

Amy Cheney Beach (1867-1944)

World-famous composer and musician Amy Cheney Beach, rightly called America's first woman composer, was one of Hillsborough's most illustrious citizens. Musicians and



music lovers everywhere know her for her "Gaelic Symphony," her "Piano Concerto in C# Minor", an opera, and hundreds of other choral, vocal and chamber works. Beach's determination, ambition and confidence has become a symbol of women's creative power. Amy Cheney Beach, the first successful woman composer, was also a brilliant pianist and teacher, known for encouraging other women composers, and much loved in Hillsborough and beyond for her Beach Clubs, some for

adults, some for children, which promoted musical education. One young Hillsborough pupil, Lisabel Gay, wrote "we have Mrs. Beach present at all our meetings,



and we are not a bit afraid to play before her. She seems to enjoy it and then she always plays for us." In her honor, Amy Beach Clubs were formed in New Hampshire and across the country.

EARLY LIFE

Amy Cheney was born on Western Avenue near the Contoocook River in Henniker on September 5, 1867, the daughter of Charles Abbott Cheney and Clara Imogene Marcy; later, she lived in Hillsborough for many years. She was born at a time when opportunities for women were limited and women were not



expected to become famous musicians and composers, but she did.

From earliest childhood, her musical genius stood out. Her mother was a talented musician, and according to family records, Amy could sing 40 different songs by the age of one. She had perfect pitch and a prodigious memory. At four, standing on a hassock at the piano at home, she played hymn tunes she had heard at church. She made her first public appearance at seven, playing the Beethoven sonata "Opus No. 49", a Chopin waltz, Handel's "Harmonious Blacksmith", and her own waltz as an encore.

When Amy was eight, her parents moved to Boston, and she had her only formal instruction—a single course in music theory. Amy was also, encouraged by her aunt Emma Francis Marcy Clement, a Hillsborough native, whom she called Aunt "Franc." Aunt Franc, a gifted contralto, lived in California with her husband and daughter Ethel Clement. Amy visited her aunt and cousin, a gifted painter, in San Francisco, which she liked so much she considered living there.

BRILLIANT CAREER

Largely self-taught at a time when a European musical education was considered essential, the young musician devoted herself to the study of the orchestral repertoire, examining scores and comparing them to performances she heard at the Boston Symphony. "I copied and memorized whole



scores of symphonies,” she said in an interview: “It was like a medical student’s dissertation.”

At sixteen, still with a long braid down her back, Amy made her musical debut at the Music Hall in Boston, playing Chopin’s Rondo in E flat. The next year she performed with the New York Philharmonic, and in 1885 played the Chopin F minor Concerto with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.



That same year, Amy Cheney met Dr. Henry Harris Aubrey Beach, a Harvard-trained Civil War veteran surgeon who was an accomplished pianist and art lover. They married that December. She was 18, he was 42 and according to his wishes, devoted herself to composition, producing most of her works during the 25 years of their marriage.

Composed in the late Romantic style popular in the late 1880s, Amy’s music had lush harmonies and long melodic lines, but as her style matured, she developed more modern elements. Her music was written to be performed and often revealed her interest in folk melodies.

In all she composed 150 pieces, including her still-popular ‘Gaelic Symphony,’ an expansive Mass in E flat, a piano Quintet in F sharp minor, and both comic and serious

operas. She was the first woman to compose a symphony and became a symbol of women’s creative power.

After Dr. Beach’s death in 1910, Mrs. Beach travelled and toured widely in Europe, performing in Sweden as well as German cities including Hamburg, Leipzig, and Berlin. After the devastating 1906 California earthquake, her aunt Franc and cousin Ethel Clement moved back east, taking an apartment at 70 Church Street in Hillsborough which Mrs. Beach provided for them, and adapting to life here.



At center, among other American composers, Amy Beach was honored at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1915.

Mrs. Beach enjoyed playing with the great European orchestras until war broke out; then settled in New York City in 1915, touring the country every winter and visiting New Hampshire and her home on Cape Cod in summers. After 1916, Hillsborough was her official residence; she voted here in presidential elections after women’s suffrage became legal.

Beginning in 1921, for 15 years she spent part of every summer at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough. In 1929 she returned to Europe to play a benefit concert at the American Embassy, and to finish her “String Quartet” (Op. 89).

A life-long Episcopalian, Mrs. Beach wrote a considerable amount of church music, anthems, and cantatas. The last composition she produced, “Though I Take the Wings of Morning,” (Opus 152) is also sacred in nature.

Perhaps the best known and most celebrated of American women composers, Amy Cheney Beach died at 77 in New York in 1944, much missed by citizens of Hillsborough as well as the world.

Hillsborough Remembers Amy Beach

The bronze plaque mounted at the entrance to the Fuller Public Library on School Street will remind visitors of Mrs. Beach’s strong connection to this town, where she lived at 60 Church Street, and that popular adult and children’s Beach Clubs met there regularly. This plaque honoring the world-famous composer was commissioned by the noted pianist and teacher Virginia Eskin and created by sculptor Kahlil Gibran. A duplicate plaque is mounted on Mrs. Beach’s former home at 28 Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. This plaque was presented to the Hillsborough Historical Society on October 29, 2019, to commemorate Mrs. Beach’s ties to Hillsborough and the area.

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