



Program II: Summer Dreams

Saturday, August 12, 2023

Amy Beach (1867-1944): Summer Dreams, Op. 47 for Piano Four-Hands (1901)

As a virtuosic pianist and a member of the Second New England School—alongside composers George Whitefield Chadwick, Edward MacDowell and others—American composer Amy Beach holds a unique place in history. In a time when composers were expected to be white, male, and European-trained, Beach’s productivity, ambition, self-awareness, and deft approach to large-scale works set her apart as she created her own path to professional success.

Throughout her life, Beach was drawn to nature as a source of inspiration. Using nature as source material was common for female composers, artists, and authors of the time, who were often operating within the confines of their homes and gardens. Beach’s natural imagery was amplified by a distinctive characteristic of her musical persona: her synesthesia. From when she was a young girl, Beach “heard” certain keys as different colors.

Summer Dreams is a suite of six pieces for piano duet which features poetic quotations at the head of each movement: music and literature enjoyed close ties in the minds of many Romantic composers. It opens with “The Brownies,” a dance of fairy sprites prefaced by a quote from Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The suite continues with a picture of a “Robin Redbreast” (composed in Beach’s “red” key of G major and containing direct transcriptions of birdcalls); a movement entitled “Twilight,” prefaced with poetry by Beach herself; “Katy-Dids,” with a quote from Walt Whitman; and an “Elfin Tarantelle,” again inspired by Shakespeare. The suite closes with a “Goodnight,” accompanied by lines from Canadian-American poet Agnes Lockhart Hughes.

Arnold Bax (1883-1953): Quintet for Harp and Strings (1919)

Arnold Bax grew up in a well-off London household, where his fluency as a pianist and appetite for reading both emerged early. Studying at the Royal Academy of Music, he found an affinity with the passionate chromaticism and bold structural innovations of Wagner and Liszt, influences then still considered subversive. The writers of the Irish literary renaissance, and Yeats’s early plays and verse in particular, inspired a lifelong fascination with Ireland and Irish mythology.

Bax once described himself as "a brazen Romantic... by that I mean that my music is the expression of

emotional states. I have no interest whatever in sound for its own sake or in any modernist 'isms' or factions." In the Quintet for Harp and Strings (written following his first visit to Ireland after World War I), Bax's musical stance is clear in both the music and the expressive markings. In a single, compact movement, the Quintet has a straightforward structure, but contains complexities of decorative textures and chromaticism. Harmonic variation is the driving force in the work, and melodic figurations evolve constantly. The expansive themes have a melancholic mood overall, ranging from symphonic grandeur to its veiled and mysterious close.

George Gershwin (1898-1937) arr. Asti: Three Preludes for Clarinet and Piano (1926)

The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, George Gershwin blended the techniques and forms of classical music with the stylistic nuances and techniques of popular music and jazz. He began his musical education at age 11, when his family bought a second-hand upright piano, ostensibly for George's older sibling Ira. After dropping out of school at age 15, Gershwin worked as a song plugger (probably the youngest in Tin Pan Alley), pounding out tunes on the piano for potential customers. During a trip to Paris in the mid-1920s, Gershwin applied to study composition with the noted Nadia Boulanger who, along with several other prospective tutors such as Maurice Ravel, rejected him, fearing that rigorous classical study would ruin his jazz-influenced style.

Gershwin had originally planned to compose 24 piano preludes called "The Melting Pot." The number was reduced to seven in manuscript form, then to six in public performance, and finally published as a set of three. The first prelude has a five-note blues motif, with syncopated rhythms based on the Brazilian *baião*. Gershwin referred to the second prelude as "a sort of blues lullaby." Two melodies together form a question-and-answer structure for the third prelude, which concludes with a flourish.

The Three Preludes were premiered by the composer at the Hotel Roosevelt in New York City on December 4, 1926. The music was also performed at the Hollywood Bowl on September 8, 1937 in a tribute to Gershwin after his untimely death from a brain tumor in July of that year. This arrangement, by Eugene Asti, was written in 1987 for Todd Palmer's New York recital debut (noted as "played with irrepressible good humor" in the review by the New York Times.)

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904): Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 87 (1889)

Antonín Dvořák was the first Bohemian composer to achieve worldwide recognition, noted for turning folk material into 19th-century Romantic music. He became an accomplished violinist as a youngster, joining in the amateur music-making that accompanied the dances at his father's inn. A contemporary of Brahms and Tchaikovsky, Dvořák infused western European classical structures with a profound

commitment to his Bohemian roots, and applied the same sensibility to the Native American and African American musical traditions he encountered during his travels in the United States.

Dvořák composed his powerful Op. 87 quartet in just one month while at his beloved summer home in the village of Vysoka. The first movement is a grand sonata form movement that features Dvořák's penchant for long, lyrical themes, and the first four notes played in bold unison become a genetic marker that shows up everywhere throughout the piece. The slow movement, longest of the four, is a deep song of tremendous beauty, combining grace, color and passionate emotional outpouring. A scherzo opens somewhat gently, swaying to a traditional folk waltz, followed by a dashing romp of a trio section. The super-charged finale is a lively dance filled with Gypsy dulcimer flavor, passionate abandon, and Dvořák's definitive exuberance