

The Rebecca Clarke Society

Newsletter Fall 2003 Vol. 3/2

Inside:

p. 3 **Two composers awarded Rebecca Clarke Prize. Works to Premiere at Brandeis Univ.**
p. 4 **A New CD – and old favorites, order from us**



Rebecca Clarke, ca. 1910

When Virginia Woolf met Rebecca Clarke: Long Beach Opera Brings Creative Pair together at Getty Museum

Nov. 15, 16, 17



Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's play *Freshwater, A Comedy* produced by the Long Beach Opera, with music by Rebecca Clarke; the Viola Sonata (1919), and songs "June Twilight," "Tiger, Tiger," "Lethe," "A Dream" and "The Seal Man." With Gina Warnick, viola; Anli Tong, Piano; Donna Balson, soprano; Timothy Durkovic, piano.

Michael Milenski, producer of the Long Beach Opera, contacted me in August to tell me about LBO's plans to bring Woolf and Clarke together, and to learn more about Clarke and her music. We communicated regularly over the next months, and he arranged for me to give a presentation at the Getty Museum, before the Nov. 15 performance. The text below is adapted from my comments at the Getty, and following that is a brief report on the performances. I was pleased to be involved in this insightful and moving event.

✧ Liane Curtis ✧

Clarke Society receives grant from Chamber Music America

The Rebecca Clarke Society, Inc. was awarded a grant from Chamber Music America, to fund a professional consultant to help us integrate our efforts in the most productive way with those of the Estate of Rebecca Clarke. Chamber Music America, a 25-year-old national organization based in New York City, includes distinguished performers, composers and music professionals on its Board of Directors. The CMA Board members were particularly impressed with the determination of the Rebecca Clarke Society to raise awareness of Clarke's music -- published and unpublished -- among scholars and performers alike and to make many of the important unpublished works and prose writings available (as has happened with the publication of 26 pieces in the past 3 years). ✧

Virginia Woolf and Rebecca Clarke met only one time, according to Clarke's diary, at what seems to have been a completely unremarkable event where Clarke played viola in a string quartet by their mutual friend Ethel Smyth. Even before reading the passage in Clarke's diary from May 25, 1930, I had been preparing a scholarly essay comparing the two women, Woolf and Clarke, both British, who grew up in the vicinity of London, both powerful creative figures. Since Clarke (until quite recently) was an obscure figure -- nearly half of her more than 90 works still remain unpublished -- I was astonished to learn that Long Beach Opera was linking them, using Clarke's music to complement their staging of Woolf's only play, "Freshwater." That someone else would share my idea of bringing the two women together was satisfying, and that it would be done vividly and creatively on stage made me determine to be there to experience it, and to be of assistance in any way I could.

Continued on p. 2

When Woolf Met Clarke, continued from p. 1

For years I have been engaged in the lonely process of studying composer Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979), and my starting point in comparing Woolf and Clarke was their creative lives – what stimulated them to choose a creative path, and how did they survive professionally in fields still very much controlled by men? On further examination I observed similarities in their childhoods, family lives, and their emotional histories.

While they would be surprised by being brought together, the insights to be gained through considering the parallels – and striking contrasts – between the lives of Clarke and Woolf deeply enrich our understanding of both these complex figures. While Woolf was vastly more prolific and also more experimental, Clarke's music shares with Woolf's work an assurance, a virtuosity at achieving its desired emotional richness and intensity, be it passion, aching poignancy, nuances of nostalgia or the exhilaration of interior discovery; both women succeed so powerfully in capturing the essence of the emotions they seek to convey.

Clarke's output, taken on its own, is quite substantial: about 55 songs, a dozen choral works, and 25 pieces of chamber music, some no less than monumental in their stature (such as the Viola Sonata that will be heard in the Long Beach Opera production). A few of these instrumental pieces achieved some fame in Clarke's lifetime, but most of Clarke's music was unpublished and unperformed until quite recently, and in fact several major works were only discovered in her estate within the last few years. Clarke worked professionally as a violist, both in Britain and the US, and there were lengthy periods (including most of the 1930s) during which she composed nothing. She married at age 58 and settled in New York. By the 1970s she had been forgotten as a composer, but her rediscovery was triggered by a WQXR radio broadcast celebrating her ninetieth birthday in 1976.

Once Clarke began to be pulled from obscurity, the shared biographical elements between Woolf and Clarke became obvious. For instance, both had sisters who were artists – Clarke's sister Dora was a sculptor, and like Vanessa Bell, studied at the Slade School. And similarities surround their childhoods, both of the upper middle class, raised in severe Victorian homes centered around a domineering patriarch. Clarke and Woolf shared a basic childhood

insecurity, growing up within an atmosphere of tyranny and even exploitation. The Paterfamilias (as Woolf described her father) felt endowed with a sense of ownership and entitlement that placed the female children in positions of servitude and vulnerability. Both Woolf and Clarke wrote about the trauma of their childhoods: Woolf in autobiographical writings and also fictionalized in *To the Lighthouse*; Clarke in a vivid unpublished memoir written in her eighties, "I Had a Father Too—or, The Mustard Spoon."

Both women portray their fathers as harsh distant figures, who made unrealistic demands from their offspring, and offered few words of encouragement.

Two brief examples will serve. Woolf recounts how, following the death of their mother, she and her sister Vanessa were expected to manage the household, although they were only teenagers. Every week her father would inspect the accounts.

Down came his fist on the account book. There was a roar. His vein filled. His face flushed. Then he shouted, "I am ruined." He flung at her all the phrases ... Never have I felt such rage and frustration. For not a word of my feeling could be expressed. ... Even now I can find nothing to say of his behavior save that it was brutal. If, instead of words, he had used a whip the brutality would have been no greater.

Clarke experienced the brutality of both words and blows. Her memoir, "I Had a Father Too," that she wrote in the 1960s, describes how she and her siblings were whipped by their father with a 2 foot steel architect's rule. She was beaten regularly for infractions such as the habit of biting her nails. During these sessions her mother stood crying helplessly outside the door.

It seems likely that the traumas of their childhoods led to the insecurities that – despite the great differences in their careers – both Woolf and Clarke experienced in their professional lives.

Both suffered from depression. Woolf's was certainly more intense and acute, with her first breakdown and attempt at suicide occurring in 1904. Clarke's instead was intermittent, and often low-grade, what psychologists call dysthymia – not completely incapacitating her, but affecting her

Continued on p. 5

Two Composers awarded Rebecca Clarke Prize Competition for New Music sparks strong interest

Designed to encourage and promote the work of women composers, The Rebecca Clarke New Music Competition was organized this past spring, with scores accepted to July 30, 2003 (see the RCS Newsletter Spring, 2003). Calling for anonymous submissions and offering a \$1000 prize (as did the Coolidge competitions that so stimulated Rebecca Clarke in 1919 and 1921), the competition a remarkably large number of 160 entries from fifteen countries and four continents, ranging in age from teenagers to octogenarians. The three judges, impressed by many of the submitted works, decided to divide the prize between two outstanding entries, "Shifting Landscapes" for string quartet, by Ellen Harrison, and "Cloister Songs" for voice and piano, by Martha C. Horst. The works were to be premiered on the Dec. 6 Gala concert of the Festival of Women Composers, at Brandeis University, but because of the heavy snowstorm, the concert did not take place and will be rescheduled. See www.brandeis.edu/centers/wsrc for more information about the Festival.

Martha C. Horst is part of the theory and composition faculty at the School of Music of East Carolina University. She studied composition at Stanford University and has attended national and international festivals where she studied with composers such as Milton Babbitt, Mario Davidovsky and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. In recent years, Horst has received commissions from the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, Earplay, Emyrean Ensemble, and the Dartington International Festival. Her music has been performed by such notable groups as the Fromm Players, members of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Eighth Blackbird, The Women's Philharmonic, Composers, Inc., and at the Wellesley Festival of Women Composers Conference. Her Piano Sonata No. 1 was recorded by acclaimed pianist Lara Downes and released by Crossover Media.

Ellen Harrison, a native of Illinois, received her doctorate in composition from the University of California, Berkeley, where her teachers included Edwin Dugger, Richard Felciano, Andrew Imbrie and Olly Wilson. Supported by U.C. Berkeley's Prix de Paris, she spent two years in France (1992-94).

She has also studied at the Musikhochschule in Stuttgart. Harrison's music has been performed in both the United States and Europe, and her works have received awards from organizations such as the American Guild of Organists, the Fromm Music Foundation, IBLA European International Competition for Composers, and the Ohio Arts Council. She is currently writing a septet for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players and teaching at the University of Cincinnati, College Conservatory of Music Preparatory Department.

The judges for the Competition were Ruth Lomon (composer and Resident Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University), Martin Boykan (composer and professor in the Music Department, Brandeis), and Marjorie Merryman (composer, Chair of Music Department, Macalester College, St. Paul, MN; and a Brandeis alumna). Two of Lomon's recent choral works will also be performed on the Gala concert.

The judges and Festival Committee also decided to award two more outstanding entries to the competition an "Honorable Mention" and \$100 prize. These were Patricia Morehead's "Triptych for soprano and string quartet" and Bonnie Miksch "Man Dreaming Butterfly Dreaming Man," for violin and piano. The Festival organizing committee, the Rebecca Clarke Society, Inc. and the Women's Studies Research Center of Brandeis University (sponsoring Festival of Women Composers) may hold the competition again in two years. ☞

Coming in March 2004:

A Rebecca Clarke Reader

Published by Indiana University Press, this edited anthology features writings by Clarke herself and edited interviews, where she speaks candidly about her fascinating life. Also includes research by leading scholars on Clarke's songs and chamber music, and her cultural milieu. Edited by Liane Curtis. Cloth, 0-253-34395-X, \$34.95, plus shipping and handling.

Order now from Indiana University Press, by calling 800-842-6796 (sale code F7KR)

Celebrate Women Composers! -- CDs available from the RCS

(1) **The Cloths of Heaven – Songs, and music for Violin** by Rebecca Clarke. "The songs are pure gold" stated the Boston Globe in 1999. Clarke's sensitive treatment of the English language and remarkable range of expression is demonstrated on this disk. Poets include Yeats and Blake, and works by women who Clarke's personal friends, including Ella Young and Anna Wickham. Patricia Wright, soprano; Jonathan Rees, violin; Kathron Sturrock, piano. This re-released CD (2000, originally 1992) includes notes by Liane Curtis. Guild, GMCD 7208. Hear audio clips on our website. \$15

(2) **NEW!! Rebecca Clarke: Chamber Music.** An entire CD of unknown and unpublished music, most in first recordings. Includes the recently discovered Nocturne and *Danse Bizarre*, for two violins and piano (1907), Clarke's "Dumka," for viola, violin and piano, and two pieces for String Quartet. The Flesch Quartet, Lorraine McAslan and David Juritz, violins; Michael Ponder, viola; Ian Jones, piano. Dutton Digital CDLX 7132, 2003. \$16

(3) **"Midsummer Moon" Chamber music by Rebecca Clarke** This new CD features first recordings of some of the unpublished works that remain the privately-held property of Clarke's estate, including the "Rhapsody" for cello and piano, that Clarke wrote as a commission for Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge in 1923 (it was premiered by cellist May Mukle and pianist Myra Hess). Also includes "Morpheus" for viola and piano, which Clarke wrote under the pseudonym of "Anthony Trent." Lorraine McAslan, violin; Michael Ponder, viola; Justin Pearson, cello; Ian Jones, piano. Dutton CDLX 7105, 2000 \$15

(4) **Death and the Maiden.** The Lafayette String Quartet. First recording of Clarke's "Poem" for String Quartet. Music by Schubert, Fanny Mendelssohn. Review and clips of this CD on our Website, <http://www.rebeccaclarke.org/poem.html> \$14

(5) **Piano Trios by Rebecca Clarke, Felix Mendelssohn, and Ping Jin.** Performed by the Newstead Trio. Michael Jamanis, violin; Sara Male; cello; Xun Pan, piano. Clarke's passionate Piano Trio (1921) is, along with the Viola Sonata, her best-known work, given an exhilarating performance by these energetic young musicians. This ensemble's patron, Joan Newstead, was a personal friend of Clarke's as also were the parents of violinist Michael Jamanis. Prince Productions, 1998. \$12

(6) **British Women Composers – music for cello and piano**, performed by Catherine Wilmers (cello) and Simon Marlow (piano). Music by Rebecca Clarke, May Mukle (a cellist who was Clarke's friend and colleague), Sheila Power, Marie Dare and others, contemporary and from the early 20th century. You'll say "WHY haven't we heard of these women before?" ASV Quicksilva. \$9

(7) **Ruth Lomon: Songs of Remembrance** Lomon has been commissioned to orchestrate the Clarke Viola Sonata. Ruth Lomon has set ten poems by Holocaust survivors to create a song-cycle that deals with that disturbing part of 20th-century history. The Cycle and the CD (produced by Jane Ring Frank) are critically acclaimed. Pamela Dellal, mezzo-soprano; Donald Berman, piano; Laura Albeck, oboe and English horn; Frank Kelley, tenor; Donald Boothman, baritone. "The songs are indescribably beautiful. (*Fanfare*) More info on our website <http://www.rebeccaclarke.org/remembrance.html> (Composers Recordings, Inc. 2002) \$10

(8) **The Women's Philharmonic**, conducted by Joann Falletta. Performs music by Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann (piano concerto composed by the young virtuosa!), Germaine Tailleferre (the sparkling concertino for Harp and Orchestra) and Lili Boulanger. A remarkable set of first recordings of music by some of the best-known historic women composers. Koch, 1992 \$15

(9) **Florence Price – World Premiere recordings** of orchestral music by this African-American composer (1887-1953) associated with the Harlem Renaissance. "The Oak," "Mississippi River," and Symphony No. 3 in c-minor. Music is lushly romantic and tuneful. The Women's Philharmonic, conducted by Apo Hsu. Koch, 2001 \$15

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When Woolf Met Clarke, continued from p. 2

emotionally and creatively. As documented by her diaries, at its worst it was manifested in a particularly feminine theme – devotion and sacrifice to romantic love, a hopeless and self-destructive love, her secret affair with the married singer John Goss. Her diaries report her restlessness, her inability to work and how it disturbed her, and an ongoing sorrowful ache that at least in one instance, led her to wish for death (Diaries 1928-1931).

That the depression impeded Clarke's ability to compose is clear – but instead of focusing on this creative block, she lived out a very stereotypical role, of preoccupation with a man – whether she could see him or not. But Clarke – like Woolf – sometimes also expressed this depression in her art. As she wrote in her memoir, composing could be “a refuge, an outlet, and finally, a passion.” Her pre-occupation with death, and its metaphor, sleep, is revealed in some of the songs performed in the Long Beach Opera production, most dramatically (in the case of comparison with Woolf) Clarke's vivid depiction of a drowning by suicide in her setting of Masefield's “The Seal Man.”

Clarke and Woolf experienced feelings of insecurity about the value of their creative abilities, feelings that can be connected with their traumatic childhoods. But they dealt differently with the memories of their childhoods and the resulting emotions.

Clarke understood her experiences very personally, while Woolf instead was able to see her life as part of a larger cultural fabric. Woolf often understood feminist issues as having a personal relevance for her, and she was able to draw strength from this perspective. Woolf recalled her father's behavior with a sense of outrage, an anger that she expressed in her writing. Clarke never expressed anger. Her tone in describing her father is matter-of-fact, sometimes she expresses pity for him, and occasionally suggests she deserved the cruel treatment she received – “being the naughtiest.”

Woolf saw her father's behavior as part of a larger patriarchal structure that left women powerless. By seeing her obstacles and problems as related to these broad issues, Woolf was inspired and her determination to work was strengthened. She knew that she was not to blame for all the problems she confronted.

Clarke, in contrast, took her failures and difficulties personally, as something all her own and not part of a larger pattern. Rather than courageously going against the grain of social expectations, Clarke conceded to them. Feeling isolated, it was hard for her to contradict cultural expectations and devote herself to her own creative abilities. Her father, representing cultural authority, had undermined her confidence, and she did not challenge his status.

The long silences in Clarke's life, the periods when she did not write music, can best be understood by keeping in mind the struggle faced by all women who sought to work outside the confines of the traditionally feminine. Femininity, for those who grew up in the Victorian Era, was felt to be in conflict with creativity, with devotion to one's self, to one's own power and ideas. We can feel this sense of conflict in this 1976 interview, in which Clarke is asked why she stopped composing.

I wanted to, but I couldn't. I had lots of sketches of things. I know and I miss it, because there's nothing in the world more thrilling -- or practically nothing -- But you can't do it -- at least I can't -- maybe that's where a woman's different -- I can't do it unless it's the first thing I think of every morning when I wake and the last thing I think of every night before I go to sleep -- I've got to have it in my mind all the time and if one allows too many other things to take over one is liable not to be able to do it, that's been my experience. (Interview with Robert Sherman)

Woolf, in a 1931 essay, explains this conflicted self admirably.

*I discovered that if I were going to write, I needed to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her *The Angel in the House*. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. ... I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. ... Had I not killed her she would have killed me -- she would have plucked the heart out of my writing. ... Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe. .. But it was found to befall all women writers at that time. *Killing the Angel in the House* was part of the occupation of a woman writer.*

Continued on p. 6

When Woolf Met Clarke, continued from p. 5

Woolf was successful in her battle with her Angel, since we find not only shelves of her books in the library, but also shelves of books about her; she is a subject of stage and screen, and looms large on many a college syllabus. But we might say that Woolf's suicide in 1941 was an indication that her struggle took its toll; having sacrificed her "Angel" she had no other side or identity to turn to when she felt insecure as an artist. Clarke, on the other hand, tried to make peace with her angel, tried to find a compromise, but in the end sacrificed her creative self. Thus between 1942 and her death in 1979, she wrote only three pieces of music. As sad as it might seem to those of us who love her music, Clarke's compromise did bring her peace and satisfaction; by all accounts her marriage in 1944 was a happy one. A letter from her husband-to-be encouraged her to continue composing, but Rebecca herself saw no place for this activity in her role as Mrs. James Friskin. Thus she had close friends in New York who knew her as a former violist and wife of the distinguished Juilliard Instructor, but who only learned that she was a composer from the 1976 birthday celebration.

As the brilliance of Rebecca Clarke's work begins to be known and celebrated, she can be part of a remarkable lesson in how people from the past continue to have a future, to shape and influence present lives, works, and sensibilities. In 1976, the year the discovery of Clarke began, Woolf was in many circles still considered a relatively minor, arcane literary figure. Hermione Lee, author of a recent Woolf biography, was advised at that time that Woolf did not deserve serious study. And Woolf's volume of essays and autobiographical writings, *Moments of Being*, was published for the first time in that year. For Clarke, this process of discovery, recognition, her influence upon the musical world and the development of multiple interpretations of her music and life, remain for the most part in the future. For Clarke, the best "moments of being" are still to come. ❧ ❧ ❧

About the Performances

"Freshwater," a drawing room comedy, pokes fun at Woolf's great-aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, and her Victorian contemporaries. The Long Beach Opera staged the play as the first half of the event, and Clarke's music was staged in the second half.

The Viola Sonata was performed by musicians in period costume, with the members of the cast serving as an on-stage (or in-parlor) audience. In the first movement they listened attentively, but in the Scherzo, the bouncy rhythms were so infectious that the character of the maid broke into a jig, and soon others were dancing as well. This use of the rhythmic character of this vivacious movement I found remarkably fitting. By the end of the Sonata, the young lovers of the play were rolling around on the floor together in heated passion. While far from typical concert decorum, I found the interpretation completely within the range of the plausible, having received correspondence from many who have played the Clarke Sonata and remarked on the powerful emotions the work triggers. These letters included one from a pianist who became lovers with the violist he was working with, following an intense bout with the Clarke.

The cast members left the stage, leaving soprano Donna Balson and pianist Timothy Durkovic. Experienced in opera, Balson was compelling in the staged performance of five songs. To set the mood, Durkovic was tasked with the job of dragging a coffin (which had figured prominently in the play) across the stage. This deed (certainly a rare one for a pianist) emphasized the biographical associations of the melancholy songs with Woolf's life. The Los Angeles Times praised the Brahmsian qualities of Clarke's music, and was particularly impressed with Balson, who conveyed the songs as powerful operatic experiences, ending with the tragic onstage drowning ("The Seal Man").

❧ ❧ ❧ Liane Curtis

The Rebecca Clarke Society, Inc. Newsletter -- edited by Liane Curtis, President

Women's Studies Research Center
Brandeis University MS 079
Waltham, MA 02454-9110

phone: (617) 776-1809
fax: (781) 736-8117
E-mail: info@rebeccaclarke.org

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