

## *AMY MARCY CHENEY BEACH (1867-1944)*

Amy Marcy Cheney Beach was born in Henniker, New Hampshire on September 5, 1867. The family moved to Boston, Massachusetts when she was four. At the age of two, she already exhibited incredible musical precociousness by singing melodies and was actually able to distinguish both alto and soprano lines of a vast repertoire of songs which she then repeated in exactly the key in which she first heard them. She possessed a photographic memory of great magnitude, and was often called upon to recite poems and biblical texts of long duration by memory. She mastered reading by the age of three and began composing at four. Amy's mother and father, themselves blessed with acceptable musical ability, recognized their daughter's talents and encouraged her to develop them. They guided her in her seemingly unquenchable thirst for musical knowledge. Amy began piano lessons with her mother and at the age of nine began instruction with Johann Ernest Perabo (a pupil of Ignaz Moscheles). She was gifted with perfect pitch, and in 1877 at the age of ten, began transcribing into musical notation the many recordings of bird calls collected throughout the years by Prof. Edward Sill, the distinguished ornithologist. (These transcriptions may have provided her with inspiration for several of her later pieces, such as *A Hummingbird* (1932), *A Hermit Thrush at Eve* (Op.92,No.1) and *A Hermit Thrush at Morn* (Op.92,No.2) for piano, and the songs *Wind O' the Westland* (Op.77,No2), and *Meadow-Larks* (Op.78,No.1). She studied harmony for one year when she was fourteen with Junius W. Hill, Professor of Music at Wellesley College. This was, theoretically, her only formal training in music theory. Remarkably, most of her knowledge in composition, counterpoint and orchestration was independently acquired. Amy also schooled herself in languages, and from the originals, translated the treatises on instrumentation by Gavaert and Berlioz.

Eighteen year old Amy Marcy Cheney married Dr. Henry Harris Aubrey Beach December 2, 1885, in a service at Trinity Church (Boston). The service was conducted by the Rector, Rev. Phillip Brooks, a close friend of the Cheney family. Dr. Beach was forty-three years old. The couple was well-off financially, and although Mrs. Beach continued to perform, at her husband's insistence her fees were donated to charity. In spite of the obstacles and prejudices against women composers at that time, Mrs. Beach made considerable inroads in recognition as a major composer. She composed over 150 songs, some of which were set to her own poems, as well as sacred and secular music, chamber and symphonic works. She was the first American woman composer to have written a symphony (*Symphony in E-minor, the Gaelic*, Op.32 in 1895), as well as many piano pieces, and a one-act opera, *Cabildo* (Op.149). Mrs. Beach followed traditional outlines in her compositional structure, but she explored a more romantic

model in her extended melodic lines and rich, chromatic harmonies. She was the youngest member of the New England School of composers (known as the Boston School), which included Edward MacDowell, Horatio Parker, Arthur Foote, John Knowles Paine, and George Chadwick.

After the death of her husband in June 1910 and a one-year period of mourning, the forty-six year old pianist/composer embarked on a highly successful concert tour in Europe, re-establishing her career as a concert artist.,

Amy Marcy Cheney Beach spent her remaining years divided between the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire (the wooded summer refuge for artists), and New York City. She died in her suite at the Hotel Barclay on December 27, 1944, having enjoyed a magnificent career, and leaving her works as her legacy, both spiritually and musically.

### The Songs

*Wouldn't that be Queer* (Op.26), with its delightful text, is a quixotic musical jest. The three Shakespeare songs, *Take, O take those lips away*, *O Mistress Mine*, and *Fairy Lullaby* (Op.37) are bagatelles. When performed in the seriously romantic frame of mind for which they are intended, they are a joy for the performer as well as the audience. *Der Totenkranz* (Op.73) is a poignant, wrenching *lied* composed three years after the death of Mrs. Beach's mother; it depicts the sense of suffering brought on by the loss. *Juni*, (Op.51) in contrast, is a song of rebirth, of hope in the fresh new beauty of spring with its healing renewal of life. The intense baring of the soul in *Extase*, (Op.21) with its religious implications, ends with exultation and jubilation over belief in God. *Elle et moi* (Op.21) is a spring pastiche with its delightful coloratura phrases. *Chanson d'Amour* describes the pulsating, joyous declaration of love, yet has an element of pathos which can be brought out effectively by the performer. This mini-aria builds to a passionate vocal climax, echoed by the thunderous heartbeat of the accompaniment. A powerful and very gratifying song to sing, it makes a particularly wonderful finale to any selection of Beach songs. The sweet *Prayer of a Tired Child* (Op.75) in its utter simplicity is reminiscent of some of her earliest works.

A collection of Mrs. Beach's work would not be complete without one of her most popular songs, *The Year's at the Spring* (Op.44). This work, together with *Ecstasy* and *Ah, Love but a Day*, was among her most successful songs. These three songs were often performed by the noted soprano Emma Eames and earned Amy Beach her greatest royalties. *The Year's at the Spring*, from Browning's "Pippa passes" has an unmistakable feeling of good will and optimism.

Amy Marcy Cheney Beach was a very religious and moral woman; her own spirituality permeates much of her work. *When Soul is Joined to Soul* (Op.62) is a fitting conclusion to this collection, with its comforting, positive message, and calming, effective accompaniment.

The songs in this collection were chosen to illustrate the various facets of vocal color and mood created by this unique composer. They are suitable for performance by either medium or high voice, and I hope that my humble contribution will enable any singer to capture easily the nuance and spirituality of these wonderful songs, as Mrs. Beach might have wished.

*Deborah Cook*, 1994

### **The Edition**

All original markings are retained in this edition. Where the editor has decided to make additions they have been placed in brackets. Where she differs with some of Amy Beach's phrasing or dynamic markings, the Beach originals have been placed in parentheses and the editor's marks can be found in square brackets.

### **Bibliography**

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## TRANSLATIONS

### 5. Der Totenkranz (The Children's Thanks)

Words by Louis Zacharias.

English version by John Bernhoff

I lay a wreath, with trembling hand,  
Dear mother, on thy grave,  
A wreath of thornless roses twined,  
As fair as earth e'er gave.  
No fairer blossoms o'er the head of king or queen were  
piled,  
And yet they oft on lowly grave  
Are laid by beggar-child.

They grow beside the hedgerow wild  
On summer's sunny banks,  
Not ev'ry eye their charm beholds!  
They call them "children's thanks."  
O let them plead for me today,  
O'er thee their fragrance shed.  
To ev'ry blessing thou didst give  
Thy "children's thanks" be wed!

And lest they lose their fragrant breath,  
Or die before their hour,  
With tears of love, in sorrow shed,  
Have I bedewed each flower.

### 6. Juni (June)

Words by Erich Jansen

English text by Mme. Isadora Martinez

O sunny days of June divine,  
Fresh beauty each hour discloses!  
Of blossoming meadows, and zephyrs benign,  
And in the gardens with fruit and vine,  
Heart'sease and Roses!

Heart'sease and Roses; a perfume strong  
The mellowing vineyards are gibing!  
The nights so lang'rous, the days so long!  
So beaming the brow, and so ringing the song,  
Such joy but in living!

Yon leafy arbor all tremulous there,  
Doth sigh as at night it reposes.  
Rich blessings fill all the scented air  
With rapture surpassing; and everywhere  
Heart'sease and Roses!

### 7. Extase (Exaltation)

Words by Victor Hugo

By the sea, 'neath the stars, I stood alone at night,  
No cloud above in heav'n, not a sail shimmered bright;  
Beyond this present world, into space, into space, roamed  
mine eye.  
And the woods, and the hills, all Nature around me  
Appeared, with murmur strange, to question profoundly

The waves below, the stars on high, the stars on high.

And all the starry host, in golden splendor,  
Crying loudly, whisp'ring softly, with thousand voices  
tender,  
Replied, their firey crowns bowing low toward the sea,  
The azure waves, that naught may control or arrest,  
Exclaimed, as they upward did toss their foamy crest,  
"Our Creator, we worship Thee!"

### 8. Elle et moi (My Sweetheart and I)

Words by Félix Bovet

Like springtime with colors so fair,  
Like rosy flame entrancing, with its bright, joyous  
dancing,  
Like the flow'ret pale, whose perfume fills the air,  
So lovely thou art, thou art, Ah!  
My sweetheart!

Like the swallow that heralds the coming of May  
Like the fawn that doth follow the white flower away,  
Ah,  
Its beauteous charm his heart, his heart alluring; Ah!

Like fearless moth who soon must sly  
Through the flame, his wings consuming, his wings the  
flame consuming, Ah!  
Am I!

### 9. Chanson d'Amour (A Song of Love)

Words by Victor Hugo

Still asleep, when the dawn is breaking!  
My dearest, thy portal unfold;  
When roses around thee are waking,  
Arouse thee now to joys untold!  
O my beloved, I sing to thee,  
Sighing, imploring  
Eternally!

All Nature a welcome is bringing;  
Aurora says: "I am the day!"  
And sweetly the bird is singing,  
And my heart, my heart says:  
"I love alway!"  
O my beloved, I sing to thee,  
Sighing, imploring  
Eternally!

I adore thee, I love thee truly;  
God, who has filled by life with thine,  
Created mine eyes for thy beauty,  
And for thy soul this love divine.  
O my beloved, I sing to thee,  
Sighing, imploring  
Eternally!