I am beginning to feel real happy about my physical condition. Despite the nasty weather, I could walk perfectly normal downstairs, no pain whatsoever!"¹⁹⁰ But

¹⁹⁰ Beyer to Cowell, December 5, 1940, Box 2, Folder 2, HCC.

only three months later she admitted her worsening condition, writing: “There is not much hope for me, unless I give in, and rest completely...”¹⁹¹ Beyond 1941, very little is known about her activities. Her last surviving correspondence dates from mid 1941 and her last composition from June 1943.

Under these circumstances, she composed five final works: two pieces for orchestra, a woodwind trio, a string quartet and a sonatina for piano.¹⁹² Considering her physical condition and the lack of opportunities for performances of larger works, it is remarkable that she undertook and completed these projects, especially the symphonic works. Three of these late manuscripts are not in Beyer’s hand: the Trio for Woodwinds, the Fourth String Quartet and *Sonatina in C*. She was undoubtedly unable grasp a pen by the time she composed them, due to the effects of ALS. The identity of the assistant who took her dictation for these works is unknown. Only the Sonatina is dated (1943), but considering the consistent handwriting of the three works and stylistic similarities, it is likely they were all written around the same time.

The woodwind trio (for flute, oboe and an unspecified lower instrument) and the string quartet are curious works that have received little attention. Yet in many ways, they demonstrate Beyer’s continued commitment to experimentation, even at the end of her life. Like many of Beyer’s late orchestral works, the first movements of both of these works are constructed in distinctive layers. The conversational element that is so valued in chamber music (including earlier works by Beyer) is absent in these opening movements. Instead the voices seem oblivious of one another and obstinately repeat and

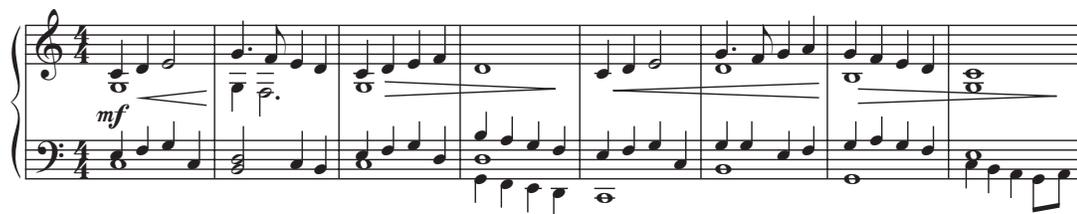
¹⁹¹ Beyer to Cowell, March 22, 1941, Box 2, Folder 4, HCC.

¹⁹² The two symphonic works are: *Symphonic Opus 5* (1940) and *Symphonic Movement II* (1941).

develop only their own separate ideas. This is most ironic in the first movement of the string quartet, in which the cello quotes the *Dies Irae* while the first violin plays snippets of “London Bridge is Falling Down.” Both works contain minimalist traits, but they are never employed in a systematic manner, such as in the First String Quartet. Despite the presence of modern traits such as pastiche and minimalism, the late trio and quartet are generally diatonic and feature balanced phrases and classical forms (for example, the second movement of the trio, “Scherzando” is a minuet and trio). In this, they are similar to the *Sonatina in C*.

The Sonatina represents a continuation and deepening of the musical language used in the piano suite of 1939. Beyer dictated the piece just seven months before her death and dedicated it to Roland Leitner, a favorite student she mentioned frequently in letters. The tonal areas of the sonatina closely imitate those of the piano suite from 1939. Both begin in C major and end in A major. While the suite arrives in its final key via F minor and then A minor, the sonatina moves to F major in the second movement, then A minor in the third. However, the sonatina conforms even more closely to classical norms than does the suite. Its four-movement structure includes a sonatina, a minuet and trio, a slow movement and a rapid energetic finale. The melodic material is structured entirely in four-bar phrases. See example 4.6 for the opening eight measures of the first movement, “Allegro brioso,” which demonstrate this balanced phrasing. The key relationships within movements also adhere to classical standards: the first modulates to the dominant, and the second movement’s trio is in the subdominant of its minuet.

Example 4.6. Sonatina in C, measures 1-8.



The final two movements of the sonatina include the same ultra-modern techniques featured in *Suite for Piano*, polyrhythms and tone clusters. The tone clusters are similar in size and effect to those in the piano suite. These three- and four-note clusters appear only fleetingly, unlike the extended series of chords in the earlier suite. The polyrhythms in the final movement of the sonatina are, however, more complex than those of the suite. See example 4.7 for the first sixteen measures of the finale, which include the rhythmic combination of ten against four. The opening theme also shown in this example is a typical example of Beyer's economy of means. It is composed primarily of just two notes that later become the genesis of the movement's virtuosic middle section.

The ultra-modernist elements that persist in these late works are effortlessly integrated into a delicate, neo-classical fabric that recalls mid-eighteenth-century keyboard music. Whereas Beyer once used polyrhythms and cluster chords in a complex, dramatic manner, here their presence is subdued and thoughtful. The clusters are miniature and bell-like and the polyrhythms blend seamlessly into their surroundings. The symmetry that the composer emphasized consistently throughout the 1930s is preserved in the balanced classical forms and phrases of these late pieces. Her

characteristic economy of means is likewise present in the simple phrases and condensed, brief movements.

When Larry Polansky, one of Beyer's earliest champions, first encountered *Sonatina in C* he believed it to be insignificant. He attributed its simplified language to the effects of ALS and even speculated that the work was not composed by Beyer, but by one of her students. Almost two decades later, upon its recording in 2008, he reversed this position, instead interpreting the simple qualities of the work as maturity.¹⁹³ I too believe the neo-classical language of the sonatina and other late works was not a regression due to her physical condition but rather the result of an intentional choice to move in a new compositional direction.

Example 4.7 Sonatina in C, movement IV, measures 1-16.

IV. Sciolto

¹⁹³ Kennedy and Polansky, 749; Polansky, *Sticky Melodies*, 16.

While Beyer's illness must be taken into account in light of its chronological correspondence with the tonal works, it should not be cited as the single or even main impetus for the final works. She wrote several tonal works—including *Suite for Piano* and the orchestral pieces of 1939—before the disease affected her compositional output and work. The trends in even earlier works toward tonality and simplicity (such as in the choral works) further support the argument that Beyer's stylistic change was not the result of her disease. The existence of some early tonal music, such as that in *Piano-Book* and the first movement of *Clusters*, sets another precedent for her later compositions.

Perhaps if Beyer had lived longer and composed more, the stark contrast between her early and late works could be reconciled even further than is done here. The unusual construction of the final string quartet and the Trio for Woodwinds seems to be an attempt at a new type of experimentation. She continued to seek performances for these works as late as 1941, and clearly wanted her contemporaries and the public to hear them. In January of that year she wrote in a letter to Cowell: "I have all intentions to further my own cause from now on."¹⁹⁴ It seems that Beyer considered these final works to be the beginning of a new stage in her career. Viewing these late works as such, her early death seems even more tragic. Considering her innovative and individualized approach to ultra-modernism, one wonders what the results of several years immersed in neo-classicism might have been.

¹⁹⁴ Beyer to Cowell, January 19, 1941, Box 2, Folder 3, HCC.

Conclusion

The first movement of Beyer's Second String Quartet is a convenient analogy that summarizes her compositional evolution. It incorporates two of the most distinctive elements of her music: the avant-garde ultra-modernist style of the 1930s and European classicism. The cello's quotation of Papageno's aria, "Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen," from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* evokes her German heritage, while the dissonant counterpoint of the upper voices reflects the American life she embraced. Beyer does not simply present these idioms as a contrast; rather she gradually integrates the Papageno theme into the upper voices. Although these voices seem to acquiesce to the cello's classical melody by becoming a homophonic accompaniment, they subtly maintain their identity through dissonant pitch combinations. Beyer's stylistic evolution followed a similar trajectory from radical experimentation and strict dissonant counterpoint to a more understated, simple and classically conceived idiom. Yet she elegantly wove remnants of her earlier style into the music written at the end of her life. Furthermore, she never lost sight of her identity as a composer, even when she struggled unsuccessfully for years to hear her works performed. The humor and verve of this movement reflect her unceasing optimism even in the harshest of conditions.

While Beyer will perhaps always be best-known for her most experimental works, if we wish to truly grasp and honor her contribution, we must seek to integrate the varied components of her musical personality. In 1940, she wrote to Cowell: "I am not a set piece of so many molecules. I am an ever changing something." This model of continuous change—which understands Beyer's music as a unified oeuvre that is more

than the sum of its parts—allows us to approach a more complete and meaningful understanding of her remarkable body of work.

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