

The TRIANGLE, book review -- December 2006
Mu Phi Epsilon International Music Fraternity
Rona Commins, Bookshelf Editor

A Rebecca Clarke Reader

Liane Curtis, editor, 2005. Paperback, pp.241, 98 musical examples, 10 photos, \$25.00. The Rebecca Clarke Society, Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University, MS 079, 515 South Street, Waltham MA 02454 or www.rebeccaclarke.org

The story of the publication of this book about a noted violist, a female who broke into the all-male bastion of early twentieth century instrumental performance, reads like an opera libretto! First published in 2004 by Indiana University Press, the book was threatened with a lawsuit by the manager of the Clarke estate, claiming defamation of character and unlawful use of unpublished material. In mid-June of 2004 two letters arrived in the mailboxes of reviewers. From Indiana University Press, the message was to ship back **A Rebecca Clarke Reader** at the press's expense. From the editor Liane Curtis, the pasted-on label of the enveloped declared "DON'T RETURN your Rebecca Clarke Reader! The recall is groundless! We are fighting back!!" The denouement of this imbroglio of operatic proportions was that we now have the book! (A story which can be read at www.rebeccaclarke.org.)

British-American Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979) was a remarkable performer and composer. As a noted violist, she blazed trails for the female performers of her time. As a female composer of the 1920's, she faced nearly insurmountable obstacles and her work was rarely performed or published in her lifetime. When Clarke's Viola Sonata was rediscovered in the 1970's, it became the single most performed work for the viola. It has now been released on more than fifteen CD recordings.

A Rebecca Clarke Reader presents original research on Clarke's life, work and career. The first section of the three-part book consists of four essays about Clarke as a composer. We learn from essay number two by Liane Curtis, *Rebecca Clarke and the British Musical Renaissance*, that Clarke was "probably encouraged to write in the genre of song because of its appropriateness as a feminine genre. Her songs are a remarkable artistic achievement.... this makes a statement about the proscribed areas that were considered suitable for women. Larger works were thought to be an area that women were incapable of working in, and any attempt to do so was going against the 'natural' dictates of their gender." The essays of section one include analysis of the text, melody and harmony of nine of Clarke's songs. Three songs are printed in their entirety.

Five essays written by Clarke herself (published 1923-1931) comprise the second section of the **Reader**. We get a sense of the charming Rebecca in her *History of the Viola in Quartet Writing* (chapter 5) as she explains the scarcity of good viola players: "Whether for so long no parts of importance were written for it is because there were no good viola players, or whether there were no good viola players because no parts of importance were written for it, is one of those puzzles.... Even up to the present generation it was almost

accounted a confession of failure to play the viola at all; and teachers...have been known quite seriously to advise parents...to make their most unmusical child learn to play the viola, leaving the violin and the cello to its more gifted brothers and sisters.” And how did the viola rise to its present position of prominence? Clarke’s explanation: “One can imagine Mozart.... thinking: *We really must give a nice part to the poor old viola now and then*, and straight-way proceeding to write in his quartets—and still more so in his string quintets--passages such as it had never before been confronted with. Whereupon the poor old viola player of the day, startled, had to emerge from his comfortable obscurity, and begin to practice....”

Lastly in **A Rebecca Clarke Reader**, in the third section of the book, we are treated to the spoken word of Rebecca through four taped interviews dating from 1976 to 1979, the year of her death. Her own words give us a vivid insight into her career and life. Rebecca describes her experience of being one of the first women to play professionally in an orchestra in 1913. “It was considered very, very strange to have women in a symphony orchestra. I remember the men in the orchestra were *disgusted*.... The first concert we played at we sort of slunk into our places. Well now, I was rather tall for slinking, and when I came in it was impossible to do it inconspicuously.” A man in the gallery of Queen’s Hall shouted, *well, good enough, they’ve got some women*, and Rebecca says she felt “as if I could have dropped into the floor, because I knew how the orchestra were annoyed at having women, they thought it was a fearful comedown.” (Chapter 13, *Musicologist Ellen D. Lerner Interviews Rebecca Clarke*.)

Well, enough of quotes. Now *you* must read this book. Though being a work of scholarship, it is also an engaging story of musical life in the early twentieth century through a woman’s eyes. Through the work of editor Liane Curtis, Rebecca Clarke’s creative output is finally being revealed. Through the work of *musicologist* Liane Curtis, we are learning that Rebecca Clarke research is “reshaping our understanding of twentieth-century music history”.