

ORIGINAL FOLKSONG SCORE

A Mountain Glimpsed Through Clouds: Polansky's *Lonesome Road*

It is commonplace to stand in awe of works by great figures of the past. It is a very different feeling to stand in awe of a work by one's own contemporary. And Larry Polansky's *Lonesome Road* (*The Crawford Variations*) does inspire awe. Where did it come from? At a time when serialism was kaput, minimalism was still developing, and improvisation was rampant, how did someone of the younger generation produce a piano piece so massive, so complex, so unreliant on then-current techniques? Mammoth works usually appear at times when the musical language is highly evolved, but *Lonesome Road* seemed to grow lushly in very thin soil. And how did Polansky, a conceptualist, student, and protégé of James Tenney, a composer usually given to austere musical ideas, create—in Indonesia, no less—this cornucopia of dense piano writing?

Lonesome Road does stem from a tradition, but a discontinuous one. One could date the impulse back to 1823, when Beethoven took an insipid scrap of melody by Anton Diabelli and wrote a huge, hour-long set of variations on it, the *Diabelli Variations*. From that moment on, the theme and variations was no longer necessarily a minor musical form, but offered the potential of grandiose ambitions. Max Reger followed Beethoven's example with grand opuses on themes by Bach, Telemann, Mozart, and Beethoven; Busoni took an incomplete Bach fugue as a starting point for his great *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* (different versions, 1910–22). Among Americans, Frederic Rzewski wrote a lengthy set, fanatical in its structural detail, on a Chilean political song: *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* (1975). It is this work that is Polansky's most direct and obvious predecessor.

Then there is another tradition of tremendously difficult piano music by “outsider” composers. One could mention Charles Valentin Alkan (1813–88), whose eight-voice fugues only he could play; Charles Ives (1874–1954), whose *Concord Sonata* represents one of the summits of difficulty in the piano repertoire; and Kaikhosru Sorabji (1892–1988), whose five-hour *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1930) surely sets some sort of record for pianistic difficulty. (Notably, this last work also contains a theme with 49 variations and another with 81.) In terms of length and difficulty, *Lonesome Road* has to take a back seat to Sorabji. However, it is still notable that the world premiere of Polansky's work required no fewer than three pianists playing in shifts! That must be some sort of record in itself.

It seems all the more inexplicable that this august pair of overlapping and intersecting traditions would be encroached upon by an American in his thirties who had grown up playing jazz, bluegrass, and rock guitar. Larry Polansky was born on October 16, 1954, in New York City, and grew up on the border of Queens and Nassau counties. His early ambitions as a jazz guitarist were eventually shed when he decided that he was more cut out to be a composer than a performer (though he still plays guitar publicly as well). Like so many in the 1970s he fled to the West Coast for a more liberal academic environment, where at the University of California at Santa Cruz he studied with James Tenney and Gordon Mumma, and became friends with Lou Harrison.

Partly from Tenney, Polansky inherited a fascination with process, which informs the tempo accelerations, applied to samples of frog croaks and Javanese *rebab*, in his *Four Voice Canons* (1975–75); the dissolving of complexity among various harmonic series of his electronic-vocal work *B'rey'sheet* (1985), and the melodic mutations of his *51 Melodies* (“*Pride Holds the Multitudes. . .*”) for guitars (1990–91). He also inherited Mumma's open attitude about what an electronic studio should be, and from Harrison he received an interest in alternative tunings, and especially a fascination with the overtone series.

None of these influences seems to be directly related to *Lonesome Road*, however, nor does the interest in mathematics and gestalt perception he indulged in while studying with composer David Rosenboom at York University in Toronto (where Tenney had relocated). With Rosenboom and Phil Burk, Polansky developed a piece of music software, actually an object-oriented programming language, called HMSL—Hierarchical Music Specification Language. Polansky has used the program in many of his works, and it remains his chief contribution to the field aside from his musical output. But this brings us no closer to the origins of *Lonesome Road*.

During the 1970s, Polansky “bounced around a lot,” got his master’s degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana (where he studied the manuscripts of alternative-tuning pioneer Harry Partch), went mountain climbing, lived in Moscow, Idaho, for a while, then moved to New York. When Rosenboom took a job at Mills College, he brought Polansky along, and Polansky taught there for a decade, from 1980 to 1990. In 1990, he obtained a job at Dartmouth, where he still teaches. And it is in the juncture between these two schools and locations that *Lonesome Road* was born. Polansky and his wife, Jody Diamond, an expert in Javanese gamelan, spent a year between 1988 and 1989 on leave in the city of Surakarta in Java, studying the techniques of playing gamelan, the metallic orchestra of Indonesia. And it was during this yearlong residency, incongruously enough, that Polansky wrote the bulk of one of the largest and most elegant works in the American piano tradition. (The given dates of the work are 1988–1991, with some revisions after the 1994 premiere.)

The subtitle *The Crawford Variations* refers to Ruth Crawford (1901–1953), America’s first important woman composer. Married to and a student of Charles Seeger, who as an important and experimental teacher was sort of the James Tenney of the early twentieth century, Crawford wrote some ground-breaking works in the 1920s that were precociously original and contrapuntally expert. As America entered the Depression, however, she became—due to the waning interest in avant-garde techniques and the growing emphasis on indigenous musical Americana—a pioneering scholar of American folk music, working with the poet Carl Sandburg on his *American Songbag*. “Lonesome Road” was a song she harmonized, with plaintive lyrics running:

Look down, look down that lonesome road,
Hang down your head an’ sigh;
The best of friends must part some day,
An’ why not you an’ I,
An’ why not you an’ I?

I wish to God that I had died,
Had died ’fore I was born,
Before I seen your smilin’ face
An’ heard your lyin’ tongue,
An’ heard your lyin’ tongue.

Her harmonization of the song, published in Sandburg’s *American Songbag*, provided the starting point for Polansky’s variation cycle.

Polansky seems to leave the bitter connotations of the lyric behind, and concentrate on the tune’s poignant contours. His take on variation form (also present in other works, notably *Another You* and *Simple Harmonic Motion*) is remarkably original, and can’t be related back to any single model. It does not spin figurations over the harmonies of Crawford’s arrangement like eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century variation forms, though the influence of those harmonies does make itself felt in myriad ways. There are few obvious transformations of the theme, as one would find in late nineteenth-century variations. There is no rigorous application of one structural model after another to the same pitch materials, as one finds in twentieth-century, especially serialist, variations by Schoenberg, Webern, Elliott Carter, and others. Nor is there any overarching structural plan as in Rzewski’s *The People United*, although there is a rough parallelism among the three sections of the work. Polansky notes similarities between Variations I, XVIII, and XXXV, and it is somewhat as though he wrote the first seventeen variations, then improvised his way through them again twice to create two more very different versions. The most original aspect of Polansky’s achievement is that the piece doesn’t *sound* the way variations usually sound. Even in the most complex twentieth-century variation set, one can note the beginning of each new variation by a change of texture or speed at least. Polansky’s variations, however, are full of self-interruptions, sudden withdrawals into slow, quiet introversion, dramatic pauses, bursts of activity. What you may think is a new variation may suddenly resume the texture it had just left. Alternatively, one variation will often crescendo into another, or segue with no change in activity level. You can’t listen to *Lonesome Road* and count off the variations as they go by.

But you will hear the theme reappear in the most unexpected, amazing ways. You will search for it in vain in the opening dreamy triplets, and with even less success in the staccato quintuplets and 32nd-notes of the second variation, appropriately entitled “Little Black Dots.” But the little black dots pause thoughtfully, and then suddenly, in the third variation chorale, the theme comes calmly singing in, although still with quiet interruptions. And this is how it will continue for seventy-five minutes. Sometimes Polansky’s approach to variation seems to have more to do with the paraphrase technique of the Renaissance era than with anything more recent: Notes from the theme are present, but interpolated with chords, chromatic passing tones, arpeggios, and flights of fancy that separate and obscure them. Despite vast atonal stretches, the entire work rarely modulates away from its G major tonality, and sometimes a stepwise movement from B to C in the treble, or from B to A, is all the hint you’ll get that that theme is still out there. It’s as though the theme is a mountain height that you can sometimes glimpse and sometimes not as you travel toward it through thick jungle territory—and occasionally a curve in the road will unexpectedly bring it in full view.

There are modernist variation pieces in which you can *never* hear the theme (or tone row). There are nineteenth-century variation sets in which you can always hear the theme, or motives from it, or at least the underlying harmony. There are variations where the composer will seem to gradually leave the theme for a long stretch (Beethoven’s *Diabelli*) or slowly accumulate so many harmonic accretions that the original harmony all but disappears (Brahms’s *Handel Variations*). But no other variation set I can name offers such a fully gradated continuum between disappearance of the theme through recognition of an occasional note to appearance of an unmistakable motive to outright quotation of the whole—and nonlinearly arranged, so that you can never tell when the moment of recognition is going to come, nor how far it will extend. The work appears to be a vast improvisation by someone who has that theme going intermittently through the back of his mind, sometimes influencing him unconsciously, sometimes taking over and singing its heart out.

Like Ives’s *Concord Sonata* (and Polansky’s fluid piano writing will bring Ives to mind so many times!), *Lonesome Road* begins with some of its more difficult material. The second variation’s perpetual motion, with furious cross-rhythms of five against six and seven between the hands, may make you despair of finding clarity, but hold on. Variation III is the first of a series of chorales and waltzes that actually make the first of the three overall sections easier listening than the other two. Variation V is a thorny waltz, followed by a fun and not-too-complex variation that rips through parallel octaves. At Variation VII, the piece takes a turn toward more accessible territory. Variation VIII is the first in which the influence of Indonesian gamelan—the metallic percussion orchestra Polansky and his wife studied in Surakarta—is audible, this infusion of gamelan technique into piano playing being one of *Lonesome Road*’s most original features. The patterns aren’t strictly repetitive, but they keep hitting the same notes over and over in a quirky kind of counterpoint.

Variation IX, with the hands again in unison octaves, leads to a simpler waltz in Variation X, followed by a series of chorales that are increasingly chromatic, though the chromatic notes always flow from Polansky’s elegant and long-lined sense of voice leading. Section 1 ends with a variation called “The Hensley Deviations,” incorporating riffs from an earlier Polansky work called *Hensley Variations*, a trio written for guitarist Doug Hensley. This is another perpetual motion passage whose weird, clocklike repetition of motives in each hand suggests more Indonesian influence. Section 2 has the longest, most elaborate variations and strays furthest from the theme for the longest time. It begins gently, however, then brings in more gamelan ideas in Variation XIX, with steady rhythms in the bass against repeated notes in the right hand creating truly gamelan-like textures. Variation XX is called “Song,” and you can indeed pick out the theme among the interpolated notes in the melody. In the long, luxuriously romantic cadence to this passage, you can get a sense for how much of the piece is concerned with gradually closing in on G major (and it is remarkable how many variations end on a sweetly approached G Major triad). Variation XXII, titled “Phantasy,” is a high point of the work, much of it couched in long, sweeping, irregular arpeggios up and down the piano, and in both hands at once.

Variation XXV brings us an almost traditional transformation of the theme into 5/4 meter and B major, while XXVI moves the theme into D major and into the left hand as the right plays gentle quintuplets. Full of arpeggios again, number XXVII is the longest variation. You'll hear the perpetual motion of number XXVIII interrupted by the theme's quickly falling motive, from B to D or A to D. At the end of Variation XXXI those motives are greatly expanded to leaps across the piano keyboard, giving you an idea of how Polansky plays off the theme's contour. Variation XXXII is highly fragmented, with dissonant chords in varying speeds and dynamics, but Variation XXXIV brings the section to a close with a highly chromaticized version of the theme.

Section 3 (Variation XXXV) starts out with the theme clearly audible in the left hand. Further alterations bring the piece to what, for me, is its emotional climax, Variation XXXVIII, in which a variant of the theme is heard over lush sweeps of the left hand up and down the bass of the keyboard. "Songlike" Variation XL transforms the theme into 6/8 meter, followed by Variation XLI, which leaps quickly by octaves, but delicately, calling Rzewski to mind more than any other part of the piece. Variation XLIII is fast but simple, with the theme's contour audible, leading to Variation XLIV's crazily drunken waltz. Variation XLVII is a climax of ingenuity: a waltz in three keys at once, with the bass in G, the theme in A, and a middle voice in D. Terrifically difficult Variation XLIX brings a final climax, followed by a chorale, after which the final variation strips down to one unaccompanied melody line—a stunningly poignant effect after seventy-five minutes of so much complexity.

As this cursory travel guide makes clear, it's a tremendous amount to take in, and an exceedingly difficult piece to play (although it must be added, the need for three pianists at the early performances was due not only to the work's difficulty, but partly to the hard-to-read quality of the first pencil score). Where does such a work fit into the ongoing development of music? It is starkly atypical of Polansky's output, otherwise full of experimental works involving overtone series, tempo canons, electronic sampling, and language-based composing algorithms. It seems foreign to the American streams of the 1980s and '90s, which were concerned with offshoots of minimalism and the influx of vernacular influences on the classical vocabulary. And yet here it is, this great amalgam of Ivesian pianism, gamelan patterns, jazz-tinged harmonies, and folk song. Its size and grandeur hark back to a pianistic outsider tradition of *sui generis* works, the cloud-hidden mountain peaks of the piano repertoire. —*Kyle Gann*

Kyle Gann, a composer, has taught at Bard College since 1997 and been music critic for *The Village Voice* since 1986. His books include *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), *American Music in the Twentieth Century* (Schirmer Books, 1997), and *It's Only As Good As It Sounds: American Music After Minimalism* (University of California Press, 2001).

Lonesome Road (The Crawford Variations) is a set of variations on Ruth Crawford's harmonization of the folk song of the same name. Her arrangement was published in Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag* (1927). The piece is in three sections, seventeen variations each. Those in the middle section (XVIII–XXXIV) are generally longer and more developed than those in the outer sections. Often, corresponding variations in the three sections have similar structures (for example, Variations I, XVIII, and XXXV are closely related).

Lonesome Road (The Crawford Variations) was composed over the course of one year spent in Indonesia (June 1988–June 1989), where I assisted my wife Jody Diamond in her work with Indonesian experimental composers. Many of these composers' ideas somehow found their way into this work, but in most cases I can no longer remember how (except in the case of B. Subono, a Central Javanese composer after whom two of the variations are named). Some of the variations, however, involve "transcriptions" of Javanese *gendèran*, the music of a two-handed elaborating instrument that I studied in Java.

The piece was revised during the following years in Oakland, California, and Hanover, New Hampshire. I am grateful to Sarah Cahill for her assistance in the revision process, and for her encouragement and support of the work over the past decade. In 1997, Vermont pianist Michael Arnowitt created a suite from the piece, consisting of about sixteen variations, and helped supervise an edition prepared by David Fuqua. New York pianist Joseph Kubera has also made his own suite.

Lonesome Road (The Crawford Variations) was premiered by Thomas Bächli (Section 1), Urs Egli (Section 2), and Martin Christ (Section 3), at the Röte Fabrik in Zürich, Switzerland, on March 20, 1994. The performance was recorded by the Swiss Broadcasting Company and was sponsored by the Internationale Gesellschaft für Neue Musik Zürich, with Marino Pliakas, curator. These three pianists toured the work in North America in the spring of 1995, sponsored by the Pro Helvetia Foundation and Bay Area Pianists, directed by pianist Sarah Cahill. The first U.S. performance was at Roulette in New York City. Martin Christ premiered the work as a solo performer in September 1997, in Hanover, New Hampshire. Sincere thanks to my friends Walter and Liz Sinnott-Armstrong, Ed Carroll, and Jackie Jacobus for their support of that premiere.

Michael Arnowitt premiered the *Suite from Lonesome Road* (about thirty minutes long) on New Year's Eve 1996, in Montpelier and Burlington, Vermont. The *Suite . . .*, as well as other compositions of mine, is published by Frog Peak Music (a composers' collective): <http://www.frogpeak.org>. —Larry Polansky

Larry Polansky is a composer, theorist, teacher, writer, performer, programmer, and systems designer. His interests include live interactive intelligent computer music, computer composition, theories of form, and experimental intonation. He lives in Lebanon, New Hampshire, and teaches at Dartmouth College.

Martin Christ studied piano with Jürg Wyttenbach in Basel, with Yvonne Lefebure in Paris, with Dieter Weer and Bruno Seidlhofer in Vienna, and with Stanislas Neuhaus in Moscow. Beginning as a traditional concert soloist, he later changed his focus to the exploration and promulgation of the music of our time, while maintaining a connection to his roots. He likes to work in a number of different ways: as a specialist for the whole piano repertoire since Bach, as an improviser in modern styles, and in the more traditional role of silent movie pianist. He currently teaches at the Zürich Conservatory.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Larry Polansky

The Theory of Impossible Melody. Artifact Recordings ART 1004.

Simple Harmonic Motion. Artifact Recordings ART 1011.

Charles Ives

Sonata No. 2 for Piano, "Concord, Mass., 1840–1890". Marc-André Hamelin. New World Records 80378-2.

Gordon Mumma

Studio Retrospect. Lovely Music LCD 1093.

Frederic Rzewski

The People United Will Never Be Defeated. Stephen Drury. New Albion NALB 63.

James Tenney

Selected Works 1961–1969. Artifact Recordings ART 1007.

Bridge & Flocking. hat ART CD 6193.

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Gann, Kyle. *American Music in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997.

Sandburg, Carl. *The American Songbag*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927.

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Thanks to my wife, composer Jody Diamond, for helping with so many aspects of the piece, and to Tom Erbe for technical advice. Finally, my deepest appreciation to Martin Christ, who has paid me the deepest compliment a performer can give to a composer—he knows the piece better than I do.

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LARRY POLANSKY (b. 1954)

LONESOME ROAD (THE CRAWFORD VARIATIONS) (1988–89)

NW# 80566-2

Three variations in the middle section (XXIII, XXIVa and b, and XXXIVb) are omitted, in order to fit the piece onto one CD.

Section 1

1. I. Opening	1:35
2. II. Little Black Dots	1:17
3. III. Chorale (I)	1:01
4. IV. After Subono (I)	1:16
5. V. Waltz (I)	1:36
6. VI. Unison/Octaves	1:08
7. VII. Chorale (II)	1:04
8. VIII. Gendèran (for Marc Perlman)	:38
9. IX. Unison	:48
10. X. Waltz (II)	:39
11. XI. Chorale (III)	:21
12. XII. Chorale (IV)	:52
13. XIII. Chorale (V)	:47
14. XIVa.	:54
15. XIVb.	1:11
16. XV. Very fast and loud	:55
17. XVI. Chorale (VI)	:58
18. XVII. “The Hensley Deviations”	2:13

Section 2

19. XVIII. Quietly, peacefully	1:00
20. XIX. Cengkok and coda	2:15
21. XX. Song	1:35
22. XXI. Fast	1:56
23. XXII. Phantasy	2:37
24. XXVa. Slowly	1:57
25. XXVb. Very legato	1:26
26. XXVI. Middle	:52
27. XXVII. Melody and accompaniment	3:19
28. XXVIII. Rather fast	2:09
29. XXIX. Soft, slow, very rubato	2:32
30. XXX. Fast, swing	1:30
31. XXXI. Still fast, swing	1:24
32. XXXII. Faster	2:48
33. XXXIII. "The Independence Movement" (for David Rosenboom)	2:37
34. XXXIVa. Very lyrical	1:25

Section 3

35. XXXV. Fast	:42
36. XXXVI. Very slow, very quiet	2:01
37. XXXVII. Ballad	1:11
38. XXXVIII. Steady	1:52
39. XXXIX.	1:42
40. XL. Slow and pretty	1:30
41. XLI.	:54
42. XLII.	1:17
43. XLIII. Fast	:40
44. XLIV. Waltz (III)	:49
45. XLV.	1:14
46. XLVI. Legato, slow, soft, rubato	1:26
47. XLVII. Three keys waltz	1:40
48. XLVIII. After Subono (II)	2:36
49. XLIX.	1:35
50. L. Chorale (VI)	1:32
51. LI. Gently, freely	1:45

Martin Christ, piano

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