

Making waves

Amy Beach's piano concerto will be performed next week in London for the very first time - 100 years after she wrote it. Jessica Duchen rediscovers a composer who overcame the obstacles of being an American, a Romantic and a woman

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Clara Imogene Cheney was not happy. Her small daughter Amy, although not yet two years old, desperately wanted to play the piano. Moreover, she could already improvise "a perfectly correct alto to any soprano" that her mother might sing. The little girl was showing every sign of becoming a musical child prodigy. But this was New Hampshire in the late 1860s. Little girls were not child prodigies; little girls did not scream if forbidden to touch a piano; and little girls certainly did not compose - they had to learn discipline, submission and propriety.

Little Amy's talents were not so easily suppressed. By the time she was eight - a bright child with a determined chin and huge, violet-blue eyes - her proficiency at the piano was a matter for public awareness. She made her debut as a pianist at 16 to great acclaim, and her first composition was published the same year.

By the end of her long and extremely active life in 1944, Amy Marcy Cheney - known at first as Mrs HHA Beach and only later as Amy Beach - had become one of the most celebrated composers in America, the first woman composer in that country to achieve wide recognition, and an icon for younger women musicians who sought to follow in her footsteps. But by this time the musical world was fast turning against the late Romantic style in which Beach had composed most of her works. After her death, it quickly forgot about her.

Next week, Amy Beach's Piano Concerto - a full-scale piano-versus-orchestra bonanza that would probably be world famous had Rachmaninov written it - will be performed in London for the very first time, nearly 100 years to the day after its first performance in 1900.

The concert, with American pianist Joanne Polk as soloist, is part of an ongoing revival of interest in Beach's music. Polk is recording Beach's complete works for piano; the musicologist Adrienne Fried Block's authoritative examination of Beach's life and works, *Amy Beach: Passionate Victorian*, has won several significant prizes and is about to be released in paperback by OUP. The British pianist and conductor Diana Ambache has recorded several of Beach's chamber works and the American Composers Orchestra has recorded her largest orchestral piece, the Gaelic Symphony.

It looks as if today's more inclusive musical climate is not only more accepting of women composers but has also relaxed the Modernist rigours that for decades dismissed anything that smacked even vaguely of Victorian sentiment. Yet while Beach composed for many years with the emotional, expressive qualities of late German Romanticism, tinged with imaginative quasi-French coloration, her late works did move with the times to explore the Expressionist aesthetic that swept through Europe in the first decades of the 20th century. By that time, however, her reputation was for music in the earlier style, and the label was difficult, if not impossible, to shake off.

An additional problem was that when Beach was a young, aspiring composer, Americans of Anglo-Saxon origin weren't supposed to be able to compose music any more than women were. Musicality was perceived as the exclusive provenance of those of German or central European

origin. "Her neglect is due to three things," says Adrienne Fried Block. "First, she was American. Then she was known as a late Romantic composer at a time when people weren't open to that. Finally, she was a woman."

In her lifetime, however, Beach was able to overcome virtually all these apparent obstacles, and particularly the last. "She was the first important woman composer in the USA and the first to write large-scale works," says Block. "It was a breakthrough, especially in consideration of what came before - women were all expected to be amateur musicians, but were prevented from breaking into a professional career. She was the first to do so - and her story is dramatic because she had the courage and drive to succeed."

The piano remained Amy Beach's first love, but her burgeoning teenage fame was nipped in the bud all too soon. At just 18 years old she married an eminent surgeon, Henry Beach - a marriage that was possibly engineered by her mother - and although Amy herself saw no reason why she could not have both a successful performing career and a successful marriage, the conventions of the time were strongly opposed to such a notion.

Her husband, who was older than her mother, was particularly against it. At once Amy found her public performances restricted to an annual recital for charity - it was definitely not socially acceptable for a married woman from the cream of good society to earn money from public performance. Her musical activities necessarily focused instead on composition. Here Henry encouraged her - but the name that appeared on the printed sheet music was not Amy's own, but the inevitable "Mrs HHA Beach".

"One of her most successful pieces is the Prelude and Fugue based on the letters of her name: A-B-E-A-C-H," says Joanne Polk. (In German, B is the note called B flat in English and H is what we know as B). "She wrote it just after her husband died. During his lifetime she was Mrs HHA Beach, but here the note A is very important - the piece is in A minor and there is a strong A in the bass line which returns again and again - it's as if she's screaming out, 'I'm Amy!' "

Polk describes Beach as "a wonderful pianist, incredibly gifted, but with this pain-in-the-butt Mom - and she doubled her problem by marrying a man who was just like her mother! As soon as he died, she tried to revive her performing career, but, by this time, she'd been away from it for so long she never really got it back."

Perhaps the Piano Concerto reflects these difficult relationships: Block describes it as "autobiographical". Several of its themes are drawn from songs that Beach wrote which were intimately connected with her husband and mother, both of whom exerted an ongoing repressive control over her. Polk says, "I find so much of her music autobiographical. Some is based on poetry which concerns burial and struggle - her life contained many struggles, and the third movement of the concerto especially is full of pain."

After her husband and mother died within six months of one another in 1910-11, Amy Beach quickly set about resuscitating her career. She moved to Europe, where she travelled widely and performed many of her own works, though reviews were sometimes critical of her piano technique. When she eventually returned to America, leaving Europe to escape the outbreak of the first world war, Block says "she was welcomed back like a hero".

In her later life Beach turned herself into "Aunt Amy" and served as mentor to a number of younger would-be women composers. "They certainly saw her as an inspiration and she was the first president of the Society of American Women Composers, which she founded in 1925," Block relates. "Lots of people owed her debts for her help in arranging concerts, where her presence on the same programme was a real support for younger, less well-known composers - and she helped them generally, listening to their music, suggesting publishers and so on, in a very hands-on way. She couldn't have had more devoted friends or a wider circle of acquaintances."

Beach never had a family of her own; instead, she tended to cultivate substitute families of younger people. She was "a networker par excellence", according to Block, but her constant seeking of companionship had more to it than that. Emotionally, she appears to have remained unfulfilled. Her marriage seems to have been arranged with security in mind, rather than love. In

middle age she developed some strange emotional attachments to two much younger men, at least one of whom was thought to be gay. In her book, Block describes those attachments as "inappropriate and unrealistic". Fame can come at a price, and it looks as if Beach never really found the closeness and intimacy for which she might have hoped.

Beach's breakthrough on behalf of women in music was immeasurable - yet Polk points out that, even now, the battle is not fully won. "Is life that different for women composers today?" she asks. "We've gone a certain distance - but how far?" Polk feels that it is time gender became irrelevant: "You don't say 'Bach was a great male composer', so you shouldn't say 'Beach was a great female composer'! To me the best programming is just to programme good music without reference to gender or nationality. The important thing now is to put this music out there in its own right and let it be evaluated as music and nothing else. It takes a lot of doing. We shouldn't have to fight so hard."

- Joanne Polk performs Amy Beach's Piano Concerto with the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Paul Goodwin at the Barbican, London, (0171-638 8891) on Tuesday. Adrienne Fried Block will also be there, signing copies of *Amy Beach: Passionate Victorian* (OUP, £14.50).