

Whitney

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and George Chadwick – Amy was invited twice to the White House to perform her work.

Yet, despite that notoriety, Amy Beach is an unsung composer. Musical taste and timing did not work in her favor. When modern composers like Stravinsky and Schoenberg came into favor reflecting the upheaval of WWII, Romantic composers like Beach and her colleagues fell out of favor. But Beach, as a female composer, paid the additional price of being outside the “norm.”

The male-dominated classical music scene, centered in academia, omitted female composers from textbook narratives, arguing that they tended to be associated with smaller, “lesser” works like songs or piano pieces. In reality, the actual problem was that they had no access to orchestral conductors or opera directors who might showcase larger works. Consequently, musicians did not include Beach in their repertoire so her music fell silent. In addition, misogynistic stereotypes held that women did not have the talent or genius for musical composition. As a result, Beach’s Gaelic Symphony was a pioneering work.

Not much has changed in terms of inclusion; the bias against female composers continues. According to musicologist Marian Wilson Kimber, “A century ago in America, you were far more likely to hear a piece by a woman than you are today.”

A few years ago, Marie Harris –

former New Hampshire State Poet Laureate – became fascinated by the paradox of Amy Beach’s life. She chased down Beach’s music and fell in love with it – songs, piano pieces, sonatas, trios, masses, her best known symphony. Eventually, Harris wrote “Amy Beach in Words and Music,” a first-person poetic narrative performance about Beach that she later performed with North Country Chamber Music Players playing some of Beach’s music interspersed.

Now, to honor Beach’s 150th Anniversary, Harris will bring her one-woman performance to four libraries – and more upon request – in conjunction with a special exhibition “A Brilliant Career: The Musical Career of New Hampshire’s Amy Beach,” at the Milne Special Collections and Archives, at the University of New Hampshire.

Imagine being able to hum 40 tunes played on the piano by your mother at age 1, and composing four complete works at age 4 – without access to a piano.

Such began the life of child prodigy Amy Beach. By age 5, her mother, reluctant to embrace the idea of raising a prodigy, admitted that her daughter possessed perfect pitch and synesthesia.

Music history is filled with instances where erroneous “norms” drastically limited musical horizons. Around 1700, when a gifted harpsichord maker by the name of Bartolomeo Cristofori invented the hammer-action-mechanism of the piano forte, he struggled all his life against a musical “norm” centered on the clavichord and harpsichord.

A century later, three virtuosos brought the piano into the lime-

light – Beethoven for his dramatic style; Chopin for his quiet innuendo; and Liszt for his Paganini-style showmanship.

Up until the mid-1700s, there were many different-sized violins and stringed instruments. But in 1755, one virtuoso Viennese composer, Joseph Haydn, invented the string quartet, wrote 83 quartets, and took the string world by storm by creating an entirely new “standard” repertoire.

On three different occasions, 20th century violin makers invented new stringed instruments in order to expand the string quartet into an 8-or-10-piece tonally matched string family. All struggled against the reluctance of string players to consider any alternative to the “sacred” string quartet.

Antoine-Joseph “Adolphe” Sax invented the saxophone but struggled all of his life for its acceptance, facing bankruptcy three times defending his patents. When Sax died in 1894, his instrument was still in musical catacombs. Then in 1910, with the dawn of the jazz age, two virtuosos Charlie Parker and John Coltrane took the sax to new heights, and it became a standard.

Despite the passage of a thousand years, the words of Hildgard of Bingen speak to Amy Beach today: “Dare to declare who you are. It is not far from the shores of silence to the boundaries of speech. The path is not long, but it is deep. You must not only walk there, you must be prepared to leap.”

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