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Charles Seeger: A Life in American Music

Ann M. Pescatello

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The life of Charles Seeger (1886-1979) - composer, teacher, performer, beureaucrat, inventor, musicologist - spanned 92 years and touched many areas of American music. Almost every modern musician has been affected by some aspect of Seeger's life and work. Seeger was both a traditionalist and an insistent champion of the new. After embracing music at Harvard, despite his family wishes, he established the University of California's music department and the nation's first curriculum in musicology. He taught at the Institute of Musical Arts (later Julliard) and at the New School in New York, where he was a founder and leader of the Composers' Collective and (under a pseudonym) wrote music reviews for the "Daily Worker". During his years in Washington at the Resettlement Administration, the WPA, and the Pan American Union, Seeger defended the artistic value of folk music and strove for global cooperation in musical enterprises. A pioneer ethnomusicologist, he invented the melograph, a device for capturing the nuances of non-notated music, and helped to launch a number of professional musical societies in the United States and abroad. Two of Seeger's wives were gifted musicians: the violinist Constance Edson and the composer Ruth Crawford, the first American woman to receive a Guggenheim award for the study of music. Three of his children - Peter, Michael and Peggy - have established international reputations in the field of folk music. This biography of Charles Seeger describes the energy and creative undertakings of this man who the author describes as an astonishingly versatile figure. Drawing on Seeger's own writings as he explored his social and musical world, Ann Pescatello portrays the experience of a pivotal figure in modern American culture.

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