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“Her Whimsy and Originality Really Amount to Genius”: New Biographical Research on Johanna Beyer

by Amy C. Beal

Most musicologists I know have never heard of the German-born composer and pianist Johanna Magdalena Beyer (1888-1944), who emigrated to the U.S. in 1923 and spent the rest of her life in New York City. During that period she composed over fifty works, including piano miniatures, instrumental solos, songs, string quartets, and pieces for band, chorus, and orchestra. This body of work allies Beyer with the group known as the “ultramodernists,” and it offers a further perspective on the compositional style known as “dissonant counterpoint.” These terms are associated almost exclusively with Henry Cowell, Ruth Crawford, Carl Ruggles, and Charles Seeger, but Beyer, too, deserves to be placed in their ranks. In addition to her compositional work, she took full advantage of America’s musical capital during a period of determined experimentation and self-conscious nationalism. Her network included American and immigrant composers, conductors, musicians, choreographers, writers, and scholars. Beyer’s friendship with Henry Cowell constituted her most important professional and personal relationship, yet the official account of his biography erases her from his life and from the music of his time. Similarly, histories of twentieth-century music and American music have continued to overlook Beyer’s contributions.

A recent New World Records two-CD release of Beyer’s previously unrecorded music (NWR 80678-2, 2008) allows us to become better acquainted with her little-known oeuvre. Yet the compilation also points to the fact that in the twelve years since the publication of John Kennedy and Larry Polansky’s pioneering research on Beyer in *The Musical Quarterly*, only a handful of people have carried on the work that their biographical sketch, compositional catalog, and source guide called for.¹ Since then, with the assistance of some fifteen volunteer editors, the Frog Peak/Johanna Beyer Project has published sixteen editions of her compositions, all complete with scrupulous editorial notes and facsimiles of the manuscripts. This

editorial flurry has facilitated many performances and first recordings. The most noteworthy recent research on Beyer has been undertaken by Melissa de Graaf, whose work on the New York Composers’ Forum events during the 1930s portrays Beyer’s public persona during the highpoint of her compositional career (see, for example, de Graaf’s spring 2004 article in the *I.S.A.M. Newsletter*). Beyond de Graaf’s work, we have learned little more about Beyer since 1996. Yet it is clear that her compelling biography, as much as her intriguing compositional output, merits further attention.



Johanna Beyer
Courtesy of the National Archives

Beyer’s correspondence with Henry Cowell (held primarily at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts) helps us construct a better picture of her life between February 1935, when her letters to Cowell apparently began, and mid-1941, when their relationship ended. Her letters reveal both mundane and profound details about a composer’s daily routines in Depression-era New York, painting a rich portrait of an intelligent, passionate, humorous, and deeply troubled woman whose reading ranged from Hölderlin’s *Hyperion* to Huxley’s essay “Fashions in Love.” Her correspondence with Cowell, for whom she provided a number of musical and administrative services for approximately five years, mixes dry exchanges (“send me two copies of *Country Set* by Tuesday for Philadelphia”) with painful intimacies (“may friends touch each other?”). Beyond these occasional non-sequiturs, Beyer’s letters offer vivid impressions of a piano teacher’s exhausting commute between Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island, and New Jersey, and expose her suffering caused by the crippling, degenerative illness ALS (Lou Gehrig’s Disease). Beyer’s life hovered

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