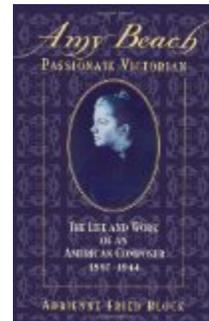


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Adrienne Fried Block. *Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian: The Life and Work of an American Composer 1867-1944.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. 448 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-507408-6.

Reviewed by Millie Jackson (Grand Valley State University)
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At the conclusion of her biography, Adrienne Fried Block writes that she “hopes she has neither diminished Amy Beach nor blown her up to superwoman size but rather shown her as a fallible girl and woman who exhibited courage in the face of obstacles...” (298). She succeeds in her task by weaving the scores of Amy Beach’s (1867-1944) music with the narrative of her daily life to tell the story of this remarkable Victorian woman. Though the work is primarily about Beach’s life as a composer, the book is by no means only for those interested in music. Discussions of Victorian society and gender roles make this biography of interest to a broader audience. Readers interested in music will be pleased with the detailed descriptions of Beach’s compositions and the facsimile scores while readers interested in women’s lives and the changes in society between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will find a fascinating study of a talented woman who refused to be limited by the time she lived.

Amy Beach’s music is the main focus of the work and Block rightly identifies Beach as an American composer instead of just a female composer. Born Amy Marcy Cheney, the “fair-haired child with large blue-violet eyes,” (4) created music from a young age, composing by the age of four. Her musical family did not want to recognize her natural talents at first but finally had to acknowledge them. Beach’s musical development and training are traced through a number of examples of her works. Expectations about Beach’s life as a composer and musician are described from the perspectives of her family and from the musical society of Boston. Analysis of the politics of being a female and a composer in the Victorian era is often at the heart of the sections on Beach’s adult life. At age 27, Beach began to compose a symphony, the

ultimate test of skill for a composer, especially one without much formal training. She kept a fresh perspective throughout her musical career: she “claimed that song writing was recreation for her” (146). Beach performed widely and composed music until nearly the end of her life in 1944.

Description of the role Beach played as a daughter, wife and friend add to the interest of this biography. These gender roles are particularly important in the context of the age Beach lived in and the length of her life over two centuries. As a daughter, Block imparts the story of a child raised by a strict Victorian mother who taught her daughter discipline along with the piano. As most women of her era, she was not being raised to be a professional musician though she enjoyed high praise from Boston musical society in her teens.

Like many other women of the age, Amy Cheney married. In 1885 she wed Henry Beach, a physician who was slightly older than her father. This essentially ended her public performance for years, and again, the reader learns about the standards for Victorian marriage through descriptions of Henry Beach’s expectations for his wife. With marriage her identity was “obliterated” as Amy Cheney and as a promising performer to become Mrs. H.H.A. Beach. When she withdrew from performance and was forced to refuse “fees when she did so” (51), she was “deprived her ...former status as a professional pianist” (52). Block relates the reality of Beach’s life as a wife of a prominent physician who “had considerable authority over his wife” (50) through her narrative. While she carried out her role as a physician’s wife, Beach did not settle to play just to entertain friends. She continued to challenge herself as a musician, fighting the

norms for the day despite the obstacles she faced. One can only imagine what Amy Beach's life would have been like if she had been male.

The Amy Beach of the early- to mid-twentieth century was an independent woman who traveled, performed and moved around when she desired. During her travels and performances in Europe she reclaimed her identity as Amy Beach. This freedom gained after her husband's death reflects both the changes in society and the respect that came with her age and reputation. Her role as a resident and supporter of the MacDowell Colony are included in detail.

Beach remained disciplined in her composing and personal life even though her music went out of vogue in the twentieth century. Block has written a fascinating biography of an important nineteenth century woman. It will be of interest to many readers.

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