

PART I

Historical Context

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Excerpt
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Amy Beach's Life and Works

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I have literally lived the life of two people – one a pianist, the other a writer. Anything more unlike than the state of mind demanded by these two professions I could not imagine! When I do one kind of work, I shut the other up in a closed room and lock the door, unless I happen to be composing for the piano, in which case there is a connecting link. One great advantage, however, in this kind of life, is that one never grows stale, but there is always a continual interest and freshness from the change back and forth.

– Amy Beach¹

The eighteenth-century ideal of a master musician equally skilled as performer and composer – exemplified by Bach, Haydn, and Mozart – became increasingly rare in the nineteenth century. Despite noteworthy exceptions like Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Rachmaninoff, most musicians specialized in one or another aspect of musical production, and their choices were reinforced by the expectations of critics and audiences. In assessing the life and career of Amy Marcy Cheney Beach (1867–1944), it is enlightening to view her as one of those rare individuals who achieved fame as both a performer and a composer. The decision to vacillate between composer's desk and piano bench was not entirely her own, but it is crucial to a complete understanding of her significance.

Beach's origin story – like those of Mozart and Mendelssohn – centers on her role as a child prodigy. Her mother reported that the precocious child had a repertoire of forty tunes before her first birthday, and that she could improvise a simple harmony to her mother's melody before her second birthday. She exhibited early evidence of perfect pitch, along with a synesthetic association of colors with pitches and keys. This association was so strong that as a toddler she cried if adults sang a song that she knew in a different key than she had learned, and as a six-year-old she transposed a piano piece up a step to accommodate for an out-of-tune piano at a friend's house.²

In a 1914 article entitled “Why I Chose My Profession,” Beach recalled that her mother, “who was a fine musician and wanted to raise one,” subscribed to Gerald Stanley Lee’s “top bureau-drawer principle” of education, in which a student’s motivation is stimulated by keeping a desired object just out of reach.³ In her case, this meant that the family piano, which Clara Cheney played often, was off limits to her daughter Amy during her toddler years. The future composer and pianist was obsessed with music and thought about it constantly, but she was limited to singing until the age of four or five, when a visiting aunt granted her access to the instrument. Amy was then able to play the songs that she had been singing and to improvise accompaniments as she had seen her mother do. When she was six, her mother consented to giving her lessons, and by the age of seven, her playing of a Beethoven sonata and Chopin waltz was sufficiently advanced that her parents received offers from several music managers. These were declined, and Amy’s public performances were curtailed.

The family moved from her birthplace of Henniker, New Hampshire, to Chelsea, Massachusetts, around 1871, and from there to Boston in 1875. This opened a new world of educational possibilities, and Amy had the opportunity to study piano with professional teachers, first Ernst Perabo (1845–1920) and later Carl Baermann (1839–1913). Both had been trained in German conservatories, and it may have been they who reportedly advised Beach’s parents to send her abroad for a European musical education. By this time, German musical education had become the preferred professional training for any American who could afford it,⁴ but again Amy’s parents refused to consider this course of action.

Adrienne Fried Block explored the motivations and results of the restrictions placed on Amy’s musical opportunities by her parents. She argued that the “top bureau-drawer principle” was an outgrowth of Protestant religious practices in child-rearing, and that her parents’ decisions prioritized Amy’s eternal salvation over her musical development.⁵ There is an additional explanation, however, that may have unconsciously played into their deliberations.

Amy’s parents, Charles Abbot Cheney (1844–95) and Clara Imogene Marcy Cheney (1845–1911), were members of the Progressive Generation (born 1843–59), whose worldview was shaped by the political polarization and harrowing losses of the Civil War. When they became parents, this cohort of Americans prioritized home comforts and security over adventure and risk. Their children, known as the Missionary Generation (born 1860–82), grew up in the 1870s loved and protected in ways that would not be replicated until the Baby Boomer childhood of the 1950s. When the

Missionary Generation reached adulthood, full of confidence and accustomed to having their wishes fulfilled, they set out to change the world as missionaries, civic leaders, and reformers. These generational characteristics help to explain Clara's need to restrict her daughter's public activities as well as Amy's desire for a public career.⁶

Beach's recollection of the next stage of her life is telling. She wrote, "When I was sixteen, I was allowed to make my *début* in Boston. I played the Moscheles G minor concerto with a large orchestra. Life was beginning!"⁷ This October 1883 debut, so long deferred, was an unalloyed triumph. The *Boston Transcript* gushed:

She is plainly a pianist to the manner born and bred. Her technique is facile, even and brilliant; her use of the pedal exceptionally good. But fine as her technical qualifications are, it is the correctness and precocity of her musical understanding that must, in the end, most excite admiration. Much natural musical sentiment must, of course, be taken for granted; but the purity and breadth of her phrasing, the intelligence with which she grasps the relation of the several parts of a composition to the whole, show how thoroughly musical her training must have been. That she does not play like a woman of forty need not be said. The ineffable charm of her playing is that perfect youthful freshness, directness and simplicity of sentiment which belongs to her age, but which one very rarely finds so utterly free from the little awkwardnesses which are also wont to characterize immaturity.⁸

Praise like this can open doors for a young performer, and now that her parents' permission had been granted, Amy played frequently in solo recitals, chamber music, and concerto performances throughout the Boston area. On March 28, 1885, she debuted with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Wilhelm Gericke in the Chopin Concerto in F minor, op. 21, earning praise for her sensitive interpretation of this notoriously challenging work. A month later, she famously impressed America's leading conductor, Theodore Thomas, when he conducted her in a performance of the Mendelssohn Concerto. He assumed that a seventeen-year-old girl would not be able to handle the brisk tempo of the finale, but when she heard his slow tempo, she "swung the orchestra into time," to the amusement of all present.⁹ She proved herself equally adept at solo recitals and chamber music, making inroads with the most prominent musicians in Boston's close-knit professional circle.¹⁰ It seems that in her teens she already possessed the technique, artistic sensitivity, and fearlessness that are the essential ingredients of a successful performance career. She also possessed unusually large hands, with broad palms and very long thumbs, as shown in Figure 1.1.



Figure 1.1 Wedding photo of Dr. and Mrs. Beach. Box 17 envelope 15, Amy Cheney Beach (Mrs. H. H. A. Beach) Papers, 1835–1956, MC 51, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH.

But on December 2, 1885, Amy's career trajectory shifted dramatically with her marriage to Dr. Henry Harris Aubrey Beach (1843–1910). Their engagement had been announced in the Boston papers in mid-August, but it is unclear how the two met.¹¹ A prominent surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital and lecturer at Harvard University who was actively building a private practice treating Boston's wealthiest and most socially connected residents, Beach was a 42-year-old widower when he married the 18-year-old Amy. She moved into his home at 28 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston's exclusive, tree-lined counterpart to New York's Park Avenue. She immediately took his name, and for the rest of her life was known in the United States as "Mrs. H. H. A. Beach." Her new home came with a staff of servants, allowing her to devote all her time to music and her husband. The spacious second-floor music room contained a grand piano, ample shelf space for her growing collection of books and scores, and a bay

window facing north onto the trees of Commonwealth Avenue. A reporter who described the room in 1897 noted, "A quaint empire desk inlaid in various light woods tells the place where all Mrs. Beach's best and most serious work has been done, and it is considered a family friend and treasure."¹²

Dr. Beach's position in Boston society was worth protecting, which may help to explain – but not justify – the stipulations he placed on his young bride. She was not to play concerts for money, but rather to donate her fees to charitable causes. During the twenty-five years of their marriage, she averaged one solo recital per year, often advertised prominently as a benefit for a specific charity. She was allowed to accept invitations to play chamber music or concerto performances with orchestra more often, but again the fees were donated to charity. She was also not to teach piano lessons, which were associated with working women of a lower class. She was expected to serve as hostess on social occasions as appropriate for a female member of Boston's elite Brahmin set. These stipulations clearly changed her status in the city. When Amy played the Mozart Concerto in D minor with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on February 20, 1886 (less than three months after her marriage), she donated her fees to the free-bed fund of the Massachusetts General Hospital, and her concert two weeks later was for the "kindergarten entertainment at Mr. Robert Treat Paine's."¹³ The *Boston Transcript* review of the BSO concert was considerably less specific about her playing than that of the previous year. The reviewer stated: "Mrs. Beach, who was enthusiastically received by the audience, played it very beautifully indeed; especially fine was her playing of the Romanza (second movement); she struck the true keynote of Mozart's grace." He then went on a lengthy diatribe about the cadenza chosen for the performance, without another word about her playing.¹⁴ The impression is of a reviewer who does not wish to say too much.

Again, Amy found her career path circumscribed by a member of the Progressive Generation. If Dr. Beach restricted her performance career, however, he had bold plans for her compositional career. It is unclear why he saw potential in her as a composer, since at the time of her marriage she had published only two songs with piano accompaniment. "The Rainy Day" (published by Oliver Ditson in 1883) was a setting of a Longfellow poem whose vocal line begins with a direct quotation from the third movement of Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata, op. 13, transposed from C minor to F minor. "With Violets," op. 1, no. 1 (Arthur P. Schmidt, 1885) was a setting of a poem by Kate Vannah dedicated to the opera star Adelina Patti. Dr. Beach also had intimate knowledge of a third song, however: on

January 16, 1885, he had sung her unpublished song “Jeune fille, jeune fleur” on a recital of voice students of Mr. L. W. Wheeler.¹⁵ These songs are pleasant and sentimental but do not show the maturity and technique that reviewers had praised in her piano playing. More to the point, they contain no inkling of the large-scale works that would eventually become her most distinctive creations. Nonetheless, the couple agreed that she would devote the bulk of her time to composition rather than performance. As an added incentive, she was allowed to keep the publication royalties her compositions generated.¹⁶

Beach’s composition training had been limited to one year of harmony and music theory lessons with Junius Welch Hill (1840–1916). In 1885, Amy’s parents had consulted the recently appointed conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Wilhelm Gericke (1845–1925), who recommended that she learn composition by studying scores of European masters rather than studying with a composition teacher.¹⁷ After her marriage, Henry urged her to follow the same course. A conscientious student, she acquired the best books available on orchestration and counterpoint, along with a substantial collection of scores. These she studied carefully to develop the skills she would need to go beyond songwriting. It is a testament to her discipline and innate talent that her autodidactic approach yielded remarkable results and gave her the tools for a successful compositional career. In later years, she gave credit to her husband and mother for developing her into a composer:

When Dr. Beach and I were married, he felt that my future lay in composition, and very often he and I would discuss works as I was preparing them. He might differ as to certain expressions and so would my mother, with the result that I had two critics before facing a professional critic. And Dr. Beach would be very impartial and hard-boiled.¹⁸

The following twenty-five years saw Beach’s most productive period of compositional activity and a steady trajectory of growth. Her first major work – which will be discussed in the chapter by Matthew Phelps – was a setting of the Latin Mass for choir, soloists, and orchestra. The work was premiered by the Boston Handel and Haydn Society on February 7, 1892, a reflection of the Boston musical establishment’s support for their hometown composer. Her next major work was a symphony that made extensive use of Irish folk themes. Known as the “Gaelic” Symphony, it was written in the shadow of American debates over musical nationalism spurred by the New York residency of Antonín Dvořák from 1892 to 1895 and was premiered by the BSO on October 31, 1896. This performance elicited

a much-quoted note of appreciation from her fellow Boston composer George Whitefield Chadwick, who confirmed her position in the inner circle of local musicians: "I always feel a thrill of pride myself whenever I hear a fine new work by any one of us, and as such you will have to be counted in, whether you will or not – one of the boys."¹⁹ The experience she gained in orchestrating her symphony prepared her for her next orchestral work, the Piano Concerto in C-sharp minor, completed and performed with the BSO in 1900. These two works will be analyzed in Douglas Shadle's chapter on the orchestral works.

Beach enjoyed a fruitful relationship with the Kneisel Quartet and its first violinist, Franz Kneisel (1865–1926). She performed major chamber works with them, including the Schumann Piano Quintet, op. 44, in 1894 and the Brahms Piano Quintet, op. 34, in 1900. Her familiarity with these works, along with her relationship with Kneisel, informed the composition of her Violin Sonata, op. 34 (1896), and Piano Quintet in F-sharp minor, op. 67 (1907). Both are serious works whose virtuosity is used not for empty display but for the exploration of serious thematic connections. Beach's engagement with the European cosmopolitan tradition in these works will be the subject of Larry Todd's chapter on the chamber music.

The major works that Beach wrote and premiered between 1892 and 1907 represent much more than the determined efforts of an autodidact. Beach (and by extension her principal patron, her husband) directly confronted the assertions of George P. Upton in his influential 1880 book *Woman in Music*. Writing five years before Beach's marriage, Upton acknowledged that women had successfully created serious works of painting, poetry, and fiction but had achieved nothing comparable in music:

[W]ho is to represent woman in the higher realm of music? While a few women, during the last two centuries, have created a few works, now mostly unknown, no woman during that time has written either an opera, oratorio, symphony, or instrumental work of large dimensions that is in the modern repertory. Man has been the creative representative."²⁰

He went on to assert that the proper role of women in music was as muse to great men. In the home at 28 Commonwealth Avenue, this hierarchy was reversed, as Dr. Beach played the role of muse and his wife created works in the major cosmopolitan genres that Upton had declared to be the province of men alone because of their ability "to treat emotions as if they were mathematics, to bind and measure and limit them within the rigid laws of harmony and counterpoint."²¹ Beach's choral, orchestral, and chamber works put the lie to Upton's claim that women lacked the intellectual

facility to plan and create works of integrity in these genres. Of her husband's role in her compositional development, Beach later recalled,

It was he more than any one else who encouraged my interest upon the field of musical composition in the larger forms. It was pioneer work, at least for this country, for a woman to do, and I was fearful that I had not the skill to carry it on, but his constant assurance that I could do the work, and keen criticism whenever it seemed to be weak in spots, gave me the courage to go on.²²

As Beach produced ever more ambitious concert works in the major genres of Western music, she continued to broaden her pianistic repertoire in her annual benefit recitals. These events sometimes included her own piano works, but their primary focus was European solo piano literature from the Baroque to Romantic eras. During the 1890s and 1900s, she composed a steady stream of shorter solo works with programmatic titles, including the *Four Sketches*, op. 15 (1892) and the *Trois morceaux caractéristiques*, op. 28 (1894). Curiously, she never composed a piano sonata, but in 1904 she produced a solo piano work that was a worthy companion to her major works in other genres. The *Variations on Balkan Themes*, op. 60 (1904), is a 30-minute compendium of virtuoso techniques that introduces and develops four songs shared with her by a missionary to Bulgaria. The poignancy of the first of these songs, "O Maiko moyá," inspired some of her most evocative pianistic writing. Her extensive catalog of piano compositions is explored in Kirsten Johnson's chapter.

The preceding works demonstrate that Beach took seriously the imperative of composing in the major concert genres, but it was her solo songs that gained her a national following. In a 1918 interview, she explained how her composition of songs differed from her work on more "serious" genres:

I write, primarily, for instruments – my song writing I have always considered rather as recreation. When I am working on some larger work, as when I was writing my piano Concerto, I will occasionally find myself tiring – "going stale," as they say. Then I just drop the larger work for the day and write a song. It freshens me up; I really consider that I have given myself a special treat when I have written a song. In this way I have written about a hundred songs.²³

As Katherine Kelton discusses in her chapter, Beach's art songs spanned the entirety of her career and drew from a vast array of textual sources. At their best, they contain tuneful melodies that lie well in the voice, supported by piano accompaniments that enhance but do not overpower the vocal lines. Her early song "Ecstasy," op. 19, no. 2 (1892), was so successful that its royalties financed the purchase of a vacation home in Centerville on