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Rebecca Clarke

An Uncommon Woman

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Joan Tower, the eminent American composer, has written five Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman.¹ They celebrate women who take risks, in Tower's words, women who dare. Women achievers have always had to accept challenges; this is equally true for women in musical life as in all other fields. The acceptance of women composers and performers as colleagues by the musical world has not been an easy progression: it has been a rocky road with many bumps and detours. Most striking, I believe, is that it was individual women themselves, often acting alone, who forged ahead and forced changes. They dared to be different, often defying community mores and family expectations. And yet, with the exception of such articulate militants as Dame Ethel Smyth, it is unlikely that most women musicians of the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries thought of themselves as brave or uncommon, or even as feminists. Today, however, we can look back and see that it not only

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required talent and determination but also courage to enter what, until then, had been exclusively a man's world.

Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979) was one of these unique women whose career as a composer and viola player opened doors for later generations of women musicians. Yet this Anglo-American composer (she was born and studied in England but eventually settled in the United States and spent most of her life in that country) remains relatively unknown.

Her entire entry in the 1980 *New Grove Dictionary of Music* reads: "Clarke, Rebecca, see James Friskin." In order to learn about Clarke, we must turn to the entry on Friskin, the musician she married when she was fifty-eight, after a lifetime of highly regarded music-making and composing.² That Rebecca Clarke has not been given the recognition she deserves may be attributed to several factors: (1) she composed a relatively small (but choice) body of work, most of which was not published in her lifetime;³ (2) her last work was composed in the 1950s, though she lived on to 1979; (3) perhaps, because of her dual citizenship, she fell between the cracks and was claimed neither by English nor American scholars of women's history; and (4) she was not a self-promoter, and, like many women, spoke deprecatingly of her own talents. When she wrote about her composition studies with Sir Charles Stanford (1852-1924), her composition teacher at the Royal College of Music, for example, she declared: "that I was the only woman he had accepted was a source of great pride to me, though I knew full well that I never really deserved it."⁴ An examination of her work, however, reveals a composer of enormous talent, and a study of her life is evidence of her considerable contribution to chamber music in the United States.

Clarke, born in Harrow, a suburb of London, to an American father⁵ and a German mother, was plunged into the world of chamber music at an early age by her father, a tyrannical, often cruel and abusive man,⁶ but a passionate music lover. She began studying the violin but switched to the viola at the suggestion of Stanford, who in addition to being her composition teacher was also the conductor of the student orchestra, when he pointed out to her that playing the viola would place her "right in the middle of the sound, and [she] can tell how it is all done."⁷ Clarke also studied with Lionel Tertis, the great English violist responsible for creating much of the modern solo viola repertoire.

After an argument with her father, the final one of many, Rebecca Clarke left home in her early twenties to undertake a career as an independent, professional viola player in London, a most unusual situation for a proper upper-middle-class Englishwoman in the first decade of the



Fig. 1.1. Rebecca Clarke Standing, with Viola, ca. 1917 or 1918. Hopkins Studio, Denver.



Fig. 1.2. The English Ensemble (Publicity Photo, ca. 1928 or 1929) (L to R: May Mukle, cello; Rebecca Clarke, viola; Marjorie Hayward, violin; and Kathleen Long, piano)

twentieth century. She had the encouragement and backing not only of music lovers who hired her to play in private music parties but also of her teachers and colleagues who helped her find jobs. In 1912, at the age of twenty-five, she was engaged by Sir Henry Wood, the conductor, and became one of the very few women to be employed in a major orchestra in London. For the next two decades she supported herself by playing in orchestras and with chamber music groups. Touring as a viola soloist and also playing with May Mukle, a cellist and good friend, she performed in Europe and England as well as in the United States, and completed a worldwide tour in 1922–23. In 1925 she presented a concert of her own works at Wigmore Hall in which she was joined by Myra Hess and other leading English musicians. In the 1910s and 1920s Clarke played with an all-woman string quartet, and later organized, performed with, and managed the English Ensemble, a chamber group (piano, violin, viola, and cello) of four women.⁸

In 1919 Rebecca Clarke submitted a viola sonata to the Competition of the Berkshire Chamber Music Festival, founded one year earlier by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. Clarke's Sonata tied for first place with the Viola Suite by Ernest Bloch, and the sponsor of the competition was asked to break the tie. Coolidge cast the deciding vote for Bloch's work, although Clarke had impressed her and the judges. Eventually the two women became lifelong friends—they were on a first-name basis—and in 1923 Coolidge commissioned a cello work from Clarke.⁹

It is noteworthy—but perhaps not atypical of patronesses—that Coolidge, sometimes called “the patron saint of American chamber music,” a woman of excellent judgment, taste, and no little musical talent,¹⁰ commissioned many works (most of them dedicated to her), but that the commission for Rebecca Clarke was the only one she ever gave to a woman composer. In fact, Rebecca Clarke's music was the only music composed by a woman performed at the Berkshire Festival between 1918 and 1938, a period marked by a large number of premieres by contemporary male composers.

Chamber music was one of Clarke's passions, as we learn from several articles she wrote for Cobbett's *Cyclopedia* and for *Music and Letters*. She wrote the following in one letter to Mrs. Coolidge in the early 1920s:

I think it is only those who have loved chamber music all their lives who can fully realize what a wonderful thing you are doing by this innovation of yours [the Berkshire Festival]. It is going to make people in this country realize, as I don't think they have ever been given the chance to before, that chamber music is really the highest form of all.¹¹

For Rebecca Clarke, performing chamber music was like opening the door to the inner secrets of music. In an article titled “The Beethoven Quartets as a Player Sees Them,” she wrote:

There is something about playing in a quartet that makes one in some subtle way part of the atmosphere of the music and gives one an insight not otherwise to be gained. It is this that makes the amateur infinitely prefer to take part in villainous home quartets than to hear them more or less perfectly performed at a concert, and it is this that impels many a musician to give up everything for chamber music, though he knows it will never bring him either riches or personal fame.¹²

Her published writings all convey this passion and deep commitment to her art.

Unlike her English contemporary and colleague Dame Ethel Smyth, Clarke was not known as a fighter for women's suffrage or women's rights.¹³ And so it was a great surprise for me to find a letter she wrote to her patroness, Mrs. Coolidge, which, in its understated English way, says much about Rebecca Clarke, about Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, and about the place of women musicians in the 1920s:

I have been thinking a lot about the plans you spoke of for next year. . . . And there is one thing I am simply longing to say to you, but I hardly dare to, because it is awfully presumptuous of me to offer an opinion. Still, I know you are a lover of frankness, so I will take my courage in both hands, and believe you will understand well enough not to be offended.

I have been wondering, if, when you said you were undecided about the cellist for the cello recital next year, you had ever thought of the possibility of having a *woman*! I can't help feeling, and I believe you do too, that a great cause is served in putting the work of women executants on an equal footing with that of men—that is, only when it really *is* equal, I mean, of course. This would make such a splendid opportunity, for the woman I am thinking of is an exceptionally fine example, as everyone knows she is one of the very finest artists on any instrument, quite irrespective of sex.

Please do not think for a minute that May Mukle knows I am writing this, I am doing it absolutely off my own bat, so that if you do not like my having spoken of it, *please* be offended with me only. It is only my tremendous faith in the whole subject that gave me courage to do such a hard thing as to write to you about it, and I do believe that you will feel my sincerity enough not to mind my having done so!¹⁴

The letter had its effect—May Mukle was engaged to play Clarke's Rhapsody (commissioned by Coolidge), together with pianist Myra Hess, at the Berkshire Festival. In our current time, when women fill important chairs in major orchestras and often outnumber the men in the smaller orchestras, this document reminds us of the risk Clarke took in writing such a letter to a strong-minded patroness.¹⁵

Clarke made many trips to the United States, the first at age eighteen when she was sent to Boston to stay with the William James family (old friends of her father) and to visit other American friends and relatives. She was in the United States during both world wars, indeed spent much time there, and died in New York in 1979. For almost all the years of her performing and composing career, she was unmarried. In New York she became reacquainted with an old school friend from the Royal College of Music—James Friskin, pianist, composer, and teacher at Juilliard. They were married in 1944. Though she spoke about continuing to com-

pose, she spent most of the next thirty-five years of her life teaching and lecturing on music—on radio, in New York City, and at the Chautauqua summer festivals that her husband directed for a number of years. She relinquished the name of Rebecca Clarke quite cheerfully and seemed to be happy to be known as Mrs. James Friskin.

One of Clarke's ravishing (and best-known) pieces is her Trio for Piano, Violin, and Cello, a work composed for the Chamber Music Competition in 1921.¹⁶ Again, it won only second place. A number of women—Clara Schumann, Fanny Hensel, Leopoldine Blahetka, Cecile Chaminade, and Amy Beach (pianists all)—have written for the combination of piano, violin, and cello, but the Trio by Clarke is one of the few composed by a string player. She knew intimately all the possibilities for sound and color that could be expressed by strings, and her experience as an orchestral and chamber music player colored every page of her scores. Clarke was well acquainted with the chamber music of the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century masters (Brahms was particularly respected), and among her contemporaries she most admired Debussy, Ravel, Vaughan Williams, and especially Ernest Bloch.

Clarke wrote an enthusiastic article on the chamber music of Ernest Bloch for *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*.¹⁷ Much of her description of Bloch's string quartet, written a few years before her Trio, reads like a portrait of her own music: "It is a work of great power, imagination, and beauty, using to the full the resources of the instruments, and abounding in melodic and contrapuntal interest." She closes the entry on Bloch with this:

His effects, though dramatic and full of originality, never give the impression of having been made for their own sake, but are always essential to the deeply felt meaning of his ideas. . . . At a time when music too often aims at a somewhat passionless perfection, sacrificing sincerity to technique and vitality to polish, his glowing works, almost elemental in their directness, bring the breath of a new and powerful life.

Had she herself not written these words about Bloch, one might assume they refer to Clarke's own compositions (although she was too modest to ever describe her own music in such a resoundingly positive manner). Like Bloch's works, hers are "deeply felt" and "bring the breath of a new and powerful life." They should be better known. Her generous tribute to Bloch, her own eloquence as composer and writer, her creative energy

and power, and her courage distinguish Rebecca Clarke as one of the twentieth century's "uncommon women."

Notes

1. The Houston Symphony premiered Tower's first "Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman" (for brass and percussion) in 1987. To date, she has written four more works with this title (numbers 2–5). All her Fanfares have been recorded on Koch International Classics [KIC 7469, 2002]. Tower's publisher, Schirmer, provides up-to-date information on her via this website: <http://www.schirmer.com/composers/tower_bio.html>, accessed July 24, 2003.

2. In fairness to *The New Grove*, however, we can point out that she has her own entry (by Ellen D. Lerner) in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, 6 vols. (New York: Grove's Dictionaries of Music, 1986), 1:452, and is also represented in an article by Stephen Banfield in the *Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers* (New York: Norton, [1995] 1994); published in England as *The New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, ed. Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 119–20; and in the revised *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, 29 vols. (London: Macmillan, 2001), with an article by Liane Curtis (3:919–21).

3. Christopher Johnson's "Thematic Catalog" (1977; unpublished) lists eighty-one works, surely a respectable number for a working violist. The research of Liane Curtis has now increased this count to more than ninety works; see Curtis's article in the revised *New Grove Dictionary* and subsequent updates on the website of the Rebecca Clarke Society, Inc., <<http://www.rebeccaclarke.org>>, accessed July 24, 2003.

4. Clarke, "I Had a Father, Too" (unpublished memoir), p. 154.

5. Her father, Joseph Thacher Clarke, was born in Boston in 1856. Thus, although she may not have been aware of it for many years, Clarke had dual citizenship in Great Britain and the United States.

6. Clarke's memoir, "I Had a Father, Too," reveals her father's psychopathology, which she was still trying to understand and perhaps come to terms with in her eighties.

7. Clarke, "I Had a Father, Too," p. 158.

8. As examined in Maria Baylock's unpublished article on the English Ensemble. In the interview with Nancy Uscher in this volume Clarke mentions performing with an all-female quartet before World War I.

9. Clarke's relationship with Coolidge is considered in Cyrilla Barr's unpublished essay "Rebecca Clarke's 'One Brief Whiff of Fame.'" The Rhapsody for Cello and Piano remains unpublished, although it has been performed occasionally. The premiere was given in 1923, and it was also heard in the 1986 BBC tribute to Clarke's centennial. The first recording was released in 2000 on the

Dutton label. The autograph is in the Library of Congress, Performing Arts Reading Room, ML29c/.C6/case/.

10. See Cyrilla Barr, *Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge: American Patron of Music* (New York: Schirmer, 1997).

11. Undated letter, Library of Congress, Coolidge Collection, Rebecca Clarke Correspondence.

12. *Music and Letters* 8 (1927), reprinted in this volume.

13. Clarke was certainly supportive of the women's movement, as seen by her occasional involvement in the suffrage cause and women's organizations. She participated in concerts supporting the movement, for instance, one with Ethel Smyth (documented in *Votes for Women*, London, January 27, 1911, p. 270), and she was a founding member of the Society of Women Musicians, which was organized in 1911 in London.

14. Written from Honolulu, Hawaii, while on her around-the-world tour, the undated letter (probably 1923) is in the Library of Congress, Coolidge Collection, Rebecca Clarke Correspondence.

15. Discussed further in Cyrilla Barr's unpublished essay "Rebecca Clarke's 'One Brief Whiff of Fame,'" with observations regarding Coolidge's attitude about women as creative figures.

16. London: Winthrop Rogers, 1928; reprinted by Boosey and Hawkes, 1994. Autograph in Library of Congress, ML 29c/.C6/case. The Elschuco Trio (as Clarke describes in her diary) was the first to perform this work, privately, in New York City on February 12, 1920. To date, six recordings of the Trio have been released. They are (starting with the most recent) the Bekova Sisters (Chandos 9844, 2000); the Newstead Trio (Prince Productions 9801, 1999); members of the Endellion String Quartet with Martin Roscoe, piano (ASV, DCA932, 1995); the Hartley Trio (Gamut 518 CD 1990); the Clementi Trio (Largo Records [Germany] 5103, CD 1986); and Suzanne Ornstein, violin; James Kreger, cello; Virginia Eskin, piano (Leonarda LPI 103, 1980).

17. *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, ed. Walter Willson Cobbett, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963 [1929]), reprinted in this volume.