

BEACH *Out of the Depths*, op. 130. *Variations on Balkan Themes in c♯*, op. 60. *Sketches*, op. 15: No. 3, *Dreaming*. *Serenade "Ständchen" after Richard Strauss*. *Prelude and Fugue in a*, op. 81. *From Six to Twelve*, op. 119: No. 3, *Canoeing*. *From my Grandmother's Garden*, op. 97: No. 5, *Honeysuckle*. *Hermit Thrush*, op. 92: No. 1, *A Hermit Thrush at Eve*. *Nocturne*, op. 107. *Three Pieces*, op. 128 • Martina Frezzotti (pn) • PIANO 10277 (64:27)

This is another valuable step in our knowledge of the music of Amy Beach. And yet, it is a full decade and more since I reviewed a full disc of her music in 2011: That was piano music, too, performed by Kirsten Johnson on the Guild label (*Fanfare* 35:3; this Piano Classics recording is notably superior). Since then, only one shared disc has appeared: a Cambria release performed by Margaret Mills, with four of Beach's opus numbers sharing the bed with Crawford and Ives (41:2). The latter disc overlaps with Martina Frezzotti's new disc in only one piece (*Out of the Depths*), and the Guild CD in the *Prelude and Fugue* and *A Hermit Thrush at Eve* (Johnson also includes *A Hermit Thrush at Morn*, though).

To have a disc packed with fine performance on the Piano Classics label, then, is joy indeed. Martina Frezzotti is a wonderful pianist: Her tone is full, her playing is clear, and she is clearly fully devoted to her Beachian cause. We are in good hands: Frizzotti studied with Lazar Berman at Imola, Italy, and later at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow with Eliso Virsaladze. Her previous disc, of music by Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel, seems not to have made it to *Fanfare's* pages.

It's good that this one has, though. Frezzotti's Beach disc ticks off a whole load of boxes. The choice of composer, the programming on the disc itself (it works perfectly as an hour-long listening experience), the audio recording (superbly done in Holland, at the Westvest Church in Schiedam), the expert playing, and the detailed booklet notes by Mark Viner. My only criticism of this last is that a paragraph break would not have gone amiss in the first two columns or so.

The recital begins with a late work, *Out of the Depths* (published in 1932 and first performed 1931), a musical meditation on Psalm 130 ("De profundis"). There is a late Lisztian sense of mysticism here, and the spacious scoring (I assume that at least at one point it is written on three staves) is most impressive.

The set of variations on a Balkan theme is an extensive work of some 25-plus minutes. This is a majestic work: The theme, marked *Adagio malinconico*, is subjected to eight variations, followed by a funeral march, a cadenza, and a final *Adagio*. In all, Beach uses four themes (given to her by a Balkan missionary). There is a 1936 revision of the work, plus a version for two pianos that remains in manuscript, but it is the original 1904 score that is heard here. Listening to Frezzotti play is like watching someone weave a lushly colored tapestry. By some margin the most substantive work presented here, this is something of a masterpiece and one that I, for one, am itching to hear in a live recital. There is no missing the funeral march, with its bass tremolos replicating a funeral drum. In total contrast is the passage thereafter marked "Quasi fantasia," and Frezzotti is magnificent in both. As if to underline the seriousness of its intent, the piece returns after some truly virtuosic Lisztian passages to the *Adagio* of its opening, now calmer, more at peace with itself.

From the *Four Sketches*, op. 15 comes the third, "Dreaming." Bizarrely, the opening measures could be by Philip Glass (although the principal melody is pure Beach). The Strauss arrangement does not feel quite as much a stretch as it might sound; the performance is calm and concentrates much on filigree. (Compare and contrast this to Jessye Norman and James Levine, for example, live on Orfeo—very much the flip side of this song.) A *Prelude and Fugue* offers the real contrast: Cast in a severe A Minor, this initially has all the hallmarks of a transcription of a Bach *Prelude* by Liszt (indeed, it has been suggested Beach modeled her piece after Liszt's *Fantasia und Fuga über das Thema B-A-C-H*, S 529). Frezzotti plays with a huge sound and the ability to grade *diminuendo* finely. There is something Franckian about some of this writing of the prelude; the fugue offers a sense of calm, at least initially, before regaining its organ-like sonorities. Frezzotti's performance is impressive, a mighty shout from the abyss. This is one piece that will shock listeners with only a casual acquaintance with Amy Beach. It is muscular, stern (I do get the impression Busoni would have been proud of a score like this), and inspired throughout.

It is certainly the last substantive work on the disc. In complete and utter contrast, the blissfully nonchalant slow spreads of *Canoeing* speak of idyllic summer days (writing this in late November, I think I just about remember summer). "Honeysuckle" (the fifth piece from the set *From My Grandmother's Garden*) flits away in a post-Schubertian way before a melody arrives (fairly late on) that is pure Beach in the sense that its simplicity conceals art. Frezzotti's shaping of this piece is exquisite, aided by her carefully varied approach to texture and her range of touch.

Inspired by a poem by John Vance Cheney, "A Hermit Thrush at Eve" is a piece of great loveliness. (It includes transcribed birdsong, so Messiaen was not the only one!) Beach pits the song against a soft background, with the gentle harmonic clashes delineating the bird's song perfectly. It is worth mentioning a rival performance here to highlight a pianist who does not get the coverage he deserves: Finghin Collins, on his *Claves* disc *The Bright Day is Done*, offers a fine alternative; Joanne Polk on an all-Beach disc *Under the Stars* is by some way the most languorous, but her bird "speaks" the most of the three. The *Nocturne*, op. 107, follows on beautifully in the Piano Classics disc, carrying a palpable sense of longing in its wake, before a set of three pieces, each portraying an animal, tree, or bird, closes the disc. A "Scherzino" represents "A Peterborough Chipmunk" (teasingly delivered by Frezzotti) before the gentle whisperings of trees are heard in the upper voice of "Young Birches"; modal hints add a sense of timelessness before the hummingbird forms the basis of the rapid-fire yet elusive final movement. Frezzotti's lightness of touch is remarkable.

This is the finest all-Beach piano recital disc I have come across. Martina Frezzotti is a fine, musical pianist. Recommended. Colin Clarke

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Unlike innumerable other women composers, Amy Beach’s music was frequently performed in her lifetime, and yet this didn’t save her from later obscurity after her death in 1944. Restoring her reputation and appreciating the value of her compositions moves ahead by small and large milestones. I’d say that this captivating collection from the sterling Italian pianist Martina Frezzotti is a major milestone—it vibrantly brings to life Beach’s dual careers as composer and pianist.

Born in New Hampshire to a musical family in 1867, Beach (her family name was Cheney) revealed extraordinary precocity—the extensive program notes inform us that she could accurately sing 40 songs by age one. She could write counter-melodies when she was two and taught herself to read when she was three. Her “Gaelic” Symphony was performed by the Boston Symphony in 1896, becoming the first symphony ever published by an American woman. Just as remarkably, she succeeded without the benefit of European training.

There is much more to the story, including marriage to a prominent Boston surgeon, H. H. A. Beach, when she was 18 and he was 42—the alliance elevated her to the upper tier of Boston society but at the same time brought restrictions. Although she declared that she thought of herself first and foremost as a pianist, while her husband was alive (Beach died in 1910) she agreed to give only two public recitals a year, with the proceeds donated to charity. Somehow the union was happy under these severely limiting conditions—as evidence, Amy kept Beach’s last name in her expanded performing career after his death.

Thinking about how she stands with posterity, it’s worth remembering that we are posterity and should keep looking at Beach with fresh eyes. Frezzotti presents a selection of strong pieces that nonetheless reflect the Beaux Arts tradition in New England at the time. The opening piece, *Out of the Depths*, is a very brief study in Lisztian moodiness. Another lovely miniature, *Dreaming*, has a languid melody that echoes the shape of Schumann’s “Träumerei,” while *Ständchen* is a glittering transcription of Richard Strauss’s Lied of the same name, in the virtuosic manner of Liszt’s Schubert transcriptions.

All the miniatures and character pieces on the program are performed with a combination of gracefulness and technical ease by Frezzotti. Like every touring virtuoso in the Romantic era and well into the twilight of the Golden Age, Beach composed waltzes, character pieces, and nocturnes. Here we get only a single Nocturne, op. 107, a late work from 1924. The generic title is misleading. Beach puts passion into this evocative night music, wandering rhapsodically away from the home key with restlessness, and showing real harmonic assurance.

She was drawn to homespun titles and nature references her audiences could nostalgically identify with (“A Peterborough Chipmunk,” “Honeysuckle,” “A Hermit Thrush at Eve”), which might have misled a later generation into thinking that Beach firmly belonged in the Genteel Tradition that was the mainstay of Boston culture during her lifetime. But her mind was more explorative than that, as evidenced in the advanced chromaticism of *Three Pieces* from 1932. With a few stylistic twists, she might have ventured close to Scriabin, minus his harmonic wildness.

Beach wrote in larger forms, too, and Frezzotti includes two examples, beginning with an all but inevitable Prelude and Fugue, a form inherited from Bach that became a musical necessity thereafter to prove a composer’s *bona fides*. The bold, sweeping theme of the Prelude also derives something else from Bach, its use of the composer’s musical signature, B-E-A-C-H. In the bravura nature of both parts we are hearing something much closer to Busoni than anyone else, and Beach gives nothing away in the power of her imagination. Frezzotti’s bold, confident performance keeps faith with the stature of the piece.

The longest work here is the 25-minute *Variations on Balkan Themes*, which dates from 1904 during one of Beach’s most creative periods. Four songs given to her by a missionary from the Balkans serve as thematic grounding for “the assorted guises of a barcarolle, a Hungarian *friska*, a dusky parlor waltz, a funeral march, and many others besides,” as the program notes tell us. Beach was fond of using folk material, but in this case she was particularly motivated by politics—the brutal treatment meted out by the Ottomans after quelling an uprising in Macedonia.

The *Variations* are a showpiece for Beach’s technical abilities as a pianist, and Frezzotti takes full advantage, in a dazzling reading that gives every note the fullest expression. Besides her outstanding pianism, Frezzotti, fascinatingly, was the first Italian to graduate from the Moscow Conservatory, where he received her doctorate in 2012. She teaches at the conservatory in Trieste besides her concertizing career.

What makes this release a milestone is not only that a superb performer is giving Beach’s piano music its due, but also that the quality of the music is so high. Beach fanciers will be delighted. More importantly, here is a disc offering rich rewards for the general listener. Warmly recommended. **Huntley Dent**

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Amy Beach: Piano Music spotlights Martina Frezzotti, the first Italian to obtain her doctorate in music from the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory. Frezzotti currently teaches at the Conservatory “Giuseppe Tartini” in Trieste. This is an absorbing recital in every respect. It’s clear that Frezzotti has given the cultivation and execution of this project a great deal of study and reflection. The repertoire showcases the depth and versatility of a great American composer who perhaps remains underappreciated. The works span Beach’s embrace of modernism in *Out of the Depths* (1932), a Brahmsian/Franckian rigor in *Variations on Balkan Themes* (1904) and *Prelude and Fugue* (1914), a mastery of song transcription that recalls Liszt in the *Serenade “Ständchen” after Richard Strauss* (1902), and an exploration of Impressionist pictorialism in a host of brief works. In all of these compositions, Beach is a master of architecture, pianistic color, and the deployment of virtuoso technique to expressive ends. Throughout, Frezzotti is convincing as an artist who has gotten very much inside the various Beach compositions. Her technical command, plasticity of phrasing, and impressive range of colors are all to be savored. Also impressive is Frezzotti’s sensitivity to proportion, contrast, and momentum in the two larger works, *Variations on Balkan Themes* and *Prelude and Fugue*. The pulse and sense of purpose never flag. The recorded sound is lovely. Mark Viner’s eloquent and informative liner notes are most welcome. Recommended. **Ken Meltzer**

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