

A Rebecca Clarke Reader, Liane Curtis, ed.

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By Deborah Hayes

The idea behind this superb collection of essays and interviews by and about the acclaimed composer and violist Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979) originated at a one-day conference of performances and scholarly papers that Liane Curtis organized at Brandeis University in 1999. *A Rebecca Clarke Reader* is organized in three sections, two of which, occupying a little over half of the book, are Clarke's writings and interviews. First come four recent essays about her music and her place in music history, then reprints of five of her essays on music published in England from 1923 to 1931, and finally, from the 1970s in New York City, transcripts of her only known taped interviews and a reprint of her 1977 program note on the Viola Sonata. The book is rich in musical examples, photographs and other illustrations. Curtis provides editorial introductions, and everything is thoroughly footnoted and indexed. A comprehensive bibliography and a

discography of 24 recordings provide testimony to the attention Clarke's work has received since her death, most of it during the past 15 years.

Published in 2004 by Indiana University Press and highly praised by its initial reviewers, the *Reader* was almost immediately withdrawn when Christopher Johnson, Clarke's grandnephew by marriage and manager of her estate, threatened legal action. An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in July of that year reported that Johnson found "libelous and defamatory statements" in the book as well as violations of copyright. Indiana, while protesting the charges, chose not to fight. In 2005 Indiana released its distribution rights to Curtis, who is now issuing the book in a photocopied, paperback volume through the Rebecca Clarke Society, of which she is founder and president. The book is available

at <http://www.rebeccaclarke.org/reader.html>. The page also offers a link to the 2004 *Chronicle* article that explains the controversy in detail.

A *Rebecca Clarke Reader* presents a close view, from several perspectives, of a major musical figure, in particular an important and influential woman musician, whose modesty and self-deprecating view of her own work almost caused a large part of it to be lost forever. Born in England of an American father and German mother, Clarke studied violin at the Royal Academy of Music in London and, beginning in 1907, composition with Sir Charles Stanford at the Royal College of Music. She was the first woman Stanford accepted as a student, a distinction she still recalled with pride some 60 years later, while maintaining that she hadn't deserved it

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(pp.11, 21). Stanford encouraged her to switch to viola for insights into the inner workings of musical texture. Her reluctance to draw attention to herself as a composer reflected current social standards for women. Her domineering father encouraged her education but disapproved of her professional ambition. After one final argument with him, she left home for good in 1910 and set out on an independent professional career as a violist. She was among the first women to be hired in a professional orchestra; she toured with chamber groups and as a solo recitalist.

In a brief biographical essay, "Rebecca Clarke: An Uncommon Woman," Nancy Reich describes a musician of "uncommon eloquence, creative energy and power, and courage" (pp.16-17); her career "opened doors for later generations of women musicians" (p.11). In all, Clarke composed over 90 works—choral music, songs, and instrumental chamber music. Owing perhaps to her hesitancy about self-promotion, only six instrumental pieces and 14 songs were published during her lifetime.

She wrote some pieces for her own recitals; an early example is *Morpheus* for viola and piano (1917-18), which she premiered in New York City. She wrote two large, multi-movement works, the *Viola Sonata* (1919, pub. 1921) and the *Piano Trio* (1921, pub. 1928), for American competitions sponsored by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. Entries were anonymous; the story of the judges' astonishment that the *Viola Sonata*, which tied with Ernest Bloch's work, was composed "by a woman" is cited more than once in the *Reader*. The *Viola Sonata* has become one of the most frequently performed works in the repertoire; the *Piano Trio*, runner-up in the 1921 competition, is almost as well known.

Coolidge then commissioned the *Rhapsody for Cello and Piano* (1923) for the Berkshire Festival in Massachusetts; it was this distinguished patron's only commission from a woman composer (p. 14). Perhaps dissatisfied with the work's reception, Clarke did not pursue publication. She did not, however, stop writing music as some have thought (p. 3). After 1923 she composed mainly songs and single-movement instrumental chamber works with descriptive titles (p. 80).

Besides performing and composing, she was in demand as an engagingly warm and knowledgeable speaker and writer on music. The second part of the *Reader* reprints five of her articles: "The History of the Viola in Quartet Writing" (1923) and "The Beethoven Quartets as a Player Sees Them" (1927), both from *Music and Letters*; two entries, "Viola" and "Bloch, Ernest," from *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* (1929); and "La semaine anglaise at the Paris Colonial Exhibition" (1931) from *The B.M.S. [British Music Society] Bulletin*. Clarke's explanations of the strengths of other composers' music reveal much about the musical and aesthetic aims of her own work.

Two of the recent essays in the *Reader*, those of Bryony Jones and Deborah Stein, analyze specific works to explain Clarke's compositional techniques. Jones's essay is a detailed comparison of the two Coolidge competition works, the *Viola Sonata* and the more complex *Piano Trio*. Over 20 musical examples effectively illustrate formal structure, harmonic and rhythmic constructions, instrumental devices and scoring techniques. Basic to Clarke's procedure, Jones notes, is the "repetition and transformation of motifs" (p. 80). An eclectic composer, Clarke absorbed much from the repertoire she knew well as a performer and writer, especially the music of Bloch, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. Jones attributes some of the chromatic inflections in Clarke's writing to octatonic pitch collections.

Stein's essay is a sensitive examination of text and music in three songs from three different decades, in which she finds an "evolution" in Clarke's style from late romantic to modern. Stein notes influences of Bloch, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Debussy and Ravel. The earliest song of the three, "Shy One" (1912), is strophic and tonal with chromatic and modal inflections. Ten years later, "The Seal Man" (1922-23) is still tonal but with post-tonal implications. (In a 1978 interview transcribed elsewhere in the *Reader*, Clarke calls this "the best song I ever did" [p. 218].) Stein finds two basic theoretical constructions here, an "X" that can be reduced to a chromatically-altered triad, and a "Y" in the form C-B-D-A-flat, which she identifies as set 4-18 or (0,1,4,7), vector array [10211]. (Jones might describe this set as an octatonic harmony.) The third song, "Tiger, Tiger" (1933) is an intense dramatic scene in which triads and seventh-chords function atonally to create a "powerful dissonance of musical elements" (p. 77). All three songs are reprinted in full, and Stein

provides illuminating charts of melodic motives, underlying pitch design, meter changes, and other elements.

Liane Curtis's essay is concerned with the context of Clarke's compositional style. She sees Clarke as part of the "British musical renaissance" among composers of the early 20th century, especially Vaughan Williams and some of Stanford's students such as Ivor Gurney. Clarke was also part of a group of English women, most of whose names are unfamiliar today, who formed the Society of Women Musicians in 1911 (p. 20). Curtis examines two of Clarke's settings of poems by W.B. Yeats, "Down by the Salley Gardens" (1919) and "The Cloths of Heaven" (ca. 1912), and compares Gurney's settings of the same poems. She also analyzes "The Aspidistra" (1929, pub. 1930), a comical song about the murder of a favorite Victorian-era houseplant, a symbol of cultural conservatism.

Clarke composed little in the 1930s; she said that a love affair sapped her energy for composition. Of the ten works she wrote from 1939 to 1942, only the *Passacaglia on an Old English Tune* (1941) for viola and piano, "her most emphatically British" work, in Curtis's estimation (p. 37), was published in her lifetime. Using a tune added to the *English Hymnal* of 1906 by Vaughan Williams, she adopts a sparse and "antique" sound, quite different from her chromatic-impressionist-expressionist style. Living in America, separated from homeland and friends in a time of war, Clarke was expressing "both her sense of longing and a determined hope, a spiritual transcendence" in the manner of Vaughan Williams (p. 37).

In 1944, at age 58, Clarke married James Friskin (1886-1967), a Scottish pianist and a friend from RCM days who was teaching at Juilliard. She lectured as an adjunct to her husband's involvement in music festivals—at Chautauqua in upstate New York and the Yale summer festival—and she broadcast occasionally on WQXR radio in New York City (pp. 101, 227). In the 1970s she returned to revising some of her works and possibly composing *Binnorie: A Ballad* (p. 5n6). She lived for the rest of her life in New York City.

In February 1976, just a few months before her 90th birthday (August 27th), Robert Sherman of WQXR radio interviewed her for a broadcast he was preparing about Dame Myra Hess. In the course of the conversation, which is transcribed in the *Reader*, Sherman discovered that Clarke, whom he had known only as Friskin's widow, was a composer of some renown. Curtis comments that here we witness the "actual moment when Clarke was rediscovered as a composer" (p. 157). Further, this was also the beginning of Clarke's rediscovery of herself as a composer (p. 160). Sherman immediately starts to plan a birthday tribute to Clarke in August. In the Sherman interviews Clarke recalls the deep pleasure and satisfaction she derived from writing

music. She admits some regret at not writing more. "I wanted to, but I couldn't.... I had lots of sketches of things" but I "allowed too many other things to take over" (pp. 176-77).

She touches upon her perception that people found it strange for a woman to be a serious composer. She tells the story of the judges' surprise over the Viola Sonata, adding that some people believed that "Rebecca Clarke" was Bloch's pseudonym (p. 175). She recalls that when she mischievously listed a fictitious "Anthony Trent" as the composer of *Morpheus* at its 1918 premiere, people paid more attention to it than to the works she performed under her own name; some wanted to hear more of "his" work and others speculated that "he" was her lover (pp. 172, 174).

In 1978, interviewed by Nancy Uscher, a fellow violist, Clarke discusses some of her pieces, available editions, viola players and teachers, other musicians, and related professional issues. In three interviews Ellen Lerner conducted in 1978 and 1979 for a study of women composers, Clarke recounts how she was hired by conductor Henry Wood in 1913 for the Queen's Hall orchestra as part of an experimental hiring of six women players (p. 214). As a composer she describes herself as "lucky" with performances, probably because "people were so anxious to be fair to women" (p. 207).

In 1977, the year after Sherman initiated what Clarke called "my mini revival" (p. 177), Christopher Johnson, in the course of his musicology studies, worked with her to compile a work list. In 1981 his essay "Remembering the Glorious Rebecca Clarke," part of his Introduction to the Da Capo Press reprint of the Piano Trio (1921, pub. 1928), appeared in *American Women Composers News*, the journal of one of the IAWM's parent organizations. Perhaps reluctant to present herself as a composer, Clarke had made no provision for the disposition of her music (p. 3). In 1982 her heirs assigned the copyrights to her work and the royalties from it to Johnson; the unpublished scores, diaries, clippings, and other materials became his private property. He has published several pieces through Oxford University Press. Liane Curtis has questioned some of his editing decisions and commentaries. But instead of defending his work on musicological grounds in scholarly journals, the usual way, he has chosen to act through lawyers. The battle, like many intellectual battles, might be quite enlightening, if he does not succeed in clearing the field.

The *Reader* was awarded a 2004 Society for American Music publication subvention. This distinguished award represents a great honor for both editor Liane Curtis and the publisher.

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