

AMY BEACH

Out In The Cold

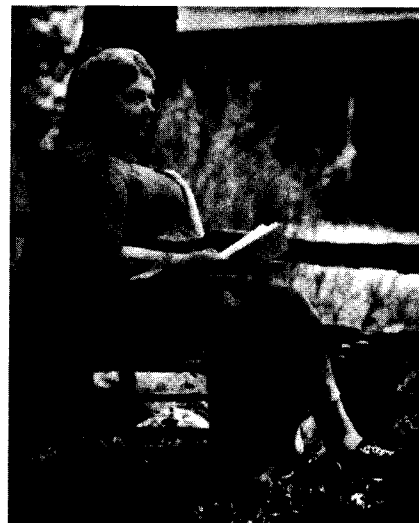
BY JOSEPH SMITH

Reading music history can take you to the most unlikely places. When I began to explore the music of Beach, little did I suspect that it would bring me to the adventures of a German anthropologist in the Arctic.

In August of 1883, Franz Boas stepped from a German ship onto Baffin Island to spend a year with the Eskimos, who became the subject of his first major work of anthropology, *The Central Eskimo* (1888). (In fact, he had begun dreaming of Arctic adventure as a boy: he would practice going without food and running for hours through the snow.) It is often said that his interest was in studying the effect of the color of water—the vast blue—on a people, but he never seems to have actually addressed this idea in any of his writings on the Eskimo. Boas was to become, arguably, not just a great anthropologist, but one of the great figures of the twentieth century. He contributed to the fields of ethnology, physical anthropology, linguistics, statistics, geography, and folklore. His work influenced such areas as child welfare, civil rights, international relations, and museum display.

The tone of *The Central Eskimo*, written in the third person, projects lofty, scientific detachment. Only from Boas's journal do we learn the degree to which he himself went Eskimo during his year of study. This journal, for instance, reveals that "The ice we had to pass through was very rough, slabs of one to two feet thickness being piled on one another to more than man's height. The holes between the pieces were filled up with soft snow, and we were obliged to crawl and stumble over the projecting points and edges of the slabs..." And this for twenty-five hours at Fahrenheit 40-50 degrees below zero! *The Central Eskimo* tells us that for lunch, Eskimo hunters customarily open a seal caught in the morning and eat the liver—raw, of course. But it doesn't mention that Boas himself

hunted, and shared this dish with them. (He told his journal that "It didn't taste bad once I overcame a certain resistance.") What distinguished Boas's approach from that of most of his contemporaries was his openness to and respect for other cultures. "I often ask myself what advantages our 'good society' has over that of 'savages.' The more I see of their customs, the more I realize that we have no right to look down on them."



Amy Beach

The Central Eskimo contains fifteen songs notated by Boas himself. This remarkable polymath was, in fact, an avid amateur pianist. During his stay on Baffin Island, he wrote his fiancée: "There is one thing that pains me in my soul. My rough, horny fingers will probably never play the piano again... If only I could just hear Schumann's Fantasy or the Eroica..." Fortunately, his prediction proved overly pessimistic—he did continue to play into old age.

Now... from the tribes of Baffin to the tribes of Boston. While Boas was in the Arctic, a sixteen-year-old pianist made an auspicious debut, and published her first composition. She went on to become one of the leading American composers of concert music of her generation. One would like to discuss her without regard to gender issues, but

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Franz Boas



Franz Boas dressed as an Eskimo

Rare Finds, continued from p. 7

even her name insists on raising them. She chose to publish her work as Mrs. H.H.A. Beach, but this subordination of her own identity troubles our generation. Amy Marcy Cheney Beach seems a little unwieldy—can we agree on Amy Beach?

In 1907, Beach used the tunes collected by Boas for her suite, *Eskimos*. She did not specialize in folkloric materials, but her *Variations on Balkan Themes*, Op. 60, composed in 1904, remains her most ambitious work for solo piano. With *Eskimos*, she did not use the folk tunes to create a large work, but rather easy pieces suitable for teaching. Inspired by the admiration of a colleague, however, she decided to include them on her concert programs. (The piano trio is also sometimes referred to as “based” on Eskimo songs, but in fact uses them only incidentally.) Looking at the original songs in Boas, the non-Eskimo reader receives them shorn of both meaning and the sound of their words—any characteristic vocal inflections, and their cultural context. (“Without harmony” goes without saying.) Of the three songs combined in the present “Exiles” movement, only the first, Boas’s number III, is a complete melody; the others are merely four bars each (discounting the half-spoken portion of number X). But at issue is not so much the material itself as its suitability to Beach. The fact that X and XI are so short may be an advantage—motifs are more malleable than complete melodies. As a result, Beach could create “Exiles” as a little composition, not just an arrangement.

So, among his myriad achievements, Boas even helped add a work to the repertoire of the instrument he loved to play!

Two volumes of Beach’s piano music have been issued by Hildegard Publishing Company. (“Scottish Legend” and “A Hermit Thrush at Morn” are included in my Dover anthology, *American Piano Classics*, and “The Returning Hunter” from *Eskimos* appears in my Steinway volume, *Simply Romantic Piano*.) The biography by Adrienne Fried Block is

highly recommended—it is voluminously researched, clearly written, and provides important cultural background to Beach’s life. I must, however, mention that I regard Block’s claims to Beach’s modernity as exaggerated.

See music by Amy Beach on page 8.

The Edvard Grieg Society, Inc. will present Joseph Smith in a lecture-recital on folkloric music of Grieg, Grainger, and Bartok on Friday March 9, at 7:30 in NY. For information please call or fax the Society at 201 750 0526. Piano Today and Sheet Music Magazine will present Joseph Smith in a free lecture-recital of beautiful “rare finds” on May 20 at the Katonah Village Library in Katonah, NY (see the display on page 18 for more information).

These are the three folk songs collected by Boas and used by Beach in Exiles.

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The first staff is labeled 'Andante' and is in 3/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The second staff is labeled 'Adagio' and is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The third staff is labeled 'Andantino' and is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Each staff contains a single melodic line.

Oscar Peterson On Piano Jazz, continued from p. 6

“After they had finished their third encore to a five-minute standing, whistling, screaming, stomping ovation and left the bandstand, it was my unbelievable task to follow them with my trio.

I was proud of [bassist] Richard Evans and [drummer] Marshall Thompson, and we had developed a good reputation of our own among the various groups with whom we shared the bandstand in those days. But there wasn’t anyone who could have followed Oscar Peterson that night. I mean, there was, I swear, smoke and steam coming out of the piano when the set ended.

“Well, I did what I was being paid to do, but with that sinking feeling you get when you’re down two sets to love, the score in the third set is two-five, and you’re looking across the net at John McEnroe.

“After a lackluster set of forty minutes, which seemed like three hours, we left the stand to polite applause, and I started to look for a hole to climb into. Oscar had been sitting with friends in booth 16—remember?—and as I attempted to sneak past him into the bar, he reached out and grabbed my arm.

“I want to talk to you,” he said in a grim tone of voice.

“I followed him out into the lobby of the building, which of course was deserted at that time of night. He backed me up against the wall and started poking a finger into my chest. It still hurts when I think about it.

“What the hell was that set all about?” he said.

“I started a feeble justification but he cut me off. ‘Bullshit! If you couldn’t play, you wouldn’t be here. If I ever hear you play another dumb-ass set like that, I’m going to come up there personally and break your arm! You embarrassed me in front of my friends, just when I had been telling them how proud I am of you, and how great you play.

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EXILES

AMY BEACH
(1867-1944)

Lento con amore.

pp

Musical notation for measures 1-5, starting with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The piece is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. The right hand features a melodic line with grace notes and slurs, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving bass lines.

mp

Musical notation for measures 6-11, with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The right hand continues the melodic development with slurs and grace notes. The left hand features a more active bass line with chords and eighth-note patterns.

8va

cresc. f dim.

Musical notation for measures 12-17. Measure 12 includes a first fingering (4) and a dynamic of *cresc.*. Measure 13 has an *8va* marking. Measure 14 has a dynamic of *f*. Measure 17 has a dynamic of *dim.*. The right hand has slurs and grace notes, while the left hand has chords and moving bass lines.

18

p pp

Musical notation for measures 18-23. Measure 18 has a dynamic of *p*. Measure 19 has a dynamic of *pp*. The right hand has slurs and grace notes, while the left hand has chords and moving bass lines.

24

cresc. p espress.

Musical notation for measures 24-29. Measure 24 has a dynamic of *cresc.*. Measure 25 has a dynamic of *p*. Measure 26 has a dynamic of *espress.*. The right hand has slurs and grace notes, while the left hand has chords and moving bass lines.

30

35

40

8va

45

51