

Amy Marcy Cheney Beach and Her Struggles as a Female Composer

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Music History: 1750- Present Day

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Born in West Henniker, New Hampshire, Amy Marcy Cheney was, and still is, regarded as one of the finest composers in American history. Her imprint on music history as a female composer is even more lasting, and for the time period in which she was born, her success was remarkable. From a young age it was clear that Amy was gifted. Her Mother, Clara, her Father, Charles, and Grandmother Amy Eliza Marcy certainly had their hands full when she came along<sup>1</sup>. Before she could even speak, Amy was able to hum upwards of 40 songs exactly as she first heard them, always in the same key<sup>2</sup>. As she grew older, she would demand she be sung to, and if her mother or grandmother missed a note, she would scold them for being incorrect and have them start over. Amy also associated the songs and pitches with colors. It is for this reason that she is thought to have had a form of synesthesia, which assisted her within composition, particularly in transposition<sup>3</sup>. As she grew older, Amy was actually kept away from piano and musical performance by her mother, for fear that she would fall in love with it and want a career in performance. However, nothing she could have done would have kept Amy away from music. Eventually, Amy found herself practicing the piano at a mere four years old. Her performing debut with an orchestra was at just 16 years old in the year of 1883 at the Boston Music Hall. In her teenage years, she sustained a hand injury and was treated by Dr. Henry Beach M.D. After the death of his wife, Dr. Beach pursued Amy, and having the support of her parents, even though he himself was nine months older than Amy's father, they became engaged in the year of 1885 and married in December of that year. Though Dr. Beach fully supported his wife's career

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<sup>1</sup> Jenkins, Walter S. *The Remarkable Mrs. Beach, American Composer: A Biographical Account Based on Her Diaries, Letters, Newspaper Clippings, and Personal Reminiscences.* (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 1997), 3-6

<sup>2</sup> Block, Adrienne Fried. *Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian: The Life and Work of an American Composer, 1867-1944.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Logan, Jeremy. "Synesthesia and Feminism: A Case Study on Amy Beach (1867-1944)." *New Sound: International Magazine for Music*, no. 46 (December 2015): 133.

in music, her interest in performance dwindled while she was a housewife. Instead, she became more focused on composition. During this time period she wrote some of her most famous works, including the Mass in E-Flat and the Gaelic Symphony. Her career direction only changed upon the death of her husband in 1910, when he fell down a flight of stairs. He lingered for nine weeks after the accident before inevitably passing away at the age of sixty-six years. Moving forward, Amy began several years of touring. The first European trip she planned with her mother. However, Mrs. Cheney also passed away in 1911, leaving Amy to complete the journey on her own in honor of her mother. She went on several tours in the following years, both in Europe and across the U.S. Amy died in 1944, as one of the few women composers of the time who were taken seriously by her male counterparts and critics<sup>4</sup>.

Her musicianship was admired by critics as a young performer. They appreciated her technique and musical sense that could not be taught<sup>5</sup>. However, her career was not without struggle. The first boundary imposed on Amy was by her own mother, who refused to let the toddler learn to play the piano. Why certainly not wanting to hold Amy back from any sort of musical training, she knew the brilliance they lay within her child's mind. It was to keep her female modesty and to provide Amy with a normal upbringing. The problem with raising a gifted child is to know when to let them use their gifts, while still preserving their childhood. Not only did she want her child to remain young, but she did not want Amy to fall in love with performance, since she knew that would not be a stable career for a woman, no matter how bad she wanted it<sup>6</sup>. Her mother of course was not able to hold out very long, Amy got her own keyboard at the age of four.

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<sup>4</sup> Walter, *The Remarkable*, 71-149.

<sup>5</sup> Walter, *The Remarkable*, 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Block, *Amy Beach, Passionate*, 5-6.

Marriage brought secondary musical struggles to the new Mrs. Beach. Her marriage to Dr. Henry Beach brought her performance career to a halt. While her husband supported her endeavors in music, performance or composition, it just fell naturally into their lifestyle that she began composing more often than performing. It was her compositions that ultimately brought most of the critical attention during her career. While the music was generally regarded as good, especially when Amy herself was performing, many critics felt it necessary to mention how she looked and her professionalism. However, comments regarding the actual music were secondary, likely as a result of her gender. Rather than commenting on the music or the performance, many mentioned the gown she wore, her weight, and who was in attendance at the concert<sup>7</sup>. One of Beach's most famous compositions, *Gaelic Symphony* received some of the finest reviews of her career. While some of the reviews are of truly astounding compliments as far as composition across the board, many were concerned with gender, in that they were surprised a woman could write so well<sup>8</sup>. While her music was generally well received, she struggled to be critically acclaimed as a result of all of her compositions being devalued because she was a woman. Her career was not a matter of working as equal to her male counterparts, rather she was valued because she was decent for a woman.

Ultimately, Amy Marcy Cheney Beach was a successful musician and composer. Perhaps, this is as a result of her gender, since she was so extraordinarily gifted that she stood out amongst men because she was a woman. However, it still begs the question that if Amy was born a male, would her talents be recognized even more? This is the unfortunate case that it seems many female composers and musicians fell into, regardless of the hard work they put into their

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<sup>7</sup> Walter, *The Remarkable*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Walter, *The Remarkable*, 43.

music, as well as natural talent. While the gap in equality between the genders in music has certainly narrowed since the time of Mrs. Beach, it still has not closed. As a female musician myself, I hope to be a part of the generation that closes that gap, but only time will tell. Until then, we have Amy Marcy Cheney Beach to thank for her contributions to music, as a composer and as a woman.

## Bibliography

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