

Early Works of Amy Beach Discovered Among Copyright Deposits

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2008 Junior Fellows Tara Neely and Kandice Newren looked for buried treasures in uncataloged 1899 copyright deposits and found songs by one of the most important and successful American female composers, Amy Beach.

The songs are from a group of five set to poems of Robert Burns for solo voice and piano. They include “Far awa’!,” “My Lassie,” and “Oh were my love yon lilac fair!” The name Arthur P. Schmidt, a German-born music publisher who emigrated in 1866, appears in the notice.

Amy Marcy Cheney Beach was born in Henniker, New Hampshire, in 1867. By age one she could sing 40 tunes accurately. At four she was composing simple waltzes and at six started piano lessons with her mother. Beach had perfect pitch and apparently a condition called synesthesia, where a person’s senses blend together. She associated colors with music in different keys and would ask her mother to play the “purple” song or the “green” song.

At seven she began giving public recitals, playing works by Handel, Beethoven, and Chopin, as well as her own compositions. In 1875 the family moved to Boston, where she studied piano with local teachers. She received her only formal training in composition at age 14 from Junius W. Hill, with whom she studied for a year. Otherwise, she was self-taught.

In 1885 Beach appeared as piano soloist with the Boston Symphony, and the same year she married Dr. Henry Harris Aubrey Beach, a surgeon 24 years her senior. She began using the name “Mrs. H.H.A. Beach” professionally, and, following her husband’s wishes, limited public performances to one recital a year, concentrating instead on composition.

After Dr. Beach’s death, Amy Beach toured Europe for three years, giving piano recitals



Amy Beach

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under her own name. She returned to the United States and continued performing and composing, again using the name “Mrs. H.H.A. Beach.”

Beach spent summers at the MacDowell Colony, founded by Marian MacDowell, wife of composer Edward MacDowell. The rural New Hampshire atmosphere inspired works such as “The Hermit Thrush at Morn” and “The Hermit Thrush at Eve.” Beach served as the first president of the Society of American Women Composers.

In all, she composed over 150 works, including the “Mass in E Flat Major” (1892), the “Gaelic Symphony” (1893), a violin sonata, a piano concerto and quintet, choral and chamber music pieces, and the opera “Cahildo” (1932). She was most popular, however, for her songs like those discovered by our summer interns.

Beach’s music is primarily Romantic in style, reminiscent of Brahms. In her later works, she moved away from tonality and experimented with more exotic scales, harmonies, and techniques. She studied bird songs and was influenced by Irish, Scottish, and Native American themes. A heart condition hampered Beach’s activities in later life and led to her death in 1944. She left the rights to her music to the MacDowell Colony, which continues to receive royalties. ©

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