SEARCHING FOR SONGS OF THE PEOPLE: THE IDEOLOGY OF THE COMPOSERS’ COLLECTIVE AND ITS MUSICAL IMPLICATIONS

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The Composers' Collective, founded by leftist composers in 1932 New York City, sought to create proletarian music that avoided the "bourgeois" traditions of the past and functioned as a vehicle to engage Americans in political dialogue. The Collective aimed to understand how the modern composer became isolated from his public, and discussions on the relationship between music and society pervade the radical writings of Marc Blitzstein, Charles Seeger, and Elie Siegmeister, three of the organization's most vocal members. This new proletarian music juxtaposed revolutionary text with avant-garde musical idioms that were incorporated in increasingly greater quantities; thus, composers progressively acclimated the listener to the dissonance of modern music, a distinctive sound that the Collective hoped would become associated with revolutionary ideals. The mass songs of the two *Workers' Song Books* published by the Collective, illustrate the transitional phase of the musical implementation of their ideology. In contrast, a case study of the song "Chinaman! Laundryman!" by Ruth Crawford Seeger, a fringe member of the Collective, suggests that this song belongs within the final stage of proletarian music, where the text and highly modernist music seamlessly interact to create what Charles Seeger called an "art-product of the highest type."
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Art, then, is always and inevitably a social function. It has social significance. It is a social force. It is propaganda: explicit, positive; implied, negative. The better the art, the better propaganda it makes: the better propaganda, the better art it is.

Charles Seeger

Charles Seeger’s words on the social implications of music aptly illustrate the leading viewpoint of the Composers’ Collective, an organization in which Seeger was an early member and integral participant. The Composers’ Collective emerged in New York City in 1932 as a response to the expressed need for a forum in which to discuss modern music as a vehicle for engaging Americans in a political dialogue. This thesis explores the writings, compositions, and history of the Collective and provides an extensive look at the ideology of its members and their thoughts on music and its function in American society. As a result, the study of primary sources forms a crucial component of my research and excerpts from editorials and articles published in the Daily Worker, New Masses, Modern Music, Music Vanguard, and numerous other periodicals as well as unpublished materials found in the Marc Blitzstein Papers appear throughout this project. Furthermore, I examine the musical compositions of Collective members and consider how they applied their ideological views to the compositional process in examples from the mass songs of the Workers Song Books and in Ruth Crawford Seeger’s solo song “Chinaman! Laundryman!” The mass and solo song genres typify different stages within the Collective’s output, and Crawford’s solo song, I believe, exemplifies the final stage in which
musical technique and revolutionary text seamlessly interact to create what Charles Seeger called an “art-product of the highest type.”

Active members of the Collective included Lan Adomian, Marc Blitzstein, Norman Cazden, Henry Leland Clarke, Henry Cowell, Robert Gross, Herbert Haufrecht, George Maynard, Ashley Pettis, Wallingford Riegger, Earl Robinson, Jacob Schaefer, Charles Seeger, and Elie Siegmeister. Prominent composers Aaron Copland, Ruth Crawford Seeger, and Hanns Eisler were not official members, but they occasionally interacted with the organization and certainly sympathized with the Collective’s aims. This roster boasted the names of America’s leading composers, most of whom were highly educated intellectuals actively involved in the musical modernist movement.

Though an educational and economic divide existed between Collective members and the average worker, the unmistakable hardship of the Great Depression on America’s lower classes caused great concern among individuals of all backgrounds. The impetus for the formation of the Collective was not only musical but social. Seeger described the mood of the group in retrospect: “We felt urgency in those days. … ‘The economic and social system is going to hell over here. Music might be able to do something about it. Let’s see if we can try. We must try.’” Faced with the apparent collapse of the capitalist system and the havoc it inflicted upon the lives of everyday people, the members of the Collective turned to the ideals of the Communist Party as an


2 For a more comprehensive list of members please see the following source: Maria Fava, “Music as Political and Social Statement in the 1930s: Marc Blitzstein and Friends in New York City” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2012), 55-56, accessed September 2013, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

alternative. As historian Robbie Lieberman argues, “It was the human suffering of the Depression, and the sense that the Communists offered the only viable cure, that drew people into left-wing cultural activities and organizations. …Artists identifying with the working class as the agent of an imminent revolution believed they were contributing to the creation of an exciting new world.” The Collective joined a burgeoning cultural movement of writers, filmmakers, and dramatists who had already begun to create Communist art in the hopes of crafting a better society. The organization, according to member Norman Cazden, broke away from the Pierre DeGeyter Club, a direct affiliate of the Workers’ Music League of the Communist Party, because “the composers who come to the Pierre DeGeyter Club found they were swamped with a group of perfectly congenial people who didn’t have musical expertise. …Many musicians felt that in addition, we ought to have a place where musically trained people could talk on technical matters.” The Collective focused not only on the role of music in society

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4 While the ideas of the Communist Party influenced the objectives and discourse of the Collective, it is important to note that few of the composers were actual card-carrying members of the Party. Seeger, Crawford, and Siegmeister never officially joined, and Marc Blitzstein only signed on with the Party in 1938, remaining a member until 1949. See Howard Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 207-208. As a group, the Collective was only loosely affiliated with the Party through its ties with the Workers Music League. Various aspects of the Party’s vision appealed to composers in the Collective, and members certainly appropriated the Party’s rhetoric on numerous occasions. Their emphasis on how art and music should play a significant role in the daily lives of workers as well as their insistence on creating a new, revolutionary musical technique, devoid of bourgeois implications, emerges directly from the ideas of the Communist Party. See Ann M. Pescatello, *Charles Seeger: a Life in American Music* (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 112. Any closer connection to the Party or its aims depends on an examination of individual composers. For instance, Charles Seeger employs the Marxist rhetoric of “structure” and “superstructure” in his article “On Proletarian Music” in *Modern Music*. Though Collective members may have sympathized with the tenets of Marxism, the group did not officially espouse Marxist ideology or debate political or economic theories during meetings. As a result of this tenuous affiliation between official Party doctrine, Marxist ideology and the Collective, I have chosen to omit any discussion of Marxist theories as it is not directly related to the goals of the Collective.


but also on practical compositional concerns; the uniting of musical technique and political objectives became a recurrent theme in the group’s meetings.

The primary goal of the Collective was to make music for the proletariat.\(^7\) A 1933 review of a performance of compositions by Henry Cowell quotes the composer as saying that one of the purposes of the organization was “to create music that is revolutionary in form and content.”\(^8\) Not only must these songs be suitable for the people to sing, but they must be “revolutionary” in nature; a proletarian song cannot be confused with mainstream, popular music that emerges from a capitalist society. As most of the Collective’s membership trained at traditional music institutions that emulated a European model, it is not entirely surprising that many members of the group used avant-garde musical idioms as a starting point for this new proletarian style. Indeed, the musical output of many of these composers already pioneered new techniques that came to be labeled ultra-modernist.\(^9\) Here, however, is where the membership of the Collective was divided. The opinions of the most vocal participants, Seeger, Blitzstein, and Siegmeister, dominated the ideology of the group and advocated for the incorporation of modernist idioms in the new proletarian music; others, including Robinson and Adomian, suggested incorporating folk idioms derived from the songs of the working class. References to this dichotomy appear in various published and unpublished writings of Collective and in recollections of the members. Ultimately, this difference of opinion contributed to the dissolution of the group, and by then

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7 The word “proletariat”, according to Charles Seeger, indicates the members of society who do not own property. He further divides the “proletariat” into two categories: the structure and superstructure. Workers in the fields of industry, communication, transportation, and distribution comprise the structure of society, the primary members of the proletariat. Secondarily, Seeger states, the superstructure of society—the “white-collar workers and intellectuals”—forms the remainder of the proletariat. Throughout this thesis, the word “proletariat” will refer to Seeger’s definition of the word. Charles Seeger, “On Proletarian Music,” Modern Music 11, no. 3 (March/April 1934): 121.

8 A.L., review of a piano recital by Henry Cowell, Daily Worker, November 21, 1933.

9 Members of the Collective who were called ultra-modernists included Henry Cowell, Wallingford Riegger, and Ruth Crawford.
both Seeger and Siegmeister, former proponents of the avant-garde proletarian song, had become actively involved in the collection and study of folk music.

It is the early years of the Collective, however, that this project primarily discusses. The discourse focuses on the writings of Seeger, Siegmeister, and Blitzstein as their viewpoints dominate the ideological and musical narrative of the Collective and inform the organization’s musical output. The quest to write proletarian music with a social function was the _raison d’être_ for the Collective. Charles Seeger describes the gradual development of the proletarian style out of traditional (i.e. bourgeois, Romantic) techniques in his article “On Proletarian Music” published in the journal _Modern Music_ in 1934. One of the few times Seeger published a political text under his given name, this article is the most definitive writing on the aims and ideology of the Composer’s Collective. Here Seeger outlines three phases that music must undergo in order to achieve “art-products of the highest type” that would blend modern musical technique with proletarian content.\(^\text{10}\)

Modern scholarship glosses over the culmination of Seeger’s ideology, calling his third and final phase “speculative,” “obscure,” and “never satisfactorily spelled out in detail.”\(^\text{11}\) While Seeger’s prose indeed lacks transparency, it is not impossible to ascertain his meaning, especially considering the numerous supplementary sources that elucidate his perspective. These sources include editorials by Seeger and his fellow Collective members in New York City’s two most

\(^{10}\text{Charles Seeger, “On Proletarian Music,” 126.}\)

prominent leftist newspapers, *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*, as well as publications in contemporary music journals like *Music Vanguard* and *Modern Music*. The personal papers of Marc Blitzstein are also an important resource as they include meeting minutes, bylaws, drafts of program notes, personal letters, and lecture notes. The study of relevant material in these primary sources significantly informs this thesis project, and in Chapters 2 and 3, I use these resources to provide a comprehensive assessment of the Collective’s ideology.

The musical implementation of the Collective’s ideals is apparent in their two volumes of *Workers’ Song Books* published in 1934 and 1935 by the Workers’ Music League. The first volume is comprised entirely of newly composed music by members of the Collective and features overtly political lyrics; although the second volume includes mostly original compositions, it also adds two arrangements of African-American spirituals and several translated mass songs from various foreign countries. In the unsigned foreword of the second *Workers’ Song Book*, the author expresses the Collective’s hope to “provide material for mass singing on the streets and at all rallies, for choruses (from elementary to advanced) as well as for informal singing wherever workers gather.”12 The mass songs contained in these publications illustrate the principal desire of the Collective to create music for the American proletariat. In addition, the songs utilize modern musical idioms that illustrate the ideology expressed in the writings of Seeger and his colleagues. While several scholars have examined the philosophical stance of the Composers’ Collective, there is insufficient research concerning how the ideals of the group manifest themselves in the actual music.13 In the first half of Chapter 4, I look at

representative examples from the *Workers Song Books* and argue that these songs belong in the second, transitional phase of proletarian music that Seeger describes in his writings.

The second part of Chapter 4 examines as a case study the song “Chinaman! Laundryman!” from Ruth Crawford Seeger’s *Two Ricercari* (1932) and considers it within the context of the Collective’s history and ideology. Although Crawford’s participation in the organization took place on the periphery of the movement, her *Two Ricercari* for voice and piano show strong ties to the group’s ideology.\(^{14}\) In a 1976 interview, Seeger himself described the songs as “declamations of tremendous dramatic power” that have social significance—a remarkable statement of their political meaning considering that by that time Seeger had rejected the belief that the Collective’s music was socially revolutionary.\(^{15}\) Crawford’s two songs, “Chinaman! Laundryman!” and “Sacco, Vanzetti,” set texts by Chinese dissident poet H.T. Tsiang to highly organized music characteristic of her ultra-modernist style. The pronounced blend of avant-garde techniques and a political text demonstrates the Collective’s desire to unite modernist idioms and proletarian ideals, and the songs’ relationship between text and music confirms their rightful place within Seeger’s final phase of proletarian music.

The songs published in the *Workers’ Song Books* and the *Two Ricercari* by Crawford represent different stages in the development of proletarian music as defined by Seeger. Ultimately, the dissonant and often difficult nature of the music created by members of the Collective resulted in the group’s inability to produce music that appealed to the American public, and the leftist tenor of their convictions discouraged later scholarship. Even so, the

\(^{14}\) In order to distinguish between Charles Seeger and Ruth Crawford Seeger, the latter composer will be referred to throughout this document as Crawford.

political writings and musical compositions of the organization comprise an important part of the exploration for a uniquely American sound. When the Composers’ Collective dissolved in 1936, many of its members (most notably Seeger and Crawford) turned to folk idioms as a musical representation of the people. This shift laid the foundation for the influential—and largely successful—folk movement of the 1950s and 1960s. While the goals of the Collective failed to materialize, their ideological opinions and musical output relate a distinctive narrative that contributed to the formation of an American musical identity in the early twentieth century.

16 Both David Dunaway and Richard Reuss contend that the Composers’ Collective was instrumental in initiating the folk movement, if only by setting a negative example of what did not succeed in the search for music that connected with the American people. Additionally, Charles and Ruth Seeger contributed to the rising interest in traditional music through their influence on their children, notably Pete, Mike, and Peggy Seeger, who were leading figures in the folk movement.
CHAPTER 2

REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY: THE COMPOSERS’ COLLECTIVE
AND THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF MUSIC

A central purpose of the Composers’ Collective involved the composition of music that would serve as an encouragement and a battle cry for workers, and meetings incorporated discussions on what constituted a proletarian style of music and in what ways it could and should be performed. In determining how proletarian music should interact with its audience, the Collective was forced to consider the current state of music in America. Elie Siegmeister and Marc Blitzstein wrote extensively on this subject and confronted the reality that the modern composer had little influence or visibility with the public. In their various articles, both Siegmeister and Blitzstein reach conclusions quite radical for their time regarding the isolation of the composer within the proverbial Ivory Tower, the Romanticized idea of “Art for Art’s Sake,” and the culpability of wealthy patrons in the construction of the cultural divide. In response to this divide, the Collective founded the Downtown Music School and determined to educate listeners on modern music and its importance to society. The proletarian composer, in the opinion of the Collective, was responsible for bridging the rift between composer and audience in order to create a healthy musical life for a new America.

What is Proletarian Music?

Charged with composing music to further the Communist cause and appeal to America’s masses, the Composers’ Collective set out to determine what constituted a proletarian style of music and in what contexts the music should be performed. A 1935 draft of the group’s bylaws claims that the “object of the organization shall be to further the composition of music for the
workers of America which shall serve to unite and hearten them in their struggle against economic exploitation, against war and against fascism."¹⁷ Creating music that aligned with party rhetoric and inspired workers to join and further the Communist cause formed the core of the Collective’s purpose. Thus, the group’s music needed to be “revolutionary in form and content,” as member Henry Cowell described, containing radical texts and musical idioms that distanced the new works from older, bourgeois associations.¹⁸ The idea that music could project political or social commentary as well as the suggestion that outside influences, people, or institutions could directly shape the form and function of music were largely unexplored concepts in historical musicology in the 1930s. Indeed, even the field of musicology was in its early stages. Years later Seeger reflected on the period in which the Collective emerged: “There were practically no musicologists then. In America, talking about music was done in the newspapers and by teachers who taught you harmony and counterpoint, and on rare occasions, history of music out of a textbook. There was practically no history of music at the time in this country.”¹⁹ In 1929 Seeger, with fellow Collective member Henry Cowell and three other music colleagues, founded the New York Musicological Society in an effort to remedy the lack of music scholarship. (In 1934, this group reformed itself as the American Musicological Society.) The Collective and NYMS, however, were “two completely separate things,” and Seeger acknowledged that even then he was aware that the Collective was a “dangerous adventure.”²⁰ This sense of unease and concern for their reputation, undoubtedly arising from the leftist

¹⁷ Marc Blitzstein Papers 1918-1989, Wisconsin Historical Society, microfilm, p. 707, reel 7. This quote and all subsequent material from the Marc Blitzstein Papers is reprinted with permission of the of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, New York. All rights reserved.

¹⁸ A.L. “Cowell Performs Own Compositions in Piano Recital,” Daily Worker, November 21, 1933.

¹⁹ As quoted in Dunaway, “Charles Seeger and Carl Sands,” 161.

²⁰ As quoted in Dunaway, “Charles Seeger and Carl Sands,” 161-162.
political rhetoric employed by the group, resulted in several members using pseudonyms in their publications for the Collective.21

The discussion of how to construct viable proletarian music took place at each weekly gathering of the Collective. In a letter responding to an inquiring composer outside the Collective, Norman Cazden, secretary of the organization, outlined the proceedings of a typical meeting:

The compositions are played several times, the words read; then there is a round of discussion, each member present giving his individual opinion; the composer (when present) is asked to answer these, and further discussion often follows; the general trend of the criticisms is directed, so far as is possible, to technical matters; that is, how well the composer has carried out his intentions (helpful suggestions for betterment are given); finally, an aggregate opinion is decided upon as to the ideological value of the composition, and recommendation for performance, for distribution, publication, reworking by the composer, etc., is made.22

The performance and discussion of new pieces of music opened almost every meeting according to surviving minutes of the Collective; the records begin with a list of compositions and general remarks from the membership for each work, often including recommendations for a reworking of structure or harmony as well as notes on the best way to program a specific piece.23 Cazden’s description of the musical discussion between members suggests the high importance the group placed on musical technique, text, and the ideological value of compositions. In later years, he elaborated on the ways in which works were evaluated by the group:

One was its possible social and political impact: if it was designed to be a mass song, was it simple sounding? Sometimes we gave positive suggestions—‘if you left out this syncopated rest bit, it would be a lot easier to get.’ Or, ‘is there time for people to breathe during the course of a song, will the music fit the words?’

21 The two most prevalent were Charles Seeger who often used the moniker Carl Sands and Elie Siegmeister, who wrote as L.E. Swift.
23 The minutes for March-July 1935 can be found in the MB Papers, pp. 684-698, reel 7.
On the other hand, there would be some specific discussion of the musical techniques involved. People would argue whether it was right to write—let’s say—gruff tone clusters at the bottom range of the piano to give a percussive march beat rather than traditional style harmony. …The discussions were quite similar to a composition course, except for the strong focus on the social revolutionary objectives.24

Comments varied from practical concerns on the feasibility of a workers’ chorus performing a song to compositional choices in the technique; not surprisingly, however, the emphasis remained on the ability of the work to exhibit revolutionary ideals. Members also suggested the most appropriate venue or ensemble for a work’s performance, and proposals included formal concert settings, dance or theater performances, chorus concerts, May Day singing, “shock troop” programs, and the vague recommendation of “general programming.” Most of these are traditional venues for musical performances for which no explanation is needed; however, the events of May Day singing and shock troop programs are particular to the leftist movement and require further discussion.25

The origins of May Day demonstrations in which protest music played an integral role date back to the Haymarket affair in Chicago in early May 1886. From May 1 to May 4, labor activists and workers participated in a series of escalating protests that centered on the demand for an eight-hour workday, and tensions finally culminated in a deadly altercation between workers and police. Authorities blamed the violence on individuals with anarchist sympathies and ties to the labor movement, who were summarily executed after what fellow protesters denounced as a bogus trial with a conspicuous lack of hard evidence. For workers’ organizations, May 1 became a symbol of freedom, marked by organized strikes and nationwide protests.

Communist critic Michael Gold, who authored the newspaper column, “Change the World!” in

25 The military term of “shock troop” refers to the troops who lead the assault on the enemy, often at great cost to themselves.
the *Daily Worker* described May Day thus: “May Day is more than a holiday. It is a day of struggle. May Day means that millions of people all over the earth are out to show their power. They want certain things, and their parades are a living threat that they mean to get them, sooner or later.”²⁶ Workers marched not only to state their grievances but also to show solidarity. The *Daily Worker* printed the lyrics to ten mass songs that editors considered appropriate material for protesters and titled the piece “Songs to Sing While Marching.” The list featured popular leftist melodies and included Pierre DeGeyter’s “The Internationale,” Hanns Eisler’s “Comintern,” Aaron Copland’s “Into the Streets May First,” and Elie Siegmeister’s “The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die.”²⁷

During meetings, the Collective consistently recommended that members use various songs in May Day celebrations or demonstrations, suggesting that they believed their work was an integral aspect of the protest movement. Texts of these songs covered a wide range of topics including anti-fascist lyrics promoting peacetime, encouraging protesters in their May Day march, and directly addressing the injustices workers suffer at the hands of the boss. For example, Elie Siegmeister (under the pseudonym L.E. Swift) set the latter topic to music using Robert Gessner’s lyrics and entered his composition in the second annual May Day song competition sponsored by *New Masses*. The song won first place and was printed in the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* a few days before May 1, 1935 (Figure 1).

The lyrics (Figure 2) directly address workers, inspiring them to join the May Day marches and protest the inequality between owners and employees. It is quite likely that the song could have been sung by musically untrained workers during a May Day parade as its melody is

²⁷ “Songs to Sing While Marching.” *Daily Worker*, May 1, 1936.
largely stepwise and tonal (G minor) with a primarily regular rhythm; the occasional syncopation 
that occurs (see measures 2 and 4 in Figure 1) could easily be taught by rote.

Figure 1: L.E. Swift “A Song for May Day,” *Daily Worker*, April 27, 1935.

Figure 2: Lyrics by Robert Gessner in L.E. Swift’s “A Song for May Day”

Come out today's the first of May!
We workers, hungry and unfed.
Won't stand in line to work this day:
This morning's dawn is red!

Refrain:
Today we strike, today we're free!
Close every shop and factory.
Let no boss stand above our head;
we'll show who bakes his daily bread!
To all who work with hand or brain,
step off the curb and jam the street.
Come feel the call of pickets slain;
Their blood pounds thru our feet.

Refrain

Let's lock our arms and march with song
Against the owners of the world,
Until all workers to us throng—
With red flags unfurled.

Refrain

In fact, notes from a Collective meeting on April 5, 1935 suggest that Siegmeister’s song was indeed intended to be sung by workers’ choruses during May Day celebrations. After a successful inaugural song contest in 1934, in which Aaron Copland won first place for his setting of Alfred Hayes’s poem “Into the Streets May First,” Ashley Pettis, editor of *New Masses*, approached the Collective the following year requesting assistance in advertising the contest and encouraging submissions. The Collective compiled, and the membership aided in selecting the texts, contacting composers, and entering the contest themselves. The group sent letters to fifty American composers (there is no indication as to who these composers were or how they were selected) and asked them to consider setting either Robert Gessner’s “May Day Song” or Eva Goldbeck’s “First of May” poems to music. The letter outlined the requirements for the contest, advising that the composition “must be in the nature of a Mass song with piano acpt.” and that submissions would be judged based on “a) singability and ‘catchiness’ by large groups of untrained voices; b) musical vigor and effectiveness; and c) success in bringing out the words and their meaning.” The judging would be conducted by blind review, and the winning song

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published in New Masses and sung on May Day by workers’ choruses. While there is no documentation of choruses performing Siegmeister’s “A Song for May Day,” amateur ensembles could easily have mastered the song; his entry certainly meets the requirements of the contest with its accessible melody, driving rhythm, and straightforward octave accompaniment in the piano which focuses attention on the lyrics.

In addition to recommending songs for May Day singing, the Collective also suggested that particular works by members be placed on “shock troop” programs. This borrowing of militaristic language with regard to musical performances underscores how strongly the Collective felt about their objective to “unite and hearten” American workers in their struggle for a more equitable existence. It is striking that members chose to identify themselves with the soldiers who risk the most in the hope that their sacrifice ensures the final victory. The use of such strong rhetoric reveals how seriously members of the Collective took their role in the leftist movement; they viewed themselves as the leaders in the offensive for communism with music playing an integral part in the social and political process.

The first mention of the shock troop program appears in the minutes for a March 8, 1935 meeting where an announcement was made that a portion of the membership would be designated as a shock troop for “the purpose of disseminating songs composed in the C. [Collective] among organizations.” At the next meeting, members decided to send songs to the Daily Workers’ Chorus and Friends of Workers’ School in addition to Prospect Park Workers’ Club and other non-musical organizations; the Collective also agreed to form a small choral

29 Information regarding the 1935 song contest is drawn from the minutes of Collective meetings that took place between March 15, 1935 and April 5, 1935. See MB Papers p. 687-692, reel 7.

group with a pianist who would perform for the selected audiences. Minutes from the March 22 meeting suggest Seeger hoped to recruit performers from the New School Singers (a leftist chorus led by Collective member Lan Adomian), but notes from a later meeting do not affiliate the two “non-professional singers” who agreed to participate in the shock troop program as members of the chorus. (However, the New School Singers were not an exclusively professional group, so the lack of explanation as to where Seeger found these performers does not necessarily mean they were not from the New School ensemble.)

The Marc Blitzstein Papers include a list of shock troop members, though it may not be an exhaustive index of participants. Interestingly, three of the members, Adele Olsher, George Stillman, and George Grossman, are identified as a cellist, violist, and violinist, respectively, despite the consistent connection of the shock troop program with the genre of mass song. Perhaps the strings players participated in the program in ways other than performance such as distributing leaflets or copies of songs among various organizations. Since no program for a shock troop performance survives within the minutes or papers of the Collective, it is not possible to verify the genres incorporated in the concerts. The remaining names on the membership list include the baritone Mordecai Bauman, who collaborated with Collective members on numerous occasions, Arthur Winters, and Tony Kraber. While I have not discovered any information regarding the identity of Winters, I believe the Kraber cited as a participant in the shock troop program is likely the theater actor/director and folk singer Gerritt “Tony” Kraber. As a young man in New York City during the 1930s, Kraber was a founding member

of the Group Theatre, a local company that produced socially minded plays that often championed the rights of the working class; in the early 1950s, a fellow artist, Elia Kazan, would reveal to the House Committee on Un-American Activities that several members of the Group Theatre, including Kraber, had been active members of the Communist Party. While Kraber’s leftist sympathies and interest in American music may have led him to collaborate with the Collective, it is also possible that he was acquainted with Marc Blitzstein, who auditioned his opera *The Cradle Will Rock* to the Group Theatre in 1936.

While no programs from shock troop events survive, minutes from meetings of the Collective confirm that performances did take place. At the June 7, 1935 meeting Seeger announced “three new dates for shock troop performances,” and a discussion of how to distribute the money earned from such performances took place earlier in May with the members deciding to give half the fee to the performers and evenly dividing the remaining half between the composers and the Collective. Furthermore, it was decided that six copies of each song performed as well as a leaflet advertising the shock troop must be made for distribution among the audience. Records from the May 24 meeting list the following songs as appropriate material for shock troop programs: George Maynard’s “Join the Union,” Earl Robinson’s “Death House Blues,” Alex North’s “First of May” and “Put One More S [in the U.S.A.]”, and L.E. Swift’s “Profits Out of War.” Earlier in the year, the Collective had already suggested utilizing

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Seeger’s mass song “Long Boy” on shock troop performances as well. Of these six songs, only Robinson’s “Death House Blues” appears to have been published. Included in the 1937 collection *Songs for the People* that the Party itself sponsored, “Death House Blues” drifts between C major and C minor with a melody that incorporates the flattened third and seventh found in a blues style. The text, like many of the mass songs composed by the Collective, addresses social injustice; in this case, the lyrics vow that the I.L.D. (International Labor Defense) will legally represent the “Scottsboro Boys,” nine African-American young men facing trial in Scottsboro, Alabama for allegedly raping two white women.

The music earmarked for shock troop programs does not appear to be substantially different from the mass songs published in the *Workers’ Song Books* or presented in standard concert programs by Collective Composers. Though only “Death House Blues” is available for study, the titles of the other songs suggest content similar to that of all of the Collective’s output: social justice, opposition to big business, support for the unions, and solidarity among workers. The material for the shock troops may not be distinctive, but the idea behind the program certainly is. These composers assigned social value to their work created under the auspices of the Collective and expressed the need for communication with and recognition of a wider public. This was not music written in an ivory tower for a bourgeois audience who expected to experience artistic transcendence. The Collective considered themselves purveyors of music of the people, music that would embolden American workers and reflect the state of the world around them. The shock troop program was the Collective’s version of the front line in the struggle to create art that functioned with and for the proletariat. In the Collective’s mind, the modern composer had been separated from his audience for far too long.

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Radical Philosophy and the Ivory Tower

The Composers’ Collective and its members were revolutionary in their insistence that music and its creators both influenced and reacted to the societies in which they emerged. The discussion of the role of music in society and the ways in which the composer relates to his audience pervade the writings of several members of the Collective, most notably that of Elie Siegmeister and Marc Blitzstein. Their writings reflect a deep concern with the state of music in America during the 1930s and a desire to understand why and how the composer became isolated from his public. Siegmeister considers the rise of modern music and the varied responses from composers and audiences in two articles, “Social Influences in Modern Music” and “The Class Spirit in Modern Music,” which were published in the journal *Modern Monthly.* He undertakes a more substantial discussion of music’s past and present function in society in his short pamphlet, *Music and Society,* published in 1938.

Siegmeister’s writings focus on the function of music within broader social and economic contexts, an area of study that he found to be largely unexplored. He exclaims: “It is astonishing that at this late date the place of music in society and the influence of social forces on its development have been so little studied,” especially considering that other disciplines like literature and painting have already accepted the idea of “economic determinism” (that is, how social and economic conditions affect the arts) in the creation and advancement of their crafts. Siegmeister recognizes the pioneering nature of his thesis and explains,

Until now it has been the common practice of critics and writers about music to regard it almost solely in the light of the personal life, the desires, thoughts and emotional

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experiences of the individual composer. Music is spoken of as a product of the inner consciousness, springing from the mysterious depths of personality, and fluctuating with the emotional ups and downs of its creator, who, as musician and composer, is taken to move in a sphere of his own, apart from and higher than the plane of everyday life. …

Yet, if the music-production of any historical epoch be considered as an entity and brought into correlation with the economic and social conditions, the intellectual beliefs, the literature, the religion, even the state of technological advance of that epoch, wide and striking relationships among these will be almost universally observed… yet that economic and social conditions (at the root of many of these ideas), that the social status of the composers, the tastes and requirements of patrons, the domination of certain classes in society, the use of music for specific social purposes have been determining forces in the development of music has never been sufficiently pointed out.44

In the early twentieth century, critics, patrons, listeners, and even musicians themselves took for granted that both the composer and his art maintained a separation from the world. The creator, those “remarkable individuals” or “geniuses” as Siegmeister calls them, exist “beyond time and space, and outside the sweep of forces that affect other men.”45 The banal matters of everyday life as well as its demands and shortcomings have no effect on the consummate artist. Yet Siegmeister and his colleagues refuse to take this assumption at face value; instead, they challenge the idea that music subsists in a space divorced from social, political, and economic realities.

In their search for new, revolutionary music, the Collective confronted a stark reality within the music culture of American society: the compositions performed in concert halls were seldom the latest innovations of a living composer. Instead, major symphony orchestras almost exclusively programmed works by venerated European masters who had died by the first decade of the twentieth century. As a result, the American public remained largely unaware or indifferent to the modern music of their own composers. This disconnect between the composer

44 Ibid.
45 Siegmeister, Music and Society, 10-11.
and his audience troubled the members of the Collective. How could the public embrace a new proletariat music when they hardly knew the American composer and his music even existed? Blitzstein and Siegmeister believed the modern composer was ensconced within the proverbial “Ivory Tower,” creating music that the general populace seldom heard and rarely appreciated. This concept of the Artist in his ivory tower was not an unfamiliar one in the early twentieth century. In fact, the separation of the artist from society was a widely accepted, even championed, custom.

Marc Blitzstein similarly discusses the fate of the modern composer in the leftist magazine *New Masses* in a series of editorials written during the summer of 1936. Most interestingly, an unpublished and previously overlooked essay titled “The Composer, the Audience, and Music” by Blitzstein that survives in the collection of his personal papers provides us with an extraordinary look into the composer’s thoughts on how modern music came to be disregarded by the public. On the back side of the essay, a note in the composer’s hand indicates these ideas were likely written down for a radio broadcast that took place on March 20, 1936. Blitzstein addresses a “Mr. Golenpaul,” with the words “I hope this is satisfactory. Will you keep it for me to use tomorrow night? It’s my only copy!” I suggest that “Mr. Golenpaul” refers to Dan Golenpaul, a radio and later television producer for NBC. Though no records exist regarding this broadcast in the NBC archives housed in the Library of Congress, it does not mean that the program never took place. According to the library’s description of the NBC sound archives, recordings of broadcasts in the 1930s were sporadic and largely confined to notable

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classical music concerts, historic news broadcasts, and public affairs programming. Systematic recording of all radio broadcasts did not occur until the Second World War.48

Though the purpose and context surrounding Blitzstein’s unpublished essay remains ambiguous, the concepts related within the essay are well-defined and startling in their frankness regarding the modern composer and his audience. Blitzstein states:

The composer today is considered and treated as a sort of isolated fish in the community. Most people at a concert realize vaguely that he exists, but they rarely get around to realizing that they have an actual connection with him; that he plays the fundamental part in the makeup of their musical culture, and has thus a special usefulness to them and to society. What is more, most audiences hardly ever relate their musical experiences to the rest of their lives and circumstances. They feel music is a “thing apart”—a solace, or an entertainment, or an escape. And the modern composer, who seems to provide not much of these things, is left high and dry.49

As long as the American public avoids acknowledging the separation of the modern composer, his isolation persists. Listeners take for granted the existence of the composer, and the function of music is understood to be one of entertainment: music as recreation or a form of escapism, a “thing apart” from the rest of life’s experiences. Thus, since the modern composer rarely produces music that fulfills even the rudimentary function of entertainment, he endures in his ivory tower. The relative anonymity of the modern composer, and subsequent obscurity of his music, concerned the Collective as they sought to compose art that would serve and embolden the American people. Yet, music itself hardly factored into the daily lives of workers. In an article discussing the distinctions between language and music, Collective member Charles Seeger contrasts the familiarity and ubiquity of language in everyday life with the limited presence of music:


49 MB Papers, p. 102 reel 9. From “The Composer, the Audience, and Music.”
Music is so rare an element in the experience of the vast majority of men, that when it does come to their notice they are made keenly aware of the unusualness of the occurrence. …That music also communicates a content…that [it] may constitute essential elements in the rounded development of the individual and of the social organism as a whole, approaches, with most people, the inconceivable or the unimportant.50

The Composers’ Collective and its members were radical in their insistence that music and its creators both influenced and reacted to the societies in which they lived. Music was, as Seeger wrote, essential to the development of both the individual and society as a whole.

Blitzstein and Siegmeister carry their arguments still further, claiming that the confinement of modern music to the ivory tower did not result merely from experimental technique, but rather the avant-garde idioms were a causal outcome of the already established segregation of the composer from his public. This segregation, the authors contest, stems from society’s blind acceptance of the Romantic notions of the Artist and “art for art’s sake” at the expense of music that serves a function outside itself—a utilitarian characteristic vital to the Collective’s cause. Siegmeister proposes that the separation between society and artist originated in the early nineteenth century when the increasingly powerful bourgeoisie realized that the concept of artistic freedom, while advantageous when attempting to distance the advancing middle class from the unpopular aristocracy, required funding in order to support the artist and his creative endeavors; unwilling to spend their newly gained riches on struggling artists, the bourgeoisie instead touted the notion of the composer as someone who exists—and thrives—on a higher plane where the struggles of everyday life only inspire him further.51 According to Siegmeister, this desertion of the artist by his former champions led to the exhibitionism of the Romantic era and the escapism of the early twentieth century, with its “endless introspection and

51 Siegmeister, Music and Society, 48.
mulling over the same outworn themes of frustrated love, untimely death and posturing heroism." The division between the composer and the masses grew rapidly as middle class audience members sought “the old values in music—emotional exaltation, escape or diversion” and subsequently failed to connect with modern works. Finally, once the concert halls began emphasizing virtuosic performances and a set of standard repertoire, the separation was complete. The “bourgeois concert hall” as Siegmeister said, became a museum.

Similarly, Blitzstein critiques the tradition of concert halls that almost exclusively programs canonic works; for Blitzstein, “A musical scene which emphasizes dead masters no matter how beautiful the music, is like a museum; it is a dead musical scene.” He too emphasizes the problematic legacy of the Romantic era with its tendency to immortalize composers and credit them with virtually supernatural qualities. By attributing a godlike persona to the composer, society successfully marginalized both the artist and his music. Blitzstein writes:

The composer has thus been forced into an Ivory Tower not of his own making; there he writes music which he knows will have little public success or even public hearing. In a sense society has driven him into reclusion: first by exalting out of all proportion the romantic aspect of the Ivory Tower (known to us as “art for art’s sake”); second by turning its back upon the inevitable result. Is there any wonder if Ivory Tower music is often written today? And on the other hand much new music exists which is discovered to have direct and sometimes profound relations to this life and times about it. But communication has broken down. The audience will not listen; how can they be made to feel that the new music is about them, is really their possession?

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52 Ibid., 53.
53 Ibid., 56.
54 Ibid., 57. The “emphasis on brilliance of performance and constant repetition of the same repertoire have almost completely removed the audience from any effective contact with the living present of music…The bourgeois concert hall has become a museum.”
55 MB Papers, p. 102, reel 9. From “The Composer, the Audience, and Music.”
56 Ibid., p. 103, reel 9.
Once the composer is divorced from his community, the “inevitable result,” Blitzstein implies, is esoteric art music that fails to attract an enthusiastic audience. Divorced from his public, the modern composer turns inward, losing his connection to the outside world and instead developing an indifference to the opinions of the audience. Even when music is written that has a “direct” or “profound” connection to contemporary audiences, the relationship between composer and listener has been neglected for so long that communication is increasingly difficult.

Furthermore, the Romanticized isolation of the modern composer can actually fool the composer into thinking that his output is somehow inspired by a divine gift that others may not have the acumen to fully understand. Charles Seeger underlines how deeply ingrained the idea of the Artist is within the mind of the composer himself; he explains that “owing to the domination of the theory of rugged individualism (in this field known as ‘romantic individualism’) the musician is artistically exploited by being taught to regard himself as a ‘priest of art’ and his music as a semi-mystical creation of his peculiar, individual make-up.” Then, perhaps, the composer is less likely to take offense at the increasingly critical reviews, the limited performances of new works, and the overwhelming indifference of the public. The Romantic notion of “art for art’s sake” had the remarkable advantage of ridding the public sector of its responsibility to support artists while simultaneously flattering composers into believing they successfully created the purest form of art only when no one was interested in engaging with the work. After all, the consummate artist was a penniless, misunderstood genius who subsisted on a diet of solitary idealism.

The Control of Music and “Art for Art’s Sake”

For the Collective, it was imperative that the group combat the lingering image of the lonely and inspired Artist in order to renew their connection with a dwindling modern audience; however, this required the Collective to recognize both the power that wealthy patrons exerted over music institutions and also their role in perpetuating the myth of the misunderstood genius who creates “art for art’s sake.” The Collective bemoaned the near absence of new music in the lives of American workers, which in turn affected the future of the nation’s art institutions and their audience. Ashley Pettis, music critic for New Masses and Collective member, writes:

The plight of the American composer has long been known to those who are informed on the subject. With the exception of a very few well-known names, he is practically an unknown quantity to the general musical public, even in the great cities which are supposed to be our “art centers.” There have been many sporadic attempts to fan into life some slight flame of interest in the output of our creative musicians; but since these attempts have lacked organization and adequate backing they have died out.58

Efforts by musicians and composers to generate greater public awareness of new music was largely unsuccessful, Pettis claims, due to insufficient support (likely in terms of both artistic goals and financial backing.) The failure of practical attempts to encourage an American musical life as well as the prevailing idea of the Romantic artist created what Hanns Eisler called a “crisis in music.” A very successful German composer of mass songs, Eisler was the compositional model and an occasional guest speaker for the Collective. Writing in the Daily Worker, he expresses the current condition:

The crisis in music has been created by the general crisis in society. In music it appears definitely as a crisis in the technic [sic] of composition, which has succeeded in completely isolating modern music from life. The modern composer has become a

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parasite, he is supported by private connoisseurs and the benevolence of a few wealthy people, and he produces no sensible, social work.59

Young composers, Eisler argues, are particularly affected by their separation from society. Instead of producing a “sensible, social work,” some of these fledgling artists pursue questions regarding their own nature or problems of form and technique, both solitary activities that no one else wishes to disturb.60 Others, who Eisler calls those “lyric spirits,” attempt to express beauty and sensitivity in music only to have Hollywood do it better.61 In fact, Eisler claims that the “development of the crisis in music is the result primarily of the development of technical devices. The radio, the phonograph and the sound-film have created an entirely new situation.”62 There is a vast difference in listening to a symphony in a concert hall versus listening to the same piece in your living room over the radio. An even greater disparity exists between the abstract listening in the concert hall and the visual and aural pairing that occurs in film. According to Eisler, the isolation and introspection of the composer as well as new technologies contributed to the decline of modern music as a vibrant aspect of society, which left the composer subject to the whims and generosity of a select group of patrons.

Collective composers Blitzstein and Siegmeister arrived at the same conclusion as Eisler: the modern composer was woefully dependent on an elite few for his survival. Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of these authors’ opinions on modern music and American society is this belief in the culpability of wealthy patrons of art institutions who perpetuate the idea of “art for art’s sake” and the otherworldly existence of the composer. According to Blitzstein and


61 Ibid., 181-182.

62 Ibid., 184.
Siegmeister, the privileged few preserve these Romantic notions to maintain their control over music and its social advantages. Members of the Composers’ Collective thought financial gifts from prominent citizens allowed the patrons too much control over music institutions, especially in programming for concerts. The musical tastes of the elite were largely confined to nineteenth-century symphonic works, a preference that often excluded the modern composer from the program. While older works by the European masters helped to fill the seats of concert halls, Collective members argued that this music also carried with it the often undesirable associations of the past. Seeger elaborates:

The music of the great composers of the past 300 years served as music has always served, a social function. It was mostly ordered, made for, performed for, and has since been entirely appropriated for the use of the bourgeoisie. It has been jealously guarded from the rest of society by a system of high costs in the making and the hearing of it, that have stamped it as a property of the ruling class.63

In the search for a proletariat music, the Collective sought to appeal to a mass audience rather than just an elite few. Steeped in the vestiges of the past, canonic repertoire offered little of value to proletariat composers; its very existence was a result of the patronage and demands of the powerful upper class.

In addition to wielding their influence over programming, wealthy patrons favored inviting conductors from Europe to lead America’s orchestras, a move that was designed to provide legitimacy and prestige to the relatively young institutions who lagged behind their European counterparts. Unfortunately for modern composers, this meant their music would be gradually pushed aside as the American orchestra established a reputation with the imported masterpieces. In systematically programming European music, concert halls assisted in developing the perception of high art music as music of the elite. Wealthy patrons supported and

attended these concerts that were disproportionately comprised of a canonic repertoire thus associating their elite status with this particular music. As a result, the public knew little about the modern composer, and the idea of the Artist creating lofty, unattainable art while tucked away in his ivory tower was immortalized.

Siegmeister reflects that since the American state failed to fund art institutions “…the patronage of classical music was taken over at an early date by well-to-do private citizens, who found in it not only musical pleasure but a badge of elegance and prestige.”64 In his critique of the current limitations in American musical life, Siegmeister’s argument culminates in a denunciation of the nation’s wealthy citizens. He says:

Once we become aware of the constricting and limiting effects of the present social set-up upon music, it is not hard to see why the corporation magnates, socialites and bankers who patronize and hence in the long run control every important means of production of music cling to the doctrines of “music for music’s sake,” the “spirituality” of music, the “freedom” of the creative mind which can always “rise above” its “mere” material environment, etc., etc. If it be generally accepted, as it now is, that the material and social circumstances in which music is produced have no bearing on the substance of music itself, then the actual control of music will be considered unimportant and this control will not be challenged.

It is obvious now why the pure art doctrines are preached and emphasized so incessantly. They form a lovely, ethereal mist which has hovered over and almost completely concealed the domination of our musical life by the “angels” of high finance and high society. …It serves the very real and valuable purposes of maintaining social prestige and creating a benevolent cultural façade for those whose activities in other directions are hardly benevolent.65

In appealing to the public’s Romantic notions of music and their perception of the composer as a long-suffering Artist, those in power impede open dialogue about music and the function it serves. If society believes great music can be created despite distressing social or political circumstances, why advocate for change? Siegmeister further contends that the

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65 Elie Siegmeister, Music and Society, 16-17.
interdependent relationship between patron and beneficiary creates what he calls a “benevolent cultural façade”; by appearing as a supporter of the arts, the less altruistic actions or various indiscretions of the big business owner are often overlooked. Through generous contributions to art institutions, the wealthy created a divide between high art and popular art, effectively distancing themselves from the masses while simultaneously promoting themselves as a custodian of culture.

Marc Blitzstein expressed similar sentiment. Shielded in the ivory tower, protected from the world, the modern composer had become complacent, even ignorant of the circumstances that placed him there. He explains:

We have for so long dwelt in the high reaches of “art” atmosphere, believing patrons and entrepreneurs, that we are the anointed and the insulated, that it isn’t nice to realize we are the tool of a vicious economic setup. The unconscious (sometimes not so unconscious) prostitution of composers in today’s world is one of the sorry sights to see. It inheres all along the line, from the most successful to the never-heard; even when we starve, we think of it as a poetic “upper-class” starvation, quite different from the starvation of the ordinary unemployed worker. It is about time we discovered where our allegiance lies.

This self-discovery is what the Collective hoped to achieve. In writing music for the American public, the modern composer could rediscover his role in society. No longer trapped in an ivory tower composing “art for art’s sake,” the composer would rejoin his audience and music would become, as Blitzstein hoped, an “alive and fruitful part of culture.”

Such an examination of the nation’s elite and their role in establishing high culture in America was unprecedented; furthermore, the topic remained largely unexplored by scholars until the theory of sacralization of culture emerged in the 1980s. Historian Lawrence Levine

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66Siegmeister gives the example of Henry Ford: far more media attention was spent on Ford’s generous donations to the arts than on the concerns of workers in the Dearborn strikes at Ford’s factories.


discusses the “sacralization of culture” that occurred in the formation of opera houses, symphony orchestras, and art museums, and sociologist Paul DiMaggio contributes a valuable discussion of the institutionalization of high culture at the hands of what he calls “cultural capitalists.”69 Their research mirrors the concerns of the Collective, spoken over fifty years earlier, regarding the role of the wealthy in determining the future of music in America.

While Levine and DiMaggio strongly emphasize the exclusive nature that resulted from patronage of the arts, music historians like Ralph Locke and Joseph Horowitz have warned against what Locke calls a “blanket condemnation of a stratified culture.”70 Although both Locke and Horowitz acknowledge patrons’ use of high art for social purposes, they also stress the desire of the elite in cities like Boston, Chicago, and New York to found art institutions for the entire community as evidenced by their establishment of outreach programs and their insistence that a portion of tickets be available at a lower cost to concert-goers. Furthermore, Locke and Horowitz call attention to the improvement in performance once musicians were provided with a steady job and a living wage after wealthy donors contributed to the orchestra.71 The desire for a successful musical performance should not be overlooked in a history of art music in the United


71 However, musicians who earned gainful employment with symphony orchestras were often compelled to leave other jobs with competing ensembles and forced to meet strict demands laid out in their contracts. Instances of such sacrifice are especially prevalent in the history of the Boston Symphony Orchestra as discussed in Levine’s Highbrow/Lowbrow, DiMaggio’s article “Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston” and Nicholas Tawa’s book Serenading the Reluctant Eagle: American Musical Life 1925-1945 (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984).
States: while financial donations gave patrons some form of power over musicians and institutions, they also ensured that the final art product met high aesthetic standards.\footnote{Locke is especially critical of Levine’s and DiMaggio’s arguments in their failure to address aesthetic issues as well as social and political concerns.}

While current scholarship has uncovered multifaceted reasons for and consequences of the patronage of America’s art institutions, for most of the twentieth century the exclusive nature of highbrow art remained unmentioned. This lack of discussion regarding music patrons and their influence on cultural activities makes the comments of members of the Composers’ Collective that much more significant. Not only did Seeger, Siegmeister, Blitzstein and other members realize the importance of an open dialogue about art and its role in society, but they were wary of the artistic control granted to elite donors. Scholarly treatment of American art music in its social and political context would not occur again until much later in the century.

Crafting a “New Musical Life”

A central aspect of the Collective’s purpose involved making music for the masses rather than wealthy patrons and educating the public about the role of music in society. The Collective was instrumental in the founding of the Downtown Music School in New York City in 1935, which sought to instruct students on the influence of society on music in addition to training students in composition and performance. Advertisements for the school explained its intention to “satisfy the urgent requests of workers wanting good musical instruction for their children and themselves.”\footnote{On a pamphlet describing the course offerings for the Winter 1936 term in the MB Papers, p. 415 reel 9.} In a letter to the Elmhirst Committee in which Blitzstein requests grant money for the school, he argues that while the demand for concert artists and composers may be in decline, “there is an enormous field, as yet virtually untouched, for the thoroughly equipped musician
who grows out of and is a part of the working-class, and who functions in relation to its cultural needs and desires (represented in its many mass-organizations, its clubs, choruses, orchestras, etc.) The Downtown Music School plans to evolve such a type of musician.” 74 The founders of the music school intended not only to provide the working class with a musical education but also to train them as valuable contributors to the leftist community. Since the modern composer and his audience were currently estranged, the Collective decided to reach out to the people and attempt to create an interactive musical community with them. At the school, “Music is treated, not as an isolated phenomenon or a hot-house plant, but as a cultural force in the community, naturally related to other social activities.” 75 Here, conventional musical training merged with social responsibility and political discussion.

The Downtown Music School offered traditional classes on harmony, counterpoint, ear-training, sight-singing, and orchestration in addition to private lessons and ensembles, but other classes were more revolutionary and reflected the Collective’s leftist ideals. Courses like the History of Music and Music Appreciation examined music in its historical and political context while Music Criticism was taught from a Marxist viewpoint. 76 One class, entitled Social Aspects of Music, intended to show the “relation of music to other activities in the community, and tend[ed] to destroy an ‘ivory tower’ conception of music and musicians fostered by most conservatories.” 77 Collective members dominated the list of faculty, and major participants included Lan Adomian, Marc Blitzstein, Wallingford Riegger, Charles Seeger, and Elie

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75 Marc Blitzstein (?) to Mrs. Ellis, August 17, 1935, MB Papers, p. 373 reel 9.
76 On a pamphlet describing the course offerings for the Winter 1936 term in the MB Papers, p. 415 reel 9. Many papers, letters, and publications regarding the Downtown Music School may be found in the microfilm reel 9 of the Blitzstein Papers.
Siegmeister with notable figures like Hanns Eisler, Aaron Copland, and Henry Cowell teaching special courses. The Downtown Music School, later renamed the Metropolitan Music School, only survived for a few years. By 1939, the school experienced recurring financial difficulties despite a steady enrollment, and the majority of the founding members and teachers had abandoned the school and the Collective. The plan to educate workers and unite audiences with the modern composer was suspended.

Founding the Downtown Music School comprised only part of a larger vision to reform the relationship between composer and listener. The music of the modern composer had to change: a proletariat America needed proletariat music. Reflecting on the declining status of modern music in American society and its increasing alienation from the people, Blitzstein avows that no easy remedy presents itself:

The solution is a deep and drastic one, and involves more than meets the ear. Society and its relation to music must in some way be transformed, so that music becomes an alive and fruitful part of culture. Obviously the enjoyment of music will always take place during society’s leisure moments…but this does not mean that music is or should be the exclusive property of a leisure-class, nor the placid satisfying of a leisured mood.

The transformation of music to become an “alive and fruitful part of culture” belonging not solely to the affluent bourgeoisie but rather to the masses informs the compositional endeavors of the Collective. Henry Cowell poses the question, “Can music be put to some different use? Yes, of course. The use of music, aside from pure aesthetic enjoyment, consists either in creating a feeling of unity and solidarity among a group which would otherwise be less

78 Lilly Popper to Marc Blitzstein, March 9, 1939, MB Papers, p. 480, reel 9. The school’s expenses (rent, supplies, salaries) appear to have exceeded its income even in the first year of opening. See the proposed budget on p. 347-348 of MB Papers reel 9. Tuition was kept to a minimum in order to be affordable for the largest number of people. Mass lessons (large ensembles) cost $.10, classes were $.25, and individual instruction or small labs were $1.00. See Blitzstein’s letter to the Elmhirst Committee on p. 351, reel 9.

79 Ibid., 103. From the short essay, “The Composer, the Audience, and Music.”
emotionally bound together, or in stirring individuals or groups to action.”

Cowell echoes the Collective’s stance that music not only mirrors social and political realities, but it can also play an influential role in uniting disparate people to a common cause. In advocating a style of music to be used in political settings, the Collective participates in what they viewed as the breakdown of the capitalist structure. In the words of Ashley Pettis, “The old bourgeois musical system is collapsing while a new musical life is springing into existence, its basis firmly rooted in the lives of the masses.”

Yet, what elements comprise this “new musical life”? Siegmeister considers the responsibilities of the proletarian composer:

He who would write for a workers’ society (or for the workers’ movement) must be clearly aware of the new functions which music has for the working class. Here music can be no longer mainly an outlet for private, subjective emotions; it must express and solidify emotions that all have in common. …

The composer of the people’s movement and of the collective society will utilize all the skills and techniques he has inherited from the past to write not luxury music for the few, but music which shall be of, for and about the many. His is the task of breaking down the age-old division between learned or art music on the one hand, and folk or popular music on the other. In doing this he will be helping to break down the class division which these musical divisions have symbolized and helped to perpetuate.

Siegmeister emphasizes the role of music in expressing the emotions of the masses as opposed to those of the individual. The proletarian composer must bridge the divide between artist and audience and merge the art music of the elite with the popular music of the workers thus dismantling the social and musical divisions of the past.

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82 Elie Siegmeister, Music and Society, 58-59. It is worth noting that the date of this quote is 1938. The early aims of the Collective did not involve the incorporation of folk materials into art music. From approximately 1932 to 1936, the Collective focused on using avant-garde techniques to distance their music from the Western canon of art music. By the time Siegmeister published his Music and Society (1938), many of the Collective’s members had turned to folk music to appeal to the public. This change in ideology will be discussed in the conclusion.
In their reflection on the social function of music, Collective members realized that in order to write songs that engaged the public and had political purpose, they must first confront the challenges presented by an isolated composer and the current dependence upon wealthy patrons to support artistic endeavors and institutions. For the first time, composers looked critically at the development of musical life in America and sought to remedy the class divide created in the concert hall. While ideologically sound, the Collective members ultimately failed to produce a concrete vision of this new music or to deliver lasting change in the cultural life of working-class Americans. Yet the early years of the Collective were marked with an optimistic hope for the future of music for an American proletariat, and it is this hopeful future that is explored in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 3
THE NEW PROLETARIAN MUSIC

In recognizing the social function of music and the increasing isolation of the modern composer, the Composers’ Collective saw the need for new musical works that reflected the current times and appealed to the people. While the previous chapter illuminated the ideological convictions of prominent members of the group, these accounts reveal only glimpses of the application of such principles in composition. In his articles as music editor for the *Daily Worker* from 1934-1935, Charles Seeger emerges as the Collective member most responsible for chronicling the ideas of the organization. Seeger advocated for the gradual inclusion of avant-garde idioms into the new compositions of the Collective, arguing that the revolutionary movement required music that was unaffiliated with institutions, religions, and events of the past. Traditional forms and techniques should not be immediately abandoned as the listener needed time to adapt to these novel sounds, but the composer, performer, and music critic must be judicious in selecting what elements should remain in proletarian compositions. According to Seeger, the ideal proletarian music demonstrated a high level of collaboration between form and content, which he interpreted as avant-garde techniques and revolutionary text. This pairing of form and content would become so ubiquitous to the revolutionary movement that the music could not be disassociated from the meaning of the text thus ensuring that the music could not be appropriated for other purposes by simply adding new text. A close examination of Seeger’s arguments alongside the writings of Siegmeister and Blitzstein reveals the importance they placed on avoiding connections with the past and explains why the Collective insisted on utilizing avant-garde techniques as the framework for their new music.
Seeger approached the public forum of his music column with evident zeal, especially during the first year of his appointment in which he wrote extensively on the changing role of the music critic and the new proletarian style the Collective was trying to employ.\textsuperscript{83} Additionally, in 1934 Seeger authored an article titled “On Proletarian Music” that outlined three phases that music must undergo in order to achieve “art-products of the highest type.”\textsuperscript{84} This latter source is especially significant as it is published using Seeger’s given name (all his \textit{Daily Worker} editorials use his pseudonym Carl Sands or the initials C. S.), and it appeared in the periodical \textit{Modern Music}, an academic journal with no political affiliations. The content of the article and the source in which Seeger presented it to the public suggests he considered it to be of high importance; by including the essay in \textit{Modern Music}, Seeger gave the subject matter a level of credibility and a wider readership base that was unavailable in any leftist publication.

The primacy of Seeger’s position as ideological writer in the Collective is further illustrated in a letter of resignation from Irving Heilner, a one-time member of the group. He writes,

Dear Comrade Seeger, I hope Elie remembered to tell you that I resigned from the Collective! The group appears to have unanimously accepted the extremely limited and one-sided conception of what the music and words of a mass song should be, as conceived by yourself, Siegmeister and Adomyan. After yesterday afternoon, it is obvious that there is no place in your organization for people like Mrs. Spitzer and myself, for instance, who write simple melodies to be sung by large groups of musically untrained workers. \textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{83} During 1935, Seeger’s music editorials became less ideological as he and other members of the Collective became disenchanted with the group’s original aims. In November 1935, Seeger accepted a position with Roosevelt’s Resettlement Administration, a job in which he was asked to use folk music to help displaced farmers and their families adjust to their new communities. This career change and move from New York City to Washington D.C. distanced Seeger from the radicalism of leftist groups like the Collective.


\textsuperscript{85} Irving Heilner to Charles Seeger, April 27, 1935, Marc Blitzstein Papers 1918-1989, Wisconsin Historical Society, microfilm, p. 632-633 reel 7. While Heilner is listed as a Collective member in surviving minutes from Blitzstein’s tenure as secretary, Mrs. Spitzer (I have been unable to locate a first name) is indicated only once as a guest at a Collective meeting. She is, however, listed as a member of the Pierre DeGeyter Club in the minutes taken at a joint meeting of the two organizations on May 3, 1935. See MB Papers p. 694, reel 7.
Heilner lists Seeger as one of three composers who “conceive” the ideas of the Collective in relation to music. Apparently Heilner’s composition of simple melodies appropriate for the average American to sing was not well-received among the group. Interestingly, two other sources present a divergent view and suggest a more open-minded approach to revolutionary music existed within the Collective. Norman Cazden claims,

We do not have any kind of formula or style which we hold up as the only idiom for revolutionary music. Whether music be in a modern vein, popular style, folk-song character, classical or romantic style of any kind, we ask only that it be good music, free of technical defects, practicable for its intended use, and freed as much as possible from all that is obnoxious in bourgeois music. Our members themselves write in many different styles, sometimes the same composer uses a number of styles; we are entirely unprejudiced in this regard.86

Similarly, the anonymous writer of an undated draft of program notes for a concert of music by Collective composers says that “the Collective as such has no kitchen recipe for the production of music and each composer is free to write in any style or styles he chooses as best for himself.”87 While these program notes and Cazden’s letter profess to a wide variety of styles used by the Collective, the writings of Seeger and, most importantly, the musical compositions themselves indicate otherwise. Perhaps the public nature of the program notes and the nonmember status of the recipient of Cazden’s letter explains this apparent contradiction. The organization may have publicly declared itself open to compositional diversity, but the musical output of the Collective denotes a more single-minded attitude.

Creating Proletarian Music

A central aim in constructing a new musical style for proletarian use involved distancing

87 MB Papers, p. 714 reel 7.
the works of the Collective from art music of the past and from contemporary popular styles like the songs of Tin Pan Alley. Additionally, the Collective hoped to remove the composer from the ivory tower into which society had forced him and return him to his place among the people. Seeger addresses these aims in his second column for the *Daily Worker*, an editorial that seems to be a forerunner to his article “On Proletarian Music” published a few months later. In his column, Seeger claims,

Proletarian music is a historic necessity which will develop out of bourgeois music by carrying on and adding to progressive tendencies, and by discontinuing regressive or decaying tendencies. Proletarian music may have all the worthwhile qualities of bourgeois music, and many more, but it must and will express them by means different in many respects from bourgeois music.88

The emphasis placed on retaining “progressive tendencies” and discarding “regressive” ones is noteworthy. Not all aspects of bourgeois music should be abandoned entirely, and Seeger explains the existence of two types of music: "music for the proletariat and music of the proletariat. Most of the music now known as proletarian is of the former type. It is composed by a vanguard of professional musicians, bourgeois in origins and in training."89 Contemporary composers, including members of the Collective, trained at institutions that taught a rigid curriculum based on European models of past “great composers.” Naturally, even when some of these composers sought to write for the proletariat, traditional (i.e. bourgeois) elements lingered. Seeger does not suggest immediately abandoning all connections with the past, but he indicates the necessity of a careful selection of what elements should remain in proletarian works:

Proletarian music will result from revolutionary tendencies persisted in over a considerable length of time. In these revolutionary tendencies…there can be found some technical devices that must be avoided in workers’ songs and some that can and must be used in them. The choice as to what bourgeois technical devices are to be preserved and developed and what are to be discarded may be discussed under the following principle:

89 Ibid.
to be revolutionary in character, music should have not only freedom from bourgeois associations but also technical originality of 'freshness.'... It is quite generally admitted that music acquires the power of definite meaning only through prolonged use in one given connection.90

The new style should remove the associations of the bourgeois past and demonstrate a “freshness” of technique. Seeger asserts that new meaning can be assigned to older musical traditions only after “prolonged use” in a different, proletarian environment. Further on in the editorial, he elaborates on how this change can occur:

Technical freshness is difficult to speak about in an untechnical way. It usually means that some new combination of old devices has been achieved or that some unusual new material has been employed. Composers must realize, of course, that only comparatively slight departures from conventional idioms can be risked in mass song writing for the present.91

Developing “technical freshness” and “revolutionary tendencies” takes time as listeners adjust to these new sounds, a complication Seeger evidently foresaw as he advised only “slight departures from conventional idioms” and acknowledged that the use of revolutionary tendencies must be “persisted in over a considerable length of time.” Later in life, Seeger described the Collective’s fresh technical devices as different combinations of traditional procedures and gradual introduction of new technical material:

That was one of the things we tried to do in the Collective: to use ordinary fragments of technique in an unusual way, because we thought that was revolutionary and therefore suitable for the workers to use. We didn’t give them those same patterns in the usual way, which was what Broadway did. Broadway just handed out a certain number of formulas in the usual way; but we took those same formulas, simply used them differently, and hoped that we were doing something revolutionary. Lots of the compositions were in that type. They had unusual harmonic progressions in them, but usual chords. Or it there were some unusual chords, they put them in conventional patterns.92

90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
The Collective considered “unusual harmonic progressions” of recognizable chords to be just as revolutionary as writing unusual chords in “conventional patterns.” The goal was simply to ease the public into hearing and accepting modern techniques in music in order to distance the proletarian style from the echoes of the past.

The elements of bourgeois music that the Collective wished to retain in their proletarian compositions were primarily the avant-garde techniques of modern art music. For the modern reader, this musical choice may seem surprising given the esoteric nature of the avant-garde and its lack of appeal for audiences even today. Yet for the Collective, the music of this experimental movement in the 1930s was extremely revolutionary and represented a sharp break with the traditions of the nineteenth century; they hoped to take a musically revolutionary idea, pair it with revolutionary lyrics, and create a distinctive proletarian song. In his article “On Proletarian Music,” Seeger contrasts proletarian content and bourgeois art music:

The proletariat has a clear realization of the content it wishes to have in the music it hears and in the music it will make for itself. It is a content expressing, and contributing to the success of, its struggle—a revolutionary content. But it has lacked, so far, a musical technic for the expression of this content. It has relied upon and found some use for trite and debased echoes of the existing bourgeois idiom.

Bourgeois art music, on the other hand, has achieved much in the twentieth century that is definitely revolutionary in character—not revolutionary as to the class struggle but as to the technic of music. …Partly caused by and partly causing a preoccupation with technical detail, content has been lost sight of.93

To Seeger, revolutionary content—that is the text—is clearly expressed in the music of the proletariat, but the same music nevertheless continues to employ “trite and debased echoes of the existing bourgeois idiom” for its technique.94 In contrast, bourgeois art music possesses a

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94 A further discussion of “form and content” will be approached later in this chapter.
musically revolutionary technique (avant-garde idioms) though no proletarian content. Seeger concludes,

Proletarian content, then is seen as a rising, progressive factor: that of contemporary bourgeois art music, a declining, regressive one. The technic hitherto characteristic of proletarian usage has proven hopeless; but the technic of bourgeois contemporary music, though uncoordinated, is full of promise. ...The obvious thing to do is to connect the two vital trends—proletarian content and the forward looking technic of contemporary art music.95

Thus, the Collective determined that the future of proletarian music lay in the juxtaposition of radical text with avant-garde musical technique.

Why Avant-Garde Music?

When considering the Collective’s lengthy discussion of the composer’s role in society and its members’ objections to the confinement of art music within an ivory tower, it is perhaps curious why members turned to avant-garde idioms for a solution. Would a public who is already distanced from contemporary composers really rediscover its musical life in the unsettling and often inaccessible sounds of modern music? Yet the statements of Seeger, Siegmeister, and Blitzstein presented in the previous chapter suggest that it is society—not the music itself—that originally forced the composer into seclusion. As Blitzstein indicated, the ivory tower is not of the composer’s making; rather, by upholding the composer as a creative mind disassociated from society’s influence, the community, led by the bourgeois and upper classes, drove the artist into reclusion. Further contributing to his isolation, society then “turn[ed] its back upon the inevitable result” of the composer’s isolation: avant-garde music.96

The Collective did not attribute the lackluster reception of modern music solely to the compositional qualities of the music itself. The implication is that such music and its reception is a consequence of the composer’s idolized status. Divorced from his community, the composer no longer relates to his audience, who in turn has come to expect the composer to write emotionally appealing works in the tradition of the nineteenth-century symphonic masters. Blitzstein writes,

The audience for its part has ceased to be adventurous. It shuns what is new and untried and possibly difficult—and settles back comfortably to the familiar music of the past. This music of the past, magnificent and vital as it is, is now being used as a sort of sedative to ease harassed minds. Bach, Beethoven, Mozart are worth more than this.97

When confronted with the new work of a living composer, audiences were disappointed: it was far easier to rest in the familiar than to navigate the unknown. Yet Blitzstein and fellow Collective members understood that as “magnificent and vital” as the familiar was, the music of the present—no matter how difficult—should not be ignored. Blitzstein pleads with the public:

These great masters can only be vital for us and for our programs if they are heard side by side with contemporary works. At the present time about twenty percent of music performed in New York is by living composers, while eighty percent is music of the past. A musical scene which emphasizes dead masters no matter how beautiful the music, is like a museum; it is a dead musical scene. …Why cannot it be demanded that living composers be given at least as much chance as dead ones?98

Blitzstein’s words bear a remarkable similarity to Siegmeister’s own comments in *Music and Society*; both men compare the contemporary concert hall to a museum and lament the limited performances of modern music despite its ability to accurately mirror the “general chaos of present-day society.”99

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97 Ibid., 102.
98 Ibid., 102-103.
Though modern music may aptly reflect the current condition, Blitzstein argues that this actually contributes to its cool reception: “We know what the life and times of our period are—how hectic, unstable, how lacking in permanent values or calm perspective. And the music is faithful to this outlook. But for that very reason it has failed to get a response.”¹⁰⁰ In the eyes of the Collective, the modern audience only desired music that provided an escape from the realities of life, not an aural rendering of it. Blitzstein laments the public’s tepid reception of modern music:

[T]he effect on the composer is to make him protest in his music, in one way or another. The protest seems to the audience less a communication than a direct slap in the face; the dissonances and the various shocks that modern music is so full of became partially a chip-on-the-shoulder, a defense mechanism. Even less response, or actual hostility from the audience is the result. And so the vicious circle continues.¹⁰¹

As a case study of this “vicious circle,” Blitzstein provides the example of composer Arnold Schoenberg. Blitzstein calls *Pierrot Lunaire* one of the “masterpieces of our time. It is not beautiful in any conventional sense; as a matter of fact, it is extraordinarily unbeautiful. But its very ugliness, its bare, nervous and angry passages, and the…sense of horror which pervades the work are Schönberg’s true indictment and mirror of the society in which he lives.”¹⁰² In writing music that embodied the modern experience, Schoenberg inadvertently drove his audience away. His listeners sought comfortable, emotionally appealing music, not music that reflected a difficult reality. According to Blitzstein, the effect on Schoenberg was inevitable: “He [Schoenberg] proceeded to a more abstract music, to a calculation of forms and formulas, to the patterns of a music practically devoid of any emotional content whatever. …He writes a sealed,

¹⁰¹ Ibid.
hermetic music; a music of isolation.”103 For the Collective, however, this music of isolation solved the problem of finding a musical technique that was free from pre-existing connections and the weight of the past.

Despite the public’s apparent rejection of modern music, the Collective was dogmatic in its endorsement of avant-garde techniques, primarily due to its musically revolutionary nature. Here was a new musical style in which bourgeois associations—both musical and extra-musical—were entirely absent. Yet members recognized that they must combat the dismal reception that this unspoiled technique generated in concert halls. Numerous sources suggest that the group sought to endear the avant-garde to the public through education. George Maynard writes,

For the [workers] who will not or can not understand what the revolutionary composer of today is saying there is a need of education and explanation. Courses, lecture-recitals, articles, all must be used to draw them toward an appreciation of modern, revolutionary, and Marxian music.104

The Collective undertook this task with zeal as evidenced by the many articles in the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* regarding the new style of proletarian music as well as the course offerings and outreach that occurred at the Downtown Music School.105 Charles Seeger mentions the importance of lecture-recitals in his review of a concert featuring fellow Collective member Ashley Pettis:

It might be to the point, however, to ask Pettis (and any member of his audience who would like to be asked) to discuss the type of program that should be presented by a pianist to a revolutionary minded audience. Hanns Eisler has said somewhere that bourgeois music should not be played or sung by us without an accompaniment of critical discussion.106

103 Ibid.


105 The formation and aims of the Downtown Music School in New York are discussed in Chapter 2.

Seeger, drawing on German proletariat composer Hanns Eisler’s comments, emphasizes the value of engaging in a critical discussion of music, especially when so-called “bourgeois music” is programmed. Additionally, Seeger reported several instances of lecture-recitals taking place at proletarian concerts. In his review of a performance of Aaron Copland’s works, Seeger references a discussion between a steel worker and Copland himself on the ability of the composer to successfully relate to the lives of the proletariat in his music; likewise, Seeger comments on the critical discussion that took place at the premiere of Elie Siegmeister’s “A Strange Funeral at Braddock.” The use of lecture-recitals in educating audiences about music and composers endured beyond the existence of the Collective. Part of the Federal Music Program, a branch of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) from 1935 to 1939, included the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory; the brainchild of Ashley Pettis, music editor for New Masses and former Collective member, the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory aimed to place composers in dialogue with audience members in order to further the development and support of American music. The similarities to the lecture-recitals advocated by the Collective as well as Pettis’s affiliation with the organization leads several scholars to suggest that the Forums evolved directly out of the Collective’s earlier efforts to educate the American public on new music.

The influence of Hanns Eisler on the ideology of the Collective provides a second explanation for the group’s interest in applying avant-garde techniques to their proletarian works. A profile of Eisler in the Daily Worker describes him as the “foremost revolutionary composer” whose music “reflects with complete understanding the reality of their [the masses’] lives,

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infuses them with courage and provides a stimulus for further struggle.”

A former student of Arnold Schoenberg, Eisler stopped composing abstract art music after he realized it lacked social content; his subsequent compositions for the masses, however, reveal the tutelage of Schoenberg in their use of avant-garde techniques. He discusses his own choruses accordingly:

Extremely difficult to sing because of their modern structure, they [the choruses] demanded the highest measure of discipline and painstaking rehearsal. The dissatisfaction which often resulted from the work that was involved, was dispelled by the revolutionary music functionaries who pointed out the political content of the music.

Despite the difficult nature of his works, Eisler’s choruses were successful among German workers and were internationally hailed as the model for all revolutionary composers. The Collective included two of his choruses in their second *Workers’ Song Book*, published in 1935: “Forward, We’ve Not Forgotten” and “Comintern.” With Eisler’s songs as the standard, the Collective’s use of avant-garde idioms as the basis for revolutionary composition is far less surprising.

Since the Collective was eager to move proletarian music away from the sounds of the past and its association with the wealthy elite, folk music might appear to be the most viable alternative to traditional nineteenth-century repertory. Created by the workers themselves, folk materials would likely appeal immediately to the masses, a desirable outcome for any revolutionary composer. Yet, the Collective shied away from folk music as a form of revolutionary material, a position that would change radically by the end of the 1930s. Charles Seeger looked back on the early years of the leftist group and remarked,

The Collective members wouldn’t listen to folk music; they were professional musicians, unconcerned with that low-grade stuff. …Nobody in the Collective was interested in folk music. They didn’t know anything about it, except from reading the first chapters of

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school textbooks, which began with the study of Greek music and folk music and then go on into Music.\textsuperscript{111}

Seeger and many of his colleagues dismissed folk music as “low-grade stuff” unworthy of inclusion in the important revolutionary movement. In one of his first editorials for the \textit{Daily Worker}, Seeger urges caution when working with folk music:

Not all folk-tunes are suitable to the revolutionary movement. Many of them are complacent, melancholy, defeatist—originally intended to make slaves endure their lot—pretty, but not the stuff for a militant proletariat to feed upon. Folk-music that shows clearly a spirit of resentment toward oppression or vigorous resistance to it are valuable.\textsuperscript{112}

Seeger allowed for some exceptions in his counsel against folk music as proper material for a “militant proletariat,” and it indeed appears that some Collective members reconsidered their opposition to folk music quite early in the organization’s development. Lan Adomian, in his article “What Songs Should Workers’ Choruses Sing?” remarks on the potential of arranging folk songs and incorporating them in the repertory of mass song.\textsuperscript{113} Published a mere month after Seeger’s admonition, Adomian’s hopeful view of folk music illustrates the ideological divide present in the Collective even from the group’s inception. Even Seeger’s ideological ally, Elie Siegmeister, quickly became involved in the folk movement through his arrangements of African-American songs. Siegmeister arranged numerous tunes for voice and piano in Lawrence Gellert’s collection, \textit{Twenty-Four Negro Songs of Protest}, which was published in 1936, and two of Siegmeister’s choral arrangements of Negro songs appear in the Collective’s second \textit{Workers’ Song Book} in 1935. While still dominated by avant-garde idioms, choruses and mass songs in

\textsuperscript{111} David Dunaway, “Charles Seeger and Carl Sands,” 162.


this subsequent publication indicate a changing musical ideology in the Collective that differed widely from the previous dominance of modern techniques.

Distancing the Present from the Past

The benefit to using avant-garde idioms was clear: the innovative modern techniques avoided objectionable extra-musical associations. Such associations proliferated in the musical works of the past as evidenced in their connections with aristocratic patrons, capitalist ventures, and excessive personal emotion. Seeger elaborates:

Much of the music of the Rococo period—manneristic fugal virtuosity—is out of place in proletarian ears, as are also many of the beribboned polyphonic pieces of the later Renaissance, and, of course, most of the pomposities of oratorio, opera and salon exhibitionism. These are without appreciable revolutionary content. ...Indeed, the morbidity, the servile melancholy, the frenetic sexuality, the day-dreaming flight from reality that permeates much of the music of the nineteenth century cannot be regarded as fit for a class with a revolutionary task before it.\textsuperscript{114}

Such vehement criticism of the music of former centuries illustrates the Collective’s deep desire to disassociate itself from the past. The Composers’ Collective sought to create a new musical style for a new world order, and much of the music of the Western canon could hardly be said to adhere to communist objectives: “Many are full of the poisonous propaganda of church, state, salon, barracks, and school-room.”\textsuperscript{115} For the Collective, the close relationship between music and church and state institutions as well as music’s strong ties to the elite and wealthy middle class polluted the art. The Collective considered it their responsibility to determine a work’s suitability for the revolutionary movement. Yet Seeger made exceptions for certain pieces in the standard repertoire: unsurprisingly, he viewed Beethoven’s symphonies as

\textsuperscript{114} Seeger, “On Proletarian Music,” 123.

“convenient definitions of what is meant by revolutionary content.”116 Even if a work carried negative bourgeois associations, those associations could be changed. When the Pierre Degeyter Club Orchestra played Bach’s Double Concerto for Two Violins, Seeger celebrated its performance, particularly in light of who the performers were:

We have heard this great work played many times in the bourgeois concert halls and salons, but never before with such effect. Though played with ten times the skill by Kreisler and Elman and with accompaniment of the most celebrated orchestras and conductors, there was always present the feeling of standardized acrobatic exhibitionism, a commodity paid for by the gross wealth of idle sophisticates whose presence in the audience augured culture and conspicuous leisure.117

Though celebrated virtuoso violinists like Friedrich Kreisler and Mischa Elman had “ten times the skill” when compared to the workers’ orchestra, their professional performance retained a sense of “acrobatic exhibitionism,” a criticism not unlike that which plagued the Romantic era virtuoso. Seeger protests this exhibitionism, not to demand musicality in place of empty technical prowess but on the grounds that such a display of showmanship reminded audience members of the soloist’s high price tag, which the “wealth of idle sophisticates” purchased. When performed by the amateur musician for his fellow workers, however, the Concerto loses this negative association of wealth and privilege. Indeed, Seeger argues, “You may perhaps see for yourself to what a small extent the real experience of music depends upon extreme virtuosity or grotesquely high pay or upon certification by critics who assume a capacity to judge objectively of musical values.”118

According to Seeger, the task of evaluating the relevance of past masterpieces within the context of the changing social order was delegated in part to the music critic. In a series of three

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118 Ibid.
articles for the *Daily Worker*, Seeger discusses the changing role of the critic and his function in the proletariat superstructure. The critic’s job was as follows:

The music criticism of the revolutionary press must be a revolutionary criticism. It must revolt against the music-critical system that is now supported by the capitalist press. …This task [of revolutionary criticism] will be two-fold: first, to re-value the music of the past with a view to determining what of it may further and what retard the revolutionary movement; second, to aid in the growth of a new musical style that will express and further the revolutionary movement.”

Seeger viewed the critic as an integral part of the Collective’s efforts to establish music as “a weapon in the class struggle,” a stance not unexpected considering his own critical role at the *Daily Worker*. Like proletariat music, the revolutionary critic must distance himself from the past. For the Collective, past and present commentators on music contributed to the increasing isolation of the modern composer by encouraging the idea of the Artist as one who is set apart. Seeger writes,

Bourgeois musical criticism…[has] lost itself in biographical detail, thus giving undue importance to the ‘great man’ theory of history and to the ‘inspiration’ theory of musical work. A Marxian presentation of musical history will deal less in personalities than in the larger processes of art development and the interrelation of these with history as a whole. …It will be necessary to show clearly the economic background and class motivation of the lives and works of the great composers of the past, and of musical styles and practices generally—not only as they are presented to us by history but also as they are manifest in our own day. Here again will be a marked divergence from conventional practices.

While traditional music criticism focuses on the composer as a “great man” and the composition as an artistic endeavor inspired by otherworldly influences, the Marxist critic will reflect on music’s stylistic developments and relationship with “history as a whole.” In acknowledging society’s effects and demands upon the musical work, Seeger says, the “focal point will no longer be the exploits of individuals, but mass movements, mass tendencies, and

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120 Ibid.
mass achievements.” Rather than extolling the virtues of music that bourgeois audiences already revered, the new critic will judge whether a work still holds value for the current class system. In doing so, the critic freely asserts the elements of propaganda within the musical work:

Revolutionary musical criticism, since it is furthering a revolutionary music as a weapon in the class struggle, will admit its propaganda nature. Bourgeois criticism has consistently deplored the view of art and of art criticism as propaganda. We must assert and prove that art and art-criticism have always been propaganda. The musical lap-dog of this or that patroness or manager may say in his ivory tower built of stocks, bonds, and mortgages: ‘There may or may not be a class struggle, but music is free and entirely unconnected with politics, economics and classes.’

But this is just as much propaganda for the tottering capitalist structure which strives to save itself by suppressing consciousness of the struggle in which it is going down, as is propaganda against it, the simple mass song as 'The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die,' the 'Comintern' or the 'Red Wedding.'

Whereas the bourgeois critic seeks to mitigate or deny the interrelationship between political, economic, and social realities and music, the revolutionary critic admits the connection outright. Seeger argues that the person who insists on music’s complete autonomy simply provides propaganda for the existing “capitalist structure” in the same way that mass songs provide propaganda for the communist cause. By ignoring or repudiating the effects of outside influences on the artistic work, the composer only broadcasts “negative propaganda (tacit approval) for the social system that gives him a tower and allows him to sit in it.” The proletarian critic must actively engage with the musical work in all its historic and contemporary contexts to ascertain its value to the masses.

In addition to determining the value of older masterpieces and new compositions, the second task of the music critic is to “aid in the growth of a new musical style that will express

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121 Carl Sands, “The Broad Scope of Revolutionary Music Criticism,” Daily Worker, March 7, 1934.
122 Ibid.
and further the revolutionary movement.”124 Again, Seeger contrasts the revolutionary critic with the bourgeois commentator:

The bourgeois critic is always quick to call attention to defects. …He never could prove his adverse judgments in the crucial test of showing how the defect could be remedied. The revolutionary critic, on the other hand, must attempt this: he must be required to attempt it. He must be as adept at constructive as at destructive criticism.125

In order to help create a “new musical style,” the critic must be willing to contribute practical advice for composers in their endeavors to formulate an innovative style. Musical technique, however, is not the first concern of a true revolutionary critic:

The revolutionary critic will differ from his bourgeois prototype, however, by regarding technique as a secondary matter: to him content must be the first desideratum in a work of art. He must assume, along with the revolutionary composer, that a revolutionary content will eventually lead to the perfection of a revolutionary technique by means of which it can be expressed. Form and content, it is true, are independent. Ideally, they should develop side by side. But it remains a fact, we have not yet the technique. The content is given to us in a hundred years of revolutionary literature and action. The music-revolutionary tendencies that should have been integrated with these have been captured by the bourgeoisie and withheld from the masses.126

The proletarian “content” that Seeger references would emerge out of “a hundred years of revolutionary literature and action” and would assist in creating a revolutionary musical technique. Seeger declares that the latter already exists in the music of the bourgeois and needs only to be appropriated by the proletarian composer. The revolutionary technique that Seeger references is undoubtedly the avant-garde idioms that he discusses in numerous other writings. The “technical freshness” of modernist devices and their lack of extra-musical associations made the style very desirable to the Collective. The introduction of avant-garde idioms into songs for the masses, however, had to be done gradually, for as Seeger acknowledges,

126 Carl Sands, “Proletarian Music as a Historic Necessity,” Daily Worker, March 6, 1934.
It is not to be expected that American workers' songs or instrumental music in the year 1934 will make use of more than a few of the new resources. The American worker lives in a bourgeois state and has bourgeois tastes in music as in most other things. If he does not like the music arranged or composed for him, he will not sing or listen to it. The music he will sing and like will be predominantly bourgeois in character but can contain some departures from the conventional bourgeois styles—enough at least, eventually to distinguish his music from that of the decaying bourgeois society—tin-pan alley, revival meeting, and politically controlled school-room. It may be only an occasional off-accent, wide skip, irregular phrase, tart harmony or some such thing.\(^{127}\)

The programs of most public concerts in the early twentieth century relied heavily on nineteenth-century European masterworks, thus conditioning the tastes of the American audience to enjoy what the Collective considered to be bourgeois music. Evolving the musical tastes of the public to appreciate modern technical elements would take time, and thus Seeger recommended beginning with minor changes like “an occasional off-accent, wide skip, irregular phrase, tart harmony or some such thing.” Differentiating proletarian music from its bourgeois counterpart meant distinguishing the former from “bourgeois, patriotic, or religious songs on the one hand and from conventional, easy going, subservient folk-song on the other.”\(^{128}\)

“Form and Content” and the Importance of Text

In his article “On Proletarian Music,” Seeger describes three phases of musical development and suggests that the final stage exhibits a sophisticated interaction between “form and content.” This somewhat ambiguous phrase appears in a handful of writings already cited, and features prominently in the article “On Proletarian Music.” In fact, the dialectic of form and content emerges with consistency throughout the first half of Seeger’s career (1920s-1930s).\(^{129}\)


\(^{128}\) Carl Sands, “Stirring Songs of Struggle in International Collection,” *Daily Worker*, February 1, 1934.

Form most certainly indicates the compositional elements that comprise a musical work as evidenced by Seeger’s interchangeable use of the words “form” and “technique” (or “technic”). The use of the word “content,” however, is less precise. Seeger maintains that form and content are independent concepts though ideally, they should develop simultaneously. ¹³⁰ Whereas content emerges from the proletariat itself as a result of “a hundred years of revolutionary literature and action,” form is cultivated in the music of the bourgeoisie.¹³¹ This pairing of terms regarding the compositional process was common among Seeger’s writings as well as at contemporary performances of modernist works. Melissa de Graaf, in her study of the surviving transcripts of the New York Composers’ Forums, points out that “design versus sound” and “construction versus instinct” were common phrases used to describe the dichotomy of form and content during discussions of modernist music.¹³² For Forum participants, the origin of a work was intriguing: was it a result of inspiration or careful planning? In this context, “content” appears to embody the intangible aspects of music as opposed to the more overt compositional techniques.

In his discussion of form and content in Seeger’s early critical writings, scholar Robert Grimes asserts that “content” represents the function and value of the musical work, the very substance that gives music meaning. Value is determined by the individual (the composer, the listener, the performer), who is in turn influenced by tradition and the aesthetics of the society in

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¹³⁰ Carl Sands, “Proletarian Music as a Historic Necessity,” *Daily Worker*, March 6, 1934.


which they live. Both musicians and non-musicians value a musical work, which complicates the process as the non-musician is unable to comment on the technical or concrete aspects of the music. Instead, the layman draws on extra-musical meaning and personal experience to determine and communicate a work’s value. According to Grimes, the early writings of Seeger suggest that he viewed content as “the link between internal and external, between the purely, intrinsically musical and the social function of music.” The composer seeks to communicate something that is too abstract for language to relay on its own. Form, the “intrinsically musical” aspect, that is the technique, becomes the vehicle for communication. The musician’s responsibility, then, is to take the content of the proletariat, which Grimes argues exists primarily in language, and combine it with musical technique (that is, form). Linking content and language is an apt correlation that I believe is supported in the writings of Collective members. For Seeger and his colleagues, the relationship between music and text is a matter of great concern. The organization sought to distinguish revolutionary music from traditional, bourgeois music in both technical construction and extra-musical associations. As avant-garde idioms had thus far escaped distasteful capitalist or institutional connections, it could quickly adopt revolutionary overtones. However, Seeger recognized that it would take time for modernist music to acquire “definite meaning” with the proletariat. Adding unmistakably proletarian text to avant-garde music was an ideal way to begin the process.

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134 Ibid., 72.
135 Ibid., 80.
136 Ibid., 73.
For the Collective, the genres of the mass song and the choral work were vital to their cause. The model proletarian composer Hanns Eisler declared the supremacy of vocal music in the 1930s (at least among leftist composers) to be a natural result to the domination of instrumental music in the last few centuries:

Instrumental music, and the concert as an organized form of music life, are not essential forms but historical. They arose and were formed in a definite social organization, in capitalistic society, and so they come to a crisis when capitalistic society does. …After the instrumental music of the nineteenth century we are now entering a new period marked by the flowering and predominance of vocal music. The instrumental must play a more subordinate, less significant role, for in such music alone we cannot find a solution to the musical crisis. Our experience of the last twenty years has made that plain. Modern composers have tried practically everything and the result is complete anarchy; the composer rests only on his private formula and taste.\(^{138}\)

Eisler understood the crisis in music to mirror the crisis in society. Instrumental music, especially the Romantic symphonic masterworks, could not provide a solution to the crisis: the troubles of the present day could not be expressed in music alone, especially in an instrumental genre. According to Eisler, the modern composers of the last two decades attempted to maintain the tradition of instrumental music but vast differences in opinions and styles only created “complete anarchy.” For the revolutionary composer, music must be able to express something definite in order to communicate communist aims, and the addition of text mitigated much of the ambiguity of instrumental music.

In a draft of program notes for a concert of works by Collective composers, an anonymous author outlines the group’s perceptions of the “Musical Needs of the People,” which is worth quoting in its entirety as it illustrates the importance that the group placed on song and text:

These needs may be summed up briefly, as follows:

Mass Songs: the need for mass songs dealing with most immediate burning social issues, serving as a unifying force, to be sung at meetings, parades, demonstrations, and on the picket line (ex. United Front, Strike Against War, Scottsboro Boys)

Choral Songs: the need for choral music to be sung by the ever growing number of amateur as well as professional choral groups both at concerts and at meetings, dealing with themes taken from the life and problems of the workers, farmers, youth, professionals or this country. (ex. Flying Squadron, Ballad of Harry Sims, Sister and Brethren)

Solo Songs: the need for solo songs dealing with these same themes, to be sung by trained as well as untrained singers at all gatherings, meetings and festivities to replace the sentimental, exotic, highly-subjective “popular” or “art” songs which serve to concentrate attention on purely personal and private emotions to the exclusion of realistic social questions. (ex. Angelo Herndon, Death-house Blues)

Instrumental Music: the need (less immediate, perhaps, but no less important) for instrumental music (piano, chamber music, symphonic works) to express the deepest feelings of the people. …Shostakovich has given us the first examples of this sort of music in this May Day and October symphonies which are annually played in the Soviet Union on these days and whose function it is, according to the compose, to unify in the spirit of solidarity, great masses of people. 139

Notably, the first three musical needs all involve the addition of text to music: mass songs, choral songs, and solo songs. The text in mass songs should deal with the “most immediate burning social issues” and be appropriate for use at proletarian rallies. Likewise, both amateurs and professionals should be able to sing the choral songs and solo songs, which also set texts on “themes taken from the life and problems of the workers, farmers, youth, professionals of this country.” Interestingly, instrumental music is listed as the last category with the stipulation that the need here is “less immediate, perhaps, but no less important.” Apparently, the composition of instrumental music produced more difficulties for Collective composers and

139 These notes are undated though the context and certain aspects of the content suggests the date to be around 1935. One draft begins thus: “This program is the first concert in a series planned by the Composers Collective of New York to mark its third year of activity.” As the Collective was founded in 1932, that suggests the date to be three years later. See MB Papers, pp. 714-720, reel 7. Additionally, the Daily Worker published a review of a concert by Collective composers on February 23, 1935. An edited version of these “musical needs of the people” was included in the following publication of the American Music League: “The Composers’ Collective of New York,” Unison 1 (1936). While both the program notes and the short article do not directly name an author, Marc Blitzstein is listed as the contact in both sources, which may suggest his authorship.
warranted more discussion. The program notes continue with a section entitled “The Special Problem of Instrumental Music” that elaborates on these difficulties:

It will be the special function of instrumental music to bring into the conventional concert hall where it would perhaps be difficult for mass songs or choral works on social themes to penetrate, the viewpoint of composers who have definitely aligned themselves with the masses. This problem is most difficult of all for the composers since he has no words to guide and help him express this viewpoint.140

Instrumental music offered composers a way to reach audiences who did not identify with the communist cause. While these listeners did not participate in demonstrations and protests, they could become acquainted with the proletarian cause in the conventional concert hall through the performance of revolutionary instrumental music. Yet the author of the program notes admits that the proletarian composer faces great obstacles in writing this music as “he has no words to guide and help him express this viewpoint.” This perhaps explains why the need for instrumental music was “less immediate”; whereas songs could be immediately understood as revolutionary and had instant functionality at various events, instrumental music would take more time to assume a discernible revolutionary function. If the Collective was unsure of what revolutionary instrumental music entailed, they did indicate what it was not:

It [instrumental music] will not be a delicate, decorative, introspective art. It will not go in for super-complexities of technique for technique’s sake, nor refinement for refinement’s sake. It will not be “smart” nor merely entertaining and amusing, although it will entertain and perhaps amuse. …Whatever form it will take, it will contain vigor, directness, optimism, a simplicity of emotional utterance, and a broad monumental sweep.141

While the author does not provide clarification regarding how “vigor, directness, optimism, a simplicity of emotional utterance, and a broad monumental sweep” can be musically achieved in a composition, it is clear that revolutionary instrumental music will be set in stark

140 See MB Papers, pp. 719, reel 7.
141 Ibid.
opposition to the virtuosic, emotionally expressive Romantic instrumental genres. This new music will be one of distinct purpose.

The Composers’ Collective emphasized the importance of proletarian text throughout their writings and in their organization. In a *Daily Worker* column on establishing workers’ bands, Seeger asserts that arrangements of familiar mass songs are the most significant music the ensemble performs; of secondary importance are the band’s “concert pieces.”\textsuperscript{142} Perhaps more notable is the Collective’s establishment of a committee on texts. Other standing committees dealt with programming, contacts, and publication; the committee on text is unique in that its role expands beyond that of logistics. A draft of the group’s bylaws outlines the committee’s objectives:

The duties of the Sub-Committee on texts shall be: 1) the formation of a literary group and arrange meetings with them; 2) making of contacts with existing organisations [sic] such as the John Reed Clubs; 3) to make periodic appeals for texts; 4) to arrange prize contests for texts; 5) to keep on hand a file of current texts that may be used by the members of the Collective.\textsuperscript{143}

These duties include having members of the committee organize and judge contests for proletarian texts and maintain a list of texts that are appropriate for Collective composers to set to music. Proletarian songs possessed great value for the Collective. Numerous articles in the *Daily Worker* attest to the importance of the revolutionary song and its performance by proletarian choruses. Choral director and Collective member Lan Adomian emphasized his belief that “our songs have a definite purpose. They have to project the struggles of the working class both in a general as well as a specific way.”\textsuperscript{144} He praised the upcoming publication of a new

\textsuperscript{143} MB Papers, p. 712, reel 7. John Reed clubs were the literary equivalent of the Pierre DeGeyter Club.
\textsuperscript{144} Lan Adohmyan, “What Songs Should Workers’ Choruses Sing?” *Daily Worker*, February 7, 1934.
song book from the Workers’ Music League but nevertheless advised that “songs cannot be supplied fast enough to fill the truly gargantuan appetites of our singing groups.”

In order to compose new songs, new texts must be written as well. Elie Siegmeister, under his pseudonym L.E. Swift, wrote to Michael Gold, *Daily Worker* critic who penned the column “Change the World,” concerning the lack of suitable texts for revolutionary music. Siegmeister writes that proletarian composers face several problems though “One of their main problems (and the most persistent one to date) has been a lack of texts. As a result, not only have we been prevented from writing [music], but when we have turned out songs, they have suffered from the stiffness, the inadequacy, the labored quality of the words we have set to music.”

Siegmeister implored Gold to address the problem in his column and asks that Gold discuss what makes a “good text for a workers’ song.” He proposes a list of subjects that potential texts could draw upon including issues like Anti-War, Anti-Fascist, N.R.A., Unemployment Insurance and a dozen others. Siegmeister also encourages writers to compose simple, direct, and regular verse patterns and advises that “Rhyme makes them [the verses] more catchy. Very important is the necessity for having alternate verses in exactly the same rhythmic pattern as the first one, so that we can fit them to the same tune.”

Gold responds to Siegmeister’s letter in his column published the following day with his own entreaty for well-written revolutionary texts:

A popular song must be epigrammatic. It must have vitality. It must be heroic, but not in the conventional and mechanical style into which a bad writer falls so easily. The words must be singable; two syllable words that work every day, and not words that live only in libraries. The song must be flesh and blood of the movement. …It cannot be a personal

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145 Ibid.
146 Siegmeister’s letter to Gold was published in “Change the World!” *Daily Worker*, June 4, 1934.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
lyric; that is to say, the quirk or special vision of an isolated individualist. …And of course, it takes a certain kind of talent.150

Song texts must embody the essence of the movement for they create a link between form and content. The addition of text to music provided a way for avant-garde music to become associated with revolutionary ideology, a central aim of the Composers’ Collective.

The bond between revolutionary form and proletarian content needed to be indestructible. Seeger references the German Fascists’ use of mass songs initially intended for the proletariat:

“It is interesting to note that the German Fascists are consciously using the ‘International,’ ‘Comintern,’ Eisler’s ‘Red Wedding,’ the ‘Iron Reserve,’ by Shekhter and others, but with counter-revolutionary texts.”151 The appropriation of revolutionary music by the despised fascists troubled Seeger. He urged his fellow composers to further unite form and content to make it impossible for revolutionary music to be utilized in any other context:

The next very important point to be given consideration is to make it impossible, or at least, to hamper the use of our songs by the Fascists. For this purpose our songs should be politically still sharper and more definite. We must strive for the utmost unification of form and content, so that the style and general character of the song should fully ensue from and define itself by its ideological content. This, of course, will hamper and sometimes even make it impossible for the Fascists to use our songs with their words, because colossal contradictions will arise between the music and the text, which will ruthlessly destroy the artistic features of the songs.152

Avant-garde musical form must become so closely aligned with proletarian content (achieved primarily through the addition of text) that the music alone is immediately identified as revolutionary. Thus, when alternate texts are paired with the same tune, “colossal contradictions” will result, making it impossible to utilize the music in any way other than the original. In his article “On Proletarian Music” Seeger outlines three distinct phases that proletarian music will


152 Ibid.
undergo; the third and final phase will produce what he calls “art-products of the highest type.”

These ideal works arise from the interrelationship of form and content:

For technic and content are not two separate things, but rather two different aspects or ways of looking at one and the same thing. They are distinguished here for a special reason. Content can exist apart from its musical-technical expression. It is a characteristic of the structure of society whereas musical technic is of the superstructure. Revolutionary content can, for instance, be seen in the other arts and in the daily life of action. But as soon as this general content becomes associated with a new technic, that technic develops in a new way and in turn throws a new light on the generalized notions of content. This new light—musical revolutionary content—reacts again upon the general content. In this two-way relationship, technic and content become identified and then we have art-products of the highest type. 153

According to Seeger, the proletariat, or workers, comprise the structure of society while the intellectuals—like artists and musicians—make up the superstructure. The workers themselves provide the content while the composers provide the form (which the Collective imagined as avant-garde idioms). As the musical techniques combine with proletarian content, the two concepts begin to react upon each other: the form influences the content, and the content influences the form, and a new proletarian music emerges.

The Composers’ Collective sought to create music that would hearten and inspire workers to action. As the most prolific writer of the group and frequent contributor to the Daily Worker, Charles Seeger’s words on what constituted good proletarian song outlined the clearest objectives of what the Collective hoped to both accomplish and avoid. They focused on distancing new compositions from the Romanticized and bourgeois past that plagued the standard repertory and instead relied on the unpolluted avant-garde idioms of modern music. Composers paired this fresh technique with revolutionary text, with the objective of irrevocably linking the two; the final result would be “art-products of the highest type.”

CHAPTER 4
CRAFTING AN IDEAL: THE WORKERS’ SONG BOOKS AND RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER’S “CHINAMAN, LAUNDRYMAN!”

The final phase of proletarian music, which would produce “art-products of the highest type,” was attained only when form and content seamlessly interacted. The proletarian content, which Seeger reminds readers is “largely non-technical and even non- or extra-musical,” provides the revolutionary character while the avant-garde musical idioms provide the revolutionary technique. The content of the Collective’s music is closely linked to text: the organization wrote extensively on the importance of quality proletarian text and argued for the primacy of songs over purely instrumental genres. Yet before this ideal art form could be realized, music had to progress through two earlier stages according to Seeger. The first phase of proletarian music relied heavily on traditional elements and did not significantly depart from the past in order to appear more familiar to listeners. For the second phase, Seeger advised composers to introduce more and more avant-garde idioms, and an exploration of several of the mass songs in the Workers’ Songs Books confirms that these songs exemplify the transitional stage of proletarian music. The mass songs, written for workers’ choruses of varying skill levels, represent the musical manifestation of the ideology of the Collective, but Ruth Crawford Seeger’s solo song “Chinaman! Laundryman!” fulfills the ultimate goal of the group. Crawford’s song employs a serialized technical structure and pairs it with revolutionary poetry in a manner that causes the music and text to simultaneously affirm and contradict each other thus warranting the song’s inclusion into Seeger’s third and final phase of proletarian music.

The Collective knew that it would take time and extensive educational efforts for American workers to understand and accept avant-garde music. New compositions were already
rarely performed and often faced extensive criticism even when a performance was arranged. Simply pairing revolutionary text with contemporary music techniques would not immediately endear proletarian music to the public. Therefore, Seeger advocated the gradual implementation of avant-garde techniques into mass songs, hoping that over time, the American people would claim the music as their own. In the first phase of proletarian music, Seeger acknowledges that the music itself will rely mostly on traditional techniques and forms:

First there is the question of music for the proletariat. …Naturally, the musical styles are predominantly bourgeois. A new music cannot be made over night or out of whole cloth. As do other social functions, it shows an ordered development. The new grows out of the old, retaining what is strong and discarding what is weak.¹⁵⁴

This first stage of revolutionary music will be music written specifically for the workers (rather than music of the workers that emerged organically from the workers themselves). In order to appeal to listeners, composers should use musical styles that are familiar to the audience despite the style’s possible bourgeois connotations.¹⁵⁵ To my knowledge, Seeger does not connect this first phase of music to a particular composer or piece, perhaps because this stage of development still relies heavily on traditional forms and techniques.

The Composers’ Collective was not alone in their reluctance to immediately abandon traditional compositional structures in the development of proletarian style. Ashley Pettis, music editor for the leftist magazine New Masses, observed that

It is absolutely necessary at this stage in the creation of the mass songs, to preserve the best of the old traditions, harmonic and melodic, at the same time injecting new life into these old forms so that the most unsophisticated singer may be drawn into the singing. …A completely new and different harmonic structure in songs which have “popularity” in the best sense as one of their principal aims, tends to repel. The undesirability of this is

¹⁵⁵ Seeger, though, urged caution when troping past songs and styles. See the section “Distancing the Present from the Past” in Chapter 3.
obvious. These songs with the addition of a less complex and “static” accompaniment, should prove to be practical and valuable compositions.156

In order to appeal to the “unsophisticated singer,” composers should preserve older idioms while gradually introducing newer sounds and proletarian content. A “completely new harmonic structure” would likely fail to achieve popularity, but the same songs paired with a simpler accompaniment had a greater possibility of success. The magazine’s first song contest in 1934 intended to reward a song that would be accessible to the average worker and would encourage them to participate in musical activities. Collective composers submitted their original works to the contest and advertised the opportunity among a wider network of composers. Pettis describes the selection of the winning song as a process that examined not only the musical excellence of the submission but its setting of the Alfred Hayes’ text and its appeal to non-musicians. He says, “We want this song not only to be sung by a trained chorus, but to inspire others to join in the singing.”157 The winning submission, Aaron Copland’s “Into the Streets May First,” was determined to have

vigor, directness. Its spirit is identical with that of the poem. The unfamiliar, “experimental” nature of the harmonies which occur occasionally, does not tend to make the unsophisticated singer question. Copland has chosen a musical style of time-honored tradition, but he has imbued it with fresh vitality and meaning. …Some of the intervals may be somewhat difficult upon a first hearing or singing, but we believe the ear will very readily accustom itself to their sound.158

A smattering of experimental harmonies and intervals within a traditional structure was exactly what the contest judges deemed appropriate at this stage of proletarian songwriting. In contrast, the committee determined other entries to contain too many experimental harmonies,

156 Ashley Pettis, “Marching with a Song,” New Masses, May 1, 1934, 15.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
not enough experimental harmonies, or were simply too long to publish.\(^{159}\) It seems a delicate balance must be maintained in the transitional stages of mass song.

In the second phase, composers should include more and more elements of modern music and become increasingly more critical of what they take from the bourgeoisie.\(^{160}\) Seeger asserts that “Clearly, in the beginning, the bulk of the fabric of new compositions for the proletariat must be in idioms not unfamiliar to it. Into this can be introduced more and more of the newer technical resources.”\(^{161}\) This middle stage of development produces music that Seeger claims “may have all the worthwhile qualities of bourgeois music, and many more, but it must and will express them by means different in many respects from bourgeois music.”\(^{162}\) Perhaps this was the music that Seeger later referenced as containing either unusual harmonic progressions with usual chords or unusual chords in conventional patterns.\(^{163}\) The emphasis remained on attracting an audience by using customary styles and forms while slowly presenting unexpected sounds to listeners. The Collective hoped that over lengthy periods of time, the content of the proletarian text would become intrinsically linked with modernist idioms; so closely would the two relate that upon hearing a performance of avant-garde music without text, the listener would still associate the work with revolutionary ideals. For this reason, Seeger cautions composers about writing in styles that carry overt allusions to the bourgeoisie. For instance, he specifically

\(^{159}\) Other entries included works by Lahn Adohmyan, Isadore Freed, Wallingford Riegger, Carl Sands, Mitya Stillman, L.E. Swift, and a composer identified only as “XYZ.”


\(^{161}\) Ibid., 125.


entreats composers to avoid pairing revolutionary text to religious tunes or even utilizing styles with religious implications:

It is quite generally admitted that music acquires the power of definite meaning only through prolonged use in the given connection. Thus religious music of whatever kind, specific pieces (such as the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” with the words of “Solidarity Forever”) or even resemblance to religious styles should be avoided, as should also the music of leisure-class entertainment and dissipation.164

While Seeger’s second stage advocated the blending of traditional and avant-garde techniques, he perceived some musical styles of the bourgeoisie as so tainted with the corruption of religious institutions, a capitalist economy, and the general over-indulgence of the upper classes that he considered them unfit for use in revolutionary music. So what music did Seeger envision as the developmental stage of proletarian music? An examination of the intent and the practical uses of the *Workers’ Song Books*, two collections published by the Composers’ Collective in 1934 and 1935, provides a likely answer.

**Purpose and Background of the *Workers’ Song Books***

The first *Workers’ Song Book*, published in 1934, contains fourteen original songs written by five different composers all of whom were members of the Composers’ Collective.165 In the preface to the collection, the anonymous writer assures readers that “resemblance to religious, patriotic, and sentimental conventions has been studiously avoided. Free from defeatist melancholy, morbidity, hysteria, and triviality, it [the collection] shows a healthy and militant

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165 Composers listed are Carl Sands (Seeger), L.E. Swift (Siegmeister), Lan Adomian, Janet Barnes, and Jacob Schaeffer.
spirit.”166 The author continues with a description of the current state of revolutionary music in America saying the new style “is at once a demand of the new, proletarian culture and an inevitable outgrowth of the old, bourgeois art-music.”167 For a time at least, composers would have to rely on aspects of the old forms while gradually introducing newer idioms.

A second volume of the *Workers’ Song Book* quickly followed the first in 1935.168 This collection, however, expanded the purview of the repertoire and included twenty-two songs written (or arranged) by twelve different composers. The foreword, once again penned by an anonymous author, calls the book a “definite advance over the first book” and lists as noteworthy aspects the inclusion of “two original Negro songs of protest,” as well as popular workers’ songs from Germany, the Soviet Union, Mongolian People’s Republic, and Red China.169 Original songs by American composers (all affiliated with the Collective to varying degrees) still make up the core of the collection, and feature a wide range of topics including the opposition to war and fascism, the celebration of fallen heroes of the class war, and satirical looks at the “‘best’ personalities of American capitalism.”170

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166 *Workers’ Song Book 1*, (New York: Workers Music League, 1934), 2. While the preface is not attributed to a specific author, I believe it is most likely written by Charles Seeger. The opinions and writing style strongly resemble that of Seeger, and several phrases are lifted verbatim from articles by Seeger (or Sands).

167 Ibid.

168 Apparently, a third volume of mass songs was intended, though it never came to fruition. A “Note to Composers” appears in a footnote in the foreword to the second *Workers’ Song Book* and states that “the Editorial Commission of the Workers Music League will consider for publication in the third song book all MSS [manuscripts] received before June first, 1935.” See *Workers’ Song Book 2*, (New York: Workers Music League, 1935).

169 *Workers’ Song Book 2*, (New York: Workers Music League, 1935). The inclusion of German and Soviet songs (in English translation) featured the composers Hans Eisler, Stefan Volpe, Karl Vollmer, and Alexander Davidenko. L.E. Swift (Siegmeister) arranged the Negro spirituals for the collection, while J.C. Richards (Wallingford Riegger) provided the arrangements of Mongolian and Chinese workers’ songs.

170 Ibid. American composers featured in the second volume include Lan Adomian, Aaron Copland, J. Fairbanks (Henry Leland Clarke), George Maynard, J.C. Richards (Riegger), Earl Robinson, Carl Sands (Seeger), and L.E. Swift (Siegmeister).
The lyrics in both collections emphasized the growing inequality between employers and workers and the often dangerous or unfair conditions in the workplace; indeed, supplying protest songs for strikers constituted a central purpose of the publications. The anonymous author of the foreword to the second *Workers’ Song Book* claimed that “mass singing has played an ever more significant part in the great strikes and demonstrations that have been sweeping the country during recent years.”171 Additionally, the choral music found in the song books provided repertoire for the increasing number of workers’ choruses in New York City whose “size and competence…has been amazing.”172 By the mid-1930s, numerous revolutionary choruses existed, including the Daily Worker Chorus (under the conductor Elie Siegmeister and later renamed the Manhattan Chorus), New Singers (Lan Adomian), IWO’s American People’s Chorus (Earl Robinson), and Freiheit Gesang Ferein (Jacob Schaefer). The latter chorus, “Freedom Singers’ Society,” had existed since 1923 though its membership was primarily comprised of Jewish immigrants and its musical material restricted to Yiddish language songs familiar to its members. Yet this chorus and others like it had little impact outside the immigrant community even among other like-minded workers due to its reliance on songs in foreign languages with European-centered texts.173 The need for English-language proletarian songs written specifically for American workers was clear, and the Composers’ Collective was integral in the response to this need. By 1934, Lan Adomian, conductor of the New Singers and Collective member, was encouraged by the founding of more English language choruses (many in New York City led by Collective members as listed above) and their degree of “seriousness

and consistency." He urged composers to continue writing mass songs, one or two voice choral songs, four-part choruses, and even revolutionary cantatas for the more advanced chorus, citing the “gargantuan appetite” of the ensembles for proletarian music.

Many of the newly formed revolutionary choruses were what Lan Adomian called “club choruses,” groups comprised of laborers and skilled workers whose repertoire consisted primarily of one and two voice songs for chorus. In 1934, the newly founded Daily Worker Chorus held a concert celebrating the tenth anniversary of the leftist newspaper for which it was named, and Robert Kent’s review of the event and the new ensemble offers insight into how these choruses actually functioned. Kent provides a widely varied list of members’ occupations including office workers, carpenters, and needle trade workers who represented multiple races and nationalities: “Negro and white, American, Scotch, Italian, Russian, and others.” He asserts that while all the singers maintained membership in their trade unions and were class conscious, a “majority” were not official members of the Communist Party. Another common factor among the club chorus members was their lack of musical training: most members could not read music, according to Kent. He describes a rehearsal of the Daily Worker Chorus as a painstaking process of repetition: the director (Siegmeister) plays the melody on the piano, the chorus sings the melody back. The process is repeated with each phrase for each choral part (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) until the chorus learns the entire song to the director’s satisfaction.

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175 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
This slow process of rote learning and frequent repetition is undoubtedly why the one and two voice songs were the most popular choices for the beginning chorus.

In an article for the *Daily Worker* article, Adomian promotes the upcoming publication of a new song book by the Workers Music League which will contain mass choral and solo songs. Most likely, this collection Adomian references is the first *Workers’ Song Book* published in May 1934, according to a review in the *Daily Worker*. Both volumes of song books represent the achievement of an important goal of the Collective: to write music for American workers to sing. Furthermore, the publications offered the group the opportunity to put their ideology into practice. A critical look at several songs from the *Workers’ Song Books* suggests that Collective members made use of the opportunity, though some went further than others. The traditional techniques and formal structure of mass and choral songs appear alongside experimental idioms, decidedly placing these works within Seeger’s second and transitional stage of proletarian music.

**Blending Old and New Techniques in the *Workers’ Song Books***

The traditional structure of the mass songs found in the *Workers’ Song Books* adheres to established forms like the alternation of verse and refrain as well as strophic form, while songs for four-part chorus, whether original compositions or arrangements of existing songs, exhibit a through-composed form. Within these traditional structures appear the “newer technical resources” that Seeger urged composers to begin gradually incorporating into proletarian song. This juxtaposition of traditional elements with avant-garde idioms suggests that the mass songs

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of the *Workers’ Song Books* belong within Seeger’s second phase of proletarian music. He advises that this new music should “avoid pompous triviality and sentimentality. Revolutionary music should have emotional ‘drive’ and ‘lift’ and be optimistic, not morbid.”

Seeger further describes specific musical attributes of the ideal proletarian song: “Optimism is shown by vigorous and well-marked accents, ascending melodic lines, determined continuity toward objectives of surprise and daring.” Forward motion and ascending melodic lines supplied an uplifting nature to a song, while spirited tempos and short rhythmic values contributed to a relentless drive forward in time. Chromatic melodies and dissonant harmonies—those nods to the avant-garde movement—appear in varying degrees throughout the *Workers’ Song Books* as different composers employed the modern sound in varied quantities. Perhaps the characteristics that place the song books most firmly within the mass song movement are their embodiment of what Carol Oja identifies as the traits of mass song style: “Primacy of the words and their message; syllabic text settings; homophonic; hymn-like texture; frequent open octaves and fifths in the bass; and *forte* as the preferred dynamic marking (with *fortissimo* a close second).” The interaction of form and content was of paramount importance to the Collective and thus it is no surprise that the music in the *Workers’ Song Books* serves the text through its enlistment of the homophonic texture and syllabic text setting of the mass song

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183 Ibid.

184 The notable exceptions to these fast tempos, rapid rhythms, and forte/fortissimo dynamics in the *Workers’ Song Books* are the songs inspired by or arrangements of Negro spirituals. These songs tend towards slower speeds and more languorous melodies with bluesy chromaticism. See Adohmyan’s “A Negro Mother to Her Child” (WSB1) and L.E. Swift’s arrangements of the spirituals “Sistern and Brethern” and “I Went to ‘Tlanta” (WSB2). Janet Barnes’ “God to the Hungry Child” in the first song book also employs a slower, more free tempo though it is not affiliated with the tradition of the spiritual.

style. Yet composers paired this traditional formal structure and texture with cultivated
dissonance. Chromatic harmonies, experimental chord progressions, and changing meters are
pervasive throughout the collection.

One-part songs abound in both the Workers’ Song Books, though their experimental
features likely presented a greater difficulty for the untrained singers of revolutionary choruses.
In the first Workers’ Song Book, the song “Mount the Barricades” by Carl Sands (Seeger)
contains only one vocal part, but the instructions indicate occasional division into men’s voices
and women’s voices verifying that the single melodic line is intended to be performed with full
chorus (see Ex. A.1). In an index included in the second song book, “Mount the Barricades” is
listed as an appropriate song for beginning chorus.186 The emotional “drive and lift” that Seeger
recommended for proletarian music manifests here in a tempo marked “relentlessly” with a
suggested metronome speed of quarter note at 120.187 Written in 1/4 time with most measures
filled with eighth and sixteenth notes, the meter creates an even greater difficulty for beginning
revolutionary choruses, who probably found the song challenging, especially since the
intelligible delivery of the text was of utmost importance. The lack of traditional cadences and
abrupt phrase endings, while contributing to the rapid forward motion of the song, would require
deft breathing and fast transitions by chorus members to maintain the tempo and still
communicate the lyrics.

The harmonies within the piano accompaniment perhaps best represent the modernist
idioms that Seeger advocated the gradual inclusion of in proletarian song. While “Mount the
Barricades” exhibits a conventional verse-refrain form, syllabic text setting, and the preferred

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octave accompaniment in the piano with forte/fortissimo dynamics, the harmonies are far more experimental. The key signature suggests A-flat major, but though the song begins (m. 11) and ends (m. 30) with A-flat harmonies, the progressions in between have little in common with any tonal center (see Ex. A.1). For example, consider measures 21-25 of the piano part. The excerpt begins with a C-flat major chord in first inversion, followed by a major seventh chord built on E-flat in the next measure. Measure 23 is a cluster of six pitches that has no function in tonal analysis: A-flat, A, E-flat, E, D-flat, and G. When the three measures are considered together, however, it is easier to see that the inner voices contain intervals that progressively collapse by half steps while a sustained E-flat occupies the outer voices. The inner voices of the right hand move inward from a perfect fourth, to a minor third, to a major second, and the inner voices of the left hand begin with a major sixth, to a perfect fifth, and then, breaking the pattern, to a diminished seventh. All intervals but the unison and octave appear in some format though the resulting effect is hardly consonant. An F minor chord with an added B-flat and then a minor seventh chord on B-flat with a sustained C follows this jarring array of intervals in measures 24-25. The chord progression in measures 21-25 hardly belongs in A-flat major—or any tonality—but it provides the underlying harmonic structure for the voice in this phrase. Further dissonance and unrelenting forward motion can be achieved if the pianist chooses to follow the optional instruction of keeping time by playing the lowest three piano keys (A, B, C) on every downbeat for the duration of the song. Naturally, the preferred dynamic would be forte.

The text of “Mount the Barricades” is a rousing call to action to “fight for freedom” and defend the “workers’ cause.” The lyrics draw upon military images to express urgency and impress a sense of patriotism upon singers and listeners using phrases like “We do not fear guns or cannon” and the repeated cry of “Mount the barricades! For the workers’ cause, Carry on the
fight for freedom.” Such a song would not be out of place at a May Day rally, a concert of revolutionary song, or even a shock troop program. The incendiary text paired with both the traditional features of mass song and the unexpected dissonance of Seeger’s harmonies creates a unique product that characterizes the compositions by Collective members in the *Workers’ Song Books*. Despite, or perhaps because of, the dissonant harmonies and non-traditional chord progressions in “Mount the Barricades,” George Maynard, Collective member and fellow composer, called the work a “thrilling compact and forceful mass song, easy to sing, rousing in its appeal and perfectly harmonized in a virile, simple style. It is without taint of slackness or bourgeois feeling, and should be sung wherever workers make song.”188 The inclusion of avant-garde dissonance separated the song from its bourgeois counterparts, and the driving tempo certainly avoids slackness. While listeners with more traditional tastes might disagree with Maynard’s assertion of “perfectly harmonized,” once a chorus learned the melody it probably was rather easy to sing: the melody is primarily stepwise, and the top note of the piano part doubles the vocal line to aid the untrained singer.

Carl Sands (Seeger) contributed another song for one-part beginner’s chorus with piano accompaniment in the first *Workers’ Song Book* titled “Who’s That Guy?” (see Ex. A.2). Like “Mount the Barricades,” the juxtaposition of conventional elements and avant-garde idioms found in “Who’s That Guy?” further supports the inclusion of the Collective’s mass songs within Seeger’s second stage of proletarian song. An additional label of “Pioneer Song” appears above the title and staging instructions are included with select members of the chorus playing the role

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188 George Maynard, “Songs of Struggle by American Composers in New Workers’ Song Book,” *Daily Worker*, May 12, 1934.
of cops and the remaining singers functioning as “pioneers.” The use of the word “pioneers” reinforces Seeger’s view of workers as the leaders of change in the demand for social and political advancement for America’s laborers. In “Who’s That Guy?” Seeger selects a more relaxed tempo (“Jauntily”) than the unremitting pace found in “Mount the Barricades,” but the short rhythmic values and almost constant eighth notes in the piano accompaniment maintain the optimistic lift that Seeger required in proletarian song. Again, the favored dynamic is forte, the piano begins each eighth note pair with an octave, and the song sets the text syllabically as expected for mass song style. “Who’s That Guy?” utilizes a standard strophic form with text by Chinese dissident poet H.T. Tsiang in the first verse while the remaining verses are penned by Carl Sands. Seeger mimics Tsiang’s structure in the first verse, beginning by naming a prominent figure and then describing his accomplishments (Lenin and Stalin) or shortcomings (Hitler and Roosevelt). A key signature of one sharp coupled with most phrases ending on E suggests an E minor tonality, though the chord patterns in the piano are not arranged in conventional progressions. The piano accompaniment is comprised entirely of triadic harmonies that appear in a revolving pattern: F-sharp major, B major, E minor, and A minor. These four chords circulate in the same order beginning in measure 5 and continuing throughout the work. Occasionally, additional pitches sneak in and create a seventh chord (see mm. 13, 18, and 22) or more of a cluster chord effect (see mm. 1, 24, and 25). This is undoubtedly what Seeger later referred to as one of the Collective’s attempts to be musically revolutionary by employing usual chords in unusual harmonic progressions. The vocal line, while primarily stepwise with a small range,

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189 See Ex. A.2 to read the staging instructions in their entirety. The pioneers become more daring with each additional verse until they finally “rough up” the cops a bit, leaving the ineffectual officers in a heap on the floor.

offers more of challenge for the beginning chorus. While most mass songs double the vocal line in the accompaniment, Seeger staggers the chorus and piano. As a result, the voices often must sing a note half a beat before it is played in the piano (see mm. 6-7 for example). Other times, the voices and piano clash simultaneously, creating dissonance that could be hard for non-musicians to sing (for example, see the half step discrepancy m. 15 with the E in the voices and the D-sharp in the piano). Seeger’s combination of “newer technical resources” (unusual chord progressions and surprising dissonance between chorus and piano) while still relying on “idioms not unfamiliar” to workers (strophic form, triadic harmonies) places “Who’s That Guy?” decisively within the transitional phase of proletarian song.\footnote{“newer technical resources” and “idioms” from Charles Seeger, “On Proletarian Music,” \textit{Modern Music} 11, no. 3 (March/April 1934): 125.}

In his review of the first \textit{Workers’ Song Book} for \textit{New Masses}, Aaron Copland offers the opinion that Carl Sands wrote “the best songs in this present collection” citing the simple melody and unconventional harmonies of “Mount the Barricades” and the amusing nature of the play-song “Who’s That Guy?” as models for future composers to emulate.\footnote{Aaron Copland, “Workers Sing!” \textit{New Masses} June 1934, 28.}

Twelve additional unison songs for chorus are published within the \textit{Workers’ Song Books} though the amount of “newer technical resources” in individual songs varies depending on the composer. Translated foreign mass songs (like those of Hans Eisler) generally incorporate fewer modernist idioms, and some composers like Jacob Schaeffer (long-standing director of the Freiheit Gesang Verein) lean more heavily on conventional harmonies and tonality. Original compositions by Collective members most clearly embody the duality of old and new resources and represent a musical manifestation of the Collective's ideology. The remaining works within the \textit{Workers’ Song Books} include four solo songs, twelve songs for advanced four-part chorus,
and six rounds, all with varying degrees of modernist influence. The most basic of these is the round, intended for beginning revolutionary choruses with little experience in part singing. In the first *Workers’ Song Book*, a note from composers suggested that rounds function best if the chorus sings through the song in unison, then repeats it twice in canon in three (or four) equally divided groups, and ends with a final reiteration in unison. A further note is made that “Care should be taken that one part doesn’t drown out the others. The words should be very clearly enunciated.” Once again, the primacy of the text is of greatest importance.

The first *Workers’ Song Book* contains three three-part rounds by L.E. Swift (Elie Siegmeister), and it is Siegmeister’s round “Onward to Battle” that Seeger praises as an “interesting example” of the second phase of proletarian song. It is the combination of traditional and modern that appeals to Seeger, and he commends Siegmeister’s use of “a brisk tempo, alternation of four-four and five-eight meter that would cause difficulty for most bourgeois choruses. But workers’ choruses that have tried it do not have any trouble. Roughly speaking, if something unusual is done in one department it is wise to risk little in others at that time.”

“Onward to Battle” is the only round listed as intermediate level in the index to the song books, and this classification likely stems from the song’s constantly changing meter from 4/4 to 3/4 to 5/4 to 5/8 (see Ex. A.3). When performed in canon, however, the voices behave mostly homorhythmically with minimal syncopation, so the alternating meters do not create problems of immense difficulty even for singers just beginning to learn how to sing parts. Seeger advised to “risk little” in other aspects of the music, advice that Siegmeister evidently followed. The round is not particularly avant-garde: its melody is mostly stepwise with accessible leaps for the

195 Ibid. Seeger’s confidence in workers’ choruses is admirable, though it is doubtful that an ensemble’s musical aptitude depended on whether its members leaned proletarian or bourgeois in their politics.
average singer. When sung in canon, the voices create identifiable chords, though not in any
traditional progression: C major, D-A (open fifth), E minor, F# diminished, G major, B minor, G
major, A minor, B-F# (open fifth), E minor, and D major. Like Seeger’s song “Who’s That
Guy?,” the round “Onward to Battle” preserves familiar harmonies in unfamiliar settings.
Aspects of the round also suggest some modal rather than triadic influences with the E to E
octave descent in the B line that evokes E Dorian (note the C-sharp) and the alternating E and G
pitches in line A that are reminiscent of E Aeolian. Perhaps horizontal movement rather than
vertical harmony is more important here. Whether analyzed vertically or horizontally, “Onward
to Battle” contains elements of old and new techniques paired with text that is a rousing call to
action for workers. These characteristics along with Seeger’s endorsement of the round, place it
firmly within the transitional phase of proletarian music.

A brief comparison to another round is worthwhile, as the other five rounds contained
within the *Workers’ Song Books* exhibit more tonal and traditional techniques and fit better
within the first phase of proletarian music that Seeger labels as “predominantly bourgeois.”196 In
Swift’s (Siegmeister’s) round “The Three Brothers” published in the second *Workers’ Song
Book*, the key is clearly F major (see Ex. A.4). Phases cadence on the tonic chord (see beat 1 of
measures 2, 3, and 5), and familiar harmonies and chord progressions abound when the round is
sung in canon (a harmonic analysis of the final phase, measures 3-5, yields a progression of IV,
viiO, I, vi, IV, viiO, V, vi, I). The music for “The Three Brothers” may be more bourgeois in
origin, but the text is unmistakably proletarian. Siegmeister draws on a recurring theme among
proletarian song lyrics that critiques the wealthiest members of a capitalist society, here the
DuPont brothers. The DuPont family’s company manufactured gunpowder, dynamite, plastics,

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chemicals, and other materials and made their fortune selling explosives and weapons, an occupation that was especially profitable during wartime. Siegmeister’s text glibly suggests that while the DuPont brothers were patriots, their regard for their country faded when “yen or liras come along” and they “cheerfully to any nation sell, shells that will all armor pierce, and armor that will stop each shell.”\(^{197}\) Whether or not the claim was true, the concept would certainly appeal to Siegmeister’s audience of proletarian workers who viewed the powerful upper class as the enemy. Believing that their rich bosses turned a profit from trade deals with fascist regimes like Italy or Japan in the 1930s would only deepen the divide between communist workers and capitalist employers. The familiar harmonies of “The Three Brothers” likely contributed to Marc Blitzstein assessment of the round as “perfectly clear and satisfying” with the text revealing the “right trick of surprise in the last line.”\(^{198}\)

Songs for the Advanced Revolutionary Chorus

Of the twelve four-part choruses in the *Workers’ Song Books*, only four contain piano accompaniment while the remainder are a cappella. The index of songs included in the second volume lists all the four-part songs as appropriate repertoire for intermediate or advanced chorus. The advanced chorus, according to Adomian, possesses more technical skill than the club chorus, and its sole responsibility is to sing revolutionary music.\(^{199}\) The lack of piano accompaniment alone makes these songs more difficult to sing because of their reliance on modernist idioms. While members may have spent more time in rehearsals or even had some musical training, the advanced chorus was still comprised of mostly amateurs for whom singing atonal songs would

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be quite challenging without the aid of a piano. Six of the four-part songs are original compositions by Collective composers, and they contain technical devices similar to those found in the one-part songs.\textsuperscript{200} “We Want the World” (Swift), “John Reed Our Captain” (Maynard) Red Soldier’s Singing” (Adomian), and “Song of the Builders” (Sands) all exhibit changing meters, unusual harmonic progressions, and highly chromatic harmonies. Schaeffer’s two songs, “Lenin, Our Leader” and “Strife Song,” are significantly more tonal than the songs of his Collective counterparts, perhaps because of Schaeffer’s lengthy experience in choral tradition. The avant-garde technical devices in addition to the polyphonic texture of part-singing would provide a challenge for any ensemble. For the revolutionary chorus, the task of mastering these songs would appear even more daunting.

The four songs for solo voice and piano by Collective members in the \textit{Worker's Song Books} include one by Janet Barnes and three by Lan Adomian, all of which gravitate towards more avant-garde idioms and highly chromatic harmonies.\textsuperscript{201} Adomian’s song “Look Here Georgia!,” which draws attention to the southern state’s blatant racism and disenfranchisement of black Americans, contains clashing dissonance in the piano accompaniment that fortunately doubles the vocal line or even professional singers would struggle to perform the work. Aaron Copland thought Adomian showed the most promise among the young composers of the Collective, as he tried for “a revolutionary content through use of a revolutionary musical technique. He is not afraid of harsh harmonies and a jagged voice line.”\textsuperscript{202} Copland, however,

\textsuperscript{200} The other six four-part songs are arrangements of spirituals or translations of foreign songs. “The Flying Squadron,” while an original composition, was co-written by Earl Robinson and non-Collective members Oscar Saul and Peter Martin and does not exhibit the same kinds of modernist influences that are found in the songs exclusively by Collective members.

\textsuperscript{201} Lan Adomian’s “A Negro Mother to Her Child” contains these nods to modernist techniques while simultaneously drawing inspiration from African-American spirituals and the blues.

\textsuperscript{202} Aaron Copland, “Workers Sing!,” \textit{New Masses}, June 1934, 28-29.
counseled that such dissonances required “careful handling if they are not to result in music which is ungrateful for performers and unrewarding for listeners.”²⁰³ He noted that Adomian’s compositional style lacked caution in several works, but Copland was confident that the young composer would mature over time. Blitzstein agreed in his assessment of Adomian, claiming that he showed the clearest advance in style from the first to the second *Workers’ Song Book*, but his music still occasionally suffered from “eccentric harmonizing.”²⁰⁴ Blitzstein called the song “Look Here Georgia” a “rag-bag of false basses and mixed accidentals.”²⁰⁵ A short excerpt of the song illustrates Blitzstein’s criticism (see Ex. A.5). The piano accompaniment consists of octaves in the left hand that have little or no harmonic relationship to the chords in the right hand. These highly chromatic chords are not arranged in any familiar progression and tend to move in parallel motion as root position or second inversion triads.²⁰⁶ The resulting effect is strikingly dissonant and jarring: the vocal line coupled with the opposing ideas between the hands of the pianist seems to produce more confusion than cohesion.

Music for the Proletariat

The examples discussed above are representative of the Collective’s contribution to the genre of mass song and exhibit elements of their ideology in the songs’ emphasis on proletarian content paired with avant-garde compositional devices within traditional structures. In their quest to write music of the proletariat, music that the Collective hoped the average American worker

²⁰³ Ibid, 28.
²⁰⁵ Ibid.
²⁰⁶ Perhaps Blitzstein’s comment of “false basses” is due to this parallel motion. Blitzstein could be suggesting the parallel motion of the voices in the piano are reminiscent of the fifteenth-century style of fauxbourdon in which an additional vocal line is improvised a fourth below the cantus and a third above the tenor, creating a progression of harmonies that sound like first inversion triads.
would embrace as his own, the songs in the *Workers’ Song Books* reflect the transitional phase of music for the proletariat. The sounds of modernism emerge peppered throughout the collection, reflecting the organization’s belief that increasingly the listener would come to understand and appreciate avant-garde techniques. Ultimately, the Collective wished that the relationship between what they considered the untainted avant-garde style and proletarian text would develop together so closely that even the non-musician would associate that style with leftist ideals: a seamless interaction of form and content. Copland stressed the importance of creating good mass songs saying, “a good mass song is a powerful weapon in the class struggle. It creates solidarity and inspires action. …The song the mass itself sings is a cultural symbol which helps to give continuity to the day-to-day struggle of the proletariat.”

The songs in the *Workers’ Song Books* were not merely academic projects designed to test the Collective’s theory that avant-garde compositional style and revolutionary text could be combined to create a new style to represent the American proletariat. These songs were meant to be—and were—sung by the workers themselves. In the anniversary concert for the *Daily Worker* newspaper, the Daily Worker Chorus programmed songs by Siegmeister, Adomian, and Schaefer in addition to leading the audience in mass songs not listed by name. The New Singers, directed by Adomian, included works by “contemporary revolutionary composers” alongside traditional repertoire at a fundraising concert for the Workers’ Music School. Program notes that survive in the Marc Blitzstein Papers, allude to a concert of music that featured mass songs, piano works, and string quartets all by Collective composers who believed their music must have

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207 Aaron Copland, “Workers Sing!,” *New Masses*, June 1934, 28.
a “strong social content.” Quite possibly, this concert is the same one that the short-lived publication Music Vanguard sponsored that promoted Collective composers. The extant program, which took place on May 12, 1935, lists choral and solo songs, piano works, and a string quartet on the performance. Songs from the *Workers’ Song Books* include the rounds “Charlie Schwab” (Sands), “The Three Brothers” (Siegmeister), and “Not If, But When” (Sands), and the choral songs “Song of Pickets” (Robinson), “United Front” (Fairbanks), “Song of the Builders” (Sands), “Sistern and Brethren” (arr. Siegmeister), “The Ballad of Harry Simms” (Adomian), “John Reed, Our Captain” (Maynard), “The Flying Squadron” (Saul/Martin/Robinson), “Stop In Your Tracks” (Adomian), and “Who’s That Guy?” (Sands). The two latter songs, while indicated in the song books as one-part choral pieces, were performed as solo songs by baritone Mordecai Bauman on this particular concert. More concerts and performances of works by Collective composers undoubtedly occurred but no physical evidence survives to confirm that the events took place. Designed to be useful to workers and to create an interaction between the composer and his audience, the mass songs of the Collective represent the antithesis of the bourgeois, canonic music the members so vocally criticized.

Even after undergoing a demanding vetting process during Collective meetings where fellow composers offered critical suggestions, the published songs faced additional scrutiny. In his review of the first *Workers’ Song Book*, George Maynard found fault in songs with bare melodies (“Song to the Soldier”), poor choice of text (“Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die”), and

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210 MB Papers, p. 716, reel 7. The date for this concert is likely sometime in 1935. The notes list 1932 as the founding year of the Collective, and identify this concert as the first in a series designed to mark the third year of activity of the group. See MB Papers p. 714.

211 MB Papers, p.725-726, reel 7. The date of the concert is indicated as Sunday, May 12th, and while no year is included in the date, in the 1930s, May 12th was on a Sunday only in the year 1935.
unsuccessful text setting ("Hunger March").\textsuperscript{212} Marc Blitzstein thought the English translations of some of the foreign songs included in the second \textit{Workers’ Song Book} failed to impress as lyrics or even as poetry, and he found the "needless condescension" of offering a definition after every dynamic marking annoying.\textsuperscript{213} The Collective’s mass songs had not yet achieved the end goal of "art-products of the highest type," but perhaps Ruth Crawford Seeger, one of the group’s fringe members, came the closest in her \textit{Two Ricercari} for solo voice and piano.

"Chinaman! Laundryman!" and the Final Phase of Proletarian Music

Written in 1932 for voice and piano, "Chinaman, Laundryman" reflected Ruth Crawford Seeger’s "shock at the depression in 1932 and ’33."\textsuperscript{214} The Society of Contemporary Music in Philadelphia commissioned Crawford to compose a set of songs for the organization, and the \textit{Two Ricercari} “Sacco, Vanzetti” and “Chinaman, Laundryman” were the resulting works.\textsuperscript{215}

Charles Seeger called the two songs “declamations of tremendous dramatic power…[with] a social significance about them” that he claimed was not present in Crawford’s other songs from the same time period.\textsuperscript{216} Furthermore, these two solo songs vary substantially from the mass songs of the \textit{Workers’ Song Books}, and their highly organized technical structure interacts with the revolutionary text in a way that the mass songs cannot. An analytical case

\textsuperscript{212} George Maynard, “Songs of Struggle by American Composers in New Workers’ Song Book,” \textit{Daily Worker}, May 12, 1934.


\textsuperscript{214} This is Charles Seeger speaking about both ricercari in Ray Wilding-White, “Remembering Ruth Crawford Seeger: An Interview with Charles and Peggy Seeger,” \textit{American Music} 6, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 451.


study of “Chinaman! Laundryman!” reveals the close relationship between music and text in Crawford’s song and confirms that it belongs within Seeger’s final phase of proletarian music.

Both songs in the Two Ricercare deal with pressing issues of social justice and set poetic texts written by Chinese dissonant poet H.T. Tsiang. Tsiang self-published the poems in the collection Poems of the Chinese Revolution in 1929 though many of the poems had already appeared in print in the Daily Worker and New Masses. The text of “Sacco, Vanzetti” commemorates the one-year anniversary of the execution of the Italian-American men Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. In 1921, the men were accused of murder and robbery, and though the evidence suggesting their involvement was tenuous and the eyewitness accounts were dismantled in court, the jury still found the men guilty. Public outcry followed the verdict as many people believed that the well-known radicalism of Sacco and Vanzetti prejudiced the jury against the accused. Nevertheless, the men lost their final appeal and were executed in 1928.

The poetry in “Chinaman, Laundryman” centers on the equally charged topic of racism and workers’ rights told from the perspective of a Chinese immigrant employed as a launderer. The launderer confronts his boss—who is also Chinese—and exclaims, “My skin is yellow, Does my yellow skin color the clothes? Why do you pay me less for the same work?“ The worker is separated from his wife, who still resides in China perhaps due to the restrictive immigration policies the United States maintained towards Chinese people in the first half of the twentieth century. Here, the launderer earns fifteen dollars a week for twelve-hour workdays, and his employer’s response to his plea for a living wage is that he can return to China and work longer hours for far less pay if he finds the hours too long and the wages too low here in America. The

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218 Ibid., 7.
defeated launderer replies, “Thank you Boss!/For you remind me./I know/Bosses are robbers/Everywhere!” The character of the boss additionally serves to undermine the identity of the launderer. The boss never refers to him by name, instead calling him “Chinaman,” “Laundryman,” and stereotypical Chinese family names such as “Wong” and “Hai Shan.” The lack of personhood adversely affects the launderer to the point where he exclaims “Don’t call me ‘man’!/I am worse than a slave.” The launderer doubts his own humanity, feeling as though he fails to deserve even the descriptor of “man.” Yet by the conclusion of the poem, the launderer appears to claim his identity for himself and to take pride in his occupation saying, “Don’t call me ‘Chinaman’! /Yes, I am a ‘Laundryman’! /The workingman!” and calls his fellow workers to action in solidarity with the communist cause in order to create a “clean world.” (See Figure 3 for poem in its entirety.)

Figure 3: Poem “Chinaman! Laundryman!” by H.T. Tsiang. The words of the boss are in italics.

“Chinaman”!
“Laundryman”!
Don’t call me “man”!
I am worse than a slave.

Wash! Wash!
Why can I wash away
The dirt of others’ clothes
But not the hatred of my heart?
My skin is yellow,
Does my yellow skin color the clothes?
Why do you pay me less
For the same work?
Clever boss!
You know
How to scatter the seeds of hatred
Among your ignorant slaves.

219 Ibid.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid., 8.
Iron! Iron!
Why can I smooth away
The wrinkles of others’ dresses
But not the miseries of my heart?
Why should I come to America
To wash clothes?
Do you think “Chinamen” in China
Wear no dresses?
I came to America
Three days after my marriage.
When can I see her again?
Only the almighty “Dollar” knows!

Dry! Dry!
Why do clothes dry,
But not my tears?
I work
Twelve hours a day,
He pays
Fifteen dollars a week.
My boss says,
“Chinaman,
Go back to China
If you don’t feel satisfied!
There
Unlimited hours of toil;
Two silver dollars a week,
If
You can find a job.”
“Thank you Boss!
For you remind me.
I know
Bosses are robbers
Everywhere!”

Chinese boss says:
“You Chinaman,
Me Chinaman,
Come work for me—
Work for your fellow countryman!
By the way,
You ‘Wong,’ me ‘Wong’—
Do we not belong to same family?
Ha! ha!
We are cousins!
O yes!
You ‘Hai Shan’, me “Hai Shan’,  
Do we not come from same district?  
O, come work for me;  
I will treat you better!”  
“GET away from here,  
What is the difference,  
When you come to exploit me?”

“Chinaman”!  
“Laundryman”!  
Don’t call me “Chinaman”!  
Yes, I am a “Laundryman”!  
The workingman!  
Don’t call me “Chinaman”!  
I am the Worldman,  
“The International Soviet  
Shall be his human race”!

“Chinaman”!  
“Laundryman”!  
All the workingmen!  
Here is the brush  
Made of Marxism.  
Here is the soap  
Made of Leninism.  
Let us all  
Wash with the blood!  
Let us all  
Press with the iron!  
Wash!  
Brush!  
Dry!  
Iron!  
Then we shall have  
A clean world.

Like many of the mass songs in the *Workers’ Song Books*, Tsiang’s poetry explores issues of race, social, and economic justice, all topics championed by the leftist movement and the proletariat. This poetry, however, is decidedly different from the lyrics found in most of the mass songs of the *Workers’ Song Books*, which tends to contain predictable, rather elementary, rhyme schemes (aabb or abab for instance) and inflammatory rhetoric meant to appeal to
listeners’ emotions and rouse them to action.\textsuperscript{222} The music subsequently mirrors the structured, rhyming text in a strophic form or verse and refrain that highlights the simplicity of the words. In contrast, Tsiang’s poetry is free verse and encourages the reader to think more deeply about the humanity of the speaker. The first-person narrative of the poem engenders an intimacy between speaker and reader; suddenly, injustice is no longer a generic rallying cry but a personal plea.

Prior to “Chinaman! Laundryman!,” Crawford already had success in composing solo songs paired with contemporary poetry in her Five Songs (1929) and Three Songs (1930-32) that set the works of American poet Carl Sandburg. Her setting of Tsiang’s poetry follows in this tradition and requires a highly trained singer in performance as it exhibits her characteristic modernist style. This is not a mass song for amateur workers’ choruses to learn by rote at a piano. Rather, Crawford’s “Chinaman! Laundryman!” belongs more clearly in the category of “solo songs” listed by the Collective as one of the four genres to fulfill the “Musical Needs of the People.”\textsuperscript{223} Designed to be sung by both trained and untrained singers at various gatherings, these songs served to “replace the sentimental, exotic, highly-subjective “popular” or “art” songs which serve to concentrate attention on purely personal and private emotions to the exclusion of realistic social questions.”\textsuperscript{224} Crawford’s song certainly asks the listener to consider several “realistic social questions” though it also relays the personal emotions of the launderer and stirs the sensibility of the listener. Even Charles Seeger admitted that “It would take a very fine

\textsuperscript{222} A few notable exceptions are the lyrics to the songs “God to the Hungry Child” (WSB 1) with text by Langston Hughes, “Into the Streets May First” (WSB 2) by Alfred Hayes, and “John Reed, Our Captain” (WSB 2) by Michael Gold. These texts by accomplished writers demonstrate more nuance and sophistication than most of the other mass songs in the song books. (Alfred Hayes wrote the poem “Joe Hill,” which Collective composer Earl Robinson turned into a ballad later sung by performers Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, and Joan Baez. Writer and communist activist Michael Gold (pseudonym for Itzok Isaac Granich) penned the “Change the World” column in the \textit{Daily Worker} and co-edited the leftist magazine \textit{New Masses}.)

\textsuperscript{223} MB Papers, pp. 714-720, reel 7.

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.
dramatic singer or perhaps declaimer to perform them [the Two Ricerari]…they are so entirely different in tenor from the Sandburg songs that she’d [Crawford] written only a few years before. There’s a—I hesitate to use the term—a social significance about them that is scarcely in the Sandburg songs.”

The proletarian text is paired with Crawford’s signature ultra-modernist style that incorporates a declamatory delivery of text, highly serialized elements like pitch and rhythm that are rotated and transposed, and a heterophonic texture in which different lines work in tandem and in opposition to each other. This pairing of avant-garde technique and politically charged text is precisely what the Collective advocated as ideal proletarian music. In fact, the interaction between music and text in “Chinaman! Laundryman!” is decidedly sophisticated, and the musical language employed by Crawford exceeds the gradual implementation of new techniques that Seeger used to define his second phase of proletarian music. Crawford’s “Chinaman! Laundryman!” most certainly belongs in Seeger’s third phase in which form and content seamlessly interact. Seeger claimed that as revolutionary content (that is text) becomes associated with “a new technic, that technic develops in a new way and in turn throws a new light on the generalized notions of content. This new light—musical revolutionary content—reacts again upon the general content. In this two-way relationship, technic and content become identified and then we have art-products of the highest type.”


226 Joseph Straus describes the style of the ultra-modernists as one that rejected the triadic basis of European art music and instead “elevated formerly dissonant intervals to structural status, promoted the radical independence of the parts in a polyphonic texture, explored new sound combinations and means of sound production, and sought new ways of structuring rhythm and timbre, and of integrating those dimensions with pitch structure.” See Joseph Straus, The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

content comment and react upon each other, and this close relationship creates an art product that eclipses the transitional stage of proletarian music found in the mass songs of the *Workers’ Song Books*.

In prior scholarship, however, some scholars have tentatively placed Crawford’s *Two Ricercari* in the second phase of Seeger’s progression of proletarian music, while others have avoided connecting the two entirely. Yet, detaching the songs from the politics and philosophical discourse of the Collective neglects to fully understand and appreciate the works. The *Two Ricercari* are clearly intended as political works written by a member—albeit a less active member—of the Collective, which warrants a consideration of the two songs with regard to the ideological goals of the group. Scholars like Roger O’Neel and Joseph Straus focus solely on the compositional methods Crawford employs in “Chinaman! Laundryman!” and mention the Collective only as a contextual reference. Straus even expresses the opinion that because the piano accompaniment in the song does not “depart significantly from her mature, ultra-modern idiom…Crawford’s politics did not impinge in any deep way on her music.” While Crawford’s involvement with the Collective may not have transformed her compositional style, her style was already avant-garde and thus predisposed to be utilized in proletarian music as


employing modern techniques was a central goal of the Collective. Crawford certainly used the *Two Ricercari* to make a political statement, and the music adds further meaning to the text that suggests Crawford’s politics likely informed her compositional decisions.

In her dissertation, Maria Fava examines Seeger’s article “On Proletarian Music” that outlines the three phases of proletarian music, but she does not directly connect “Chinaman! Laundryman!” with any specific phase. She instead affirms that Crawford’s song better corresponds with Seeger’s idea of “proletarian musical style” than the mass songs of the *Workers’ Song Books* without clearly indicating what exactly she—or Seeger—means by “proletarian musical style.”

Judith Tick discusses the revolutionary nature of the *Two Ricercari* within the framework of the Collective, and though she does not associate Crawford’s songs with a specific phase of music as advocated by Seeger, Tick firmly states that Crawford’s use of heterophonic texture “embodied class conflict into the music itself” and reveals Crawford’s “new political consciousness.”

Finally, Ellie Hisama states definitively that it is her opinion that “Chinaman! Laundryman” “illustrates the second phase of proletarian music that Seeger describes” as the song combines revolutionary content and experimental compositional techniques. In reality, however, all of Seeger’s three phases of proletarian music juxtapose those elements; the difference lies in the degree to which experimental techniques appear. He describes the second phase as transitional, with limited and carefully chosen modernist idioms.

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and identifies Swift’s round “Onward to Battle” as a prime example of the second phase. In contrast, the rigid serialization and advanced compositional devices found in Crawford’s “Chinaman! Laundryman!” as well as its demand for a highly skilled performer, places the song decisively within Seeger’s third and final phase. There is no gradual implementation of avant-garde idioms in Crawford’s songs. Rather, this is a musical manifestation of the final goal of the Collective: the seamless interaction of form and content.

The Collaboration of Music and Text

Crawford’s highly serialized compositional style is on full display in the piano accompaniment to “Chinaman! Laundryman!” as exhibited in her use of a nine-note tone row that provides all the pitch material for the song and in the strict organization of three recurring rhythmic patterns. The nine-note tone row (G-Gb-F-Eb-C-E-D-B-C#) employs every pitch between B and G and appears in full in every measure, doubled in octaves between the hands of the pianist. The first statement of T0 is contained within measure 4 (see Ex. A.6), and Crawford subsequently rotates the row eight times in the next eight measures, beginning each rotation with the next pitch of T0 (see Ex. A.7). After the row appears in every rotation, she transposes the row beginning on the second pitch of T0 and then rotates the transposed row eight times starting each rotation on the subsequent pitch of the transposed row (see Ex. A.8). This process continues until Crawford has transposed T0 by beginning on all nine pitches of the row with the only interruption occurring in measures marked “recitative” where the piano accompaniment ceases,
and the voice sings alone. The final nine measures of piano accompaniment (mm. 91-99) restate T0 and its eight rotations exactly as it appeared in measures 4-12 (see Ex. A.9).\textsuperscript{234}

The rhythm of the piano accompaniment is equally serialized. Crawford selects three rhythmic patterns and contains each pattern within one measure of the piano’s material (See Figure 4). These patterns are then rearranged among groups of three measures until the patterns have appeared in all six possible permutations, which encompasses eighteen measures.\textsuperscript{235} Thus, the nine measure statements of two tone rows and their rotations falls within one eighteen measure section of a complete presentation of the six permutations of the rhythmic patterns. Interestingly, neither the serialization of pitch or rhythm corresponds with the structure of the poem. The stanzas and lines of the text of “Chinaman! Laundryman!” do not align with a section of a transposed and rotated tone row or any aspect of the rhythmic serialization. Straus calls this independent structuring of pitch, rhythm, and text a “wonderful example of what Seeger and Crawford would have understood as heterophonic form, a sense that there is not one single form for a piece, but rather a multiplicity of forms that contradict and strain against each other.”\textsuperscript{236} This music is highly organized on all levels and provides a sharp contrast to the mass songs of the Collective in which avant-garde techniques were limited to chromatic harmonies, unusual chord progressions, and changing meters.

\textsuperscript{234} For a thorough discussion and analysis of the serialization of pitch in “Chinaman! Laundryman!” see Hisama, “The Politics of Contour.”

\textsuperscript{235} Hisama labels the patterns A, B, and C and lists all the permutations as ABC ACB CAB CBA BCA BAC which repeats five times throughout the song. She also marks the four instances in which Crawford breaks the rhythmic pattern. See Hisama, “The Politics of Contour,” 80. Similarly, Joseph Straus analyzes the rhythmic serialization, labelling each pattern as X, Y, and Z. See Straus, “The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger,” 117-118.

\textsuperscript{236} Straus, \textit{The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger}, 118.
The political text and provenance of “Chinaman! Laundryman!” necessitates a consideration of what the serialized piano accompaniment might represent in terms of extra musical meaning. The Chinese launderer in the poem bemoans the inequity of an unregulated system in which he labors for a pittance and receives no social support. The fixed techniques applied to the accompaniment suggests that the piano represents the uncompromising capitalist system in which the launderer is trapped. Judith Tick describes the perpetual pattern of the piano as a depiction of the “pervasive oppression of the capitalist boss on an exploited worker and the inhumanity of this underpaid manual labor,” and Straus compares the piano part to a “kind of mechanistic clattering and banging that is clearly evocative of repetitious manual labor.” Hisama asserts a similar viewpoint though her interpretation is altered by her study of contour in both the piano and vocal parts. She claims that the piano has “a dual function: it represents the labor system that is being splintered, and it prompts the launderer to take a more active role in

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changing his situation.”238 In her study, Hisama analyzes “Chinaman! Laundryman!” by considering the contour of the piano in each nine-measure section that rotates a tone row. Sections 1 and 2 are considered the contour “norm” as the following sections (3-10) all relate back to these first two.239 Each subsequent section progressively deviates from its contour norm as the song and poem advances, and Hisama concludes that as the words of the launderer gain in assertiveness so does the piano accompaniment increasingly alter its contour thus representing a restructuring of the system.240 What I find problematic about Hisama’s conclusion regarding the role of the piano’s contour is her inability to explain why the final section returns verbatim to the T0 row and the exact contour of the first section (compare Ex. A.6-A.7 to Ex. A.9). If the piano represents the impetus for the launderer to break through the rigidity of the system and thus “splinter” or “restructure” it, should not the final section contain the greatest contour deviance or severance with the system?

A study of the vocal line in “Chinaman! Laundryman!” reveals a contrasting texture to the piano accompaniment and raises questions about what the vocal line represents and how it influences the understanding of the text. Crawford employs a declamatory style of singing, incorporating her own approach to Sprechstimme, which she indicates by marking wavy lines and arrows that suggest a glissandi effect and inexact pitch (see Ex. A.10). The incorporation of Sprechstimme allows the voice to create the effect of speak-singing, which ensures that the words are clearly understood, a goal the Collective was adamant about in all their proletarian music.241 The imprecise pitch designation and free delivery of the vocal line lies in stark

239 Ibid., 80-81.
240 Ibid., 91.
241 Straus notes that the use of Sprechstimme was a “technical novelty” for Crawford and thus underlines her careful planning to guarantee that the text was clearly enunciated. See Straus, The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger, 211.
opposition to the strictly planned piano accompaniment. Furthermore, the two parts are written in conflicting meters with the voice in cut time and the piano in triple time (see Ex. A.10). Straus proposes that the duality between voice and piano has “an obvious dramatic significance, contrasting the yearnings of the narrator with the oppressive world in which he is trapped,” and Tick concludes that the “voice and piano mirror conflicts between the ruling and the working classes.” Crawford designates the unstructured vocal line to represent the poem’s speaker and his struggle to free himself from the unyielding nature of the system that is characterized by the strict serialism of the piano.

Crawford is further able to give separate voice to both speakers in the poem through her manipulation of contour in the vocal line. In her analytical study of contour, Hisama marks the boundaries of each vocal contour segment by the lines of the text, and then she reduces each segment to its prime form using Robert Morris’s contour reduction algorithm. The results are intriguing. The contour of the boss regularly employs an ascending motion, and instances of two note primes most often reduce to prime contour <0 1>. Perhaps the most notable instance of the boss’s contour is in his opening cry of “Chinaman! Laundryman!” in which he sings the tritone B-F without piano accompaniment, a moment that Crawford marks “recitative” in the score (see Ex. A.10). This strikingly dissonant interval appears peppered throughout the boss’s

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243 Ellie Hisama is the first scholar to discuss the concept of contour and meaning in “Chinaman! Laundryman!” and her work forms the content for her chapter “The Politics of Contour in Crawford’s ‘Chinaman, Laundryman,’” in *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).


245 Ibid., 93.
lines every time he directly refers to the launderer, and it is exactly replicated in the same recitative fashion in measures 75-76 and 85-86.

In contrast, the launderer's contour presents an inversion of the boss’s distinctive melodic shape, consistently outlining a descending motion with most of his two note primes reducing to <1 0>.\(^{246}\) For example, the launderer’s cries of “Wash! Wash!” in measure 6 each depicts the prime <1 0>, a descending contour that suggests agitation resulting in defeat (see Ex. A.10). Even the questions posed by the launderer end on the lowest pitch of the phrase, a downward inflection that signifies the rhetorical nature of the question.\(^{247}\) The launderer asks difficult, sometimes heartrending questions: “Why can I wash away/The dirt of others’ clothes/But not the hatred of my heart; Why can I smooth away/The wrinkle of others’ dresses/But not the miseries of my heart?”\(^{248}\) Yet, his queries remain unanswered, perhaps even unheard, as the boss responds with condescension and neglects to directly address any of the launderer’s pleas.

By the conclusion of the song, however, the contour of the launderer begins to change and incorporates increasingly more upward inflections. The closing stanza of text begins with a final recitative of the boss’s slur “Chinaman! Laundryman!” set to his characteristic ascending tritone (measures 85-86). The launderer then resumes speaking, calling his fellow workers to action in order to create a better world. This assertiveness in speech is matched by a more assertive contour: the launderer employs the <0 1> contour of the boss five times in this section for a total of seven times in the entire song (see Ex. A.11, measures 88, 90, 92).\(^{249}\) To Hisama, this represents the launderer’s liberation as he is now “able to enter what formerly had been the

\(^{246}\) Ibid.
\(^{247}\) Ibid., 96.
It is her conclusion that Crawford’s use of contour in the song “Chinaman! Laundryman!” ultimately confirms the message of the text: the launderer is transformed into an independent and self-affirming individual.

Yet, this conclusion fails to address that despite the prevalence of the prime contour \(<0 1>\) in the last stanza, there is an equal number of prime contours \(<1 0>\) that have defined the character of the launderer until this point. In fact, as the launderer calls workers to action, he alternates the contour of every line of text between \(<0 1>\) and \(<1 0>\) (see Ex. A.11). This constant shift between these two distinct contours indicates a wavering uncertainty and suggests that the launderer has not entirely escaped from the control of the boss or the confines of the system. Additionally, in the final stanza of text, the piano part returns to the original form and contour of the T0 row, indicating that the environment remains unchanged, and the voice of the launderer remains imprisoned between the register of the pianist’s hands. Perhaps the launderer’s use of the \(<0 1>\) contour is mere mimicry of the boss’s voice, a desperate bid to relate to someone who might produce a change in the launderer’s circumstances. Or perhaps the launderer has succumbed to the pressures of a broken system and no longer speaks in his own voice. While Hisama concludes that Crawford’s music carries a message of hope that mirrors the assertive nature of the poetry, alternate conclusions are possible from the same study of contour. This is music and text collaborating at the highest level, a true interaction of form and content that the Collective so eagerly sought. The song forces the listener to consider its meaning without offering one clear answer. Does the song rouse listeners to hopeful resistance as a result of the

250 Ibid.
251 Ibid., 62.
252 Hisama mentions this alternation of contour but does not provide an explanation for how the launderer’s continued employment of a descending contour affects her thesis, which argues that the launderer is ultimately freed from his predicament as seen in his change in contour. Hisama, “The Politics of Contour,” 98.
launderer’s success in claiming his own identity? Or does the song depict a dim future for communist sympathizers, a lost cause due to the inability to escape the magnetic pull of systematic racism, social injustice, and economic collapse?

An analysis of the pitch, rhythm, contour, and text of “Chinaman! Laundryman!” reveals that Crawford’s politics were foremost in her mind during her compositional process. The highly serialized material in the piano reflects the rigidity of the social and political system that imprisons the launderer. Despite the transformation of the original tone row through its various transpositions, rotations, and deviation in contour, the return of the piano accompaniment to its initial form confirms the launderer’s inability to overcome his environment and his oppressor. Though the launderer’s vocal line begins to imitate the contour of the boss, it continues to alternate with his own descending contour. The voice of the launderer is buried under or between the register of the piano’s lines and suggests his words (or perhaps their full meaning) remains inaudible to others. While the end of the poem declares the autonomy of the launderer as he asserts his own identity and exhorts his fellow workers to action, the music offers a conflicting revelation. Though the launderer is eventually able to speak using the contour of the boss, this ability is discovered to be a mere mimicry of the boss’s language because nothing else has changed. The return to the prime form of material in the piano and the inability of the launderer to fully escape his original contour insinuates several possibilities: the launderer has been fooled into believing he is free and now able to communicate in the language that was previously denied him; the launderer is no longer able to resist or endure his oppression and has resigned himself to imitation and thus self-preservation; or the launderer has succumbed to the allure of the system and is now a boss himself.
Regardless of one's interpretation of the analysis of Crawford's song, the classification of the song within Seeger's third phase of revolutionary music is clear. Here, form and content create an interplay in which technique and text influence, even contradict, each other. The song “Chinaman! Laundryman!” asks questions of the listener that the mass songs of the *Workers’ Song Books* only hint at superficially. While the mass songs communicate generic leftist ideas such as opposition to capitalism, fascism, economic disparity, and racial injustice, Crawford engages the listener in an intimate telling of one man’s story and invites the audience to reflect upon wide array of complex issues. The music comments upon and reacts to the text and challenges the listener to consider the outcome: who wins in this struggle for the proletariat?
CHAPTER 5

RECEPTION AND LEGACY

By the publication of the second *Workers’ Song Book* in 1935, the landscape of the Collective was already changing. In this second volume of mass songs, the Collective included two arrangements of African-American spirituals and numerous examples of proletarian songs from other countries that were translated into English. These additions to the song book shifted the focus away from avant-garde idioms as they tended to exemplify traditional characteristics of mass songs and folk elements from their respective countries. From its inception, the Collective included members who expressed interest in and assigned value to folk music as it pertained to the future of proletarian music. Lan Adomian was one such composer, and in his discussion of the types of songs various workers’ choruses should sing, he advocates that more attention should be paid to American folk music: “In this country we have a virtually untapped source of folk songs which could be arranged…Negro songs of protest, work songs, railroad songs, cowboy and hill songs. These would be a colorful addition to our repertoire…[and] would carry us a long way toward rooting our work in the tradition of American music.” 253 Adomian’s willingness to look to folk music for inspiration and as a means of connecting with the working-class audience was not supported by other, more vocal members of the Collective, at least not in the early years. At the same time Adomian was writing his repertoire suggestions for the growing number of workers’ choruses, Charles Seeger expressed his doubts that folk music could possibly represent a powerful and expanding revolutionary movement. He writes, “Not all folk-tunes are suitable to the revolutionary movement. Many of them are complacent, melancholy, defeatist—originally intended to make slaves endure their lot—pretty, but not the stuff for a

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militant proletariat to feed upon. Folk-music that shows clearly a spirit of resentment toward oppression or vigorous resistance to it are valuable.”254 For Seeger, much folk music lacked the vigor and optimism that he felt proletarian music required, while preserving vestiges of its bourgeois past that Seeger warned was detrimental to the future of revolutionary song.

As the strongest proponent of utilizing avant-garde idioms in new proletarian compositions, Seeger devoted significant time and ink to his arguments, which he articulated in his recurring Daily Worker column and his article “On Proletarian Music.” He wrote regularly for the Daily Worker for a period of about two years (1934-35) when the Collective was most active and prolific, and when their compositional output, catalogued in the Workers’ Song Books, reflected their preoccupation with incorporating musical modernism into mass songs. Yet the opinions of Collective members were by no means unified: Adomian encouraged composers to use folk music as a resource while other members withdrew from the group due to a perceived lack of support for their “simple melodies.”255 Examples of “simple melodies,” however, begin to emerge in the second Workers’ Song Book in the form of translated mass songs that reflect aspects of folk music and in the inclusion of two African-American spirituals, arranged by Swift (Siegmeister).

In 1935, when the Collective published this second volume of mass songs, Seeger’s personal circumstances changed drastically and undoubtedly altered his perception of proletarian music, forcing him to reexamine what kind of song appealed to the average American worker. In November 1935, Seeger received a job offer from the Resettlement Administration, an office created by the implementation of President Roosevelt’s New Deal. The Music Unit of the

Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration aimed to train and place professional artists into government run communities that resettled families and workers displaced by the Depression.\footnote{256} Musicians like Seeger were hired to run music recreation programs with the intent of fostering a sense of community and cultural pride among the destitute families who comprised these makeshift and diverse communities.\footnote{257} The organization sought to place hundreds of professional musicians among these “resettled” families, and Seeger published guidelines for the music workers that urged them to ascertain what resources were available at each location, to gain people’s trust, and to encourage the workers to sing and play the music they already knew and loved rather than trying to teach them unfamiliar music from the classical tradition.\footnote{258}

Even as a prominent member in the Collective, Seeger and his colleagues always advocated for the people to sing the music themselves, and the group endeavored to educate and train workers in both performance and in understanding the meaning and form of a work in order to appreciate it. Seeger carried this desire for intimacy between the music and the audience/performer into his job at the Resettlement Administration. Perhaps he finally recognized the improbability that the average working-class American would find avant-garde music engaging or relatable. In writing about one of his most successful field operatives, Margaret Valiant, Seeger described the basic principles of her training, among them his admonition that “The point of departure for any worker new to the community should be the tastes and capacities actually existent in the group,” and his advice that “The main question, then, should be not ‘is it good music?’ but ‘what is the music good for’; and if it bids fair to aid in the

\footnote{257} Ibid., 234.
welding of the people into more independent, capable and democratic action, it must be approved.”259 Seeger’s emphasis on encouraging people to celebrate and perform their own music—that is, folk music—represents a dramatic shift in values from previous years. The move from New York City to Washington, limited Seeger’s involvement with leftist organizations and fellow sympathizers, and his change in occupation immediately thrust him into contact with vernacular music. These were no longer “complacent,” “defeatist” melodies but music that represented and embodied the spirit and traditions of the American people.

In November 1937, after the Resettlement Administration was declared defunct, Seeger was appointed the deputy director of the Federal Music Project, a division under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration.260 Charged with the responsibility of preserving and studying traditional music, Seeger and his colleagues spent the next four years recording the songs and stories of Americans across the country, a project which resulted in the placement of over 1,000 recordings in the Library of Congress in addition to a catalog of the recordings entitled Check-List of Recorded Music in the English Language in the Archive of American Folksong.261 At the same time that Seeger worked for the federal government in various positions, Ruth Crawford Seeger began a project with John and Alan Lomax in 1937 in which she transcribed the Lomax’s recordings of folk songs, an endeavor that produced the invaluable folk collection Our Singing Country.262 For both Seeger and Crawford, the idea that proletarian or people’s music would be defined by avant-garde idioms receded into the past as they studied folk music and began to realize both its value and its appeal to American audiences.

260 Pescatello, Charles Seeger, 154.
261 Ibid., 155.
262 Tick, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 246-267.
Years later, Seeger reflected on his time in the Collective and remarked that “Everything we composed was forward-looking, progressive as hell, but completely unconnected with life, just as we were in the Collective.” The ideas of Seeger, Siegmeister, and Blitzstein as articulated in their writings reveal their desire to reunite the composer with his audience and create a place for music in the daily life of the modern American worker. Yet this task proved difficult as the members gravitated toward the avant-garde music they studied during their formal training in an effort to divorce music from its overly Romanticized past. As Seeger remembered, “The Collective members wouldn't listen to folk music; they were professional musicians, unconcerned with that low-grade stuff.” He later admits that he himself began studying folk music earlier than his writings suggest though he continued to write the columns for the *Daily Worker*, relying on the same rhetoric he had always employed.

The Collective set out to compose proletarian music and reconnect audiences with the modern composer. They sought to create music that was revolutionary in both form and content, hoping to achieve that final stage of seamless interaction between text and technique that would cause listeners to immediately associate the music with proletarian ideals. In the decades after the dissolution of the Collective, Seeger examined these aspirations and concluded that

No one had any idea what would be the nature of revolutionary music, you see, and it took me a long time after this to realize that there's no such thing as revolutionary music. Music doesn't take any cognizance of the dichotomy between what is revolutionary and what is not revolutionary. To change musical technique is not revolutionary, outside of music. I considered myself a musical revolutionist simply by reversing old technical devices, such as the preparation of consonance. Instead of preparing a dissonance and resolving a dissonance, I turned it upside down, and I prepared a consonance. My first

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264 Ibid., 162.

265 Ibid., 166.
species of counterpoint was all dissonance. Well, that was musically revolutionary, but it had no significance socially.  

Seeger’s time spent in the Collective allowed him to consider the prospect of a new American music and to reflect upon the current state of music and its composer with regard to his audience; in doing so, however, he discovered that he felt music could not be revolutionary outside itself. Changing technique and compositional methods might be revolutionary in terms of the music but had little effect in political or social spheres.

Despite the failure of the Collective to create a recognizably American sound that would assist in ushering in a new world of greater equality, the organization did contribute in several significant ways. While the mass songs of the Collective enjoyed only short-lived performances among workers’ choruses in the 1930s, Marc Blitzstein achieved far more success with his work The Cradle Will Rock (1937), which he began writing during his tenure in the Collective. Though the work is loosely described as an opera or a “play in music,” it contains many elements that have their roots in the mass song style of the labor and leftist movements. The play, which chronicles the resistance of moneyed bosses against steelworkers forming a union, created quite the controversy. At its premiere, the Federal Theatre Project who sponsored the production, refused to let the play be performed due to its perceived leftist leanings. In response, director Orson Welles led the entire cast and audience up the street to another theater unaffiliated with the government, where cast members sang from the aisles and Blitzstein accompanied on the piano. The play continued to be performed at intervals throughout the next eight decades, and

266 Ibid., 167.

267 Carol Oja, “Marc Blitzstein’s ‘The Cradle Will Rock’ and Mass-Song Style of the 1930s,” The Musical Quarterly 73, no. 4 (1989): 445-475. Oja says, “The Cradle is a direct descendant of these songs [mass songs], not only in its agitating spirit and left-wing sentiments but also in its surge to a rousing fortissimo finale—so typical of proletarian music and poetry,” 446.

268 Ibid.
most recently was staged by Opera Saratoga and paired with Blitzstein’s original orchestration for the first time in 57 years.\textsuperscript{269} The recent July 2017 revival of \textit{The Cradle Will Rock} reveals that the work’s themes of corruption, nepotism, and the fight for workers’ rights still resonate with audiences today.\textsuperscript{270}

Another lasting contribution of the Composers’ Collective was their insistence that this new, proletarian music must be accompanied by the education of audiences and direct communication with the composer. While the Collective invested in the Downtown Music School to educate and train workers, they also advocated for the use of lectures or question and answer sessions to follow or precede the performances of new works. George Maynard called for the creation of courses, lecture-recitals, and articles to familiarize the audience with new music, a November 1933 review of Henry Cowell’s performance of his own music mentions the composer providing commentary on the program, and Seeger suggests a piano concert by Ashley Pettis would have been more meaningful if a critical discussion led by the pianist had been attempted.\textsuperscript{271} In his draft of program notes for a Composers’ Collective concert, Blitzstein wrote of the special role of the audience in this quest to reunite the composer with his public: “If it is the composers who are to write the music, it will be the people’s audience that will call it into being. It is necessary that at every point the development of a people’s art be checked upon and considered by the people themselves…it is for this reason that at every concert of the


Collective members felt strongly that frequent and productive discussion among composers and their public was essential to crafting a society in which music played a more significant, meaningful role.

Ashley Pettis, editor of leftist magazine *New Masses*, eventually pitched the idea of a concert series that incorporated a discussion forum to Nicolai Sokoloff, director of the Federal Music Project, which fell under the umbrella of the Works Progress Administration. Sokoloff accepted his proposal, and in 1935, the Composers’ Forum was born. Designed specifically to promote and discuss modern music, the Forum was the only program in the administration that actively encouraged new composition. The FMP established Forums across the country though some chapters were less active than others and many focused almost exclusively on promoting music by composers from that state. Over the next few years, the Forums featured hundreds of composers and thousands of compositions. Composers attended the concert, and following the program, they answered and debated questions about the music from the audience. In New York City, numerous composers affiliated to some degree with the Composers’ Collective participated in the Forums including Marc Blitzstein, Norman Cazden, Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, Ruth Crawford, Hanns Eisler, Herbert Haufrecht, Wallingford Riegger, Jacob Schaefer, and Elie Siegmeister. The Composers’ Forums championed modern music and provided

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274 Ibid., 2.

275 Ibid., 3.

276 For more information regarding how the Forums worked, see Melissa De Graaf, *The New York Composers’ Forum Concerts*. To my knowledge, no one has undertaken significant research regarding the Forums in cities other than New York. De Graaf claims that only New York and Boston Forums kept transcripts of the events, so primary sources may be difficult to find.

277 Ibid., 191-214.
opportunities for performances that uniquely connected the composer and the music to a wider audience to a greater extent than any other outreach efforts associated with Collective composers. While federal funding for the Forums ended in the early 1940s, the New York City chapter was reinstated after the world war with sponsorship from the New York Public Library and Columbia University.\textsuperscript{278} The forum existed in its original form until 2002, and it continued to seek out and stage performances of new works by American composers, while encouraging audience discussion and participation.\textsuperscript{279}

The eventual foray of Collective composers like Seeger and Crawford into folk music especially impacted the future of workers’ music specifically in the form of Seeger’s son from a previous marriage, Pete Seeger. Beginning in the early 1940s, Pete Seeger participated in various music groups like the Almanac Singers, the Weavers, and Peter, Paul, and Mary in addition to his solo career. His songs often relied on or reinvented traditional folk tunes and confronted difficult but timely subjects with lyrics that were anti-war, anti-fascist, and pro-worker. In his interview with David Dunaway in 1976, Charles Seeger confirmed that his philosophy regarding the collection of folk music during his time in the WPA had its roots in the Composers’ Collective.\textsuperscript{280} When asked by Dunaway if Pete had been influenced by this approach to music, Seeger answered,

There was kind of a little gap there, until Peter began to take hold [in 1941, with the Almanac Singers]. But then Peter continued right on; he did what we ought to have done. I didn't see it until later. The Collective should have gotten together and made songs and sung to people. And if the people liked one song more than another, then they'd make more songs in that style. Well, that's what Peter did. You see, he went out with a theory based on all that had failed. …I'm sure I talked with him about all of this. He could see that we in the Collective were not [achieving results] because we were still looking at

\textsuperscript{278} Ibid., 189.
\textsuperscript{280} Dunaway, “Charles Seeger and Carl Sands,” 168.
things from above down. By the inabilities of his father to do anything else, Peter began to look at things from below up.\textsuperscript{281}

Despite the ultimate failure of the Collective to reach the people with mass songs that juxtaposed proletarian lyrics and avant-garde techniques, their true triumph emerged in their willingness to discard the ideology and technical practices that did not produce the results they desired. After recognizing defeat, many members of the Collective began studying and promoting folk music and allowed the failures of the Collective to teach and inform the composers and performers of the next generation if only by negative example. As Seeger explained, he finally realized that the Collective’s approach to music from the top down (that is as professionals and academics) contributed to their inability to connect with audiences. When composers instead went directly to the people and showed their willingness to learn and study the music the people already knew and loved, music began to play a more prominent role in the everyday lives of Americans and affected the kind of political and social change that the Collective initially sought.

This thesis attempts to provide a comprehensive study of the Collective’s ideology and its members’ thoughts on music and American in society in the 1930s by thoroughly examining the writings and compositions of those involved in the organization. The editorials and articles published in the \textit{Daily Worker, New Masses, Modern Music, Music Vanguard}, and numerous other periodicals as well as the unpublished minutes, notes, letters, and programs found in the Marc Blitzstein Papers significantly inform this project, and the discovery of Blitzstein’s essay on “The Composer, the Audience and Music” was a particularly exciting inclusion. Though other scholars reference—to varying degrees—the aims of the Composers’ Collective, no expansive

\textsuperscript{281} Ibid.
discussion and consolidation of all of the organization’s surviving materials had been attempted until now. Furthermore, I sought to consider how the group’s ideology manifested itself in their actual compositions, first in the mass songs of the *Workers’ Song Books* and then in Crawford’s “Chinaman! Laundryman!” The mass and solo song genres represent two distinct phases of proletarian music with the latter, I believe, functioning as the best example of the final musical phase in which form and content effortlessly intersect. Yet, more work remains to be done with regard to the analysis of Crawford’s second ricercare “Sacco, Vanzetti” and Siegmeister’s solo song “A Strange Funeral at Braddock,” a work that appears to share technical characteristics with Crawford’s songs and fulfill the ideological aims of the Collective. Both of these songs merit their own study and place among the compositional output of the Collective and were omitted here simply due to time and space constraints.

The legacy of the Collective, while not blatantly obvious or frequently cited, significantly impacted American musical life well beyond the few years it existed in New York City. Their work led to the creation of the short-lived Downtown Music School, specifically designed to train and educate the working class, the establishment of numerous community choruses and ensembles, and the composition of unique (albeit poorly received) music that reflected and commented on the times while fostering avant-garde techniques. Though many of the Collective’s ideals never achieved fruition, their failures equipped them for a different kind of success in the upcoming years. Ashley Pettis successfully instituted the Composers’ Forums, which promoted modern music and sought to reintroduce the American composer to his or her public, an idea deeply rooted in the ideology of the Collective. While the New York City Forums continued into the twenty-first century in some iteration, it was the shift to folk music among former Collective members that had the most lasting impact. From its inception, the Collective
aspired to create music of the proletariat, music that would inspire and lead workers in their fight for equality, economic parity, and social justice. Though only for a short time, many of the brightest young composers in America regularly met to discuss music, politics, and questions of technique in the hope that their compositions would help chart the course to a new, more hopeful future.
APPENDIX

MUSICAL EXAMPLES
Mount The Barricades

Relentlessly (d = about 120)

1. We are fighting with a host of foes,
   Promises can not fool us
   Victory is leading you

We do not fear guns or cannon.
We will fight them to a finish.
Mount the barricades! Mount the barricades!

To the battle gladly marching.

Oasis (alternative)
Carry (third time and here) alone

Craze for the workers' cause, Carry on the fight for freedom, Carry on.

(Chorus: all holding back) Refrain (loud)

3. (Women's voices alone) All together
   the fight for freedom, Carry on the fight for freedom 2. Fas. e sist
   2. Com. redo

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Ex. A.2: “Who’s That Guy?” by Carl Sands (Charles Seeger) from *Workers’ Song Book 1*. Lyrics in verse 1 by Chinese poet H.T. Tsiang. All other text written by Sands.

Pioneer Song
Who’s That Guy?

Words by H.T. Tsiang (1.) and C.S.(2.3.4.)
(Cops) (may be sung an octave lower)

Janlily (about \( \frac{90}{4} \))

1. Le-nin! Who's that guy?
2. Sta-lin! Who's that guy?
3. Hit-ler! He's the guy!
4. Roose-velt! There's a guy!

He's not big neither is he high, He has two hands and a pair of eyes,
He's no god and he's not on high, A good strong hand and a watch-ful eye,
He's a bluff and Marx tells why This Na-ri thing is bound to die,
Na-ri is a bit too sly His wa-ges low and pri-ces high,

Just as hu-man as you and I. But he leads the work-ers to
Some-what smart-er than you and I. For he's help-ing Rus-sia to
Spout-ing theo-ries that can't get by. For the Ger-man work-ers will
Work somewhere in a cold blue sky. But A.mer-i-ca's work-ers will

(continued)
The singers march on to the stage, shepherded by the cops, with the first chord of the piano, butt them with raised clubs and ask the first question. The marchers may reply standing still. With the second verse they may become bolder and advance toward the police. With the third verse they may dance around them, and with the fourth they may rough them up a bit. With the 'goodbye' they may march off waving their hands, while the police register dismay or fall in a heap.
Ex. A.3: “Onward to Battle” by L.E. Swift (Elie Siegmeister) from *Workers’ Song Book 1.*
Lyrics by Swift.

**Onward To Battle**

Energetically in strict time

Onward to battle, Join in the fight, This world is our world Let us unite.

Onward to battle, Workers of all countries, Let's unite.

Break your chains and join our ranks, Join in with us, come fight with us.

Ex. A.4: “The Three Brothers” by L. E. Swift (Elie Siegmeister) from *Workers’ Song Book 2.*
Lyrics by Swift.

**The Three Brothers**

Lively

There are three brothers named Du pont. Patriots are

They love their country right or

always very cheerfully to any nation

they. They make their profits from munitions in an honest way.

wrong. But when yen or li ras come along They

sell shells that will all armor pierce And armor that will stop each shell.
Ex. A.5: Measures 5-9 of the solo song “Look Here, Georgia!” by Lan Adomian from *Workers’ Song Book 2*. Lyrics by Don West.

Ex. A.6: Statement of T0 in the piano accompaniment, measure 4 of “Chinaman! Laundryman!” by Ruth Crawford Seeger. Lyrics by H.T. Tsiang. Used with permission of the publisher.
Ex. A.7: Piano accompaniment, measures 5-6 of “Chinaman! Laundryman!”
First two rotations of T0. The pitch content remains the same but is reordered.
Used with permission of the publisher.

Ex. A.8: Piano accompaniment, measures 13-16 of “Chinaman! Laundryman!”
Measure 13 is a statement of T11 which begins on G-flat, the second pitch of T0. Measures 14-16 show the first three rotations of T11, each beginning on the next pitch of the row T11.
Used with permission of the publisher.
Ex. A.9: Segment, measures 91-94, of the final section of piano accompaniment of “Chinaman! Laundryman!” An exact restatement of T0 (m. 91) and its eight rotations (first three pictured here) appears with the original register and contour intact. Note the different permutations of the rhythmic patterns from mm. 4-6, however.

Used with permission of the publisher.
Ex. A.10: Voice and piano, measures 1-6 of “Chinaman! Laundryman!”
The text in quotations is spoken by the boss. Note the upward contour of the boss’s lines and the
descending contour of the launderer’s voice. The wavy lines indicate the use of Sprechstimme
and the arrows designate an inexact pitch.
Used with permission of the publisher.
Ex. A.11: Voice and piano, measures 87-92 of “Chinaman! Laundryman!”
Notice the alternation of ascending and descending lines in the vocal line. Measures 87, 89, 91 all exhibit the expected downward motion of the launderer’s voice. Measures 88, 90, 92, however, mimic the contour of the voice of the boss.
Used with permission of the publisher.
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